American Prophet, New England Town: The Memory of Joseph Smith in Vermont

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Abstract
In December 1905, a large granite monument was erected at the birthplace of Joseph Smith on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth. This thesis relates the history of the Joseph Smith Memorial Monument from its origins through its construction and dedication. It also explores its impact on the memory of Joseph Smith in the local, Vermont, and national context. I argue that the history of the Joseph Smith Memorial Monument in Vermont is the story of the formation and validation of the memory of Joseph Smith as an American Prophet.

Nineteenth century Mormons remembered a variety of individual memories of Joseph Smith that were aggregated through reminiscences, hymns, and commemorations into three dominant collective memories: Joseph Smith as prophet, martyr, and Vermont schoolboy. During the first decade of the twentieth century, these three memories of Joseph Smith were filtered through the social, religious, and political interests and concretized into the Joseph Smith Memorial Birthplace Monument. The dedication of the Joseph Smith Monument on 23 December 1905 and the messages presented at the site by Junius F. Wells over the next five years shaped a broader interpretation of Joseph Smith as an American Prophet.

The impact of the monument in Vermont is examined through a case study of Royalton, Vermont. Vermont’s past had been aggregated into a tradition emphasizing the virtue, patriotism, and individuality of Vermonters, and Royalton residents responded to the Joseph Smith Monument by concretizing their own memory of Royalton as a typical New England town through monuments, a town history, and an annual town holiday. Competing memories of an American Prophet and the New England town collided during construction of the Royalton Memorial Library in 1922, and settlement of Royalton’s division over the definition of a New England Town validated the memory of Joseph Smith as an American Prophet.

Throughout the twentieth century, the memories of an American Prophet and New England Town accommodated each other. Vermont’s validation of the memory of Joseph Smith as an American Prophet represents a national transformation in the memory of Joseph Smith.

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Born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, to Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith Jr. grew up on a series of tenant farms in Vermont, New Hampshire, and New York. Though in his youth Joseph was largely deprived of a formal education, he was "instructed in reading, writing, and the ground rules of arithmetic." ¹ Joseph’s mother said that he was often "given to meditation and deep study." ² Affected by the great religious excitement taking place around his home in Manchester, New York, in 1820, fourteen-year-old Joseph was determined to know which of the many rel The ancestry of Joseph Smith is interesting and important people are connected to him. Among the Smith’s ancestors were men and women who sailed on the Mayflower, and those who served in the American Revolution. Slideshow 3212310 by tuari. Three years of crop failure in Norwich, Vermont precipitated the family’s eventual move to Palmyra, New York. 1816 was known as “the year without a summer.” Twelve year old Robert Smith had sailed from England in 1638 at the height of the Puritan migration, and his descendants settled in Topsfield, a farm village ten miles north of Salem. Asael was the fourth generation of Smith’s in the town. Asael scrambled for a toe hold in the sparse New England economy, much like Solomon Mack, who began life with nothing.