Reams in the Desert: Papermaking in Utah, 1849–1893
Saunders, Richard L. Ann Arbor, MI: The Legacy Press, 2021. 196 pp. $25.00
Softcover ISBN 9781953421074.

Reviewed by Ashley Howdeshell, University Archivist, Northeastern Illinois University

Reams in the Desert: Papermaking in Utah, 1849–1893 details the early history of papermaking in the American West. Richard L. Saunders focuses on a desert valley in Utah and how this unlikely location was the first to produce paper west of the Mississippi River. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the reason papermaking started in this region, and Saunders delves into the lives of the individuals who played a crucial role in the development of the industry in Utah.

This book shows, in great detail, the hardship of papermaking to service the community that settled in Salt Lake City. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints heavily depended on paper and printing to keep their community tight-knit and informed, and to recruit new followers into their faith. Relying on paper imported from the east meant frequent shortages and long delays in printing. The need for paper spurred the Church to invest in the machines and expertise needed to make paper locally. Saunders details the struggle to get proper machinery to set up a paper mill, the lack of surplus rags available in the community to be used for paper, and the lack of water, all of which contributed to papermaking’s short-lived success in the region.

From an archival perspective, this book is fascinating because it clearly demonstrates how some histories are preserved and others lost. Saunders draws heavily on archival sources such as church correspondence and newspapers to document the papermaking industry in Utah. While the paper produced in Utah was of low quality, it survives because the Church had an interest in preserving their history. Without the Church’s effort, this history of papermaking would be lost to time.

Overall, Reams in the Desert: Papermaking in Utah, 1849–1893 is an informative and engaging book that provides a fascinating glimpse into the history of papermaking in Utah and the people who made it possible.