

The Macks of Gilsum and Marlow, New Hampshire

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On the occasion of the Dedication of a sign commemorating the Birthplace of Lucy Mack Smith and of the Graves of the Mack Family in Centennial Cemetery, Gilsum, NH

September 16, 2023.

I have lived in the same small town for 40 years, and I am aware of the importance of families of “doers” in keeping the town running. I married into a family of doers. In due course, I became a doer in my town, serving on the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, the Old Home Day Committee, the Trails Committee, the school PTO, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts and I helped to organize a town-wide community forum a few years ago. I have worked with other “doers” in my town over the years: selectmen and selectwomen, Scout leaders, PTO, and school board members.

My husband’s family has lived in our little town for at least three generations. His mother served as Tax Collector for several years. His father was a selectman. My mother in law’s mother is buried in the Munsonville Cemetery, as are her stepbrother and other family members.

Other families in our town have lived here for many generations and their influence is felt today in place names and yearly traditions, and on the land, as they had the foresight to see that special places were conserved for the future and available to be enjoyed by their descendants and “newcomers” alike.

The Mack family’s influence on the towns of Gilsum and Marlow is similarly felt. I have hiked on Mack Hill and driven on Mack Road in Marlow, and war memorials commemorate members of the family who fought for independence during the Revolutionary War as well as in other 18th and 19th Century conflicts.

As I prepared for this event, I discovered that the Mack family figures prominently in the history of the town of Gilsum. From its beginning as the town of “Boyle” when John and Abner Mack were listed as officers of the town in 1761, to Solomon Mack the third serving on the committee tasked with creating the town history in 1879, the Macks were a family of “doers.”

56 individual members of the Mack family from the mid-18th Century to the late 19th Century are mentioned in the History of the Town of Gilsum, NH.

Abijah, Josiah, John and Abner Mack were grantees in the town of Gilsum in 1764. “Tradition says there was a dispute whether the town should be called Gilbert or Sumner. Rev. Clement

Sumner, of Keene, was the son of Thomas Sumner, and had married Elizabeth, daughter of Samuel Gilbert. Possibly this family connection led to the compromise by which the first syllable of each name was taken to form the unique name of Gil-Sum.” (History of Gilsum, page 19)

Joseph Mack was a member of the committees charged with laying out the roads and highways and laying out the proprietors’ lands in Gilsum in 1764 and was among the petitioners to form the town of Surry from parts of Gilsum and Westmoreland in 1768.

Members of the family from Gilsum served in the local militia, and in companies during the French and Indian War, Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and the Civil War. Captain Elisha Mack, brother of Solomon Mack, played a pivotal role in what was known as the “Keene Raid,” of May 31, 1779. He and a company of men went to the houses of the 13 “Tories” in Keene who had refused to sign the Association Test. He intended to execute them all but was dissuaded from this object by his commanding officer, Colonel Alexander, who said, “you must prepare for eternity, for you shall not be permitted to take vengeance, in this irregular manner, on any men, even if they are Tories.” The Gilsum History relates that “seeing the determination of his superior officer whose orders he was under obligations to obey, and no doubt beginning to realize that his proceeding was entirely unlawful, Capt. Mack soon after led his company back silently toward home.”

In town and school affairs, members of the Mack family served as selectmen, moderator, cemeteries’ sexton (specifically of the Bond cemetery, which is the cemetery in which we stand today), superintendent of building of the County Road (now Route 10) in 1839, and on the Superintendent of Schools committee. Berzeleel Lord Mack taught at the South School House No. 3. One of the town’s schools, District No. 7, was in the ell of Chilion Mack’s house in 1836. Chilion Mack also served as postmaster from Dec. 20, 1828, until October 1842.

The Mack family engaged in social causes. Hannah Mack was listed as a member of the Gilsum Anti-Slavery Society in 1838. In 1851, Solomon Mack Jr was listed as a member of the Sons of Temperance, Upper Ashuelot Division, No. 35, and later, a new division of the Sons of Temperance (which included women) listed Adaline K. Mack as a member and Solomon Mack as “Worthy Patriarch.” Chilion and Solomon Mack were members of the Literary Societies and Gilsum Lyceum.

Hannah Mack is listed as a member of the Congregational Church in 1796. An 1807 list of Congregational Church members includes Rachel Mack, and the charter for the Congregational Church was signed by Berzeleel Mack and Berzeleel Lord Mack in 1816. In 1823, Solomon Mack was Marshall of the 4th of July celebration in Gilsum.

A branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized in Gilsum, sometime around 1842, after Elders E.P. Maginn and Austin Cowles received 16 converts to the church

from Gilsum and neighboring towns. When some contention came to the branch, Elder Joseph Grover, recommended by the "Twelve Apostles," came to reorganize the branch as the "Cheshire County Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints," in 1849. This new branch was organized in the home of Solomon Mack, Jr. Chilion Mack had served as a clerk in the earlier Gilsum branch and Solomon Mack became Branch President of the Cheshire County Branch in 1855. Adeline and Hannah Mack were listed as members. Some members of the branch travelled to Utah, others fell away from the church and according to the Gilsum History of 1879, "Elder Mack is the only one who openly maintains the doctrine at present."

The Mack family also contributed to the industry of the town. Elisha Mack built what was known as "the Great Bridge" over the Ashuelot River in 1778 or 1779. It stood where the current stone arch bridge now stands and was apparently "the only river bridge at that time." Because it was a wooden bridge, and owing to the spray from the dam below, the timbers rotted and it often needed repairs.

The dam was probably constructed by Samuel, Elisha, and Solomon Mack to accommodate the Grist Mill and Sawmill at the site, which they built in 1776. The Grist Mill in particular "became a place of great resort, people coming from the towns above as far as Camden, (now Washington,) often bringing their grists upon hand-sleds or on their backs. This mill was kept running for 75 years." Another sawmill was built upriver by Orlando Mack and his father in 1830. In 1830, Chilion Mack built a shop where he made awls and built a wheelwright shop.

Samuel Mack was a noted bridge and dam builder. "He was the first man to build dams across the Connecticut river; [He] was employed...to build one at Bellows Fall, where he was assisted by his brother Solomon, and *his* son Solomon Jr. The water being deep, he made himself a water-proof leathern suit with a pipe to supply air, with which he went under the water to place the stone and timbers... He also invented a machine for hulling wheat, but while at Washington to secure a patent, he became insane, and soon after died." (Gilsum History, p. 432)

The History of Gilsum includes some humorous stories which involved members of the Mack family. I would like to share a few short anecdotes.

Wildlife Encounters

"Capt. Solomon Mack with some of his neighbors went coon-hunting in the woods on the hill in what is now Smith's pasture, over east of the Stone Bridge. Having treed their game, they built a fire, and began chopping down the tree, when a huge bear came backing down the trunk. In their astonishment, they failed to use either ax or gun, and the bear 'cleared out.' "

"When Solomon Mack and his brother Daniel were boiling sap by night in the woods, the one whose turn it was to watch, got asleep. Solomon happening to awake, saw a large bear sitting

up between him and the fire. In his fright he called out, 'Dan, Dan, here's a moose!' The bear hastily made off."

The Walpole Cannon

"A cannon provided by the King before the Revolution and kept at the fort in Walpole was long a source of contention among the towns of this vicinity. The rivalry between Keene and Walpole is related in the Annals of Keene. The finale of that history is not, however, given correctly there. William Banks relates the following incidents *quorum pars [magna] fuit* (in which he played a part.) About eight o'clock one evening in April, 1823, a party of 17 mounted on horseback met by appointment at Lieut. Samuel Bill's. There they got a cart, two yoke of oxen, ropes and skids. The cannon was known to be hid in Daniel Day's cellar, on the road from the Peter Hayward place to Keene street. Loren Loveland who had lived at Mr. Day's conducted the company. He went ahead and made friends with the dog and got the hatchway open. The cannon was taken and put on the cart, when they hurried away as quickly and quietly as possible till they got out of hearing, when they stopped and fastened it securely for coming up the long hills. One of the party went back through Surry and got eight pounds of powder which was fired in three charges; the first when they got back to Mr. Bill's, and the other two in front of Dudley Smith's tavern near the meeting house. The last charge contained nearly half the powder, and the report broke both windows and bottles in Smith's tavern. The difficulty now was to keep the cannon. It was first carried back and hid in Mr. Bill's cellar. It was then moved to Berzeleel Mack's cellar; but he got frightened, and said he wouldn't keep it, for he heard men around the house in the night. It was then buried in the path between Deacon Pease's house and the spring. But fearing lest Keene folks had got track of it, it was put under Deacon Pease's bed, where it was kept for a long time, except when brought out for use. Keene never got it again. Gilsum let Marlow take it, [on] the Fourth of July after their own celebration, on condition of returning it when wanted. It was afterwards carried to Westmoreland to celebrate the first steamer's arrival, and was there purposely exploded, being filled with an enormous charge of powder jammed down with brick-bats and stone. *Exit Walpole cannon.*"

Solomon Mack seems to have been particularly accident-prone, having cut his leg once, broken his wrist twice, had trees or tree limbs fall on him twice, both times narrowly escaping with his life and taking months to recover. He recovered from sicknesses throughout his life including smallpox. He fell on a waterwheel and was badly bruised. He fell on ice and was knocked unconscious for four hours. He escaped injury when he felled "seven large trees against another, and very imprudently went to cut away the prop; -when suddenly the whole fell together, and I in the midst of them, this time I remained unhurt; but thought nothing of the power that protected me. (blind as ever.)" (Narrative of Solomon Mack)

In his autobiography, Solomon Mack recounts three times that he was thrown from his horse, once that he fell and broke his shoulder, and that he suffered from Rheumatism and fits. Owing to his many accidents and infirmities, he found it hard to sustain sufficient means to take care of himself and his family. He concludes the account of his life with these words:

“My friends when you read this journal remember your unfortunate friend Solomon Mack, who worried and toiled until an old age, to try to lay up treasures in this world, but the Lord would not suffer me to have it, but now I trust I have treasures laid up that no man can take away, but by the goodness of God....Although I am a poor cripple unable to walk much, or even to mount or dismount my horse I hope to serve my God by his assistance to divine acceptance, that I may at last leap for joy to see his face and hold him fast in my embrace.” (Narrative of Solomon Mack)

Solomon Mack and his family were significant citizens in the town of Gilsun. They were indeed “doers” despite their foibles and weaknesses. Their names and deeds are memorialized in *The History of the Town of Gilsun*. We are grateful for the influence that they had on this small town, but we are also very grateful that the Lord, who knows all things from the beginning to the end, saw fit to preserve the life of Solomon Mack, that he and his wife, Lydia, could bring Lucy Mack into the world in a small log cabin just steps from where we stand. Lucy Mack lived to marry Joseph Smith, Sr., and raise up the “notorious Mormon prophet,” the Prophet of the Restoration, even Joseph Smith, Jr.

Resources:

Hayward, Silvanus, 1828-1908, "History of the town of Gilsun, New Hampshire from 1752 to 1879, with maps and illustrations." (1881).

A Narratve [sic] of the Life of Solomon Mack, Containing An Account of the Many Severe Accidents he met with during a long series of years, together with the Extraordinary Manner in which he was converted to the Christian Faith (Windsor [VT]: Printed at the Expense of the Author [1811]).

“Solomon Mack and His Family”, *Improvement Era*, 1955 and 1956 (This was a series of articles spanning from October 1955 into 1956).

Note from author: I have quoted extensively from the *History of the town of Gilsun, New Hampshire*, cited above, but have not, in every instance, noted the page number from which the quote or story was taken. The reader is invited to search the *History of the town of Gilsun* for more information. All resources cited in preparation for this presentation are available online.