

# Joseph Smith's Own Story of a Serious Childhood Illness



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The story of the Prophet Joseph Smith's serious childhood illness and subsequent harsh surgery by doctors upon his leg seems almost universally known by Latter-day Saints. Until recently the only source for the story has been the history written by Lucy Mack Smith, his mother.<sup>1</sup> This account, of course, is a third person account dictated about thirty-five years after the actual event occurred and therefore most certainly reflects anachronistically some of those years.

Fortunately, a first person account of this same childhood experience was recorded by Joseph Smith himself, and has recently been brought to light with the reexamination of his early history. It is a shorter account and was dictated by the Prophet some seven years before his mother's account was dictated.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith's account, as reproduced below, has apparently never before been published. These interesting passages present the Prophet's own recollection of the event. They also give new insight into the experiences of Joseph Smith as he moved from Vermont to New York, and shows that he was not completely recovered from his illness when this significant journey took place. This account should be compared with Lucy Mack Smith's history, chapters sixteen and seventeen.

## Account by the Prophet

When I was five years old or thereabouts I was attacked with the Typhus Fever, and at one time, during my sickness, my father dispaired of my life. The doctors broke the fever, after which it settled under my shoulder, and Dr. Parker called it a sprained shoulder and anointed it with bone ointment, and freely applied the hot shovel, when it proved to be a swelling under the arm which was opened, and discharged freely, after which the disease removed and descended into my left leg and ankle and terminated in a fever sore of the worst kind, and I endured the most acute suffering for a long time under the care of Drs. Smith, Stone and Perkins, of Hanover. At one time eleven Doctors came from Dartmouth Medical College, at Hanover, New Hampshire, for the purpose of amputation, but, young as I was, I utterly refused to give my assent to the operation, but consented to their Trying an experiment by removing a large portion of the bone from my left leg, which they did, and fourteen additional pieces of bone afterwards worked out before my leg healed, during which time I was reduced so very low that my mother could carry me with ease.

After I began to get about I went on crutches till I started for the State of New York where my father had gone for the purpose of preparing a place for the removal of his family, which he affected by sending a man after us by the name of Caleb Howard, who, after he had started on, the journey with my mother and family spent the money he had received of my father by drinking and gambling, etc.—We fell in with a family by the name of Gates who were travelling west, and Howard drove me from the wagon and made me travel in my weak state through the snow 40 miles per day for several days, during which time I suffered the most excruciating weariness and pain, and all this that Mr. Howard might enjoy the society of two of Mr. Gates daughters which he took on the wagon where I should have rode, and thus he continued to do day after day through the Journey and when my brothers remonstrated with Mr. Howard for his treatment to me, he would knock them down with the butt of his whip.—When we arrived at Utica, N. York Howard threw the goods out of the wagon into the street and attempted to run away with the Horses and wagon, but my mother seized the horses by the reign, and calling witnesses forbid his taking them away as they were her property. On our way from Utica, I was left to ride on the last sleigh in the company, (the Gates family were in sleighs) but when that came up I was knocked down by the driver, one of Gate's Sons, and left to wallow in my blood until a stranger came along, picked me up, and carried me to the Town of Palmyra.—Howard having spent all our funds My Mother was compelled to pay our landlords bills from Utica to Palmyra in bits of cloth, clothing, etc. the last payment being made with [drops?] taken from Sister Sophrona's [ears?], for that purpose. Although the snow was generally deep through the country during this Journey we performed the whole on wheels, except the first two days when we were accompanied by My Mother's mother, grandmother, Lydia Mack who was injured by the upsetting of the Sleigh, and not wishing to accompany her friends west, tarried by the way with her friends in Vermont, and we soon heard of her death suffering that she never recovered from the injury received by the overturn of the Sleigh.

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1. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, 1853), pp. 62–66. Lucy Mack Smith dictated most of this in 1845. It was later revised and published as *History of Joseph Smith*.

2. The document is found in Joseph Smith, "History," Book A-1, pp. 131–132, located in the LDS Church Historian's Office, Salt Lake City. It was dictated by Joseph Smith in 1838–1839. (See Dean C. Jesse, "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies*, Vol. IX, No. 3 [Spring, 1969], pp. 286–87.)