

CHAPTER TWO

A SACRED HERITAGE

Joseph Smith Junior was born of goodly parents who were noble spirits chosen to raise this special son. Throughout their lives they were tested in the furnace of adversity in order to prove which path they would follow, and their resounding answer was always, “We will serve the Lord.”

JOSEPH SMITH SENIOR—FATHER OF THE PROPHET

Joseph Smith Senior was born July 12, 1771 at Topsfield, Massachusetts. He was the second of seven strong sons. The Smith family had lived in Massachusetts for four generations, but when Joseph was twenty years old his father, Asael, decided to move to Vermont.¹

Vermont was a beautiful and rugged state that had been the first state to join the United States after the original thirteen. The Green Mountains run down the center of the state, and Asael purchased an 83-acre farm in Tunbridge, which was on the eastern side of the Green Mountains, known as the New England Upland. This hilly area was a grassy and verdant wilderness, with patches of woods and beautiful stands of forest. Tunbridge township had been originally settled just ten years earlier and it was sparsely populated, and remains so today. Joseph and his brother, Jesse, went to Vermont before the family moved there and cleared the land and then built a small log cabin.²

At six feet, two inches and 200 pounds, Joseph Smith, Sr. was tall, handsome and a very strong and active man. In his youth he

¹ Lamar C. Berrett, ed., *Sacred Places*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999) 1:113.

² *Sacred Places* 1:113.

became quite famous as a champion wrestler, and of the many he wrestled, he met only one man he could not throw. Those who knew him said that by nature he was a benevolent soul, kind and generous to all those in need.³ He was educated enough that when he was not farming during the winter he supplemented his income as a school teacher.⁴ Three years after moving to Tunbridge, someone special arrived in town who would change his life forever.



Joseph Smith Senior

LUCY MACK—MOTHER OF THE PROPHET

Lucy Mack was the youngest child of Solomon and Lydia Mack. She was born at Gilsum, New Hampshire on July 8, 1776—four days after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. When she was thirteen years old, her older sisters, Lovina and Lovisa, died of tuberculosis within a few months of each other. It had been Lucy's task to take care of Lovina during the last three years of her life. Although this was a very trying and difficult task, young Lucy bravely found the inner strength to lovingly serve and tend to her sister.⁵

After Lovina's death, Lucy became so despondent that it threatened her health both mentally and physically. Her brother,

³ *History of the Church* 4:189-191.

⁴ Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith*, (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958), p. 46.

⁵ *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 15-19.



Lucy Mack Smith

Stephen, suggested that she come to Tunbridge to live with him for a while. This seemed to help. During this same time period Lucy was also anxious to find the correct church, but she discovered that none of them were like the original church of Christ. In this state of confusion, she decided not to join any particular denomination.⁶

She was eighteen when she met the tall, good-looking Joseph Smith, Sr. Their courtship lasted about a year and they were married

on January 24, 1796. He was 24 and she was 19. Joseph's father, Asael, gave them his farm and Asael moved to another lot where he began a new farm.⁷ Joseph and Lucy began their married life at Tunbridge with excellent prospects. Joseph owned the farm and Lucy had received \$1,000 as a wedding gift from her brother, Stephen, and his business partner. Their little family started to grow with the birth of four children at Tunbridge: Alvin on February 11, 1798, Hyrum on February 9, 1800, and Sophronia on May 18, 1803.⁸ They also lost a son, who died at childbirth.⁹

THE SMITH FAMILY'S TRIALS BEGIN

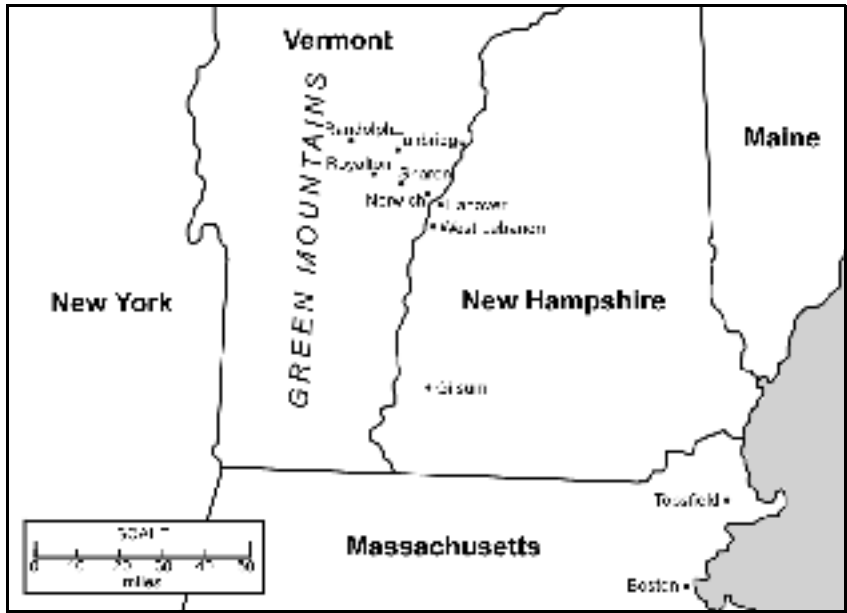
In the fall of 1802, Father and Mother Smith—as they were later affectionately named by the members of the Church—rented

⁶ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 31.

⁷ *Sacred Places* 1:115.

⁸ *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 32, 336.

⁹ *Sacred Places* 1:115.



out their farm and moved to Randolph, Vermont. Here they set up a mercantile business selling goods that were shipped in from Boston. After living in Randolph for six months, Lucy contracted a severe bout of tuberculosis that almost took her life. She became extremely sensitive to noise, and one night as she was hovering between life and death she made a covenant with God that if her life was spared, she would serve God by raising her family and helping her husband. After making this promise, she heard a voice tell her that she would live if she would obey this covenant. She immediately began to mend and her strength returned.¹⁰

Father Smith had learned that ginseng root was in high demand in China because of the plague that was occurring there, and he put all of his money from the mercantile store into buying some ginseng and crystalizing it so that it could be exported to China. A Mr. Stevens from Royalton, Vermont, offered \$3,000 for Father Smith's supply of powdered ginseng but Father Smith thought he could get more by shipping it to China himself. Traveling to New

¹⁰ *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 33-35.

York City he negotiated with the captain of a ship sailing to China to sell his ginseng. However, Mr. Stevens managed to find the ship holding the Smith's ginseng and set up a scheme that defrauded the Smiths of all of their profits.¹¹

Because of this financial loss, the mercantile business was now \$1,800 in debt. The Smiths moved back to the farm at Tunbridge where Sophronia was born in 1803. In order to get out from under their debts, they decided to sell the farm. Even though it was worth \$1,500 they could only get \$800. By combining this with Lucy's \$1,000 wedding gift they were able to pay off their creditors. However, they never recovered from these financial reverses for the rest of their lives.¹²

THE PROPHET JOSEPH IS BORN

The Smiths next moved to Sharon, Vermont, where Father Smith rented a farm owned by Lucy's father, Solomon Mack. By working there for a few years they were able to somewhat improve their financial circumstances. It was there that Lucy, who was then 29, gave birth to a baby boy on December 23, 1805 who they named Joseph, after his father. Though they didn't know it yet, by giving him this name they had fulfilled a prophecy given over 3,500 years before.¹³

The Smith family later returned to Tunbridge, where on March 13, 1808, Samuel Harrison Smith was born. A short time later the Smiths moved to Royalton, Vermont where on March 13, 1810 a seventh child was born who was named Ephraim. He only lived for eleven days. But one year after Ephraim's birth, and once again on March 13th, their eighth child was born and given the name of William. Amazingly, Samuel, Ephraim and William were all born in successive years on March 13th.¹⁴

¹¹ *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 37-38; *Comprehensive History of the Church* 1:14-15.

¹² *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 40.

¹³ 2 Nephi 3:6, 15.

¹⁴ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 46.



The rolling hills of Vermont where the Prophet Joseph grew up.

In 1811 Father Smith moved his family eighteen miles south-east to the town of West Lebanon, New Hampshire, just across the border from Vermont. At this time they were near Hanover, New Hampshire, and 11-year-old Hyrum was sent to Moor's Academy in Hanover, which is today located on the Dartmouth College campus.¹⁵ The other children were enrolled in common schools in the area.¹⁶

TYPHOID FEVER STRIKES THE SMITH FAMILY

While living at West Lebanon all of the Smith children came down with typhoid fever, which was spreading at this time throughout many communities in Vermont and New Hampshire.¹⁷

Typhoid fever is an infectious disease caused by the bacteria *salmonella typhosa* which is spread from person to person or

¹⁵ *Sacred Places* 1:71.

¹⁶ *Comprehensive History of the Church* 1:29-30.

¹⁷ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 51; LeRoy S. Wirthlin, M.D., "Joseph Smith's Boyhood Operation," *BYU Studies* (Spring 1981) 21:2:146-147.

through contaminated food or water. Flies can also transmit the disease by carrying the bacteria from sewage to food. When a person is infected, the bacteria pass from the intestines into the blood and then to the spleen and liver where they multiply rapidly. They are then released in enormous numbers into the intestines. The first symptoms are a severe headache, nausea, weakness, diarrhea and a persistent high fever. Recovery takes at least three weeks if no complications occur. Typhoid fever is rarely found in developed countries today, but epidemics occur quite often in developing countries. Prior to 1920, it was very prevalent in the United States.¹⁸

When Sophronia came down with typhoid fever, she became deathly ill. After attending her for 89 days, the physician felt that her death was imminent. Mother Smith described the poignant scene:

“The ensuing night she lay altogether motionless, with her eyes wide open, and with that peculiar aspect which bespeaks the near approach of death. As she thus lay, I gazed upon her as a mother looks upon the last shade of life in a darling child. In this moment of distraction, my husband and myself clasped our hands, fell upon our knees by the bedside, and poured out our grief to God in prayer and supplication, beseeching him to spare our child yet a little longer.

“Did the Lord hear our petition? Yes, he most assuredly did, and before we rose to our feet he gave us a testimony that she would recover.”¹⁹

Mother Smith then worked with Sophronia by wrapping her in a blanket and pacing the floor until she began breathing normally

¹⁸ Jeffrey Kunz, MD, Asher Finkel, MD, ed., *American Medical Association Family Medical Guide*, (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 470; Thomas McCrae, “Typhoid Fever,” *Modern Medicine: Its Theory and Practice*, (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers and Co., 1907), 2:71-77.

¹⁹ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 52.

again. After this Sophronia began to slowly recover, taking several weeks to regain her health.

Seven-year-old Joseph was also stricken by typhoid fever, and after suffering from it for two weeks, he finally appeared to be recovering. Unfortunately, he then developed an abscess under his arm, which the doctor initially thought was just a sprain. After two weeks of excruciating pain, however, the physician discovered the abscess and drained it. At this point, Joseph's ordeal was just beginning. Bacteria from this first abscess spread via his bloodstream to the bone of his left leg and he developed *osteomyelitis*, or infection of the bone. Prior to the discovery of antibiotics, *osteomyelitis* and bacterial abscesses were occasional side effects of typhoid fever.²⁰ As this new abscess began to fester and enlarge, the pain became "acute, unrelenting and severe."²¹

During this time Mother Smith carried Joseph around most of the time to help relieve his pain. However, as she was pregnant at the time, the strain became too great and Hyrum took over. He cared for Joseph by staying at his bedside almost continuously for the next three weeks. It was brotherly care such as this that developed into a bond of friendship and love that would last for both of their lifetimes.²²

To remove the swelling in his leg, a surgeon came to the Smith's humble home and made an eight-inch incision in Joseph's leg. This relieved the pain from the swelling in the muscles *around* the bone, but it did not help to drain the infection *in* the bone. As soon as the incision began to heal, the pain returned. A second operation was performed and the incision was made longer and deeper, but this too only had a temporary effect.

Eventually a team of surgeons was called to the small Smith farm. In spite of the severe pain that young Joseph was now

²⁰ McCrae, "Typhoid Fever," 2:166-167, 169.

²¹ Wirthlin, "Joseph Smith's Boyhood Operation," 21:2:148.

²² *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 55.

enduring, the Lord had prepared a way for him to be made whole. As the Smiths had been compelled to move from town to town in the past few years, they were now living just a few scant miles from the *only* physician in the United States who had the ability to treat Joseph's infection.²³

Dr. Nathan Smith, who was teaching at nearby Dartmouth Medical School, had pioneered an experimental surgical technique 70 years ahead of its time that could help cure bone infections. Previous to his work, amputation had been the only option. The surgery required drilling several holes into the bone and then removing the infected fragments of the bone so that the infection could drain. The bone would then heal after the infection was gone.²⁴

YOUNG JOSEPH SHOWS EXTREME BRAVERY

The doctors brought ropes to tie Joseph down and some brandy to dull the pain. But young Joseph bravely rose to the occasion. Mother Smith described the scene:

“No,” exclaimed Joseph, ‘I will not touch one particle of liquor, neither will I be tied down; but I will tell you what I will do—I will have my father sit on the bed and hold me in his arms, and then I will do whatever is necessary in order to have the bone taken out.’ Looking at me, he said, ‘Mother, I want you to leave the room, for I know you cannot bear to see me suffer so; father can stand it, but you have carried me so much, and watched over me so long, you are almost worn out.’ Then looking up into my face, his eyes swimming in tears, he continued. ‘Now, mother, promise me that you will not stay, will you? The Lord will help me, and I shall get through with it.’”

²³ LeRoy S. Wirthlin, M.D., “Nathan Smith (1762-1828): Surgical Consultant to Joseph Smith,” *BYU Studies* (Spring 1977) 17:3:320.

²⁴ Wirthlin, “Joseph Smith’s Boyhood Operation,” 21:2:152-153.

Mother Smith hesitantly agreed to Joseph's request. Trying to help in any way that she could, she found some folded sheets which she placed under Joseph's leg to catch the blood from the operation. She then left the house, going out into the nearby orchard so that she would be out of hearing. She described what happened next:



Seven-year-old Joseph refused any sedative alcohol during his bone operation, asking instead that his father hold him.

“The surgeons commenced operating by boring into the bone of his left leg first on one side of the bone where it was infected, then on the other side, after which they broke it off with a pair of forceps or pincers. They thus took away large pieces of the bone. When they broke off the first piece, Joseph screamed out so loudly, that I could not forbear running to him. On my entering the room, he cried out, ‘Oh, Mother, go back, go back! I do not want you to come in—I will try to tough it out, if you will go away.’

“When the third piece was taken away, I burst into the room again and oh, my God! What a spectacle for a mother's eye! The wound torn open, the blood still gushing from it, and the bed literally covered with blood. Joseph was pale as a corpse, and large drops of sweat were rolling down his

face, whilst upon every feature was depicted the utmost agony!

“I was immediately forced from the room, and detained until the operation was complete; but when the act was accomplished, Joseph put upon a clean bed, the room cleared of every appearance of blood, and the instruments which were used in the operation removed, I was permitted again to enter.”²⁵

The operation was a success. However, because of this ordeal Joseph limped slightly for the rest of his life.²⁶

FARMING DIFFICULTIES AFFLICT THE SMITH FAMILY

Shortly after this operation, on July 28, 1812, Mother Smith gave birth to a baby girl, whom they named Catherine. Once the family had sufficiently recovered from typhoid fever, they moved eight miles northwest of West Lebanon, New Hampshire to Norwich, Vermont, just across the state border. Father Smith rented a farm and planted his crops, but he did not have much success.

On April 5, 1815, the eruption of Mount Tambora in the East Indies sent 1.7 million tons of debris into the sky. It was one of the most powerful eruptions in recorded history. An enormous amount of dust was thrust into the stratosphere, resulting in spectacular sunsets, but also reflecting incoming sunlight back into space and lowering the average temperature worldwide. During the summer of 1816 it snowed in June throughout New England, and a killing frost on August 21st destroyed most gardens in the region. New Englanders wryly called it the year “Eighteen hundred and froze to death.”²⁷

²⁵ *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 57-58.

²⁶ Wirthlin, “Nathan Smith (1762-1828): Surgical Consultant to Joseph Smith,” 17:3:336.

²⁷ Thomas Lewis, ed., *Planet Earth: Volcano*, (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1982), p. 60.

Father Smith didn't fare much better. The cold summer of 1816 was the final year of three continuous years of crop failures.²⁸ Don Carlos was born at the farm in Norwich on March 25, 1816.

As the Smith family suffered during these frustrating and disheartening crop failures, they could have blamed God for their troubles. But instead, Father Smith determined to move his family somewhere else where other farmers were having more success. The Lord's hand is sometimes seen in our lives in retrospect, but when we are facing our daily trials it is often hard to comprehend why we suffer. As it would later turn out, all of these farming difficulties were necessary to place the Smith family just a few miles from the hidden location of the Book of Mormon plates, at the right time when this marvelous work would unfold.

THE SMITHS MOVE TO PALMYRA, NEW YORK

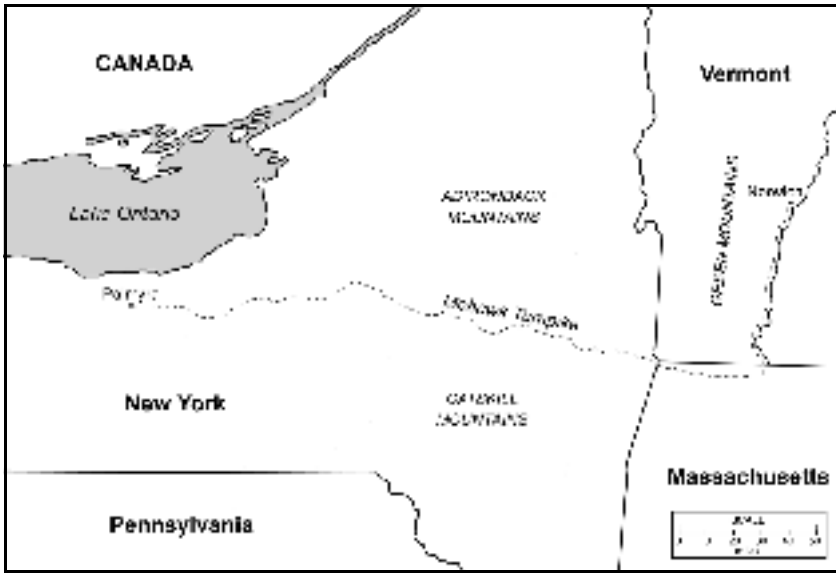
Father Smith determined to go west with a number of other farmers and settle in the new "wheat belt" located in western New York. After Father Smith had traveled to Palmyra, New York and worked there for a while, he made arrangements to have his family join him there. Palmyra was a flourishing town with a population of approximately 2,500. The town had been founded about 20 years previously, and it now had several stores, a newspaper, and at least three churches—Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian.²⁹

Palmyra had been growing recently because of the construction of the Erie Canal which would pass near the town. Palmyra was located on a plain that had been formed by glacial erosion, which had also carved out many of the surrounding lakes and also deposited their debris in *drumlins*, or large hills. One of these drumlins would later prove to be very important in Joseph's life. The soil was rich and well-suited to farming. The land was covered with grasslands and thick forests.³⁰

²⁸ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 59.

²⁹ *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, p. 19.

³⁰ Donald Q. Cannon, "Palmyra, New York: 1820-1830," *Church History Regional Studies—New York*, p. 2-3.



Probable route of the Smith family when they moved from Norwich to Palmyra.

Father Smith sent a team and wagon with an acquaintance, Caleb Howard, to bring Mother Smith and the children from Vermont to Palmyra. This journey became a great trial to Joseph, who was still lame from his operation and had barely recovered enough to walk without crutches. They had to travel south to the Mohawk Turnpike, which traveled west between the Adirondack and Catskill Mountains and across the lowlands of New York until they reached Palmyra.

Mr. Howard turned out to be a miserable wretch. Either Father Smith was a poor judge of character or, out of desperation, he had no one else to choose. Father Smith had given Mr. Howard money to pay for the family's trip, and during their journey Mr. Howard spent that money on gambling and drinking. When they met another family that was also headed west, Mr. Howard kicked Joseph out of the wagon, forcing him to walk in his lame condition, so that two of the young ladies from the other family could ride in the wagon and Mr. Howard could flirt with them. Joseph was required to walk and hobble through the snow up to 40 miles a day. When Joseph's brothers tried to stick up for him, Mr. Howard

would hit them with the butt of his whip.³¹

By the time they were about two-thirds of the way to Palmyra, Mr. Howard had spent the last of the money which Father Smith had given him. Since the money was gone, he began to throw all the goods out of the wagon and threatened to take the team and drive off, even though the team and wagon



After a perilous journey of more than 300 miles, the members of the Smith family were overjoyed to be reunited with their father again.

belonged to Father Smith. Mother Smith managed to save their possessions by appealing to the people at the inn where they were staying and Mr. Howard was forced to leave the Smith family and go about his business on foot. For the rest of the journey Mother Smith had to barter bits of cloth and clothing so that the family could have lodging and food.³²

When they arrived in Palmyra, they were delighted to see Father Smith again. Though they had arrived in an impoverished state, they immediately went to work so that they could buy a farm and raise wheat. Mother Smith decided to paint tablecloth cover-

³¹ Reed C. Durham, Jr., "Joseph Smith's Own Story of a Serious Childhood Illness," *BYU Studies* (Summer 1970) 10:4:481.

³² *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 62-63; Durham, "Joseph Smith's Own Story of a Serious Childhood Illness," p. 481.

ings and by this means, she said, "I furnished all the provisions for the family, and, besides this, began to replenish our household furniture, in a very short time, by my own exertions."³³

In the beginning the Smith family lived in a rented, small-frame building on the eastern outskirts of the village. Alvin obtained work as a carpenter's helper while Father Smith went to work as an all-around handyman. He could make barrels, chairs or baskets, and he knew how to dig wells and curb them, dig cisterns and line them, and build fireplaces and stone walls.³⁴ He sometimes took work by contract and Alvin, Hyrum and Joseph would assist him. The Smiths also set up a business selling cake and root beer on Saturdays and holidays.³⁵

School usually started in December and ended in March, and the children attended at a little red schoolhouse just northeast of the village of Palmyra. Young Joseph learned to read and write and had a fairly legible script, although he did not have time to perfect his spelling. He took part in a juvenile debating club that was held at the school, and one of the participants noted that Joseph would "help us solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics."³⁶

A year after arriving in Palmyra, the Smiths made the initial payment on 100 acres of unimproved land that was mostly covered with thick forest. This land was located about a mile and a half south of Palmyra on the way to the village of Manchester, which was about six miles distant. During the next year, when time away from farming tasks would allow, they built a "snug log house, neatly furnished"³⁷ which they moved into in 1818.³⁸ Mother Smith said:

³³ *History of Joseph Smith*, pp. 63-64.

³⁴ *Hyrum Smith, Patriarch*, p. 14.

³⁵ *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, p. 19.

³⁶ *Sacred Places* 2:193; *Joseph Smith the Prophet*, p. 19.

³⁷ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 65.

³⁸ Donald L. Enders, "A Snug Log House," *Ensign*, August 1985, pp. 15-16.



The Smiths built a “snug log house, neatly furnished” a few years after moving to Palmyra, New York.

“In a year we made nearly all of the first payment, erected a log house, and commenced clearing. I believe something like 30 acres of land were made ready for cultivation the first year.”³⁹

Clearing the land required an incredible amount of back-breaking labor. The log house that they built was 28 feet long and 18½ feet wide, and it was a 1½-story residence, with bedrooms in the attic. The main floor was divided into two rooms. The first room served as a kitchen, dining area and general workroom. The other room was a sitting room that also served as a master bedroom. The attic or garret above the main floor was divided into two bedrooms and was probably where most of the children slept. Within the walls of this humble home lived Father and Mother Smith and their eight children. Many sacred experiences would occur in this home within the next few years.⁴⁰

³⁹ *History of Joseph Smith*, p. 64.

⁴⁰ *Sacred Places* 2:197.

Next to their home the Smiths planted an apple orchard of 200 trees. They also had a large garden plot that would feed the family. The main farm was planted in wheat, corn, beans and flax. Every spring the Smiths were able to produce about a thousand pounds of sugar from sugar maple trees on their land.⁴¹ William Smith, Joseph's youngest brother, described the work to which the children were accustomed on the farm:

“We cleared 60 acres of the heaviest timber I ever saw. We had a good place. We also had on it from twelve to fifteen hundred sugar trees and to gather the sap and make sugar molasses from that number of trees was no lazy job. We worked hard to clear our place and the neighbors were a little jealous.”⁴²

It was while living here in this unassuming log house that Joseph was about to have a sacred experience with monumental implications. The heavens, which had been sealed in silence for over a thousand years, were about to be opened once again.

⁴¹ Enders, “A Snug Log House,” p. 17.

⁴² *Comprehensive History of the Church* 1:39-40.