

How Authentic Are Mormon Historic Sites in Vermont and New York?

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T. Edgar Lyon

“Faith needs roots in stone and mortar that the future may learn from the past.” (Guideline of Restored Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.)

Commencing in 1903 The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, having firmly established itself in the Far West, was bold enough to turn its face eastward to look back at its places of origin. Under the direction of President Joseph F. Smith, Carthage Jail was the first site acquired in this movement, because of the nostalgic feelings of the Mormon people for their beloved prophet who had been murdered there. Still further eastward the Church leaders pursued the course of the Church which the previous century had seen moving ever westward. In Vermont and New York places of great historical, theological, and religious importance were located and purchased. Now, more than a half a century since this renewed interest in important historical sites, it is time for a second look and more thorough confirmation of places.

The Birthplace of Joseph Smith, Sharon, Vermont

Between 1905 and 1907 the Church acquired title to 283 acres of land in Sharon Township, Windsor County, Vermont, which included the homestead of the family which Lucy Mack Smith came from. Under the able management of Junius F. Wells, a memorial cottage was constructed and a massive granite monument to Joseph Smith, Jr., was erected. These were dedicated on the hundredth anniversary of the Prophet's birth, viz., December 23, 1905.¹ This was the beginning of the Church's efforts to identify and appropriately designate historic sites in the East which related to important events in the restoration of the gospel and the rounding and development of the Church.

Property deeds to the four parcels of land which constitute the old Mack homestead, and which were recorded in the proper courthouse records, make certain that this was the farming land of the progenitors of Lucy Mack Smith. On a tract of that extent, in days of premachine farming, it was inevitable that a number of dwellings would have been constructed for farm laborers during the course of the more than a century and a half prior to 1905. Assisted by property deeds, legal records, and local tradition,

Wells located the home site on which Joseph Smith, Sr., and his wife, Lucy Mack, were residing at the time of their son Joseph's birth. Wells reported that he found a pile of logs on the land which it was assumed had been the Smith residence, and ". . . down among the logs . . ." he found an old hearthstone.² This became the center about which the fireplace, hearth, and chimney were reconstructed as the memorial cottage was built. Today the hearthstone is separately memorialized and new buildings have replaced the cottage.

In 1905 little more could have been done to authenticate the site. But twentieth century historians can utilize newly developed social and mechanical sciences which are auxiliaries to their research. One of these is historic-site archaeology. The hearthstone may be the identical one by which Mother Smith cooked the meals and around which the family gathered for warmth during the long winter evenings. But it may have belonged to a dwelling at another site and been moved to the place it was found. Or it might also have come from an earlier house at that site or a residence built at the site after the Smiths moved to New York. No available information verifies whether it was resting, when found, upon the original foundation upon which it had been placed. This necessary information needs to be carefully pursued. If there is merit in locating and designating and memorializing sites connected with our history, there is also need to verify them as authentic sites as far as possible. The New England or New York sites need to be subjected to archaeological scrutiny.

The Sacred Grove, Manchester Township, New York

When the youthful Joseph Smith was spiritually aroused by the religious fervor which led some of the members of his family to become seekers themselves in the Presbyterian Church at Palmyra Township, New York, the Smiths were residing on their farm some three miles from the Palmyra town. The farmland they had purchased was mostly covered with native forests. To clear the land for agricultural use, they were forced to cut down many trees. Some of the trees were used for fences, others to build their log house and out-buildings, some for firewood. Many loads of cordwood were hauled to Palmyra and sold for fuel.³ In those years before coal, oil, or gas were available for fuel in rural areas, each farmer sought to provide wood for cooking and heating. Usually there was a part of each farm which was never completely cleared of trees. This was known as the "woodlot." By careful management the woodlot could provide the needed fuel, if only the mature or "ripe" trees were harvested from the "tree farm." Hearth heating and cooking were very inefficient, and required a great amount of fuel. For that reason the woodlots were often several acres in extent.

Whether the present acreage included in the Sacred Grove is the survival of the Smith woodlot has never been determined. There are records of such lots which, during the course of a century or more, "migrated" (and shifted) up to a quarter of a mile. This was the result of mature trees being cut and seedlings growing up nearby, seeded by the older trees, or planted by the owner. Sometimes a family decided to make the woodlot also serve as a windbreak, and in such cases it was brought closer to the house and barns, where it grew for years while the former lot was used to supply fuel, and when all was harvested the former woodlot was converted to tillable land. After state forestry departments and the United States Department of Agriculture commenced providing seedlings for windbreaks and woodlots at ridiculously low prices, such tree farms were continuously being moved, as it was found more advantageous to plant solid plots rather than depend on nature to seed the lot, which usually produced a haphazard growth of trees and left much land unproductive.

The present Sacred Grove has in it a few very large and hence old trees, and others ranging down to last year's seedlings. If this is the survival of a natural unplanted and unplanned family woodlot, it could possibly be the survival of part of the old wooded area into which the youthful Joseph went to pray. Or, it might be that he went to some other part of their more than a hundred acre farm, since much of it was still forest. An old resident of the vicinity stated many years ago that the present Sacred Grove was not there a hundred years ago, but that it was west and a little south of the present wooded area. Another conflicting account relates that when George Ed. Anderson of Springville, Utah, was making photographs in the Sacred Grove in 1907, he conversed with Mr. Chapman, the non-Mormon caretaker employed by the Church. He related that shortly before his father's death the elder Mr. Chapman (who owned the land) told him he had never used an axe in the grove except to remove dead timber. He urged his son who inherited the property to respect the wooded area in similar fashion. This message from father to son conveyed the belief that this was the very forest in which Joseph Smith had prayed and experienced the grand theophany which was the origin of the Mormon religion. The son followed his father's policy and allowed it to develop as a sylvan grove.⁴ It has been stated that the two largest trees in the grove have had cores cut from them which have been examined by experts, who counted the annual rings and reported the trees could have been saplings a hundred and fifty years ago. Other tree experts have questioned if the trees could be more than a century old.

For those interested in research concerning this matter, an examination of county or township records or mortgages, sales of property, leases,

inventories of estates, local newspaper accounts, letters, diaries, and memoirs of those who owned or leased property on this or neighboring farms between 1831 and 1907 might be helpful. Historic-site archaeologists could tell, through tracing former roadways, tree growth and decay, removal of stumps, etc., whether the land has been continuously forested, or the present stand is a result of a replant on what was once tilled ground.

The Joseph Smith, Sr., House at Manchester

Many years before the Church purchased the Smith "homestead" in 1907, the entire community designated the white frame house presently standing on the Smith farm in Manchester Township as the Smith residence. Such identification is not sufficiently reliable to be accepted as fact without further verification. Lucy Mack Smith's history relates that while they were yet residing in Palmyra they had erected a "snug log-house" on their farm southwest of town.⁵ Several contemporary writers confirm her story, indicating it had two rooms on the ground level, and a garret (or half story) above which likewise was divided into two rooms.⁶ Before the birth of their last child, Lucy, in 1821, an additional bedroom was added on the ground level, constructed of wooden slabs. By modern standards they were obviously crowded, the family then consisting of the parents and nine children. Alvin, the eldest son, decided to build a frame dwelling for his parents and worked away from home to secure means to make the annual payments on the land and get lumber for the proposed new home. Mother Smith, according to what she related to Howard and Martha Jane Knowlton Coray, who did the actual writing of her history, stated that the construction of the new house commenced in November 1822. Her account reads:

And when November 1822 arrived, the frame was raised, and all the materials necessary for the speedy completion were procured. This opened to Alvin's mind the pleasing prospect of seeing his father and mother once more comfortable and happy.⁷

Immediately following this statement, Mother Smith related that Alvin was taken suddenly ill on November 15, 1824, and died on the 19th, following a short and painful illness. Investigation into this account shows that Mother Smith was in error concerning the dates of both events. It appears that the commencement of the house and Alvin's death followed one another in the late autumn of 1823.⁸ It is on the basis of the investigations of these related events that Andrew Jenson, B. H. Roberts, and Joseph Fielding Smith came to the conclusion that the visitation of Moroni to Joseph Smith after he had retired to his bed on the night of September 21, 1823, took place in one of the garret rooms of the log house, rather than the frame house on which construction had not yet commenced.⁹

The statement, “. . . the frame was raised . . .” is a technical builder’s term and refers to the method of wooden house construction then in vogue. Heavy hardwood timbers were laid on stone or brick foundations. Sturdy upright corner posts were then mortised into the wooden sills and crossbeams laid atop the uprights to support the second floor. The process was repeated and then the crossbeams were laid to form the ceiling of the second floor and give support to the roof rafters. All of these were held together by mortise and tenon or dovetail joints inserted in each other. These were then pegged together by oak or hickory pins driven into holes bored with augers through the joining members. Wooden pins thus driven had been dry-heated, and when in place, would then expand by absorbing moisture from the atmosphere and make an extremely tight and durable joint. Such pins had the advantage over iron bolts in that they would not rust and weaken the locked joints as metal tended to do in damp climates. After this frame had been locked together, the studs for the exterior walls and interior partitions were mortised top and bottom into the sills and cross-members to form the nailing studs for attaching exterior siding and interior lath.¹⁰ This is in direct contrast to present building practices, in which the exterior studding supports the house, without the use of framed timbers as the skeleton of the house. It was this framework, without the clapboard enclosure or interior partitions, to which Mother Smith referred, and which apparently stood through the winter of 1823–1824, after which construction on the new house was continued. According to local witnesses previously cited, the Smiths moved into the new house before it was completely finished.

Individuals who lived in Palmyra during the Smiths’ residence at Manchester refer to their new house as a “small frame house.”¹¹ This hardly fits the present house, which is a comparatively large farmhouse of two stories. A house of this size would have been a venturesome undertaking for the Smith family which had experienced difficulty making the annual payments on the land and finally lost the farm shortly after completing the house through failure to make the final payment.¹² Before it can be ascertained that this present house, or only part of it, or possibly none of it, was the house the Smiths constructed, much research needs to be done.

The present house now standing on the Smith farm has recently been renovated and refurnished and is visited by thousands of people annually. Historic architects need to be consulted so they can determine what might be new, and what might be original in the house. They possess many skills of their trade which reveal with certainty the age of buildings and their additions. Old-fashioned square nails are not a positive clue as they are still being manufactured. The methods of manufacture have changed slowly and within bounds they provide some measurable information. Cut wire

nails are still more positive in their dating to a given year or two as these did not come into common use until the eighteen-nineties. The composition of plaster, the texture and manufacturing methods of brick, and the use of Portland cement products can likewise be used with a high degree of accuracy to establish dates of construction when studied by those trained in this type of analysis.

Another phase of study appears to have remained untouched concerning this house. Assessors' and tax collectors' records of the community covering the Smith occupancy of the Manchester house may indicate evidence which would help determine the accurate history of the house. They would reveal an increase in value when the new frame house was constructed and the old log house was turned into a barn. Followed through from 1820 to 1907 when the Church purchased the property, such records would indicate the years when an unusual increased valuation was levied because of a remodeling of, or additions were made to the house. Furthermore, estate papers or mortgage records might assist in establishing the changes which have taken place since 1823.

The Martin Harris Farm, Palmyra, New York

The present site of the Martin Harris farm north of Palmyra's main street has been authenticated. It was the farm Harris mortgaged to raise \$3,000 to pay the printing costs of the first edition of the Book of Mormon. In 1937 the Church purchased a home and an eighty-eight acre tract of land, about half the 1830 Harris farm. Though this was the land Martin Harris and his wife lived on, the present home was not theirs. This stone structure was built about 1850 after the original Harris frame home had burned to the ground.¹³

The Peter Whitmer, Sr., Farm, Rural Waterloo, New York

Deed records leave no question concerning the identity and location of the Whitmer farm. But the exact location of the original house is less certain. Church members who visited the site in the eighteen-eighties and nineties indicated the present building was then standing but were informed that it had not been there when the Whitmers sold the farm in 1831. They pointed to some old logs (some say they were south and west of the present residence) which they said were the remnants of the Peter Whitmer, Sr., dwelling. This would place the Whitmer residence west of the road which leads from the county lane to the present white farmhouse with its stubby pillars.¹⁴ The New York State Historical Society's marker stresses this is the *farm*, not the *house* of the Whitmer family.

Here again the work of a historic-sites archaeologist, a historical architect, and a research historian could ascertain the age of the present house

and locate the site of the former log structure inhabited by the Whitmers prior to 1831. The date of the building of the present white farmhouse could be ascertained from county deeds, estate papers, mortgage records, assessors' and tax collectors' accounts, as well as contemporary newspapers, diaries, etc. A rather definitive article by Carter E. Grant, "The Whereabouts of the Whitmer Log House" appeared in *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 65 (1962), pp. 250, 281–283. Guides assigned to that location can depend on the article with confidence.

Conclusion

The farm sites have been authenticated;—it is the building and artifacts that need closer attention. But why should Latter-day Saints concern themselves with authentic history? What difference does it make to the tourist if he is told fact or fiction? Personally, I do not appreciate being victimized by someone who while posing as an authority disseminates error, however trivial it may seem. The Church has entered the historic-site field out of a genuine love for its past history, to establish visible monuments in honor of the people who, under God's guidance, enacted its history. Locations where important ecclesiastical events took place and authentic artifacts of the time give lasting testimony of these people. Once having embarked in this field, it appears that the Latter-day Saints must insist that we teach and present only what is in keeping with the highest standards of historical confirmation. Cooperstown, New York, is a carefully restored community which like other authentic restoration projects is not far from Palmyra. Our presentations are certain to be compared to theirs. We should be certain that the interpretation we offer at our New York and Vermont sites is as accurate as research can make it. If we do not do this, our unreliable presentation will reflect on the integrity of the Church. It is argued by some that only one person in a hundred can (or even cares to) detect a misleading or distorted account. Perhaps so. But it is that very one percent who write books and magazine articles, and spread an unfavorable reputation farther than the misinformed ninety-nine percent ever can.

Perhaps we should amend the Colonial Williamsburg Guideline to read:

"LDS faith needs roots in authentic stone and mortar that the present and the future may learn from the past."

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1. B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church* (Salt Lake City, 1930), Vol. 6, p. 427.

2. Sermon of Junius F. Wells in Twentieth Ward, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1911.
3. George W. Cowles, *Landmarks of Wayne County* (Syracuse, 1895), p. 78.
4. "Boy in the Picture of the Sacred Grove," *The Improvement Era*, Vol. 23 (May, 1920), pp. 639–640.
5. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches of the Prophet Joseph Smith and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool, 1853), p. 71.
6. Pomroy Tucker, *Origin and Progress of Mormonism* (New York, 1867), p. 13; See also *History of Wayne County* (Philadelphia, 1877), pp. 149–150.
7. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 86–87.
8. See notice in *Wayne Sentinel*, Sept. 25, 1824, by Joseph Smith, Sr., reporting the opening of Alvin's grave. The date on the tombstone also verifies the date as 1823; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Essentials in Church History* (Salt Lake City, 19__), pp. 39–40.
9. Smith, *Ibid.*, p. 39; Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, Vol. 6, p. 427; Andrew Jensen, *Andrew Jensen's Scrapbook*, p. 357; *Deseret News*, Oct. 5, 1935, p. 1; Preston Nibley, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, 1944), p. 36, is not so certain, however, thinking that the visitation of Moroni occurred in the unfinished frame house into which they had moved from the log house. Thios he bases on Mother Smith's mistaken date of November 1822 as the date of raising the frame.
10. See Frederick J. Kelly, *Early Domestic Architecture of Connecticut* (New York, 1963), for descriptive drawings of eighteenth and nineteenth century frame building construction.
11. See footnote six above.
12. Lucy Mack Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 70, 71, 94–98.
13. Thomas L. Cook, *Palmyra and Vicinity* (Palmyra, 1930), pp. 206–207. See also "Martin Harris and the Restored Church," a Cumorah Mission tract offered at the site.
14. See statement of Andrew Jenson, Ezra Stevenson, and Joseph S. Black in *Deseret News*, Oct. 2, 1888.