

Lucy Mack Smith's 1829 Letter to Mary Smith Pierce

Dean C. Jessee

Lucy Mack Smith, mother of the Prophet Joseph Smith, was born 8 July 1775 at Gilsum, Cheshire County, New Hampshire, the youngest of Solomon and Lydia Gates Mack's eight children.¹ In January 1796, at age twenty, Lucy married Joseph Smith of Tunbridge, Vermont, and settled there with her husband to a life of farming. During the next twenty-five years eleven children were born to the couple—eight sons, a first unnamed son who died at birth,² Alvin, Hyrum, Joseph, Samuel, Ephraim, William, and Don Carlos; and three daughters, Sophronia, Katherine, and Lucy.³ Bad times, spurred by a succession of crop failures, forced the Smiths to move from Vermont to Palmyra, New York, in 1816. A short time later, they moved two miles south to the adjacent township of Manchester, where events involving young Joseph transpired that changed the course of their lives.

A recently discovered letter, dated 23 January 1829, is a contemporary statement of these events. It was written by Lucy Smith, then in her fifties, to her sister-in-law Mary Pierce⁴ at Royalton, Vermont. The letter surfaced on 23 August 1982 through Brent Ashworth, a

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¹Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Joseph Smith's New England Heritage* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), p. 18.

²Comments by Joseph Smith, Sr., prior to pronouncing a blessing on his children as recorded by Oliver Cowdery, 9 December 1834, Patriarchal Blessing Book, Book A, Library-Archives of the Historical Department of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as Church Archives).

³Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History Co., 1901), 1:690-92. Katherine is also sometimes spelled with a C in some Church records.

⁴Mary Smith Pierce (1775-1844), born at Hillsborough, New Hampshire, was a younger sister to Joseph Smith, Sr. Mary married Isaac Pierce in 1796, the same year her brother married Lucy Mack. Despite the solicitations of her sister-in-law, Mary never accepted the message of Mormonism. ("Lucy Urged, But Mary Never Joined Church," *Church News*, 4 September 1982, p. 5.) However, there is a question whether Mary ever received the letter from Lucy: In the first place, the letter was part of a large collection of letters valued for their postmarks and may have come from a dead letter file. Furthermore, although separated at the fold, the letter shows no evidence of handling or wear. And finally, the letter is addressed to Royalton, Vermont, whereas the Pierces had moved to Lebanon, New Hampshire, in 1823, nearly six years prior to the postmark date of Lucy's letter.

Provo, Utah, manuscript collector. It was written on unlined white paper measuring 15¹/₄" x 11⁵/₈" folded to make four pages.⁵ Its authenticity is supported by the handwriting and signature which match another letter Lucy wrote to her brother Solomon at Gilsum, New Hampshire, dated 6 January 1831. In addition, the black, double-line oval, handstamped postmark from Palmyra, New York, is the same as that used there between 1829 and 1834. Furthermore, the postage designation of 18³/₄ cents corresponds with the zone rate in effect then for distances from 150 to 400 miles.⁶

An assessment of the significance of the letter—one of the earliest documents pertaining to Mormon history—should consider the following points:

1. It provides firsthand insight to the situation of the Smith family more than a year before the Church was organized as an institution. The letter shows the family actually involved in the pre-1830 events that their histories described years later. And it contradicts the popular theory that Joseph Smith's early religious experiences were fabricated later in his life when the need arose for a magnificent tradition—that he "distorted the past in the interest of promoting his public image."⁷

2. Lucy Smith was an articulate woman of above-average literary ability. Her penmanship and knowledge of the language transcend that of some who were engaged professionally in scribal work in her day. Beyond this, her letter is something of a tribute to her mother, who in the absence of schools had taken charge of the education of her children "and performed the duties of an instructress as none, save a mother, is capable of."⁸

3. The letter shows the impact of Joseph's early religious experiences upon the Smith family and that Lucy's commitment to her son's divine commission predated the founding of the Church and her own baptism. Right here in one of the earliest historical records Lucy Smith is expressing the same convictions about Joseph and his work that she repeated consistently throughout the rest of her life.

In 1831 she wrote her brother of her "great anxiety" for Joseph's welfare, noting that God had set His hand the second time to recover His people.

⁵Having separated along the fold, the two halves have been taped together.

⁶Benjamin Wishnietsky, ed., *American Stampless Cover Catalog* (Miami: David G. Phillips Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 8, 132.

⁷Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2d ed. rev. and enl. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 405.

⁸Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), p. 19.

He has now commenced this work: he hath sent forth a revelation in these last days, & this revelation is called the "Book of Mormon." . . . I feel to thank my God that he hath spared my life to see this day. Joseph after repenting of his sins and humbling himself before God was visited by an holy Angel whose countenance was as lightning and whose garments were white above all whiteness and gave unto him by the means of which was before prepared that he should translate this book.⁹

A decade later, Lucy was heard to say publicly that she "wished to leave her testimony that the Book of Mormon is the Book of God" and "that Joseph Smith is a man of God, a prophet of the Lord set apart to lead the people."¹⁰ And in 1855 Frederick Piercy visited Mrs. Smith in her twilight years, after the death of her husband and seven of her eleven children, including the martyred Joseph and Hyrum. Frederick Piercy heard her speak "very freely of her sons, and, with tears in her eyes, and every other symptom of earnestness, vindicated their reputations for virtue and truth."¹¹ Lucy died on 14 May 1856 in Nauvoo, Illinois.¹²

4. Lucy Smith was not only conversant on the content of the Book of Mormon some time before the bulk of the volume was translated into English but also knew details of the story that may have come from the lost 116 pages¹³—as, for example, her reference that Ishmael was the brother-in-law of Lehi.

5. The letter raises a question about the dating of Doctrine and Covenants, section 4. Joseph Smith's history states that Joseph, Sr., came to Harmony, Pennsylvania, in February 1829 "at which time [the Prophet] received the following revelation for him" (section 4).¹⁴ In her letter Lucy says that she and her husband had returned to Manchester from Harmony on 22 January after having been gone for about three months. The question hinges on whether or not Joseph, Sr., after arriving back in Manchester on the twenty-second, almost immediately returned to Harmony. Some evidence that he did may

⁹Lucy Smith to Solomon Mack, 6 January 1831, Church Archives.

¹⁰Remarks delivered by Lucy Smith before the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 28 April 1842 (cited in Richard L. Anderson, "His Mother's Manuscript: An Intimate View of Joseph Smith," BYU Forum Address, 27 January 1976). Lucy's remarks, titled, "Testimony of Mother Lucy Smith," were copied by John McEwan in Wilford Woodruff's journal after the last 1842 entry and are dated 27 August 1844.

¹¹Frederick Piercy, *Route from Liverpool to Great Salt Lake Valley*, ed. James Linforth (Liverpool: Franklin D. Richards, 1855), pp. 63–64.

¹²Buddy Youngreen, "The Death Date of Lucy Mack Smith: 8 July 1775–14 May 1856," *Brigham Young University Studies* 12 (Spring 1972): 318.

¹³Lucy makes reference to the loss of the 116 pages of the manuscript, indicating that portion "was carried off by some unknown person." For a more detailed account of the loss and of Martin Harris's involvement, see B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of the Church*, 6 vols. (1930; reprint ed., Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:109–12.

¹⁴Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1932–51), 1:28; hereafter cited as *History of the Church*.

be derived from Joseph Knight, who recalled that in January 1829 Joseph, Sr., and Samuel Smith came from Manchester to his place in Colesville, New York, and that he (Knight) went with them by sleigh to visit young Joseph in Harmony.¹⁵ However, since Joseph Knight visited the Prophet in Harmony on several occasions,¹⁶ he may not have recalled the Joseph, Sr.–Samuel Smith visit accurately. This possibility is suggested from Lucy Smith's statement that when she and her husband returned to Manchester on 22 January they found Samuel and Sophronia so ill Hyrum had had to quit his job to care for them. The pair continued to be ill for a considerable length of time. Lucy adds that soon after their return Oliver Cowdery came to board with them as a schoolteacher, that he became interested in what young Joseph was doing, and, upon learning Samuel proposed to join his brother in Pennsylvania in the spring, undertook to arrange his affairs so he could accompany Samuel there "by the time he recover[ed] his health." According to Lucy's History, Samuel and Oliver left for Pennsylvania in April 1829.¹⁷ If Lucy is right (that Samuel was too ill to travel between 22 January and April 1829), then Joseph Knight remembered the Joseph, Sr.–Samuel Smith visit incorrectly.

6. In 1825 the Smiths had lost possession of their Manchester farm, which included a home and improvements, when a Mr. Stoddard and two other individuals made technical claim upon it while the family was struggling to make the final payment. The loss was finalized in December 1825 when Lemuel Durfee, a local sheriff, paid \$1135 and received legal possession following litigation in the case. From then until the spring of 1829 the Smiths leased the farm from Durfee. Lucy recollected in 1845 that upon her and her husband's return from Harmony the lease upon the farm was "drawing to a close," that they were about to be evicted, and that they began to make preparations to move in with their son Hyrum.¹⁸ But her 1829 letter clarifies her later recollection somewhat, revealing that they had received \$700 from the sale of the farm and that they were "under no bonds to leave" the place, yet had "no inducements" to stay longer.

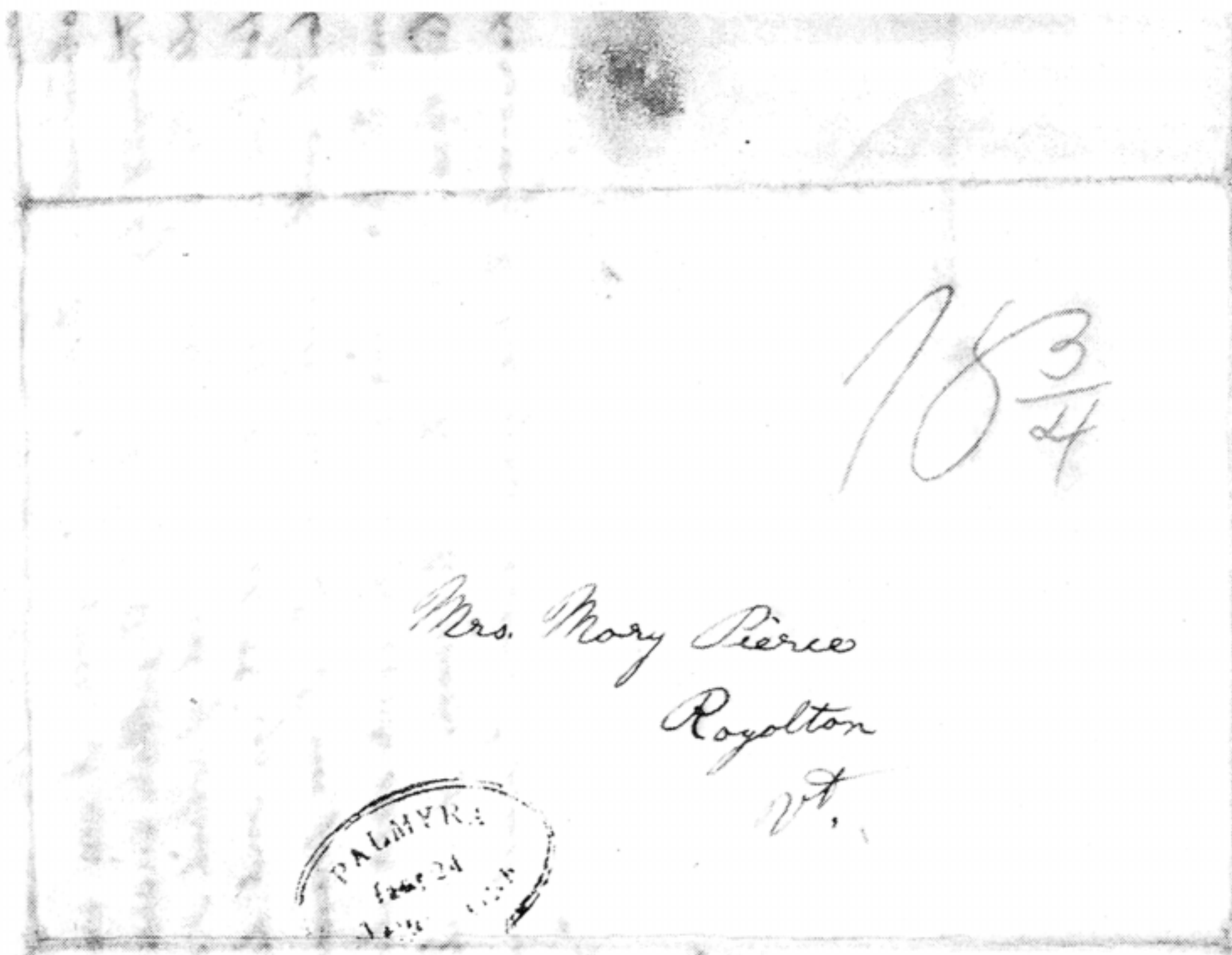
The following seven pages show photographs of the original opposed with my line by line transcription of the Lucy Smith letter.

¹⁵Dean Jessee, "Joseph Knight's Recollection of Early Mormon History," *Brigham Young University Studies* 17 (Autumn 1976): 36.

¹⁶*History of the Church*, 1:47.

¹⁷Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches*, pp. 128–30.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 129. On the loss of the farm, see Larry C. Porter, "A Study of the Origins of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the States of New York and Pennsylvania, 1816–1831" (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1971), pp. 104–9.



Courtesy of Brent Ashworth

Lucy Mack Smith letter to Mrs. Mary Pierce of Royalton, Vt., showing the black, double-line oval, handstamped postmark used in the Palmyra, New York, area between 1829 and 1834.

Manchester January 23^d 1829

Dear Sister

It is my pleasure to inform you of a great work which the Lord has wrought in our family, for he has made his paths known to Joseph in dreams and it pleased God to show him where he could dig to obtain an ancient record engraven upon plates made of pure gold and this he is able to translate. Those for aured of God in all ages have had to suffer persecutions for his name's sake and so it is with us there being such a determined effort in this place to thwart the translation that Joseph was obliged to remove his wife to Pennsylvania, nevertheless on account of negligence the translation of the first part of the record was carried off by some unknown person but God is faithful and the work is now about to proceed; yesterday Mr. Smith and myself returned from a visit to Pennsylvania which occupied us about the last 3 months in singing praises to our God, and it is natural in times of rejoicing that we should think on the welfare of our kin; my object in rehearsing these events is to soften your heart that you may seek for a witness of the truth of this work, for the Lord himself has said that they that seek shall find and to them that knock it shall be opened. I now come to say some thing of the record it was placed in the earth many hundred years ago by the forefathers of our Indians, they descended from a prophet of the Lord whose name was Lehi he fled from Jerusalem with his family and also his wife's brother's family a few days before Nebuchadnezzar besieged the City and layed it in ashes for although Lehi prophesied unto the Jews in the name of the Lord that they must repent of their sins yet they would not, neither would they believe the wonders which were shown to him in dreams concerning Christ that he should be Crucified, therefore God commanded the people of Lehi to get out of Jerusalem and flee into the wilderness and at length they were directed to enter upon the Land of America; now a part of the people of Lehi whose head was named Laman a son of Lehi became savage and they sought to exterminate their more virtuous brethren who were called the people of Nephi therefore

Courtesy of LDS Church Historical Department

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God cast off the people of Laman and he cursed them with a dark skin but the people of Nephi he preserved and prospered so long as they obeyed his commandments, and they were not unskilled workmen having a knowledge of the arts together with the sciences. but they had among them that same secret society which had brought Jerusalem and the whole nation of the Jews to destruction; and after many years they became the more wicked than their accursed bretheren, and God seeing that they would not repent of the evil he visited them with extinction. But I must stop here for I could write ever so long and not have told you one hundredth part of what I will tell you when we have the opportunity of seeing each other again. I want for you to remember that God himself has given to Joseph that he is able to translate and he is able to recover these things also in dreams therefore beware that you do not mock. I hope dear Sister this will meet you in good health and spirits that your mind might feel disposed to dwell upon it for as God lives I have written the truth. Perhaps you will find a little history of my small concerns of interest respecting our family &c; This leaves us all in comfortable health except for Sophronia and Samuel who are at present afflicted with winter coughs — — — — —

William has gone to Conondagua for the season to live with a joiner and to try his hand at that trade — — — — —

We have sold our little place for 700 Dollars and of course must leave it in the spring but Mr. Smith has not yet fixed upon what point of the compass to take, we are under no hands to leave this place yet we have no inducements to stay as we live very much retired; our neighbors generally treat us with contempt ever since it has been raised about what morrels that the Lord has worked. I will give you a little sample: a man who has always been kind and attentive to our family called on us last fall and was made welcome to our table and his horse to our barn with an urgent request as he said that before starting on our journey we would tell him all that we knew respecting the record to which request we readily assented which seemed to perfectly satisfy him, as he rose

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I am afraid it will injure my business, so much for neighborliness.
"Self love the spring of action moves the soul." — — — —
I have seen too much, quite too much of human nature to have
any confidence in 7.8ths of professed friends, with these views and
ten thousand discouragements it is not probable that we shall
locate in these parts again: such dear sister are my reflections,
but I do not want you to think that I have become so uncharitable
for my mind naturally runs upon the goodness and mercy of God,
and never before have I been the more content with my lot, having
obtained a token of his grace. I am aware that these marvels are
thought by many to be altogether incredible but I entreat you with
all the earnestness and zeal of which I am capable that you believe,
for God is mighty to do all things and he will answer the prayer of
faith with understanding." I am pressed to close but remember
me to Mr. Pierce and to your dear children Mr. Smith sends
his love. please to write soon, it would be very gratifying to me
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then adieu Lucy Smith

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¹⁹An issue has been raised with respect to the use of the word *adieu* in the Book of Mormon (Jacob 7:27). Lucy’s use of the word in the letter seems to indicate such usage could have been idiomatic in the Smith family.