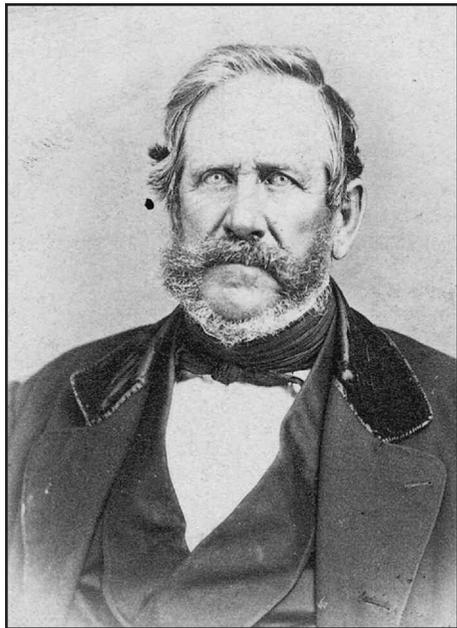


The Impact of Edward Hunter's Conversion to Mormonism in Chester County, Pennsylvania: Henry M. Vallette's 1869 Letter

Edited by Stephen J. Fleming and David W. Grua

Edward Hunter was a wealthy landowner from West Nantmeal Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania, where he was known as Squire Hunter.¹ Hunter had a wealthy father, also known as Squire Hunter, whose property Edward inherited. Hunter made significant additions to his father's holdings by buying a 440-acre farm in Chester County, Pennsylvania, the largest in the township.² When the local meetinghouse burned down, Hunter's neighbors solicited his help in building a new one. Hunter donated his property and leased the meetinghouse to the local township on condition that any religion be allowed to preach there.³



Edward Hunter of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Courtesy Church Archives.

DAVID W. GRUA received his BA in History from Brigham Young University in 2004. He is a graduate student in American Religious History at BYU. He is the author of "Joseph Smith and the D.P. Hurlbut Case," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 33–54, and is a researcher on the Joseph Smith Papers Project.



*West Nantmeal Seminary, Chester County, Pennsylvania, date unknown. This building, constructed on Edward Hunter's land, was where he first met the Mormon missionaries.
Photo by Wayne E. Homan, 1964, courtesy Church Archives.*

In January 1839, recent Mormon converts Edwin Woolley and Elisha Davis, along with Mormon missionaries Lorenzo Barnes and Harrison Sagers, traveled from Woolley's current residence in eastern Ohio to bring the gospel to Woolley's friends and family in Chester County, Pennsylvania. The missionaries received an overwhelmingly positive reaction in the central part of the county, and Elders Davis and Sagers traveled to the north part of the county to further the work.⁴ Davis and Sagers attempted to set up a meeting in the West Nantmeal Seminary, but many of the locals sought to keep them out. When Hunter heard of this attempt, he threatened to take the seminary back unless the Mormons were allowed to preach. The locals capitulated, and thus began Hunter's association with Mormonism.⁵ Hunter's interest in Mormonism was deepened during Joseph Smith's visit to the area in the winter of 1839–40. During the visit, Hunter asked the Prophet, "How is it that I am attracted to thos back-woods boys? I believe I would risk my life for them." To this, Joseph gave Hunter "the most friendly look I ever got



Ackland Mill, Chester County, Pennsylvania, date unknown. Mormon missionaries performed baptisms at the mill, which suggests that this was the location for Edward Hunter's baptism. Photo by Wayne E. Homan, 1964, courtesy Church Archives.

from [a] man.”⁶

Hunter joined the Mormons the following autumn, and Mormonism continued to grow in the area.⁷ In October 1840, Erastus Snow reported to Mormon headquarters that “all eastern Pennsylvania is literally crying out ‘come and help us,’ ‘send us preachers,’ &c. and on the other side of the Delaware it is the same.”⁸ The Mormons set up a large branch in Hunter’s vicinity called the Brandywine Branch; so successful was Mormonism in the area that the locals nicknamed the vicinity “Mormon Hollow.”⁹

Many wealthy people joined in the area, of which Hunter was the wealthiest.¹⁰ Hunter was the second wealthiest person in his township and may have been the wealthiest Mormon convert of that era.¹¹ Naturally, his conversion had a major impact on his neighborhood.

The following is a letter from one Henry Myers Valette to Edward Hunter thirty years after Mormonism’s initial foray into the region. The letter demonstrates the impact that Hunter’s conversion had on his

neighborhood and the various influences that affected the would-be convert, Vallette, many years later. Henry Meyers Vallette (c. 1826–1893) was a clerk in the Philadelphia Navy Yard who wrote a ten-part series of articles called “History and Reminiscences of the Philadelphia Navy Yard” in 1876 for the *Potter American Monthly* that was later published as a book. He came from a long line of Navy men.¹² Vallette was reasonably well off (his mentioning that he would have \$2,000 after his trip to Utah puts him well above average), so his letter should not be seen as a sycophantic attempt to receive funds. Despite his apparent sincerity, Vallette apparently was never able to overcome his trepidation. Philadelphia census records show that he remained with his family in Philadelphia until his death in 1893. The Vallette letter is a fascinating insight into the mind set of what were likely numerous individuals who desired to join the Mormons but could never quite muster the courage.¹³

Philad. Pa. Septr. 29th 1869

Bishop Edward Hunter
Reverend & Dear Sir:

Many years ago, when but a mere lad, it was my custom to spend a portion of each year at the house of my Grandfather, “Henry Meyers,” who with his son George kept a store in what was then “West Nantmeal Township Chester Co., Pa.” It was within a mile or two of where you then resided. You may perhaps have forgotten him, but no doubt you remember some more familiar names, with whom you were on terms of intimacy, such as the McClure’s, Speakman’s, McIlvaine’s, Henderson’s, ect.[sic]: I recite these names for the purpose of recalling your memory to the time when the doctrines of your Church were first introduced into that section of country.

I had cause to well remember the time, an Elder of your Church would now and again hold forth in the Old School House. I then drank in words that left so strong an impression upon my heart, that neither time nor the vicissitudes of fortune which have since beset me, have had no power to efface; a constant yearning of the heart for more light has since led me to listen frequently to the teachings of your people, to study closely their published works, and at times I have been ready to exclaim “now indeed I truly believe!” and then an inexorable something, call it reason, understanding or what you will, took possession of me and rebelled, alas too powerfully, against the impulse or dictates of the heart, and in the struggle would leave me wretched and disconsolate.

But to retrospect once more—’Twas then said, by many of your neighbors, who loved and esteemed you highly, “How strange that Edward Hunter, a man proverbial for his strong mind and sound judgement could thus easily be made a proselyte,” then came rumors of a promise made by you to join the church if these Elders would prolong the life of a dear child who was lying at death’s door—of their solemn assurance that they would accomplish it—of their signal failure—your child being taken by the hand of Him who gave it—and that then, in a state of semi-desperation, being not yourself, you were then prevailed upon to give up all and follow the fortunes of these adventurers.¹⁴

Such was the current gossip of the neighborhood (pardon me for repeating it)

but upon me, I still remember, it had no effect—I only know that my heart was touched, I only felt that if a man like Edward Hunter whose name was a synonym of upright probity, of sound sense and discernment, could be brought to believe in these things, what right had I or others of less understanding to cavil at and ridicule them: I knew that in all the controversies I listened to, when debated upon a scriptural basis, the champions of the “established church” were always worsted; Oh happy day, ’twas then I thought I saw things clearly, ’twas then I should have entered the fold but alas in the interval years have rolled and the all seeing God alone can tell what changes that lapse of time was wrought.

Without trespassing any further upon your valuable time I would ask of you sir whether you would advise me (under the circumstances of my doubts & fears) to give way to a strong desire to dispose of all that I have and come among your people with the honest intention of striving to obtain that true light I’ve been so long in search of. If I come, it would involve the breaking of no family ties, for my wife [Emaline Macargel] would willingly follow me to the end of the earth and make my God her God.

I am 43 yrs of age, have 5 children ranging from 7 yrs to 21—My worldly possessions, after paying expenses to Salt Lake, would leave me with a balance of perhaps not more than \$2,000—And so without further circumstance, having implicit confidence and faith in anything you might say I come to you as a child asking for comfort and advice. A few brief lines from you to that effect will be sincerely and gratefully appreciated.

Very respectfully & truly yours
H. M. Vallette

If you should kindly grant my request, please address “care of John Curtis, U.S. Hotel, foot of Walnut Street, Philadelphia.”

I take the liberty of forwarding by this mail a copy of the Philadelphia “Press,” in which you will find a letter purporting to give a history of the manner & customs of your people—it is nearly a stereotype of my others that I’ve read before—teeming with ridicule—but having no effect upon sensible people, save perhaps a feeling of contempt and pity for its author.

H. M. V.

Notes

1. Joseph Mullett to Edward Hunter, 10 October 1881, Edward Hunter Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

2. William E. Hunter, *Edward Hunter: Faithful Steward* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1970), 21–30; Chester County Tax Records, West Nantmeal Township, 1839. Microfiche in Chester County Archives, West Chester, Pennsylvania.

3. Hunter, *Edward Hunter*, 40.

4. Edwin Woolley, 1839 Journal, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah.

5. Edward Hunter, “Autobiography of Edward Hunter,” in Hunter, *Edward Hunter*, 315–16.

6. Hunter, “Autobiography,” 316.

7. Hunter, “Autobiography,” 317.

8. Erastus Snow, Letter of 31 October 1840, *Times and Seasons* 2, no. 2 (November 1840): 221.

9. "Mormonism Is Rolling Along with All Power' Says Letter of 1852," *Northern Chester County Herald*, 1 May 1852.

10. Stephen J. Fleming, "An Examination of the Success of Early Mormonism in the Delaware Valley" (MA thesis, California State University, Stanislaus, 2003), 29–33.

11. Chester County Tax Records, West Nantmeal Township, 1839. Hunter made major financial contributions to Nauvoo. See LaRene Porter Gaunt, "Edward Hunter: Generous Pioneer, Presiding Bishop," *Ensign* 34, no. 7 (July 2004): 46.

12. This information comes from a 3 January 2003 e-mail from Vallette's descendant, Barbara Vallette.

13. Early Mormon missionaries frequently noted many who believed but were not yet willing to be baptized. Many such persons eventually joined, but many, like Vallette, did not. In 1857, John Taylor, then president of the Eastern States Mission, lamented, "There are, however, a great many scattered all over the United States who believe 'Mormonism' is truth and have not the moral courage to embrace it." *Journal History of the Church, LDS Church Archives*, 9 August 1857, 6.

14. Hunter's biographer recorded Hunter's words on this event as follows:

My son, about three years of age, was unwell and continued declining, or got worse. Everything we could do for him he still got worse. In laying hands on him, he would feel much better and play around and in a few hours would sink down.

I expect I acted unwise offering everything but my life to the Lord if he would recover and live. Exercising all the Faith I had. My situation was desperate, as much as I could bear.

I was walking in my piazza in front of the house and I was so wonderfully concerned and anxious for my son to live that I exclaimed with all the power of my soul: "Soul, is not thy promise that thou will not trye [sic] a person more than he is able to bear, Lord?" Instantly I was filled with His Spirit and I stopt walking before I reached the end of the porch, turned around and went directly upstairs and laid my hands on my son and said, "Lord, take my son."

That great anxiety and desire was over. By the Spirit and power of God, I was filled with his spirit. As I left my walks of anxiety, I stopt and in going where my boy was laying, my feet hardly touched the floor. As I walked, I said to myself: "Let no man say that a man will not mount up as on Eagle's wings." My wife said it appeared that my feet did not touch the floor as I walked. (Hunter, *Edward Hunter*, 50)