

BYU RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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REVIEW

CALENDAR ✕ COMMENTS ✕ INTERVIEWS & SPOTLIGHTS ✕ STUDENT & TEACHER UPDATES ✕ BOOKS

A portrait of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Latter Day Saint movement, is the background for the lower half of the cover. He is depicted from the chest up, wearing a dark coat and a white cravat. The background of the portrait shows a landscape with a body of water and trees.

The Smith Family Memorial Monument

Honoring five generations of the
Prophet's ancestors in Topsfield,
Massachusetts



The Smith Family Memorial Monument IN TOPSFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS





Topsfield

Boston

Topsfield, Massachusetts, located approximately twenty-five miles north of Boston, was the home of five generations of Joseph Smith paternal ancestors.

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Many Latter-day Saints are familiar with some of the more well-known historic sites and localities associated with the early history of the Church, places like in Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. But there are many other important locales Church members are completely unfamiliar with. Mention the significance of Topsfield, Massachusetts, for example, and few Latter-day Saints would be able to comment on this community's significance as it relates to the Restoration, which is probably understandable. But Topsfield's importance is indeed noteworthy in understanding the larger framework and history of the restored gospel. For more than 150 years, five generations of Joseph Smith's paternal progenitors were Topsfield residents, and the family legacy in this rural New England community continues to be felt to the present day. And while it is impossible to measure the overall influence and extent that Topsfield's cultural, social, economic, political, and religious environment had on these early generations of the Smiths, anthropologists would contend that the early conditions, circumstances, and forces that characterized families like the Smiths had long-lasting effects that impacted the character, attitudes, beliefs, and ways of thinking of their descendants in succeeding generations. In the case of Joseph Smith, his ancestral roots helped to shape not only who he was but also who he was to become.

The 1873 Smith Family Topsfield Memorial

In 1873 Apostle George A. Smith, who had served as the Church Historian and Recorder for sixteen years (1854–1870) and who was a cousin of Joseph Smith (the son of John Smith, a brother to Joseph Smith Sr.), arranged for a memorial to be erected in what is today the Pine Grove Cemetery, located near Topsfield's town center. The monument honors Samuel Smith I and his wife Rebecca Curtis, as well as Samuel Smith II and his wife Priscilla Gould, each of whom are believed to have been buried in the cemetery. George A. Smith did not include the names of Joseph Smith's first ancestors to live in the Topsfield region, Robert and Mary French Smith, because at the time of their deaths, the Pine Grove Cemetery did not exist, so they likely would have been buried elsewhere (probably on his property). Additionally, George A. Smith



George A. Smith monument in the Pine Grove Cemetery, Topsfield, MA, June 2021. In late 1873, Apostle George A. Smith (a first cousin to Joseph Smith), while in New England en route to Europe and the Middle East, made arrangements for the placement of a monument in the Pine Grove Cemetery in Topsfield in honor of Samuel Smith Sr. (1666–1748) and Samuel Smith Jr. (1714–1785) and their wives, all of whom are presumed to have been buried in the cemetery. Courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

did not include the names of Joseph Smith's paternal grandparents Asael and Mary Duty Smith, because Asael died in Potsdam, New York, and Mary died in Kirtland, Ohio. Nor did he include the name of Joseph Smith Sr. and his wife Lucy Mack (unlike her husband, she never lived in Topsfield), both of whom died in Nauvoo, Illinois.

The 2005 Smith Family Topsfield Community Markers

The first time I visited the Pine Grove Cemetery and saw the 1873 monument was in June 2002. The memorial had weathered, having been subject to the elements for well over a century. The inscriptions had eroded somewhat, and lichens were on the surface. In subsequent years I continued to visit the site when visiting Massachusetts and when conducting Latter-day Saint tours in the New England region.

In 2005 I was in my office at BYU when I received a phone call from Norman J. Isler, the president of the Topsfield Historical Society. I later learned he had the reputation as being the most knowledgeable citizen about Topsfield's history. How Norm's phone call was directed to me is still a bit of a mystery, but my guess is that he must have somehow found the number for the Department of Church History and Doctrine offices where he then talked to one of the secretaries who directed his call to me. The secretary who took the call must have known something about my background and interest in Church history sites, which is why the call was forwarded to me. I'd like to think it was providential.

Norm introduced himself to me and then told me the purpose of his call. He said he was aware that 2005 was the two hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Prophet Joseph Smith and that because five generations of his Smith ancestors lived in Topsfield, he was calling to propose the idea of having a historical marker placed in the community to share the Smiths' ancestral story. He also recommended where the marker could be located—namely, at the “Smith homestead,” situated on Boardman Lane about a mile north of the town center. He further explained that over the years when Latter-day Saint groups would stop in Topsfield to see the 1873 Smith memorial in the Pine Grove Cemetery, many would also go to the site of the old Smith homestead (which at that time was owned by Brian and Cathy Rossanos) and wander onto the property and take photographs. Norm felt that



Above: Smith family homestead historical marker, June 2021. In 2005, the Topsfield Historical Society and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation (now the Ensign Peak Foundation) placed a historical marker on the site of the original Smith family homestead, which was occupied by four generations of Joseph Smith's paternal ancestors. Courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.



Above Right: Historical marker on the Congregational Church grounds in Topsfield, June 2021. In 2005, the Topsfield Historical Society and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation (now the Ensign Peak Foundation), in cooperation with the Topsfield Congregational church, placed a historical marker at this site. The first Congregational church in Topsfield was built in 1703, the second in 1759, and the third, shown in this photograph, in 1842. Joseph Smith's paternal ancestors affiliated and worshipped in the first and second Congregational meetinghouses. Courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

Right: Elder M. Russell Ballard and attendees on the occasion of the dedication of the historical marker on the Congregational church grounds, 15 October 2005. President Ballard is a descendant of the Topsfield Smiths through his great-great-grandfather Hyrum Smith. Courtesy of *Church News*.



if a historical marker could be placed near the side of the road, he believed visitors would be less inclined to walk aimlessly around and explore the Rossanoses' property.

At the time, I was a board member of the Mormon Historical Sites Foundation (now the Ensign Peak Foundation), a nonprofit group organized to identify, commemorate, and fund the construction and placement of monuments and markers of historical sites associated with the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I told Norm a little about the organization and

then mentioned that the idea of placing a historical marker like the one he was proposing was exactly the type of project the foundation would likely be willing to support. I told him I was confident the organization, chaired by Kim R. Wilson, would agree to fund the proposal, which they did.

A short while later, as the plans for the marker were going forward, Norm proposed having a second marker, one about the religious ties and affiliation the Smiths had with the Congregational Church in Topsfield. This

additional proposal was approved by the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation board and by Norman B. Bendroth, the minister of the congregation at the time, who gave his permission to have the marker placed in the northeast corner section of the church property. In my efforts to compose each of the marker's inscriptions, Norm provided helpful feedback and recommendations. A local monument company made and installed the two markers followed by a formal dedication held on October 16, 2005. Elder M. Russell Ballard, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and a Smith descendant, spoke and offered the dedicatory prayer.

The 2020 Smith Family Memorial Monument

In September 2018, I had a phone conversation with Becky Smith, an independent Latter-day Saint historian who has written and published several guidebooks on early Church history sites, and who, along with her husband Greg, regularly conducted Church history tours. She and I have been friends for many years, exchanged ideas from time to time, and collaborated on a few projects together. In this conversation Becky told me that she and her husband Greg had just returned from the East, where she was doing some research in order to update one of her guidebooks. She mentioned that while they were in Topsfield they noticed again the condition of the marker George A. Smith had erected in 1873. It was discolored, lichens were everywhere, and the inscriptions were getting much harder to read. They also took time to visit with Norm Isler, who was still serving as the president of the Topsfield Historical Society. In their meeting, the subject of getting the monument professionally cleaned came up. However, Norm told them that because the cemetery was owned by the town of Topsfield, they must write up a formal proposal in order to receive permission from Topsfield's Parks and Cemetery Commission and superintendent Steve Shepard. He also mentioned that it might be a difficult proposition because the commission generally did not approve disturbing any part of the old cemetery or doing anything to an original gravestone.


As Becky and I talked about the possibility of getting the 1873 marker cleaned, we also talked about how wonderful it would be if another monument could be placed or erected near the old one—one that would highlight each of the five generations of Joseph Smith's ancestors who

lived in Topsfield, not just Samuel I and Samuel II and their wives, whom George A. Smith had memorialized on the 1873 monument. We even talked about modeling the monument after the Joseph Smith Memorial in Sharon, erected in 1905 by Junius Wells, only on a smaller scale, and constructing it from the same granite that came from the E. L. Smith "Rock of Ages" quarry in Barre, Vermont—the same quarry where the granite for the Joseph Smith Memorial had come from. When it came to the cost for the marker, I thought a conservative figure would be around twenty thousand dollars, thinking once again that if our plans materialized, we could run the idea by Kim Wilson to see if the Ensign Peak Foundation would agree to fund the project.

A short time later, Becky made a phone call to the Joseph Smith Memorial Visitors' Center in Sharon, Vermont, about a matter unrelated to cleaning the 1873 Smith marker in Topsfield and was put in contact with Kay Godfrey and his wife, Debra, who were serving as senior missionaries at the site. During one of their subsequent conversations, Becky mentioned to Kay about her efforts to try to find someone and some way to get the marker in Topsfield cleaned. Kay was familiar with the history and legacy of the Smith family in Topsfield, having directed several Church history tours over the years. In fact, he regularly took his tour groups to see the 1873 Smith monument in the Pine Grove Cemetery, and the markers at



Norman J. Isler, president of the Topsfield Historical Society, June 2021.
Courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.



the Congregational Church and at Boardman Lane. Becky then asked him if he would be willing to meet with Norm and the Topsfield's Parks and Cemetery Commission to try to secure permission to have the 1873 marker cleaned. She also ran by Kay the other idea of looking into the possibility of placing a new historical monument honoring the Topsfield Smiths in the Pine Grove Cemetery, which he agreed to do. On March 21, 2019, Kay traveled to Topsfield, where he met Norm to discuss both matters. Norm was very supportive of both propositions and made arrangements for Kay to make a presentation to the Parks and Cemetery Commission in one of their upcoming meetings.

On April 9, 2019, Kay, Debra, and Norm formally met with several Topsfield officials, including representatives from the town's selectmen (the town's executive body), the Parks and Cemetery Commission, and Steve Shepard. In the course of the discussion, it became evident that the officers were open-minded but cautious. Approval to have the 1873 marker cleaned was given, with the recommendation that it be done by a professional company capable of doing the work without damaging the original stone. Much more discussion however, focused on the proposal to construct a memorial dedicated to the five generations of Joseph Smith's paternal ancestors. Fortunately, Kay came to the meeting well prepared. In his presentation he included a detailed drawing of the proposed monument, which was similar in design and appearance to that of the Joseph Smith Memorial in Sharon, although considerably smaller. This new proposed monument was ten feet in height and scaled to approximately one-fifth the size of the original made from stone from the quarry in Barre, Vermont. And, like the memorial in Sharon, Kay proposed that it consist of five separate granite stone sections, which he intuitively suggested symbolically represented the five generations of Topsfield Smiths. The location of the structure was also an issue, but it was subsequently determined that if approved, it should be placed in the vicinity of the 1873 monument. Finally, it was determined the color of the stone used in the new monument should be the same as the 1873 original. (This was later scrapped, however, when following the cleaning, it was discovered that the stone used was actually brownstone, a type of reddish sandstone, completely different in color and texture than the gray granite from the Barre quarry.) Although Kay and Norm came to the meeting with expectation that their proposals

might very well be rejected, they came away encouraged by the fact that permission was given for the cleaning of the 1873 monument, in addition to receiving consideration for a new memorial.

These officials had come to recognize that a new monument dedicated to the Topsfield Smiths would serve as an appropriate memorial to a remarkable family whose descendants had left an impactful and lasting legacy on the religious landscape in America.

What occurred during the next few weeks was totally unexpected. On April 29, when Kay met for a second time with Topsfield's Parks and Cemetery Commission and other community leaders, they had taken ownership of the monument project. In the interim, these officials had come to recognize that a new monument dedicated to the Topsfield Smiths would serve as an appropriate memorial to a remarkable family whose descendants had left an impactful and lasting legacy on the religious landscape in America. In addition, the section in the cemetery where the monument would be located was in need of some renovations and conservation, and the placement of a new memorial could be the means to make some necessary enhancements and improvements to the surrounding cemetery property. The new monument also had the potential to draw more visitors to the community (especially Latter-day Saint groups), and it would be a way to foster goodwill among religious groups in the area. Recognizing the potential of the project, community leaders implemented some plans of their own.

On May 14, 2019, when Kay met with the Parks and Cemetery Commission to learn of their plans, he was surprised to discover the commissioners had already contracted with a professional landscape architect who had produced several detailed architectural drawings for a memorial that included several features and structures that went considerably beyond the singular monument Kay had initially proposed. The design of the monument itself consisted of two base stones, a four-sided inscription

stone with space for biographical and historical inscriptions for Robert, Samuel I, Samuel II, Asael, and Joseph Smith Sr., a collar stone, and an obelisk-type column set on top of the collar. But the sketches also included a garden-like plaza, measuring 30 by 38 feet, outlined with granite curbing, interspersed with granite posts that were linked with a black iron chain to set off the site from the surrounding graves. Each quarter section of the plaza also included a granite stone bench. To facilitate construction, the site would also need to be excavated, but the original 1873 marker would not have to be moved, allowing it to be situated eleven feet to the north of the new monument. To provide access to the memorial site, plans called for a “stone dust” walkway to be installed from the main cemetery roadway and parking area to the site (a second walkway was later added). A final inclusion was the removal of a number of large, aging trees near the new memorial. To get some idea what the entire project would cost, the commissioners requested Brent and Theresa Lane, owners of Kimball Memorials in nearby Danvers, Massachusetts, submit a bid as to what the project would cost.

On June 3, the Lanes presented their estimate to the Parks and Cemetery Commission, which came in at a whopping \$220,000, a far cry from the original \$20,000 Becky and I had had originally proposed for a single monument. Understandably, when Kay saw the plans and the higher cost for the project, he had mixed feelings; he was pleased the commissioners accepted the proposal for the memorial, but frustrated that they had added so many costly embellishments. When Kay wrote Becky to tell her about the terms laid down by the commission, her reaction was much the same. Yet they both knew the only way the monument project was going to happen was if it was done according to the terms the commissioners had proposed. But the bigger question was, where could they come up with the money to fund such a project? Both Becky and Kay knew the Ensign Peak Foundation had previously helped fund other important and significant historic site projects, but in their minds this one was simply too costly even for the foundation to try to undertake. “I think this is a bust,” Kay wrote to Becky, “I don’t see this kind of money.” However, when Becky called to tell me about the commission’s decision and the cost of their revised and expanded proposal for the memorial, my reaction was just the opposite. I was thrilled and excited at the possibility. I



Above, left to right, top to bottom: Becky and Greg Smith, Kay Godfrey, Rick Cochran, and Kim Wilson, each of whom played important roles in the monument project.

Below: Construction and placement of the monument honoring the five generations of Topsfield Smiths, 15 September 2020. Kimball Memorials of Danvers, MA, was contracted to construct and install the monument and the plaza area honoring the Smith family. Courtesy of Kenneth R. Mays.



reassured her this could work if we could get the backing of the Ensign Peak Foundation, which I was confident we could do. After all, the foundation had funded the cost for the 2005 historical markers, and this would be a good follow-up project to the previous one. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the Ensign Peak Foundation was a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and as the chairman of the board, Kim Wilson was well connected and had an impressive track record of securing donors to fund past historic site projects.

While all this was taking place, the Godfreys’ mission at the Joseph Smith Memorial was coming to an end and

they were making plans to return to Utah. Providentially, a few weeks earlier, Rick Cochran, the Northeast Area regional public affairs director for the Church (now the regional communication director), visited the Joseph Smith Memorial, where he met Kay, who told him about his meetings with the Topsfield officials and his efforts to get approval for the new memorial. Topsfield was part of Rick's region, and he immediately took an interest in the project, which led Kay to ask Rick if he would take over for him. "If you do not help," Kay told him, "this project will not happen." Given that the monument project seemed to be something along the lines of his public affairs responsibilities, Rick agreed. Then, in early June, the two men went to Topsfield, where Kay introduced Rick to Norm Isler, Steve Shepard, and Bruce and Theresa Lane, the proposed contractors. It was around this time that the 1873 monument cleaning and restoration was completed. Becky and her husband Greg funded the cleaning operation.

With the Godfreys back in Utah, the next step was to arrange to get Kim Wilson and Rick Cochran together to talk things over and discuss particulars. Rick had made plans to travel to Utah for a grandson's baptism during the first week of July, which provided an opportunity to

get the two of them together. On July 8, 2019, Kim, Rick, Becky, Greg, and I met at Becky's home in Orem, where we discussed the whole situation. Rick laid out all the architectural designs the Topsfield Parks and Cemetery Commission had professionally drawn up, noting that they had added a few additional modifications, bringing the project to \$240,000. After considerable discussion, Kim felt the project was one the Ensign Peak Foundation would be interested in sponsoring, and he believed the board would support his recommendation. We also determined that in going forward we would make a goal to complete the monument project by June 2020 to coincide with the two hundredth anniversary year of Joseph Smith's First Vision. It would also be celebratory of the four hundredth anniversary of the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Bay.

Within a matter of a few weeks, Rick secured a donation of \$120,000 from a private corporate foundation, half the amount needed to fund the project. But that donation was contingent upon securing contributions from other donors or entities for the remaining \$120,000. However, within a short time, he successfully obtained another sizable donation from a donor in the Boston area. Kim obtained substantial contributions from three benefactors



Completed plaza area for the monument to the Topsfield Smiths, June 2021. The plaza also includes the 1873 monument erected by George A. Smith, June 2021. Courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

in Utah, enough to begin actual construction on the project. A fourth benefactor later covered the remainder of the costs. All the contributions were managed through the Ensign Peak Foundation.

On August 19, 2019, Rick, Kim, and Richard Lambert (vice chair of the Ensign Peak Foundation) met in Topsfield, where they signed the contract with Kimball Memorials to begin work on the monument and its accompanying features. The agreement included a subcontract with the Rock of Ages factory in Vermont to cut the five granite sections of the monument. During the next few months, I, Kim, and Kenneth Mays (an Ensign Peak Foundation board member) canvassed a number of historical sources in order to provide accurate texts and information for the monument. Rick made numerous trips

to Topsfield, where he met with civic leaders and various townspeople to solidify plans for a formal dedication of the monument, which was initially scheduled for June 2020. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 outbreak in the early spring of 2020 and government restrictions to curtail the spread of the virus caused delays in the monument's construction, making it necessary to postpone the dedication indefinitely. On September 15, 2020, the five stone sections composing the monument were assembled and fitted together on the site, marking the final completion of the entire project. Expectations are for the dedication to take place sometime in 2022, with the hope that President M. Russell Ballard, Acting President of the Quorum of the Twelve, will be able to attend and dedicate the edifice as a lasting tribute to an extraordinary family with a remarkable heritage. ✂

THE FIVE GENERATIONS OF TOPSFIELD SMITHS

Robert Smith (1624–1693)—Mary French (1634–1719). Robert Smith was born in England and in 1638, at the age of fourteen, immigrated to Boston as an indentured servant and became a tailor. He lived in Boston, then moved north to Ipswich, where he likely met Mary French, a native of Boston. The couple married around 1656 and lived in Ipswich before moving to Rowley (later to become Boxford). Together the couple had ten children, nine of whom lived to maturity. Later, Robert and Mary became residents of Topsfield, which marked the beginning of the Smiths' legacy in the community.

Samuel Smith I (1666–1748)—Rebecca Curtis/Curtice (unknown–1753). Samuel I married Rebecca Curtis/Curtice in 1707 (possibly a second marriage), and were parents of ten children. He was a landowner, practiced the carpenter's trade, and was a citizen of influence—holding offices of public trust. When his father, Robert, died in 1693, Samuel became the executor of the estate, which became known as the "Smith homestead."

Samuel Smith II (1714–1785)—Priscilla Gould (1707–1744). Samuel II married Priscilla Gould in 1734, and the couple had five children. Priscilla died in September 1744, a short time after the birth of her youngest child, Asael, Joseph Smith Jr.'s grandfather. The following year, Samuel married his second wife, Priscilla Gould, a cousin of his first wife with the same name. She had no children of her own and reared the five children left motherless the year before. Samuel was the most distinguished of the Topsfield Smiths, where he served as a Topsfield selectman (local government leader), town clerk, and a member of the Committee for Correspondence, Tea Committee, and Committee of Safety. Most notably, he represented Topsfield as a delegate to the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 (the colonial assembly), and the Second Provincial Congress in 1775. He became a captain in the Topsfield militia.

Asael Smith (1744–1830)—Mary Duty (1743–1836). Asael (also Ashael) Smith married Mary Duty in 1767. In 1772, the couple moved from Topsfield to New Hampshire, during which time he served in the Revolutionary War. The couple and their ten

children returned to Topsfield in 1786, where, three years later, their last child was born. In 1791 the family moved to Tunbridge, Vermont. The family later moved to Stockholm, New York, where he died in October 1830. In May 1836, his wife Mary left Stockholm to join the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, where she died on May 27, only a few days after her arrival, at the age of ninety-two.

Joseph Smith Sr. (1771–1840). Joseph Smith Sr. was born on July 12, 1771, in Topsfield. The following year, his parents, Asael and Mary, moved the family to New Hampshire for fourteen years, then returned to Topsfield in 1786. During this time, Joseph Sr. became a member of the Topsfield Congregational Church. In 1791, at the age of twenty, he moved with his parents to Tunbridge, Vermont. In total, Joseph Sr. lived in Topsfield for about six years. It was not until after the family moved to Vermont that he met Lucy Mack. The couple married in January 1796. He labored as a cooper, farmer, merchant, and teacher. The couple had ten children, including Joseph Smith Jr., founder and president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Hyrum Smith, Patriarch of the Church and a counselor in the First Presidency.