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Hamilton College Library "Home Notes"

Communal Societies Collection New Acquisitions

SEAL OF JOANNA SOUTHCOTT FIRST MESSENGER OF THE CHRISTIAN ISRAELITES

Hamilton College Library recently acquired a remarkable collection of documents relating to Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) for its Communal Societies Collection. Southcott is considered to have been the first messenger of the Christian Israelite faith.¹ In 1792 Southcott realized she was the woman spoken of in Revelation 12:

¹And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:

²And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

Southcott gained an increasing number of followers throughout the late 1790s. Many adherents of contemporary messenger Richard Brothers, considered second in the lineage by the followers of Benjamin and Mary Purnell (House of David and Mary's City of David), defected to Southcott upon Brothers' imprisonment in 1795. Among these was the engraver William Sharp who brought Southcott to London to begin the process of "sealing" the elect, or the 144,000 who would be saved at the Day of Judgment. The process of "sealing" began around 1803. The paper on which the seals were written was donated by wealthy Southcott follower and paper mill owner Elias Carpenter. By 1807 Southcott is estimated to have sealed 14,000 of the 144,000 elect.²

The process of sealing was this: first a compass-drawn circle was laid out on the paper, next a scribe wrote the name of the sealed written at

the top, then the sacred text substantiating the status of the sealed and the date, and finally the signature of Southcott at the bottom in her own hand. The seal was then carefully folded into a square and sealed twice on the back in red sealing wax with Southcott's emblem. The emblem consists of the initials "I C" and two six pointed stars. The "I" stands for Joanna, and the "C" strangely stands for a man named Clive (a follower of hers who was accidentally killed). These folded seals were then carried on the body of the person for whom they were made. Consequently many wore out through daily abuse, and few survive. The two major collections of manuscripts and imprints relating to Joanna Southcott in the United States are at Princeton and Duke. Neither institution holds an original Southcottian seal, perhaps the most basic artifact/document embodying the process of validation of the Christian Israelite movement.

The present example (fig. 1) was prepared for Esther Webb in December 1803. Interestingly, it was procured in 1828 by a document dealer in Liverpool for sale to the Liverpool Athaneum. A letter addressed to a Mr. Jones of the Athaneum, dated January 13, 1828, accompanies the seal, stating: "Some time ago I promised you a genuine copy of one of Joanna Southcott's Seals." The letter continues, explaining the humorous process of what was essentially bargaining away young Esther Webb's salvation:

Of the authenticity of this Seal there is no doubt. I bought it from the girl Webb in 1815 after considerable bartering: she supplied my landlady with milk, and her mother kept cows in Coventry Street, in Stourbridge, Worcestershire. That town contained a number of her [Southcott's] infatuated proselytes; and, previous to Johanna's death, I have heard this girl Webb aged 15 declare that she would have no hesitation in walking barefoot to London to nurse the young Shiloh! If she is living, she must be now about 24; and it would be curious to hear her opinion of the matter now.

The "Shiloh" referred to in the letter was the expected progeny of Southcott who declared she was about to deliver the messiah in 1814 at the age of 64.

The letter supplies the additional information that the seal enclosed is in the handwriting of the: "Rev. Mr. Foley, then Rector of Old Swinford, near Stourbridge, and whom I have often heard, in his parochial pulpit, felicitate himself and his hearers on the near approach of the Millenium(!) thro' the medium of Ms. Southcote!" Rev. Thomas Foley was one of Southcott's most important followers, and was eventually entrusted as

custodian of her box of sealed prophecies, a position he held from 1825 to 1839.³ The Panacea Society, located in Bedford, England, claims to hold the box at the present time. Mary's City of David in Benton Harbor, Michigan, continues to distribute leaflets encouraging the Bishops of England to unseal the prophetic box.

Further supporting documents included in this collection are fragments of two Southcottian imprints, acquired by the original document dealer as an intact example of Southcott's wax sealing emblem (figs. 2, 3). The wax sealing emblems used on the actual seals are necessarily destroyed when the documents are unfolded and opened. Thus, this collection presents an original seal that has been opened, as well as an intact example of the wax sealing emblem.

Notes

1. http://www.marycityofdavid.org/html/7_angels.html
2. Robert Fogarty, *The Righteous Remnant: The House of David* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981), p. 16.
3. Frances Brown, *Joanna Southcott: The Woman Clothed With the Sun* (Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2002), p. 336.

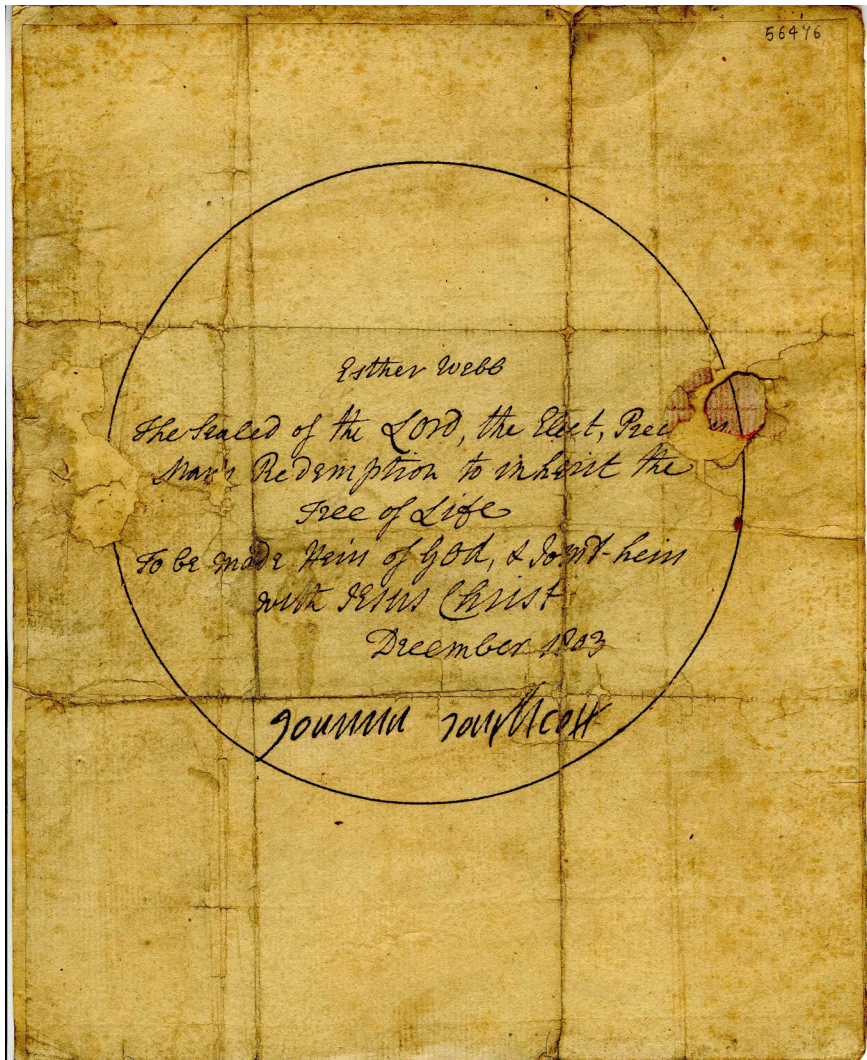


Fig. 1. Southcottian Seal for Esther Webb

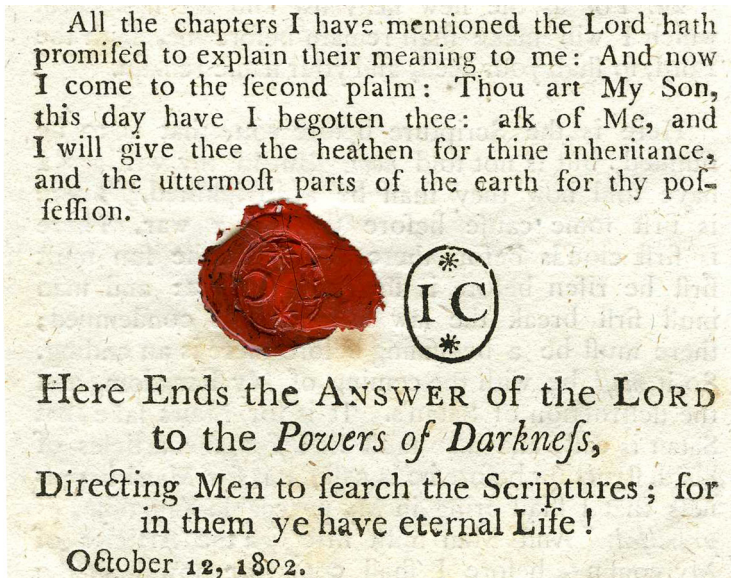


Fig. 2. Sealing Emblem of Joanna Southcott

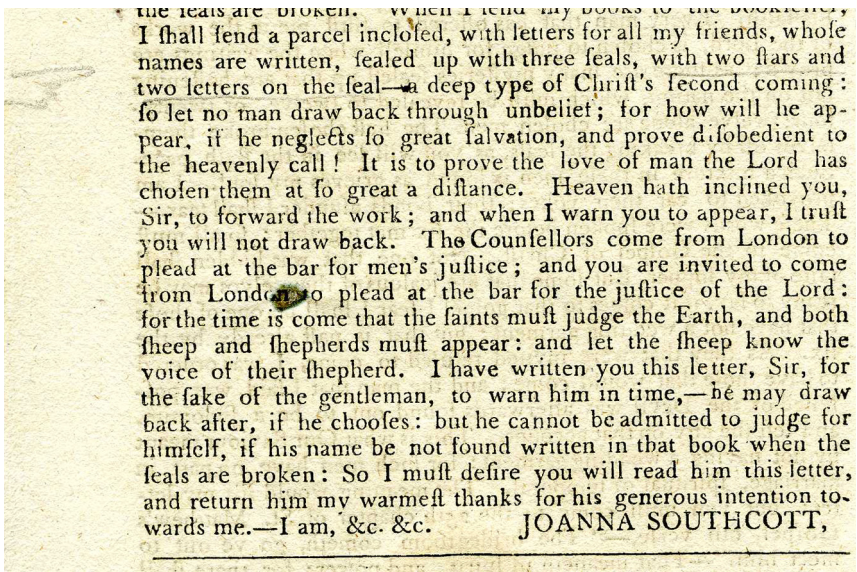


Fig. 3. The Seal Explained