

The Quest for 392

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“Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely”... Moby Dick tells the story of Captain Ahab’s quest or obsession for the White Whale. In our lives there are many White Whales. Those tangible and intangible things that we desire, want or feel we need. These White Whales change over the years and many of them are never attained. Most are just far-fetched fantasies or dreams but they keep us seeking.

As a boy, I began to collect baseball cards and still do to this day. I always hoped I would find the classic Honus Wagner T-206 series card. This rare tobacco card from 1910 was pulled immediately from distribution as Wagner did not want children to think smoking was okay. The dream of finding it in an old cigarette box in Grandpa’s attic or stuffed in an old band-aid container at a rummage sale never came true. But still today, I hope to find it among some old House of David papers. This White Whale still eludes me, but it’s one that I won’t stop seeking.

I also collected stamps. I enjoyed the history that you could learn from these little pieces of paper. I would grab the World Book Encyclopedia and try to find some information about the person or scene on the little square. I also dreamed of finding Scott’s catalog number C3a, the rare error stamp known as the “Inverted Jenny.” In 1918, a pane of stamps were produced with the airplane printed upside down. The rarity, and the fact that some were used made them very desirable. I checked every envelope I came across to see if I could find one. Today, when I unwrap a stack of House of David letters, I still look at the stamp to see if maybe one of the traveling preachers or members of the baseball team might have placed one on an envelope. Another White Whale that I haven’t caught. But again, the search will continue.

In January 2015, I received a copy of Henry Yapple’s *A Descriptive Bibliography of Imprints from the Israelite House of David and Mary’s City of David 1902-2010* from Christian Goodwillie of Hamilton College. This book lists the various books printed at the two colonies’ print shops. I was excited to receive it and immediately read it from cover to cover. Since Henry did not have access to the collection at the House of David, there were some books or different editions of books that I had found that were not listed. There were also many listed that I had never seen and would like to have for our collection. But the one thing that stuck out was Henry’s

entry number 392: *Free Press of the House of Israel* (illustrated on page 202 of this issue), the one imprint that Henry had not found in any of the collections that he went through while researching his book. This pamphlet from 1894 is believed to be Benjamin Purnell's first writing. Its existence was substantiated only through reprints in the House of David's monthly newsletter, *Shiloh's Messenger of Wisdom* and in publications about Mary and Benjamin's travels. I now had a new White Whale to find.

When I came to the House of David, there was no organization to the massive amount of books, photos, letters and other paper material. There was no magic file drawer that was marked "Early writings of Benjamin that aren't found anywhere else." But there were boxes of Benjamin's notes and paper items he kept that I had discovered years before in the attic of Shiloh. They sat undisturbed for years waiting to be discovered. There was no reason that the trunks that contained these notes hadn't been pried open and the contents either stolen or destroyed by animals.

Colony member Wilma Estes once stated "When something is supposed to be found at the House of David, the right person will find it at the right time." These words have held true many times. Surely, it must be in one of those boxes. It would only make sense. This White Whale would be easy prey and finally a quest would be attained. Nope.

In the following years, I continued the search with lessened interest. My project to organize and archive the various imprints of Henry's book had stalled (like so many other House of David projects I began). In the summer of 2017, I hired Shannon McRae to take on the task of archiving all of our colony owned imprints. Even after bringing her stacks and boxes of books, pamphlets and ephemera, the elusive 392 was not located. Shannon meticulously examined and organized the piles of material. If a copy of 392 was to be found, it would be within these stacks. Sadly, it wasn't in the plethora of paper that I piled on Shannon. This quest was not going well.

Edith Meldrim Bell was a longtime colony pillar who was known for her wisdom. As a last ditch effort to try to find 392, I decided to do a complete search of her office which hadn't been disturbed from her passing in 1965 until I went in two years ago. She also kept many items that weren't found anywhere else in the colony. Though many one-of-a-kind printed items were found, there was no 392.

When Henry Yaple visited later that summer, the elusive 392 was a big topic of discussion. Henry, Shannon and I knew if it could be found,

it would be the link between Benjamin and Mary's Jezreelite days and the writing of the *Star of Bethlehem* and then the formation of the Israelite House of David. However, at this point it would have to be pure luck that put the White Whale in my hands.

As luck would have it, early one evening, I decided to glance through a box of colony newspaper articles. The clippings were kept by an unknown, now deceased member and were the typical 1970-1990 articles about the passing of colony members and the decline of the colony. As I sadly gazed upon the newsprint, looking for an article that I had never read or at least one that didn't depress me, I came across a large four-page pamphlet. Since it was wider than the box and been crushed by paper, it wasn't in the best of shape. Then I flipped it over and read the words "Free Press of the House of Israel." Holy Shi...loh!!!! The White Whale was in my hands!!!! I immediately sent a picture of it to Shannon. She put her dinner on hold and came rushing over to her office and like little kids we examined it. Indeed, it was the holy grail of House of David imprints. The next day, Shannon sent out an email to fellow House of David imprint gurus (a nice way of saying nerds) including Henry. Henry's response was memorable:

MOST AMAZING! I just knew that sometime, somewhere this first pamphlet, I would term it the Israelite incunabulum or cradle piece, would turn up. However, I never anticipated, back when I was finishing the bibliography, that it would be in Shiloh/HOD. I thought some antiquarian bookseller would purloin it from an impoverished widow and whoop it and its value sky high. So very pleased you have found it, and in the very correct place it should be.

Henry's response was right on the money. I went back to Wilma's words about the right time and the right person. I guess Benjamin decided it was the right time and I was the right person to find 392. I finally caught the White Whale. In life's quests or obsessions, we try our best to be thorough. But sometimes, its luck that brings home the prize.