

EPISODE 2

Legacy JOSEPH SMITH JR., BIRTHPLACE

NATHAN WRIGHT: One of the most remarkable aspects of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is it's unique history. Throughout the world, great stories from faithful church members have only added to that history. This program shares some of these incredible stories of faith, perseverance, hope and inspiration. You're listening to Legacy. I am your host, Nathan Wright.

In the maple covered of hills of Vermont, stands a granite monument commemorating the birthplace of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It was here on a wintry New England day, that the Smith family welcomed another son into the world. Of his own birth the prophet wrote simply, "I was born in the town of Sharon, in the state of Vermont, on the twenty-third day of December, A.D., 1805, to goodly parents."

With us in the studio today is Gary Boatright Jr. Gary Boatright Jr. has worked for the Church History Department since the year 2000. His current assignment is Historic Sites Researcher, where he is involved in writing historic site guides for the missionaries that work at these sites. Gary Boatright Jr. received a Bachelor's degree in History, and Geography from Weber State University, and a Master's degree in Museum Studies from the University of Oklahoma. As mentioned, Gary Boatright Jr. has most recently written the site guide for the Joseph Smith Jr., Birthplace in Sharon, Vermont and we welcome you, Gary Boatright Jr..

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.: Thank you.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Tell us just briefly about the site in Sharon.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.: Oh, the site in Sharon. The only way I can really describe it, it's a beautiful, sacred site. It's neatly tucked away in the hills of Vermont between the towns of Sharon and South Royalton and it is just a peaceful, spiritual place that I have learned to love over the last few years as I have been working on some projects associated with it.

NATHAN WRIGHT: What buildings or monuments are actually there?

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.: Well, there's the Joseph Smith monument of course, which is the granite monument that everybody knows or recognizes from the Joseph Smith birthplace. There is also a Visitor's Center there which is a small building that houses some exhibits about the prophet and his family and his early life and Vermont and also his contributions as the prophet throughout his whole life. And then we have some archaeological remains at the site. We have the remains of the foundation of the Solomon and Mack home and also the Daniel Mack home, and then there's some historic features of a rock wall and the old Sharon Road, which used to be the main road connecting Royalton and Sharon that was frequented by the Smiths and the Macks and then just the beautiful landscape. You know, you can climb to the top of

Patriarch Hill and get a wonderful view of the green mountains and of the monument and-- just a lovely, lovely place.

NATHAN WRIGHT: Let's talk a little bit about the families and their circumstances that eventually brought the Prophet Joseph into the world. Tell us about his grand-parents and his parents if you would.

GARY BOATRRIGHT JR.: Well, let's probably first talk about Solomon Mack. I've learned to love Solomon Mack quite a bit. He had a very interesting life. He was born on September 15th, 1732 in Lyme, Connecticut. His family, they were doing quite well, but there was an economic depression early in his life and his parents had to bound him out as an indentured servant, and so he was bound out until he was twenty-one years old.

NATHAN WRIGHT: So, describe briefly what that means to be an indentured servant.

GARY BOATRRIGHT JR.: Well, basically he was contracted to be a full-time employee of whomever he was contracted to. You know, he was asked to do anything and everything. He had to work, basically. He couldn't leave until he had fulfilled his obligation.

NATHAN WRIGHT: And his family got some remuneration because of this?

GARY BOATRRIGHT JR.: They did. We don't know exactly what that is. Solomon, in his autobiography, simply states that he was bound out by his parents and he faithfully, but some what grudgingly, did that. He even writes of a time, about the time, when he was probably in his late teens or early twenties, where he said that there was a dispute with him, and as he referred to him as his master. And he left, Solomon left, but he felt that he needed to fulfill the obligation that really his parents had made and so he went back and fulfilled his indenture and following his service there, he began a life-long pursuit of financial prosperity. Which unfortunately, he never did quite realize in this life. So, but as he left his indenture he did almost everything and anything that you could do there in New England at the time. He was farmer, he was a sailor, he was a soldier. He enlisted 3 times to serve in the French and Indian war. He was, in fact in the battle of Ticonderoga which is one of the most famous battles of that war, he escaped you know that battle without dying—which was miraculous because he writes that he had a bullet fly underneath his chin, just mere inches from his, his head. But, he went on like I said, to do selling and in the Revolutionary war, he helped produce saltpeter which was essential in making gun powder which the colonial forces so desperately needed during the Revolution. But the sad part about this is, all these activities took him away from his family and he was frequently gone from his family often for years at a time and there's a period where he and his son had purchased a boat where he was gone for 4 years from his family and he returned home to find that they were destitute. They had been kicked out of their home and were just poor and this is kind of a life long struggle that, that we see in Solomon's life and he readily acknowledges it in his autobiography looking back on it, that it was a mistake as he was searching after these riches. But he wasn't searching for God in his life. And Solomon's wife Lydia Gates, she was really the strong point of the family. She is the one who cared for the children and when

Solomon was away so frequently, she raised the children and Solomon even states in his autobiography that she is the perfect instructress to teach children. She grew up, herself, she grew up in a religious home and she passed on those traits to her children. Of course, you know Lucy Mack was one of them and so the influence of Lucy's mother in her life, her religious feelings and her god-fearing nature really was passed through Lucy Mack Smith and then of course onto the Prophet Joseph. But Solomon Mack later on in his life, he kind of realized the folly of his ways and had some experiences which brought him closer to God. He devoted the rest of his life to serving God and helping others to come unto Christ. That was you know, part of the reason why he wrote an autobiography around 1811. He sold his farm we believe to help pay-- to publish this book. He went around and distributed his autobiography to help others "come unto Christ" as he had come.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

Thinking about publishing something like an autobiography or a religious experience pamphlet--was that a common thing in the day?

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

You know, I'm not really positive on that. I have not done a whole lot of research on that but we know that during this time, shortly before this time-- religion was a big thing in New England, and in the colonies. We know about the Great Awakening that occurred in that area and there's a lot of religious figures in that area and religion really was a part of everybody's life. I mean it was interesting that Solomon really wasn't caught up in religion and he blamed a lot of that on his master when he was an indentured servant. He states that he wasn't taught about God or anybody by his master and so I think, I don't think he was especially unique, but the surroundings, his environment, and the religion that was around in New England and such a component of everybody's life. It had influenced him and especially having his wife Lydia who was a religious person and who strongly believed in God and taught her children to pray. Undoubtedly that played a big influence in Solomon's later conversion and dedication to God for the rest of his life.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

So let's move to the other side of the family for a minute.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

OK, Asael Smith, of course Joseph's grand-father, he was born in Topsfield, Massachusetts on March 7th, in 1744. And Topsfield Massachusetts was really, the—you could call it the Smith home base. From the first Smith's who arrived in the new world, they settled in Topsfield and grew up and got married and those kids would just stay there you know-- for generations. Asael, he—not being the oldest, he basically had to fend for himself when he came of age. It was tradition at the time that the oldest son in the family received the land of the parents and so Asael had most likely been taught how to be a cooper and other skills from his father, and so he, uh, he went out and began to work and as he grew and eventually married Mary Duty, they began their family and they were still living in Topsfield for quite sometime. In fact, Joseph Smith Sr., was born in his grand-father's home in Topsfield. But as time went on, we know that Asael, like Solomon Mack, enlisted as a soldier in the Revolutionary War, and then you know approximately twenty years later, in 1791, his children are a little more grown, and he decides to make a new beginning for himself

in Vermont. So he and his oldest son travel to Vermont. They find an, acre, some acreage in Tunbridge, Vermont that is virgin forest and he purchases the land--he goes back to get his family in Massachusetts. Then Joseph Sr., and Jesse Smith, his older brother began to clear this land. They built a log home in preparation for the family and Asael would eventually move his family up to Tunbridge, Vermont. Of course, we know it's there in Tunbridge that Joseph Sr., and Lucy Mack met each other. But speaking of his grand-parents, Joseph Smith--his grand-parents really played an important role in his life and they really influenced his, the feelings that he would have later in life and there is a, speaking of liberty, Joseph Smith he said, "It's the love of liberty that inspires my soul; the simple and religious liberty to the whole of the human race." Then he continues, "love of liberty was defused into my soul by my grand-fathers while they dandled me on their knees." And so Joseph, he had close interaction with his grand-parents, and we know that later in his life that Asael Smith, you know, believed in the prophet's calling and the fact Joseph later stated that Asael Smith, his grand-father had predicted that the Lord would raise up a prophet in his family, and Asael believed that Joseph Smith Jr., was the fulfillment of that prediction.

So the Smith family and the Mack family really—their lives, their experiences, their traditions, and their faith, really played a role in the lives of Joseph Smith Sr., and Lucy Mack who raised their family in a God-fearing and loving home where they were taught to read the scriptures and pray and believe in God, and subsequently this is the type of environment that the Prophet grew up in. So really, his grand-parents and even his great grand-parents all the way back—they really played an influence in preparing the way and preparing an environment for the Prophet to grow up in and to be prepared to receive his call as a prophet.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

It—you might also think that the hardships that his parents and grand-parents went through also prepared him for some of the hardships that would come in his life.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

Well, you are right. Solomon Mack and Asael Smith and even the prophet's parents, they struggled through life. The Smith family, when they moved up to Tunbridge, you know, they didn't have the convenience of just moving into a home and settling right down. There was a lot of hard work and dedication that went into it and a lot of sacrifice and trials as well. Even, you know with Solomon Mack, during his many excursions, you know, he frequently faced obstacles. He was ship-wrecked once and fighting in you know--battles and in the French and Indian War. All these trials and tribulations as we know has in our own lives, as they help strengthen us , they strengthen these, the Macks and the Smiths. And shortly after Joseph Sr., and Lucy Mack were married, they faced their own trials you know. They were raising their children and Joseph—he was given a farm to live on in Tunbridge and he decided he was going to try his hand at store keeping and there by Randolph, Vermont. And so he bought a number of items on credit from a boss to merchant and he you know he went into debt for it. He also tried his hand at selling, at crystallizing Ginseng. And we know about the famous story where he crystallized the Ginseng and was preparing to ship it to China in hopes of making a large profit and he was asked by one

of the merchants to serve as a middle man. He said, “if you give me your Ginseng, I can make sure it gets to China and bring back the funds, but Joseph believed that he could make more profit if he took the middle man out and did it himself. Well, when the ship came back from China all he was told he received was a chest of tea. So his hopes of financial prosperity were ruined. So the family had to struggle. How are they going to maintain their income and their standard of living because they had owed this money to the Boston merchants, of which Joseph was hoping to use some of this money to pay them back, and we know that Lucy Mack—she was given a gift of a thousand dollars from her brother and her brother’s business partner. So they used that to help settle some of the debt. But the Smiths had to sell their farm in Tunbridge and that began a series of moves, but the Smith’s experience while in New England is part of which lead to the Smith’s renting a home on Solomon Mack’s farm in Sharon, Vermont. But you know, their moves and their struggles continued until you know—they finally moved to Palmyra in 1816, when they actually had a little stability in their lives and they were able to purchase some land as we know, build a nice log home and eventually a frame home. So for a few years they had some stability in their lives, but it kind of started all over again in Palmyra years later.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

So the prophet Joseph having been close to his grand-parents and knowing all these stories, it just seems that’s part of the reason why he kind of took hardships and persecution in stride actually, good-naturedly.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

I believe so, you know. Being around his grand-parents and his parents, and as you said knowing what they had gone through and seeing what fine men and women they were. You know, I think the prophet knew inside—that these things are bad and they are tough to get through, but I’m going to be better because of it. And in Liberty Jail, and the lowest portion of his life, the Lord confirmed that to him. “That all these things shall be for thy good,” and so, I think that is really right what you are saying that he kind of took them in stride. He, like the rest of us, he didn’t want to go through them but he had that eternal perspective and the experience of his family knowing that this is going to make me a better person to go through these trials and come out on the other end having endured them.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

Thank you. Let’s move to the Sharon, Vermont site again. Tell me how it came about. Who was instrumental in making the monument and getting the property.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

Ok. Well, Junius F. Wells, he was really the driver behind the Joseph Smith monument. He visited the site in 1894, if I have my dates correctly, yes in 1894, he traveled to Vermont, and while he was there he inquired in the local records office of where’s the land that prophet Joseph was born on? Well, he was directed to a local resident named Harvey Smith whose no relation to Joseph and Harvey Smith took him up to the top of this hill called “Dairy Hill,” and showed him the ruins of the home where it was believed that the Prophet Joseph was born. Well during this trip, Junius thought, wouldn’t it be ideal to mark this spot as the birthplace of the Prophet Joseph. Well you know that idea—he kind of just—he put it in his back pocket and it kind of remained dormant for a decade. Well in 1905,

which was the hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Prophet, Junius Wells revived this idea of marking the site of the Prophet's birth. I believe he felt that this was the perfect timing and the perfect way to honor the Prophet for his hundredth birthday. So, Junius F. Wells, he met with the First Presidency--Joseph F. Smith was President of the Church at that time—and discussed the idea with them and they gave him the go ahead to go back to Vermont, research the site and confirm that it was indeed the birthplace of the Prophet, and to purchase the site. So that's exactly what Junius did. He spent a few months gathering information and affidavits, and meeting with long-time residents of area who all confirmed that the spot he was shown nearly 10 years ago was indeed the spot of the home where the Prophet Joseph was born. But Junius Wells, he was also, during this time he was also looking to erect a monument in honor of his father Daniel Wells for the Salt Lake City cemetery, and he was meeting with some folks from R.C. Bowers Co. that were out of Montpelier, Vermont about erecting this monument for his father, but during the conversation, he also brought up the idea of a monument for the Prophet. And the, these people he was meeting with, said that would be a feasible idea—we could easily do that. So Junius drew up some plans and designs of the monument and sent them back Joseph F. Smith and the First Presidency and they approved the project. This was in July of 1905, when they actually approved the project and it was on July 24th, 1905, that he signed the contract with the company to create the project. And I emphasize that because, this was tremendous undertaking. You know, they signed the contract near the end of July, 1905. Well the plan was to have the monument erected and dedicated, on December 23, 1905. Just a few short months away. But, Junius F. Wells, being the dedicated person that he was, he moved right ahead. They found out that the best stone that they could build the monument out of Vermont was in Barre, Vermont—just a short way from the birthplace. And as they were searching through the quarry for these perfect pieces of granite to build a monument from, Junius F. Well, he wanted to have the perfect piece of stone from which the main section of the sculpture would be made from. This was the long shaft that we know that is thirty-eight and a half feet long with each foot representing a year of the Prophet's life and speaking of this, Junius F. Wells stated, "I was after the perfect shaft; the stone that was large enough to measure. One that should be polished up--four feet at the base and long enough to measure to thirty-eight and a half feet—a foot for each year of the Prophet's life." Well, finding a stone that large is extremely difficult and especially to have it that large and transport it without it cracking or even breaking. But they were able, after a thorough search of the quarry, they were able to find a block of granite from which this could be made. So they got the stones cut out of the mountain. They shipped them off to the polisher who polished them and there were five stones total, which amounted to almost a hundred tons of total weight. Now, you have to remember this is 1905, they're still doing things with horses and wagons and part of or the majority of the trip they are able to load up on the railroad which saved a tremendous amount of time and eased the process, but when the stones were unloaded in Royalton, Vermont, there was still a number of miles that they had to be pulled up to the birthplace, and I emphasize up—it's an uphill road. Even today, if you go to the Joseph Smith birthplace, when you leave the main road and begin the drive up Dairy Hill road, if you have a small car, it struggles going up the hill. So this really was a

tremendous undertaking that Junius F. Wells was commencing on. So they, in order to do this, they had a special wagon made. The wagon itself weighed 2 tons and they were drawn by a number of horses and one of the things that they had to do in Royalton, was they had to cross the White River. There was a newly constructed steel bridge, but it wasn't strong enough to hold this load and so there was an old wooden bridge downstream that they shored up and put some more supports so they could get the load across the river. Uh, but that was kind of the easy part compared to what they had ahead of them. As they began pulling these stones up, they did them one at a time. It took days to take them from Royalton and to get them to the birthplace and along the way, they would have to use block and tackle, which basically they would tie ropes to the trees along the road and using a pulley system, they would help the horses and pull this up the hill just ever so slowly and you know, while they were doing this and the local residents kind of caught wind and heard what was going on, they were all saying you know you're never going to make it. There is no way you can get this done. This is Vermont. Winters are quite harsh here and the fact they said that from early November to the end of March there is snow on the ground which was just going to make it that much more difficult. So Junius Wells he just kind of kept reminding himself, were doing this for the Lord's prophet and he prayed and had faith that they would be able to meet the deadline. So the weather for the most part throughout this whole process was actually quite nice for Vermont and especially as it got into the winter months. But there was one day that they really thought they were going to struggle and it might bring the whole thing to a stop, and I just want to read here from what Junius Wells wrote regarding this day and the situation they faced. He said, "We latter-day saints are believers in providence. Not only believers in what Mr. Boutwell", (a local resident he was referring to) "calls Mormon luck but in providence. Even in the matter of weather we feel so. The day before we had to cross Mr. Button's mud hole," and this, along the road, this is kind of a flat area of the road and kind of low, low lying, so it's a place where water would gather and it would be really marshy.) "but the day before they had to cross Mr. Button's mud hole it rained. There was an empty hay press that tried to go through it and the wheels went out of sight. It took four horses to get it out. Next it commenced to snow but the thermometer dropped in 3 ½ hours, 35 degrees and the North wind blew the storm down to sea. We had arranged to have nine inch thickness of planks at that mud hole if necessary to get over. As it happened we only needed three. For when the wagons went over it the next morning the ground was frozen so hard that it split the planks into kindling wood—and the weather has not been so cold since. I call that providence." So really during the, as they moved these stones and erected it, Junius Wells, he saw the hand of God in assisting him to get this completed. And during the dedication of the monument, President Joseph F. Smith, he stated and I quote, "When I pass over the roads over which he—Junius F. Wells has brought these immense blocks of granite successfully and erected them on this spot where they are destined to remain by providence of God, it is something marvelous in my eyes—I'm astonished to have it." So really this was I believe a miraculous feat to do in such a short period of time. And to have it done on time and in fact the monument, it was completed on December 8th, a few days you know before the dedication. You know the dedication and the faithfulness of Junius Wells to

get this project completed just amazes me. It's an example to me of really once you've determined to do something and you've been asked by the Lord's prophet to do something—you do it. And as you do that the Lord will bless you and assist you.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

Does it seem fitting to you that based on the struggles that Joseph's ancestors had to go through and Joseph himself, that the whole process of getting the monument up to the top of Dairy Hill Road was also a struggle—was a hardship. It just seems rather fitting or rather ironic—I'm not sure.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

You know, I've never thought of it that way, but that is so true. I mean the fact that you know, that the Prophet faced so much, so many trials and adversity in his life, you know, like I said, it only seems fitting that Junius F. Wells, in erecting this monument, had to go through some struggles himself and I guess you could say it's kind of symbolic of the Prophets life. Not just how tall it is, but how it was erected, you know, it had to be cut out of the mountain and shaped and polished. Hauled up a large hill and finally erected to where it has stood now for over 100 years and hopefully it will stand for 100 more.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

So, how does one get to Sharon, Vermont, if someone's on vacation.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

Well, Sharon, Vermont is really out of the way. And if you're flying into Vermont, the best place is to fly into Burlington, Vermont which is on the western side of that and the main freeway I believe, it's I-89, I'd usually have my GPS thing so I'd just easily follow it. But you follow the main highway from Burlington, southeast, and you know, as you're driving you'll start seeing signs for towns that we hear about in Church history, Royalton, you know, South Royalton, Tunbridge and eventually Sharon. But you can get off at either the Royalton or the Sharon Exits. Then just follow the signs and follow the signs if you're getting of Royalton—follow the signs to Sharon. If you get off at Sharon—follow the signs to Royalton and there's a road that follows the White River. A Beautiful road, scenic road, I mean it's well worth that alone. But as you go through these little villages, you will eventually see the sign for Dairy Hill Road and a marker pointing the way to the Joseph Smith Birthplace and it's a short drive now. For Junius Wells it wasn't a short drive, but just go to Dairy Hill Road and you will find yourself in that of the way, beautiful, scenic area of the green mountains of Vermont. Excellent—thank you.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

Well, based on what you've done with your site information for the tour guides and missionaries and all that you've worked with—with this site—what are some of your final thoughts?

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

You know—I love the Joseph Smith birthplace. And a part of that comes obviously from the amount of time and effort that I have been putting into the projects. But it is truly a special and sacred place and oft times when people travel on Church history trips—they start in Palmyra and Sharon is kind of left out because outside from the Prophet being born there—there were no visions or revelations or doctrinal contributions that came out of Sharon. But the thing is that the Prophet came out of Sharon and his

grandparents were there and their faith, their dedication to hard work—all these things from his grandparents and his parents helped to shape the Prophet into who he was. And so I'd highly recommend if anybody is in the area or even if they are planning a Church history trip, don't exclude Sharon you know. Go—and feel the spirit that is there and talk to the missionaries and see the sights and stand in awe of the monument and really, when you drive up Dairy Hill Road and you pull up into the birthplace and you see that monument on top of the hill—you gain an appreciation of what Junius F. Wells did. And you know, the dedication and sacrifice he made. And as well, that monument today stands as a witness for all the latter-day saints that we testify that Joseph Smith is a Prophet of God. And that he restored the fullness of the gospel to this earth. And so it's just a beautiful, special and even sacred place, I'd say.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

We've been visiting today with Gary Boatright Jr., Historic Sites Researcher for the Church History Department.

GARY BOATRIGHT JR.:

Thank you, it's been a pleasure.

NATHAN WRIGHT:

You've been listening to Legacy. I'm Nathan Wright.