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By Donald L. Enders


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The Joseph Smith, Sr. family lived in the Palmyra, New York, area for 14 years—from 1816 through 1830. They spent 12 of those 14 years on a farm in a “sequestered neighborhood” (Townsend 1) two miles south of the village near the Palmyra-Manchester town line. Lucy Mack Smith’s reminiscences, plus Joseph Smith, Jr.’s, and William Smith’s recollections, paint an admirable picture of those years. In just ten years, says Lucy, the Smiths turned their heavily forested hundred acres into a productive farm “admired for its good order and industry” (Lucy Smith 1). They cleared 60 acres (thirty in the first year alone), cultivated approximately 35 acres, fenced the farm, planted a large apple orchard, and tapped 1,200 to 1,500 sugar maples, producing 1,000 pounds of sugar annually. They also built a
planted a large apple orchard, and tapped 1,200 to 1,500 sugar maples, producing 1,000 pounds of sugar annually. They also built a log home, a frame home, a barn, a cooper’s shop, and other outbuildings. By fall 1823, the season of Alvin’s death, the Smiths “enjoyed their third harvest,” and within five years they had completed the clearing and fencing. The Smith reminiscences recall with pride that every able family member cooperated fully, showing “the strictest kind of economy and labor” (Lucy Smith 49; see also Peterson 11).

This account is an impressive record, not only of achievement but of family unity, thrift, and exemplary work habits. But were the Smiths the effective and successful farm laborers their accounts portray? A number of their Palmyra and Manchester neighbors and acquaintances said no. After the Smiths moved away in 1830, some associates went on record with accusations that the Smiths had done little to improve the farm, had cleared only a small acreage (Deming), and were “lazy,” and “indolent” (Howe 262). One neighbor claimed that the Smiths’ “great objective appeared to be to live without work” (260), while another said, “It was a mystery to their neighbors how [the Smiths] got their living” (249). Some even asserted that the Smiths had no legal claim to those property but were mere “squatters” (Tucker 12–13; see also Cook 219).

Which version is correct? Land and tax records, farm account books and correspondence, soil surveys, and interviews with archaeological reports, historic building surveys, and interviews with agricultural historians and specialists of early nineteenth-century New York suggest that the Smith version is an honest one. These sources, which generally have not been part of the scholarly reconstructions of the origin period of Mormon history, yield data about the process of buying and developing land, farm labor, crops and markets, farm values, farm building construction, and agricultural knowledge and practices. Some of these sources specifically mention the Joseph Smith, Sr., family. Used in conjunction with traditional sources, these new sources permit a much clearer view about the Smiths’ work ethics and habits and of their accomplishments and failures as farm people. I will cast in question form the Smiths’ assertions about how they developed the farm, then draw from the combined sources data relevant to those claims.

**Question 1: Did the Smiths move into their log home on the Palmyra-Manchester town line before 1820 or did they not move onto their farm until late that year as others claim?**

The Smith log home, built near the Palmyra-Manchester town line, was no longer standing in 1850; however, its precise location is known. A survey of Stafford Street, conducted in late spring 1820, specifically mentions “the Joseph Smith dwelling house” (Palmyra 221). The survey placed the log home site on the Palmyra side of the town line a few feet northwest of the center of the road. An archaeological dig at the site in 1982 unearthed the log home’s root cellar and other features, verifying the preciseness of the 1820 survey data (Berge 24–26). The same survey also establishes that the Smiths were living there by late spring 1820. The 1820 federal census of Farmington (Manchester) Township, enumerated in June, (1820 Federal Census), also identifies the Smith family as living there by June 1820.

Non-familial and familial accounts also support the Smiths’ assertion that they moved to their Palmyra-Manchester home before 1820. Orsamus Turner, and Pomeroy Tucker, two contemporaries of the Smiths, wrote books about the origin of Mormonism based on their personal acquaintance with the Smith family. Turner dated the Smith occupancy in their “rude log house” as early as “the winter of [18]19, [18]20” (Turner 212, first note). Tucker gives the date as 1818 (Tucker 12–13). Lucy Mack Smith indicates that the family reached Palmyra in 1816 or early 1817 and built and moved into the cabin “two years” later (49). This would date occupancy of the cabin in 1818 or soon after. Joseph Jr. dated the move from Vermont as his tenth year, or thereabouts “his tenth year was 1815” followed by the move to Manchester “in about four years” (JS-H 1:3). This statement dates the move to the log home about 1819.

The 1818 or 1819 date seems accurate for other reasons. According to Lucy Smith, they “enjoyed their third harvest on the farm” in the fall of 1823 (51). The first harvest would then have been in the fall of 1821, the grain having been planted in the spring of 1821. They would have prepared the fields for planting in the early spring of 1821 and the previous autumn of 1820. A prerequisite to tilling would have been burning trees that autumn which had been felled during the previous winter of 1819–1820 and dried during the summer of 1820. Even prior to that activity, the Smiths had to make a clearing and build their log home. Thus, they could not have moved to the Palmyra-Manchester town line any later than mid-1819 if they were to have a “third harvest” on the farm in the fall of 1823.

**Question 2: Did the Smiths buy their farm or were they squatters as some of their neighbors claimed? Which version is correct? Lucy says they “contracted” to buy the hundred-acre farm (48), while William Smith remembered that “this farm had been articulated for, to be paid in yearly installments of $100 each” (11). Articling allowed possession but not title. One could sell “improvements,” but ownership of title remained with the original owner until the land was paid for.**

On 2 November 1825, a “Squire” Stoddard signed a deed purchasing 150 acres immediately south of the Smith farm. The deed described Stoddard’s north boundary as “the south line of lands heretofore articulated to Joseph and Alvin Smith. . . .” (Deed Book 44:219–21).

**Question 3: Were the Smiths “weak in intellect” and “destitute of genius” as former neighbors generally said they were (Johnson 26–51)? How knowledgeable were the Smiths about farming?**

Agricultural knowledge and practices on America’s nineteenth-century frontier were primitive. There was very little scientific knowledge of soils, productivity, and crops. Farm implements were crude, heavy, and mostly homemade. There was virtually no defense against crop pests and disease. Livestock breeding and management were virtually nonexistent. Most frontier families produced barely enough for their own needs. However, things were changing. Throughout the 1810s and 1820s, new agricultural methods largely imported from Great Britain, agricultural fairs, agricultural literature, the importation and development of improved livestock breeds, and the invention and use of better tools all improved farming, resulting in greater productivity, a larger share of output for the market, and a better standard of living for farm families (McNall 26–51).

According to the Smiths’ accounts, Joseph Sr. had worked on and improved farms in Vermont. Skills that Yankee farmers routinely acquired included clearing land; constructing fences; raising fruit; making maple sugar; planting, tending, and harvesting crops; threshing grain; and mowing and putting up hay. Joseph Sr. could also lay stone walls, dig and rock up wells, construct simple buildings, and make barrels. When the Smiths moved to the Genesee, the oldest sons, Alvin and Hyrum, likely had a working knowledge of these trades as well (see Bushman 22–23, 40–41).

It seems probable that the Smiths looked for land that met specific criteria based not only on their practical experience in working the land, but also on established agricultural models. For example, Tench Coxe, Supervisor of the Revenue during the Presidency of George Washington, published widely read recommendations about agricultural settlement types during the years following the land, but also on established agricultural models. For example, Tench Coxe, Supervisor of the Revenue during the Presidency of George Washington, published widely read recommendations about agricultural settlement types during the years following the
George Washington, published widely read recommendations about agricultural settlement types during the years following the Revolution. Coxe suggested that emigrants to Western New York purchase “on hundred acres of sugar maple land.” If these acres were developed to standards of “ordinary American improvement,” “two thirds” should be cleared for the “culture of grass and grain,” and “one third” should be left in “wood and timber.” The timber should include about 1,200 maple trees, which, when tapped, would “make one thousand pounds of weight of sugar” (Coxe 69). The Smith family followed Coxe’s recommendation in almost exact detail.

How many parcels of land the Smiths looked at before deciding on the Stafford Road property is not known, but that particular parcel, in addition to its access and seemingly manageable price, had strong advantages. Its fertile soil would readily produce wheat, corn, rye, oats, buckwheat, beans, and root crops. Its gentle slopes provided well-drained land with good airflow for a sizeable orchard. It already had hundreds of maples for sugar and molasses. Large numbers of oaks, willows, and cattails would provide staves, hoops, and “flagging” for coopering. Crooked Creek flowed through the land furnishing a year-round source of good water for domestic and farm needs. Flanking the creek on either side lay quality ground where hayfields, meadow, and winter pasture could be developed. Rising along the drumlins (hills) on the eastern side of the property was suitable grazing. Its hardwoods would supply excellent building materials, farm and household implements, fence rails, and firewood. There were also prime sites for wells. The wetlands and forest provided cover for wild animals that could be trapped and hunted. Wild berries, fruits, herbs and roots offered both food and medicines (John Marion). Taken altogether these resources created conditions for a first-rate farm. In short, not only did the Smiths have a legal claim to their property, they obviously selected it carefully and intelligently and were responsible and skilled farmers.

Question 4: Did the Smiths clear land, plant fields and an orchard, make the fences, and construct the building as they said they did?

Here tax records which define farm values as the combined value of the land and improvements made on the land are an important source. Generally, buildings represented 50 to 60 percent of the assessed value of farms. Cleared land, fencing, orchards, gardens, and woodlots were generally less than half of the value. In 1830, in rural Manchester Township for example, the mean value of one hundred acres in “developed” condition was $1,285. A developed hundred acre parcel translates into about two-thirds of the land cleared of timber, the perimeter and interior fenced with 25 to 30 acres of cultivated fields, a woodlot and meadow, and a log or small frame house and a barn. Improved land represented about $550 of that amount. About $735 represented the value of the buildings (John Mott).

In 1820, when the Smiths purchased their hundred acres of heavily forested “undeveloped” land it was valued at $700 (Assessment Rolls 17). The 1830 tax records assess its value at $1,300. The $600 increase represents considerable development by standards of that time. The Smiths’ 60 acres of cleared land, divided into 30 to 35 acres of cultivated fields, 10 to 15 acres of meadow, an orchard of 200 apple trees, and the woodlot and fencing, represented about $250 to $275 of the $600 increase. The Smith barn, which historical sources suggest was of common design, would have been valued at $150 to $175; the cooper’s shop, with “wood floor and loft” (Research File) at $50, animal enclosures at $25, and the “unfinished” but inhabited frame home at $675 to $125 (Ibid and John Mott; also William H. Siles). The value of the buildings (about $325), when added to the value of the improved land ($250-$275), agrees very closely with the $600 increase in the value during the decade of the 1820s. This data must be viewed as verification of the accuracy of the Smiths’ memory of their improvements.

Consider what those developments represent. Based on horticultural studies, approximately 100 trees per acre grew in that area. To clear the 60 acres, the Smiths cut down about 6,000 trees. (Marion). A large percentage measured from four to six feet in diameter, and grew to heights of one hundred feet or more (Peterson). These figures help us to better appreciate William Smith’s statement: “If you will figure up how much work it should take to clear sixty acres of heavy timber land . . . trees you could not conveniently cut down, you can tell whether we were lazy or not” (Ibid 11).

The Smith farm had a perimeter of one and 2/3 miles. To fence that distance with a standard stone and singer fence required moving tons of stone from fields to farm perimeter, then cutting and placing about 4,000 ten-foot rails. This does not include the labor and materials involved in fencing the barnyard, garden, pastures, and orchard, which, at a conservative estimate, required an additional 2,000 to 3,000 cut wooden rails (McNall 59, 84, 87, 91, 110–11, and 144). Clearly, this work alone—all of it separate from the actual labor of farming—represents a prodigious amount of concerted planning and labor.

Question 5: How did the Smith farm compare to other farms in the township and “neighborhood”?

The 1830 tax records for Manchester Township contain the evaluations of 176 farms of more than 50 acres in size. The average value per acre for those farms was $13. The mean value was $12.85. The Smith farm was appraised at the average value per acre. Seventy-one farms were valued at a higher rate per acre than the Smith farm, 90 were valued below theirs, and 14 were valued at the same level. The farms raising higher than the Smiths ranged from $13.10 to $18 per acre, while those of less value were appraised at $12.90 to $8 (Ibid).

The average size of the township’s 253 farms was 85 acres. The mean was 63 acres. Sixty-two of the 253 farms were larger than the Smith farm. They ranged from 105 to just over 300 acres. Twenty-two farms were the same size as the Smith; 168 were smaller and decreased in size from 98 to 10 acres (Ibid).

The Smith “neighborhood” farms are of particular interest because their owners included some of those who accused the Smiths of being “lazy, indolent and shiftless.” Forty-two families resided in the “neighborhood,” that is, the area along Stafford and Canadaquia Roads extending three miles south from the Palmyra-Manchester town line. Of these 42, eleven had larger farms than the Smiths’, ranging from about 125 acres to 215 acres. Four had farms the same size. Twenty-five were smaller, ranging downward from 98 to 14 acres. The average size farm in the “neighborhood” was 83 acres and the mean was 71 acres. Twelve of the neighborhood farms were assessed at a greater value per acre than the Smith farm ranging from $14 to $18 per acre. Five farms, including the Smiths’, were valued at $13 per acre, while 25 were valued lower, from $12.96 to $10 per acre.

The Staffords, Stoddards, Chases, and Caprons were neighborhood residents who spoke poorly of the Smiths. Only one of the ten families in this four-family group had property assessed more valuable than the Smiths’. Of the five families in the Stafford family group, none had a higher appraisal than the Smiths. Abraham Stafford’s 162 acres was valued at $12.96, William Stafford’s 100 acres at $12.50 per acre, Joshua Stafford’s 123 acres at $12.20 per acre, David Stafford’s 20 acres at $11 per acre, and John Stafford’s 60 acres at $10 per acre (Assessment Rolls 21–22). Only Edmund Chase of the Chase family group was still farming in Manchester Township in 1830. His 29-acre farm, bordering east on the Smith farm, was valued at $10 per acre (Assessment Rolls 6).

Russell Stoddard, the man who, according to Lucy Smith, cheated them out of their farm, lived a mile and a half south of the Smiths in a frame house with a barn, outbuildings, an orchard, a handsome cedar grove, and a small sawmill. His 98-acre farm was considered “number one quality” and was valued at $16 per acre (Assessment Roll 21). Stoddard owned other farms, speculated in land, and built more than a dozen frame houses, outbuildings, and a barn. Improved land represented about $14 of that amount (Ibid). Considering the Stoddards’ “good frame house and barn” (Ibid), this assessment seems justifiable.
houses. After Alvin’s death, he contracted with the Smiths to complete their frame home enough to allow them to move into it. [For identification of Russell Stoddard as the carpenter who finished building the Smith’s frame home after Alvin’s death, see George Albert Smith Diary.] When fully “enclosed” after the Smiths moved away, it was comparable in size to Stoddard’s home (Research File). The 150 acre farm of Squire Stoddard, Russell’s brother, lay immediately south of the Smith farm and was valued at $12 per acre. Joseph Capron’s land, a five-acre parcel situated within 200 yards of the Smith home, was valued at $10 per acre (Assessment Rolls 5, 22).

In comparison to others in the township and neighborhood, the Smiths’ efforts and accomplishments were superior to most. In the township, only 40 percent of the farms were worth more per acre and just 25 percent were larger. In the “neighborhood,” only 29 percent of the farms were worth more and only 26 percent were larger (Assessment Rolls 1-34).

Question 6: Does the fact that the Smiths worked at day-labor to provide for themselves and pay for their farm support the charge that they were “lazy and indolent” and “without industry”? Day laboring implied low work, and people who were employed for short term, often at menial tasks, were considered “low folk,” unrefined and socially undesirable. What “day labor” did the Smiths perform?

Sources document over two dozen kinds of labor the Smiths performed for hire, including digging and rock ing up wells, mowing, cooper ing, constructing cisterns, hunting and trapping, teaching school, providing domestic service, and making split-wood chairs, brooks and baskets. The Smiths also harvested, did modest carpentry work, dug for salt, constructed stone walls and fire places, flailed grain, cut and sold cordwood, carted, made cider, and “witched” for water. They sold garden produce, made bee-gums, washed clothes, painted oil-cloth coverings, butchered, dug coal, painted chairs, hauled stone, and made maple syrup and sugar (Research File).

Joseph Jr.’s account suggests honest industry in the face of difficult conditions: “Being in indigent circumstances,” he says, “[we] were obliged to labour hard for the support of [our] Large family and . . . it required exertions of all [family members] that were able to render any assistances” (Jessee 4). The Smith men had a reputation as skilled and diligent workers. William Smith asserted that “whenever the neighbors wanted a good day’s work done they knew where they could get a good hand” (Peterson 11). Eight wells in three townships are attributed to the Smiths (Research File). They likely dug and rocked others, including some of the 11 wells dug on the farm of Lemuel Durfee, who lived a little east of Martin Harris. The Smiths did considerable work for this kindly old Quaker; some of their labor served as rent for their farm after it passed into his ownership in December 1825 (Ralph Cator; Lemuel Durfee Farm books).

Father Joseph, Hyrum, and Joseph Jr. were coopers. Cooper ing was an exacting trade, particularly if the barrel was designed to hold liquid. Dye tubs, barrels, and water and sap buckets were products of the Smiths’ cooper shop. They also repaired leaky barrels for neighbors at cidering time. (Research File).

Sugaring was another labor-intensive work. William recalls, “To gather the sap and make sugar and molasses from [1,200–1,500 sugar] trees was no lazy job” (Peterson 11). Lucy said they produced an average of “one thousand pounds” (50) of sugar a year. One neighbor reportedly said that the Smiths made 7,000 pounds of sugar one season and won a premium for their effort at the county fair (Brodie 10–11). Many people could make maple syrup, but it required considerable skill to make sugar and particularly good skill, dexterity, and commitment to make high quality sugar.

These labors indicate a strong work attitude, and the record of their hiring does not substantiate accusations that they were an “idle” family.

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Joseph Smith Jr. was an American religious leader and founder of Mormonism and the Latter Day Saint movement. When he was 24, Smith published the Book of Mormon. By the time of his death, 14 years later, he had attracted tens of thousands of followers and founded a religion that continues to the present. Members of the church were later called "Latter Day Saints" or "Mormons", and Smith announced a revelation in 1838 which renamed the church as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In 1831, Smith and his followers moved west, planning to build a communalistic American Zion. Family members supplemented their meager farm income by hiring out for odd jobs and working as treasure seekers, a type of magical supernaturalism common during the period. Joseph Smith Jr. was an American religious leader and founder of Mormonism and the Latter Day Saint movement. When he was 24, Smith published the Book of Mormon. By the time of his death, 14 years later, he had attracted tens of thousands of followers and founded a religion that continues to the present. Members of the church were later called "Latter Day Saints" or "Mormons", and Smith announced a revelation in 1838 which renamed the church as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. In 1831, Smith and his followers moved west, planning to build a communalistic American Zion. Family members supplemented their meager farm income by hiring out for odd jobs and working as treasure seekers, a type of magical supernaturalism common during the period.

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