Topsfield, Massachusetts: Ancestral Home of the Prophet Joseph Smith

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Much has been written concerning the ancestors of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Almost every biographical or historical account refers to his forebears. Those writers unsympathetic to the Church have branded his ancestors as irresponsible, even demented, people, while writers friendly to the Church have consistently described the Smiths in terms of the steadfast qualities, such as honesty and sobriety, generally associated with early America.

Although the Smith family has received ample attention, almost nothing has been written concerning the place where they resided. Five generations of the Smith family lived in Topsfield, Massachusetts, before Joseph Smith, Jr. was born, and yet we know very little about this significant town. Does not the place have something to tell us concerning the Smith family and indeed the Prophet himself? Physical and social environment as well as home and family help mold the lives of men and women.

Visiting Topsfield today, one discovers a well-kept, quiet New England village. The normal visual manifestations of the New England town such as the white frame meetinghouse, the common, and colonial homes meet the eye as soon as one enters Topsfield. Here, only a few miles from the frenetic pace of Boston, one finds the solace and peace associated with the small New England town. Indeed, at least once a

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year, the residents of Topsfield gather together in the schoolhouse and hold a town meeting. In such meetings the people choose their officials and conduct the major business of the town, much as they have done since colonial times.[1]

Situated on the North Shore of Massachusetts about twenty miles north of Boston and ten miles southeast of Lawrence, Topsfield is a so-called bedroom city of some 5,000 people. In its role as a bedroom suburb for Greater Boston, Topsfield has grown rapidly since World War II, from 1,412 in 1950 to 5,225 in 1970. Comprising a land area of 12.80 square miles the town has a population density of 408 persons per square mile. The town is 99.8% white, predominantly Republican, and has a median annual income of $8,745. Economically, it is a progressive rural community with a modest amount of small-scale manufacturing.[2]

Topsfield, located at the center of Essex County, is noted for its rolling hills. These rounded elevations, thrown up by a retreating sheet of ice in the glacial period, form a kind of barrier around the edge of the town. They bear such names as Great Hill, Town Hill, and Witch Hill. Much of the land in the town consists of a thin coating of sand and gravel which covers a layer of bed-rock. Almost everywhere in the valley where the town is located, one can drill and secure water. The Ipswich River runs through the southerly and easterly portion of the township, and into it flow the important tributary brooks Pye, Howlett, Mile, Fish, and Nichols. In the rich meadow land along the banks of the river are found large deposits of peat. Topsfield is heavily wooded and boulders of all sizes and shapes abound. On the outskirts of the village are excellent farmlands, especially along the river banks.[3]

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[1]*Annual Report of the Town of Topsfield, Massachusetts,* 1969, 1970, 1971.

[2]Massachusetts Department of Commerce and Development, *City and Town Monographs: Town of Topsfield* (Boston, Mass.: Massachusetts Department of Commerce and Development, 1971); Topsfield Conservation Commission, *Open Space Plan, 1970* (Topsfield, Mass.: Town of Topsfield, 1970).

[3]George Francis Dow, *History of Topsfield Massachusetts* (Topsfield, Mass.: The Topsfield Historical Society, 1940), pp. 475-479; John Henry Sears, *The Physical Geography, Geology, Mineralogy, and Paleontology of Essex County, Massachusetts* (Salem, Mass.: The Essex Institute, 1861), pp. 259-290; Samuel S. MacKenzie, "Geology of Topsfield," *Essex Institute Proceedings,* 3:49-55 (1861); Ralph H. Brown, *The Historical Geography of the United States* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1948), pp. 13-15, 52-54, 98.

Topsfield has a rich architectural heritage. In close proximity to the common, or village green (as some Topsfield residents refer to it) are several excellent examples of colonial architecture. Best known of all colonial homes in Topsfield is the Parson Capen House. Guides to Topsfield and Essex County, architectural studies of New England and many other published works refer to the Parson Capen House as an architectural treasure. Reverend Joseph Capen, Minister of the church in Topsfield, built the house in the summer of 1683. Patterned after the frame homes the colonists knew in England, the house has a framework of heavy oak timbers mortised and tenoned together. The exterior walls are covered with clapboards and there is a second story overhang in the garrison style. Acquired by the Topsfield Historical Society in 1913, it has been carefully restored and is open to the public during the summer.[4]

In this quaint village the spirit of colonial America lives on in the twentieth century. This spirit was best described by one speaker during the 250th anniversary of the town:

> "Let Topsfield continue as it is—a place of agricultural industry and modest manufacturing interests; an increasingly residential community; nature's retreat for weary bodies and tired brains; a home of virtue and a source of life for the nation. . . ."[5]

But what of Topsfield's past? What kind of a town was it when ancestors of Joseph Smith walked its streets? Was it a typical New England town or did it have a unique history?

Concerning the question of typicality, recent historical studies show that the traditional notion of the typical New England town is largely incorrect. Historical research of the past decade demonstrates that each town must be considered as a separate and distinct entity, not a part of a related whole. In his *Puritan Village,* Sumner Chilton Powell explains that not just Englishmen, but various types of Englishmen came to New England. Consequently, he claims that they created many

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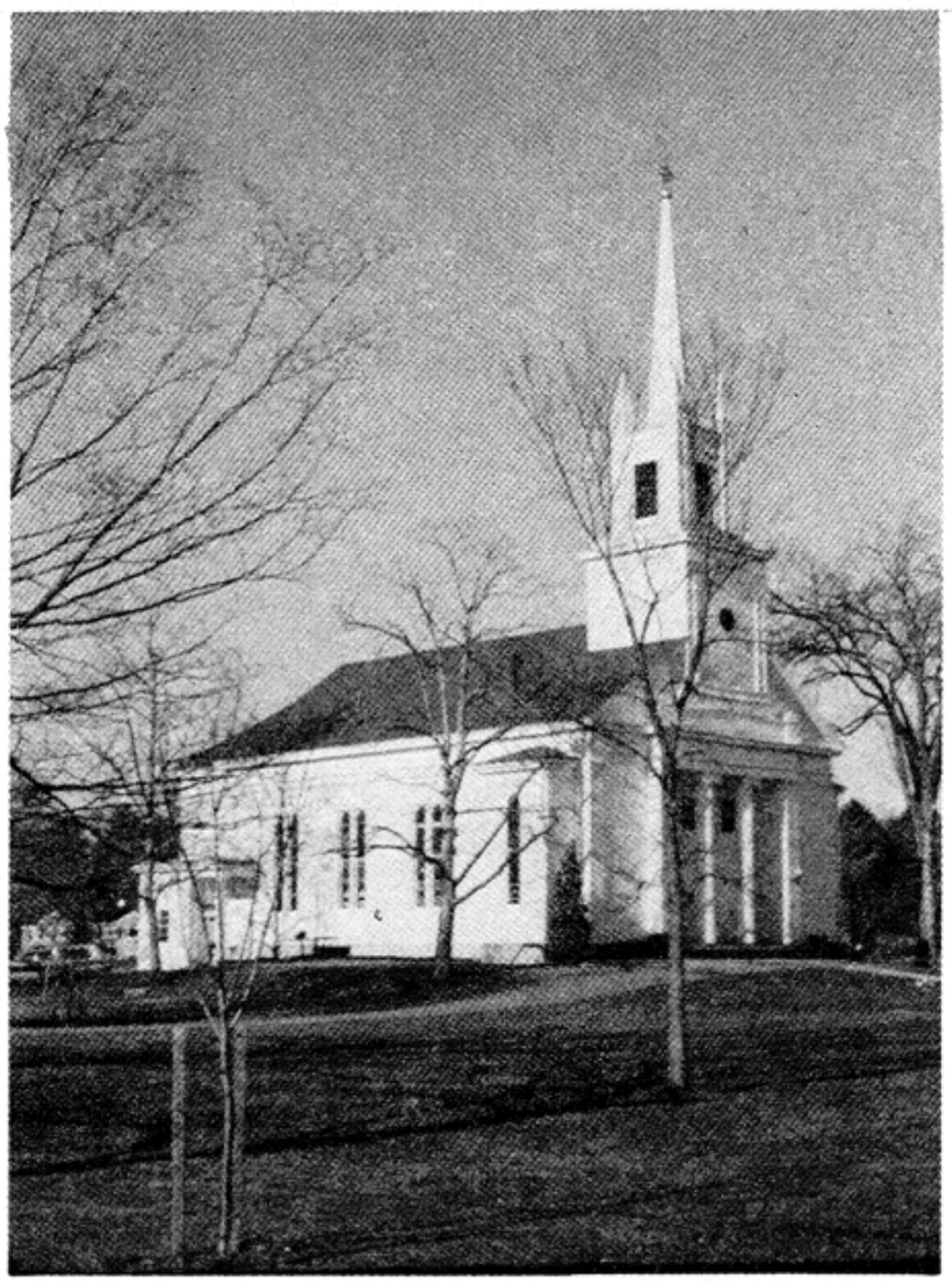
[4]Hugh Morrison, *Early American Architecture: From the Colonial Settlements to the National Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952) pp. 57-59; William H. Pierson, Jr., *American Buildings and Their Architects*s *The Colonial and New-Classical Styles* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1970), pp. 50-53, 58; Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 447-450.

[5]*Proceedings of the Celebration of the Two-Hundred-and Fiftieth Anniversary of the incorporation of Topsfield, Massachusetts* (Topsfield, Mass.: Merrill Press, 1901), p. 28.

Reverend Joseph Capen built this house in the late seventeenth century. Framed with oak timbers and covered with clapboard, it is a valuable example of the more substantial architecture of the period.



The Congregational Meetinghouse, a center for religious as well as community activities in early Topsfield.

distinct towns, each with its own origin, its own character, and each different from the towns in Old England.[6] Kenneth Lockridge explains in his study of Dedham, Massachusetts, that the New England town has been a myth—one of the great American myths. He seeks to discredit that myth by describing Dedham's own true history as a record of change—a transition from a static rural community to a thriving commercial and manufacturing center. While suggesting that other New England towns changed also, Lockridge maintains that each alteration was unique. No two towns experienced quite the same transformation.[7] Finally, Rhys Isaac cautions: "there are grave difficulties in the construction of a picture of the larger society from the study of the microcosm. It would be misleading to proceed by the simple multiplication of a supposedly typical example."[8]

Any examination of Topsfield during the colonial period, then, must proceed on the assumption that this town experienced a unique historical development, one which may or may not have been like the experience of any other New England town.

Captain John Smith and other English explorers had described the North Shore and the Ipswich River long before the establishment of permanent settlements in New England. In fact, the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony had heard of Ipswich and thought of settling there. The earliest settlements in the area occurred not at Topsfield, but at the mouth of the Ipswich River where the town of Ipswich is now located. Ipswich, or Agawam, as it was then known, was settled by John Winthrop, Jr., in 1633. Agawam took its name from the most prominent local Indian tribe, the Agawams.[9]

Soon after settling Agawam (Ipswich), settlers began to move upriver; they came to a place known as she-ne-we-medy, "the pleasant place of the flowing waters." This area, dubbed

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[6]Summer Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village*: (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1965, pp. xv, 178-179.

[7]Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1970), pp. xi, 91-93, 172-174.

[8]Rhys Isaac, "Order and Growth, Authority and Meaning in Colonial New England," *The American Historical Review,* vol. 76, no. 3 (June 1971), p. 736.

[9]George F. Dow, "The Settlement of Topsfield," *The Historical Collections of the Topsfield Historical Society,* 1:15-18 (1895). (Hereafter referred to as *Topsfield Historical Collections*).

"New Meadows" because of the extensive meadowland along the river, became the nucleus of Topsfield. The earliest settlers moved into the Topsfield area about 1641. While extant records do not show who settled there first, most of the early townspeople were prominent men in Massachusetts Bay. The earliest records contain such names as Dorman, Bradstreet, Endicott, Gould, Curtis, Bixby, and Redington.[10]

These people had participated in a great English folk migration during the first half of the seventeenth century. Because of economic dislocation, political turmoil, religious persecutions, and general insecurity, they joined others who had left their native land to create a new nation across the stormy Atlantic. They came from all parts of England and from many different walks of life. Enticed by promotional literature and motivated by the hope of improving their lot in the New World, "these ordinary men and women had together performed the most daring act of modern history when they succeeded in planting a new nation where none before had stood."[11]

Some of those who settled at New Meadows, later Topsfield, came from Essex County, England, so naturally they used place names from English Essex to designate their new settlements in Massachusetts Bay. Samuel Symonds, who owned five hundred acres at New Meadows had come from Toppesfield, a small parish in Essex County, England. His ancestral home had been named after Topp, a Saxon Chieftan who crossed the North Sea from the Friesian Islands about 550 A.D. Seeking to honor and perhaps remember his home in England, Symonds, an assistant in the Massachusetts General Court, changed the name New Meadows to Toppesfield in October 1648. Eventually the residents of the village simplified and shortened the English spelling to Topsfield.[12]

According to George Francis Dow, the foremost authority on Topsfield history, "farming was the chief occupation of the first settlers here and has continued to be through all the

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[10]Dow, *History of Topsfield*, pp. 1-30.

[11]Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen, 1590-1642* (New York: *Oxford University Press,* 1968), p. 476.

[12]Allan Forbes, "Namesake Towns in Our Essex County," *The Essex Institute Historical Collections,* 81:270 (1945); "On The Origin of the Names of Towns in Massachusetts," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society,* 12:397 (1873).

years."[13] Most of the early settlers had been farmers in England so they farmed in New England, too. The unusually rich farmlands along the river had attracted settlers from Ipswich, and they set about the task of making the land productive. Corn, the main crop all along the Atlantic seaboard in the colonial period, became the major crop of Topsfield farmers as well. Native to the New World, and introduced to the settlers by the Indians, corn had many purposes: food for man, fodder for animals, and bedding for the home.[14]

Corn grinding, a logical outgrowth of the production of corn, became an important economic enterprise. At first, Topsfield farmers carried their corn to Ipswich. In the 1660s, however, two grist mills were erected in Topsfield, one by Francis Peabody and another by the Howlett family.[15]

One rather unusual agricultural enterprise capitalized on one of the major natural resources of the Massachusetts marshlands. The salt marshes of Essex County yielded sizeable quantities of salt grass, supposedly more desirable for feeding horses and cattle than hay grown in fresh water meadows. Described by Captain John Smith, this salt grass or hay attracted the attention of these farmers from England because they had cut such hay in their homeland. Harvesting salt grass was hard work, but these ambitious Yankees harvested about six hundred tons of salt grass annually during the colonial era. Often, neighbors from adjacent farms would share the arduous task, the men working in the marsh, while the women prepared their food. Topsfield's farmers used salt hay not only for feed, but also for thatch for their crude dwellings, and to protect early vegetables in the fields.[16]

Topsfield farms also produced flax and wool, used in spinning and weaving cloth. Most textile manufacturing, however, was done on a domestic rather than a commercial scale, the home serving as the center of the early textile industry. Hides from domestic and wild animals were processed in Tops-

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[13]Dow, *History of Topsfield,* p. 354.

[14]Ibid., pp. 354-355; D. Hamilton Hurd, *History of Essex County Massachusetts, With Biographical Sketches of its Pioneers and Prominent Men,* 2 *vols.* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis and Co., 1888), 2:982; Brown, *Historical Geography of the United States*, pp. 12, 15, 22.

[15]John H. Town, "Francis Peabody's Grist Mill," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 1:39-45 (1895).

[16]Henry F. Long, "The Salt Marshes of the Massachusetts Coast," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 15:105-123 (1910).

field tanneries and much of the leather was used in shoe manufacturing. Indeed, shoe manufacturing became the largest industry in the town, reaching its zenith in the early nineteenth century. Some Topsfield residents worked in Topsfield shoe factories, while other commuted to work in factories in Danvers and other nearby communities.

Many of the trades and crafts commonly found in England also appeared in early Topsfield. Edmund Bridges, the first blacksmith, set up his shop in 1661.[17] For Topsfield residents his work was indispensable. He not only shod horses, but manufactured household tools and farm implements as well. Town records dating back as early as 1654 carry the names of carpenters and cabinetmakers. By the eighteenth century a carpenters union had been formed. Topsfield's first cooper, Isaac Estey, began making barrels in 1661. Asael Smith, grandfather of the Prophet, worked for a time as a cooper in Topsfield.[18] Not unlike their counterparts in many other towns in colonial America, the residents of Topsfield searched earnestly and doggedly for precious metals, hoping perhaps to rival the wealth of the Spanish colonies in the New World. In 1648, Governor Endicott, who owned property in Topsfield, employed Richard Leader, the man in charge of the famed Saugus Iron Works, to mine copper on his land. Although Leader had "skill in mynes and tryall of metalls," the copper mining venture failed. In 1770 William Buntin, an English promoter, reopened the copper mines, and managed to extract some copper ore, but the mine failed to produce enough to make the operation pay.[19]

Topsfield had no distinct class of men practicing medicine—no doctors in the modern sense—in colonial days. Men of other callings practiced medicine as a sideline. A schoolmaster, for example, might also work as a doctor. Indeed, practicing the adage, "everyman his own doctor," each family met most of its own medical needs. Almost every household had its own herb garden, and every wife and mother could apply quaint household remedies to ease pain and comfort the sick. In addition to dispensing wormwood, dandelion, parsley,

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[17]Dow, *History of Topsfield*, pp. 357-359.
[18]Ibid., pp. 360-363.
[19]Essex County Registry of Deeds, Vol. 129, leaf 58; George F. Dow, "Topsfield Copper Mines," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, 65: 570-580 (1916).

sage, and mint, some Topsfield mothers reduced fever by binding two salt water herring to the soles of the patient's feet. In keeping with medical theory of the day, bleeding and leeches were also employed. By 1740 some of these customs began to diminish as Topsfield's first full-time, trained physician, Richard Dexter, began his practice.[20]

In colonial Topsfield, poverty and wealth existed side by side. Although all houses conformed basically to English styles, they ranged from crude huts to elaborate mansion-like dwellings. Looking inside the house, with assistance from Essex County probate records, one discovers, in general, modest furniture and possessions. The kitchen, often referred to as the hall in the seventeenth century, was the center of the household. Culinary activities centered, in turn, around the huge fireplace with its pots and kettles suspended from pot chains. In front of the fireplace stood plain tables, chairs and cupboards. Here, the average family dined simply on corn meal, boiled meat and vegetables. Residents of colonial Topsfield often used sand to clean their floors, both in the kitchen and elsewhere. The so-called "better" families had rugs and carpets and consequently employed other cleaning materials. The work in these more prosperous homes was performed not only by the family, but by servants as well. Some of the latter were indentured servants, having to work a certain number of years in order to pay for their passage to America. Once their term of service ended, they received "freedom dues," clothing, tools, and land, to get them started on their own.[21]

Religion played a major role in the lives of the people who resided in Topsfield prior to the Revolution. From the time of the earliest settlements provisions were made for the public worship of God. In the colonial period, Topsfield's major church was, of course, the Congregational church. Although Topsfield did not erect its first meetinghouse until 1643, one William Knight had preached the word of God as early as 1641. He did not remain permanently, and in 1655 the Rev-

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[20]Richard H. Shryock, "Eighteenth Century Medicine in America," *The Antiquarian Society Proceedings,* 59:275-292 (1949); Henry F. Long, "The Physicians of Topsfield, with Some Account of Early Medical Practice," *The Essex Institute Historcal Collection,* 47:197-229 (1911); Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), pp. 207-240.

[21]Essex County Probate Files, Docket 14,093; Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 81-95.

erend William Perkins of Gloucester arrived in Topsfield and made arrangements for the erection of a meetinghouse. Upon completion of the meetinghouse and with the establishment of the first regular church, the townspeople replaced Reverend Perkins, maintaining that he was too old. His replacement, the Reverend Thomas Gilbert of Charleston, was ordained on 4 November 1663. Reverend Gilbert remained until 1671 when he was tried for intemperance, having become intoxicated at the table of the Lord's Supper. His replacement, Jeremiah Hobart, arranged for the construction of a stone wall to protect the meetinghouse during King Philip's War. In 1681 Parson Capen, the owner of the famed house bearing his name, arrived in Topsfield, and thus began the most auspicious period in the history of the Congregational church of Topsfield. The Reverend Joseph Capen served for more than three decades as minister, and under his leadership church membership increased and the quality of religious life improved.[22]

A close examination of the records and history of the Congregational church in Topsfield reveals considerable strife and friction among its members. The members of the congregation quarreled frequently with the ministers over such matters as proper conduct, salaries, church membership, and seating arrangements. The rapid turnover in ministerial personnel is evidence of this friction. The seating of townsfolk in the meetinghouse, for example, was a matter of no little consequence. On 20 May 1760, a special committee of twelve men was appointed to seat the people according to their "best skill and judgment." Some of the pews in the new meetinghouse had been previously sold to the wealthier members of the community, but the committee had to wrestle with the problem of seating the remainder of the congregation. Those who could not purchase a pew were seated by the committee, the men and women being segregated.[23]

The sermons preached in colonial Topsfield remind one of Puritan sermons preached elsewhere in New England. Abundantly studded with scriptural citations, each sermon was designed to communicate one central message. In organization, it

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[22]*Historical Manual of the Congregational Church of Topsfield, Massachusetts*, 1663-1907 (Topsfield, Mass.: Published by the Church, 1907), pp. 5-15; Dow *History of Topsfield,* pp. 246-264, 271-280.

[23]Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 253-264, 271-273.

resembled a legal brief, including the proposition to be considered, the reasons for its consideration, and other legalistic formulations. Sermons of that day filled two or three hours and provided ample food for thought.[24]

It is difficult for most twentieth-century Americans to imagine the intense concern with spiritual matters demonstrated by the people of seventeenth-century Topsfield, Massachusetts. Religion filled much of their lives, indeed gave direction to them. That they took religion seriously is demonstrated by the recording of numerous public confessions before the entire congregation. Thus, Jacob Towne and his wife confessed before their fellow church members that they had known each other carnally before they were married.[25]

The Congregational church and the town maintained a cemetery from the earliest period of settlement. While the exact location of the earliest burial ground is not known, it was probably adjacent to the earliest meetinghouse. The oldest cemetery still in use, Pine Grove Cemetery, contains tombstones with legible inscriptions running back as far as 1717. In this cemetery are such notables as the Reverend Joseph Capen (1659-1728), the Reverend John Emerson (1707-1774), Major Joseph Gould (1763-1803), and the ancestors of Joseph Smith.[26]

Residents of colonial Topsfield carefully looked after their educational as well as their spiritual needs. Initially, the burden of education fell upon individual families. Indeed, during most of the colonial era, even public school classes convened in private homes. The townspeople did not erect a schoolhouse until late in the colonial period. Beginning in 1694 the town of Topsfield hired one man each year to serve as schoolmaster. Until a public building was erected the schoolmaster boarded with families near the houses where school was held. Much of the record of early education in Topsfield contains information about struggles to obtain money and buildings—a struggle between various factions in the town. Clearly, educa-

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[24]A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of Mr. Joseph Green late Pastor of the Church in Salem Village, by Joseph Capen" *Topsfield Historical Collections*, 12:5-38 (1907).

[25]George F. Dow, "Records of the Congregational Church in Topsfield," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 14:11 (1909).

[26]Interview with Mr. Wallace Kneeland, superintendent of Topsfield cemeteries, 2 September 1971; Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 430-436.

tion was a part of the democratic process—not something imposed by a ruling caste.[27]

Travel was an ordeal in colonial Topsfield. Descriptions of the early roadways within the town and of those connecting Topsfield with other towns paint a picture of primitive, inadequate roads, often no more than widened Indian trails. Maintenance of public highways required teamwork and every able-bodied male citizen had to report for road work periodically to provide such maintenance. In keeping with New England custom, the road leading to a certain town bore the name of that town; thus, Salem Street led to Salem and Boxford Street to Boxford.[28]

In colonial America roads existed for the conduct of commerce, but most important, they existed for the benefit of the postal system. Originally, the Salem post office handled mail for Topsfield and many other Essex County communities. Eventually, however, Topsfield got its own postmaster. The Topsfield Postmaster, like the postmaster in many parts of colonial America, was a "Jack of all trades." This busy man not only handled the mail but also took care of all freight business for Topsfield and taught penmanship.[29]

The town of Topsfield concerned itself not only with communication and transportations, but also with caring for the poor and needy within its borders. Although few of the early settlers of Topsfield were wealthy, few were poor. Most managed to care for themselves. The first poor person to receive aid was Luke Wakeling. In 1663 the town bought a cow for Luke and his family. Harking back to an English tradition, Topsfield officials often solved problems of poverty by "warning" undesirables out of town. People who had moved from other towns and would not support themselves were forced to leave; thus Evan Morris, described as a "shiftless, indolent fellow," had to leave Topsfield. Topsfield preferred to have its legitimate poor earn their way; consequently, people receiving poor relief would perform tasks such as digging graves in return for the assistance they received. Occasionally, people boarded destitute persons in their homes and received a reimbursement for expenses from the town officials. Although

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[27]Dow, *History of Topsfield*, pp. 296-303.
[28]Ibid., pp. 98-123.
[29]Henry Follansbee Long, "The Post Office in Topsfield With Some Account of the Postmasters," *Topsfield Historical Collections*, 13:23 (1908).

town meetings frequently discussed the construction of an almshouse, Topsfield did not build one until 1822.[30]

In seventeenth-century Topsfield another social problem of major concern was witchcraft. Although overshadowed by its neighbors, Salem Village and Salem, Topsfield also figured prominently in the famous witchcraft episode of the 1690s. As one study expressed it, "Topsfield's connection with the witchcraft delusion in Salem Village (now Danvers) is of much importance historically and has a greater claim upon the notice of the historian of that period than generally has been conceded."[31]

Topsfield's involvement in the witchcraft episode in Salem Village centered on disputes over boundaries and ownership of land. One of the most persistent disputes may have arisen from a clerical error made by the Massachusetts General Court as early as 1639. This first came into the open in 1668 when Topsfield divided up some common land on the south bank of the Ipswich River near the property of Thomas Putnam of Salem Village. Described as strong-willed men, eager for controversy, the Putnams easily became the center of conflict. Arrests followed accusations, and executions followed trials in this period of frenzy and distrust. Many of the characters of the famous Salem witch trials were actually residents of Topsfield. Anne Putnam, Rebecca Nurse, Mary Easty, and Sarah Wilds, all of Topsfield, became principal participants in the trials and executions in Salem. Indeed, Mary Easty was hanged on Gallows Hill in Salem on 22 September 1692. Ultimately, the people of Topsfield and other villages came to their senses and the witchcraft delusion ended. In Topsfield, and elsewhere, pardons were granted to those convicted on insufficient evidence and reparations were paid to the unfortunate relatives of the condemned.[32]

The only town government, which dealt with such problems as witchcraft, was the town meeting so often associated with co-

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[30]Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 343-353.

[31]Mrs. Abbie Peterson Towne and Miss Marietta Clark, "Topsfield in the Witchcraft Delusion," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 13:23 (1908).

[32]Towne and Clark, "Topsfield in the Witchcraft Delusion," pp. 23-38; George F. Dow, "Witchcraft Records Pertaining to Topsfield," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 13:39-143 (1908). Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 320-342; See also Essex County Court Records, Essex Institute Manuscript Collections, Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts.

lonial New England. Originally scheduled for the first Tuesday in March, annual town meetings in Topsfield convened as early as 1664. Settled in the late 1630s and officially incorporated in 1650, Topsfield obviously had some form of government prior to 1664. Unfortunately, many early records were destroyed by fire; consequently 1664 is the earliest year for which records exist. Initially, only the "freemen"—those involved in the original settlement and incorporation—could vote. Later, all "commoners" could vote. According to Topsfield's standards and definition a commoner was an Englishman of orthodox religion, who owned a specified amount of real or personal property. Thus, Topsfield imposed religious and property qualifications for voting. In this sense, Topsfield differed little from many other New England towns.[33]

Town meetings could not be convened without adequate warning and notice, including the posting of a notice on the meetinghouse door. According to records of the town meetings, matters that came within the purview of the town government included land grants, boundaries, taxes, highways, bridges, provision for the poor, care of common lands, and public morals. Officials elected in early town meetings included town clerks, selectmen, constables, and jurymen for trials held in Ipswich. In the period between town meetings these town officials had the responsibility of conducting the affairs of government. They knew, however, that the town meeting would hold them accountable for their actions. From the earliest times, town meetings convened in the meetinghouse. Occasionally, however, during periods of repair and renovation on the meetinghouse, the townsfolk gathered at a local inn. A town hall was not constructed until after the Civil War.[34]

During the frequent intercolonial wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Topsfield's town fathers had the responsibility of defending the town against attack and providing solidiers for offensive operations against the foe. The earliest residents of Topsfield maintained membership in the militia of Ipswich, the first independent militia in Topsfield being established in 1662. All able bodied men between 16 and 45 years of age had to belong to the militia company, attend training sessions, and fight, if called up.[35]

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[33]Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 73-80.
[34]Ibid.
[35]Ibid., pp. 124-127.

Topsfield did call upon its militia for defense several times during the first century and a half of its existence. The first Topsfield militia members to engage in a general conflict were those who participated in King Philip's War (1675-77). While only incidentally engaged in that Indian uprising, Topsfield's military forces made a substantial contribution to the series of intercolonial wars against the French and their Indian allies. Official military records indicate that Topsfield residents fought in King William's War (1689-97), Queen Anne's War (1702-13), King George's War (1740-48), and the French and Indian War (1754-63). Indeed, Topsfield men participated in the capture of Louisbourg, "the Gibralter of the North," during King George's War. The capture of that supposedly impregnable Canadian fortress on Cape Breton Island ranks as one of the outstanding military achievements of the American colonists during the long series of wars against the French.[36]

Although participating in all of the intercolonial wars, Topsfield made its greatest military contribution during the American Revolution. Relying upon more than a century of experience, Topsfield's Minute Men played an important role in many of the battles of the War of Independence. Thus, Topsfield men saw action at Lexington and Concord, at the Battle of Bunker Hill, in the New York Campaign of 1776, and at the Battle of Trenton. It was during this struggle against Great Britain that one of Joseph Smith's most illustrious ancestors, Samuel Smith II, distinguished himself.[37]

By the time the American Revolution drew to a close, Topsfield had become a thriving New England town. Travelers and visitors extolled its progress and praised its natural beauty. Thus, the Reverend William Bentley of Salem described Topsfield as "one of the most pleasing towns in our neighborhood."[38]

Having considered the social and physical environment of

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[36]Ibid.; Massachusetts Archives, vols. 71-72.

[37]Dow, *History of Topsfield,* pp. 167-197; Brigham H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News Press, 1930), 1:3-4. (Hereafter referred to as *CHC.*)

[38]George F. Dow, "Extracts From the Diary of Rev. William Bentley Relating to Topsfield," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 20:50 (1915). *The Diary of William Bentley,* D.D., 4 vols. (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1952), pp. 17-20.

early Topsfield, it remains to examine the role played by the Smith family in the community. Since this story has been told elsewhere,[39] only a brief sketch is necessary within the context of this study.

The five generations of the Smith family who resided in Topsfield before the birth of the Prophet included Robert Smith, Samuel Smith (I), Samuel Smith (II), Asael Smith, and Joseph Smith, Sr. For almost two centuries the Smiths were regarded as solid members of the community. In a recent study, Richard Lloyd Anderson has described the ancestors of the Prophet as possessing "moral responsibility, unselfisness, personal tenacity, intellectual awareness, and intelligent sincereity."[40]

Histories of the Church, biographies of the Smiths, and Topsfield historical records agree on at least three characteristics which the Smiths of Topsfield shared: patriotism, religiosity, and socio-economic success. While all five generations of Joseph Smith's ancestors demonstrated patriotic virtues, Samuel Smith (II) and Asael Smith seemed best to exemplify love of country. Samuel Smith served in the General Court, the state legislature, on committees of correspondence prior to the Revolution, and held a number of local offices. Known as "Captain Samuel Smith," he distinguished himself in the Topsfield militia. While his father, Samuel (II), served as an officer in the Revolution, Asael enlisted as a soldier and saw military action in New York. In an address written on 10 April 1799, Asael Smith urged his family to be loyal to the United States and impressed upon them his own sense of patriotism and conviction that the Constitution was inspired. Clearly, the ancestors of the Prophet Joseph Smith were as patriotic as any of the founding fathers.[41]

The ancestors of the Prophet loved God as well as country. Church records and historical accounts provide substantial evidence to prove that all five generations of Smiths who resided

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[39]The general histories of the Church as well as most biographical studies of Joseph Smith and his ancestors deal with this matter. See especially Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1971).

[40]Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage,* p. 159.

[41]Ibid., pp. 82-92; *CHC,* 1:2-5; Joseph F. Smith, Jr., "Asahel Smith of Topsfield, With Some Account of the Smith Family," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 8:87-101 (1902). Note: Joseph Smith, Jr. is now commonly referred to as Joseph Fielding Smith; Dow, *History of Topsfield,* p. 167.

in Topsfield were sincerely religious. While Robert, Samuel (I), and Samuel (II) affiliated with the Congregational Church, Asael advocated the beliefs of the Universalist Church. Throughout his life Asael Smith endeavored to teach his children and grandchildren the basic tenets of Christianity. A man of practiced integrity and uncompromising honesty, Asael Smith emulated the life of Jesus Christ in whom he so firmly believed. It was this kind of faith that Asael Smith bequeathed his son Joseph Smith, Sr., and his grandson Joseph Smith, Jr.[42]

Recognized for their patriotism and religiousness, the ancestors of Joseph Smith also gained recognition for their socio-economic achievements. Their contemporaries referred to them as pillars of the community and their property holdings demonstrate their relative affluence. The most impressive property acquired by the Smiths was the farm where the well-known Smith-Dorman house was located. Situated on Pye Brook, this property was the site of a grist mill operated by Francis Peabody as early as 1665. In 1690 Thomas Dorman built a house there. Sometime after 1755, Samuel Smith acquired the house and land and conveyed it to his son Asael on 24 March 1786. Joseph Smith, Sr., was born in this house 12 July 1771. The birthplace of the Prophet's father was a two-story colonial style farm house measuring forty by twenty feet. Asael Smith sold the property to Nathaniel Perkins Averill in 1791 for 270 pounds.[43]

While many know that Joseph Smith's ancestors lived in Topsfield, few realize that some of Brigham Young's ancestors also resided there. Through his mother, Abigail Howe, Brigham Young was related to Francis Peabody, an ancestor of Joseph Smith, who lived in a house about a quarter of a mile from the Smith home.[44]

And what of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young: did they

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[42]George F. Dow, "Records of the Congregational Church in Topsfield," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 14:8, 23 (1909); George F. Dow, "Baptismal Records of the Church in Topsfield," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 1:1 (1895); Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage,* pp. 105-108.

[43]Sidney Perley, *History of Boxford, Essex County, Massachusetts* (Boxford, Mass.: Published by the author, 1880), pp. 33-34; John H. Towne, "Francis Peabody's Gristmill," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 1:39-45 (1895); Sidney Perley, "Topsfield Houses and Lands," *Topsfield Historical Collections,* 29:87-88 (1928). The house in which the Smiths resided was taken down in about 1875. The present house had been built in the meantime, during the nineteenth century. The property is presently owned by Levi C. Wade, Jr. There are no markers or signs to indicate the historical significance of the property.

[44]*Topsfield Historical Collections,* 30:120 (1933).

ever visit Topsfield? Although no direct evidence exists to substantiate such a visit by either man, it is a well-documented fact that they visited nearby Salem, Massachusetts. Following his leg operation in Lebanon, New Hampshire, Joseph Smith, then only eight years of age, went to the home of his uncle Jesse Smith, in Salem, Massachusetts, to recuperate.[45] Many years later, in 1836, after he and the Church had moved from New York to Ohio, Joseph Smith again visited Salem. One scholar believes that the purpose of this second visit was to find buried treasure supposedly hidden in Salem.[46] Certainly the Church was in dire need of financial assistance and thus one motive for the journey to Salem might have been to find the treasure reputedly located there. Section 3 of the Doctrine and Covenants, a revelation received by Joseph Smith on 6 August 1836, at Salem, does make reference to treasure located there, but the wording makes the meaning difficult and obscure. Joseph Smith's own account in his *Journal History* and in the *History of the Church* fails to mention anything about treasure or treasure hunting and dwells on the missionary activity in which they engaged. His account reads in part: "We . . . arrived in Salem, Massachusetts, early in August, where we hired a house, and occupied the same during the month, teaching people from house to house, and preaching publicly, as opportunity presented; visiting occasionally, sections of the surrounding country, rich in the history of the Pilgrim Fathers of New England. . . ."[47] From the evidence available, one might conclude that the purpose of Joseph Smith's second journey to Salem was both to enrich the Church and to do missionary work. Apparently, however, any alleged attempt to locate buried or hidden treasure was unsuccessful. From his statement concerning visits to "sections of the surrounding country" one might conclude that the Prophet also visited Topsfield, his ancestral home. At any rate, his second trip to Salem was a most interesting and unusual event.

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[45]Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1969), p. 33; Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 8.

[46]David R. Proper, "Joseph Smith and Salem," *Essex Institute Historical Collections,* vol. 100: 88-97 (1964).

[47]Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret News Press, 1965), 2:464 (hereafter referred to as *HC*). The same words are also found in the Journal History of the Church located at the Church Historian's Office in Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter referred to as JH).

Like his predecessor, Joseph Smith, Brigham Young was also in Salem and may have visited Topsfield, as well. While Joseph Smith was there on his second trip, Brigham Young arrived in the company of Lyman E. Johnson.[48] During the spring of the next year, 1837, Brigham Young returned to Salem for the purpose of calling on members of the Church and transacting business.[49] Thus, Brigham Young and Joseph Smith both sojourned in Salem and possibly in Topsfield, Massachusetts.

The name of Joseph Smith may or may not be familiar to residents of Topsfield today. It depends upon whom one asks. Newer residents, those who live in Topsfield as a "bedroom city" and commute to work in Boston, generally have not heard of the Prophet Joseph Smith. On the other hand, the old Yankee members of the community, those whose roots run far back into Topsfield's past, generally know of the founder of Mormonism. In separate interviews, the town librarian and the curator of the Topsfield Historical Society confirmed the fact that the older members of the community are aware that Topsfield *is* the ancestral home of Joseph Smith.[50]

Physical evidence of the Prophet's ancestors is scant. The home which some of his forebears occupied is no longer there. Not even a marker exists to identify the old Smith property. In the Pine Grove Cemetery, Topsfield's oldest surviving burial ground, one finds a single marker or monument to the Smith family erected by George Albert Smith in 1873. In the library, of course, there are historical and genealogical records of the five generations of Smiths who lived in this picturesque New England village during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Despite the lack of physical evidence or historical artifacts, the knowledge that Topsfield is the ancestral home of the Prophet is part of the lives of those who are descendants of Topsfield's founders. For Wallace Kneeland, superintendent of Topsfield cemeteries, Joseph Smith is a part of his experience. Mr. Kneeland enjoys chatting with members of the

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[48]*HC,* 2:466.

[49]*JH* (14 March 1837).

[50]Interviews with Mrs. Margaret J. Mayo, librarian of the town of Topsfield, 1 April 1971 and 16 October 1972. Interviews with Miss June Tilton, curator of the Topsfield Historical Society, 14 July 1970 and 2 September 1971. Miss Tilton is related to Joseph Smith through the Gould family of Topsfield. She has an excellent family history and genealogy in her possession.

The Smith family marker in Topsfield Pine Grove Cemetery. The monument was erected in 1873 by George Albert Smith.

Church who visit Topsfield today, either to pay homage to the Prophet's ancestors or to engage in genealogical research. Reminiscing about earlier visitors, Kneeland recalled that some Mormons came to Topsfield during the early part of the twentieth century and visited the site of the old Smith farm. He said that they carried off bits and pieces from the remains of the old house as souvenirs and also held religious services near the well on the former Smith property.[51] Wallace Kneeland, June Tilton and other descendants of the original founding families are proud that their town is the ancestral home of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

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[51]Interview with Wallace Kneeland, superintendent of Topsfield cemeteries, 2 September 1971.