



Smith Family Cemetery, Nauvoo, Illinois, 2 May 1907, photographed by George Edward Anderson. Emma Hale Smith Bidamon's grave marker can be seen in the foreground. The graves of Emmeline Griswold Smith (wife of Joseph Smith III), Evelyn Rebecca Smith, and Joseph Arthur Smith (children of Joseph III and Emmeline) can also be seen. Photograph courtesy of LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, Utah.

A Brief History of the Smith Family Nauvoo Cemetery

Lachlan Mackay

Joseph I should like if you are willing to extend that fence so as to enclose the graves of your two little brothers. I have got twenty five dollars that no one has any right to but myself. . . . I feel anxious to apply that money on that graveyard, after I have done that . . . I think I can ask our Smith relatives to help mark Fathers and Mothers graves if no more.¹

Emma Smith Bidamon expressed her desire to mark the graves of her in-laws, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, in an 1867 letter to her son, Joseph Smith III. One hundred thirty-five years later, her wish was fulfilled. The placement of monuments in the spring of 2002 by the Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family Foundation is the latest chapter in the complex history of a small parcel of land on the east bank of the Mississippi River.

Situated on the south side of the Nauvoo peninsula, the area was first used as a burying ground by prehistoric peoples who populated the valley and who constructed a burial pit near the riverbank.² It has been commonly believed that the Smith Family Cemetery had its beginnings with the interment of Joseph Smith Sr. in September 1840. Numerous other family members and friends were understood to be buried in the family plot between 1841–45. These assumptions are mistaken. Most family members who died in the 1840s were buried in Nauvoo's first cemetery located south of Mulholland on Durphy Street. Others were most likely buried in what is now known as the Old Pioneer Cemetery, southeast of town on Parley Street.

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Inez Smith Davis cites her Utah cousin, Joseph Fielding Smith, as saying that their ancestor, Joseph Smith Sr., “was buried in the old burying ground southeast [southwest] of the Temple.”³ Joseph Smith Jr. stated in 1842 that his father and his brother, Don Carlos Smith, were buried beside each other.⁴ Where then, was Don Carlos buried?

Concerning the death of Don Carlos Smith in 1841, Helen Mar Whitney remembered, “A few days after their return to Nauvoo the Prophet’s brother Don Carlos dies, and being an officer in the legion as well as a Freemason he was buried with Masonic and military rites. Those of the Masonic fraternity marched next to the family to the grave which was in a little grove at the foot of the hill southwest of the temple.”⁵ The recently published “Record of Deaths in the City of Nauvoo,” kept by Nauvoo Sexton William D. Huntington, supports the accuracy of these reminiscences. The record lists twenty-six people who were apparently buried in the first Nauvoo Cemetery. Among those listed are Joseph Smith Sr., Mary (Bailey) Smith, Hyrum Smith Jr., an unnamed infant of Joseph Smith, and Don Carlos Smith (child of Joseph and Emma). Curiously absent from this list is Joseph’s brother, Don Carlos Smith, their friend, Robert B. Thompson, and Lucy B. Smith, the infant daughter of Mary and Samuel Smith. At this part in the record, a break occurs with a reference to “Commensen [sic] in the new grave yard”—likely referring to the current Old Pioneer Cemetery situated southeast of Nauvoo. Among the hundreds of names following this break are Sophronia C. Smith, the daughter of Don Carlos and Agnes Smith, Samuel H. Smith, and Caroline G. Smith, wife of William.⁶

It now seems clear that the Smith Family Cemetery did not exist during the early 1840s. Instead, it developed a year or so after Joseph and Hyrum Smith were entombed under a small building near the southwest corner of Joseph and Emma’s Homestead. Killed on 27 June 1844, the brothers were initially secretly buried in the cellar of the unfinished Nauvoo House. With even greater secrecy, they became the first occupants of what would become the family cemetery as they were moved and reburied near the Homestead sometime in the late fall or early winter of 1844–45.⁷ Like Joseph and Hyrum, those family members who died before this time were first buried somewhere else and then moved to the riverbank. Inez Smith Davis noted, “Some have expressed doubts as to the information given by Joseph F. Smith, re[garding] the reburial of some of the family, but it seems the only reasonable explanation of the facts to me. I cannot believe there was a family cemetery there before the burial of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, because it would certainly be a poor way to secrete the bodies to place them in a family cemetery.”⁸ Inez specifically quotes her cousin as saying that Joseph Smith Sr., Robert B. Thompson, and Don Carlos Smith were all moved to what is now the family cemetery in 1846 or later. He also places Samuel Harrison

Smith and Caroline Smith in the family plot.⁹ Part of this later reminiscence is supported by Agnes Coolbrith Smith, widow of Don Carlos, who wrote to George Albert Smith on 3 June 1846 and reported, "I have had my dead removed into Emma[s] garden."¹⁰ Emma's 1867 letter to Joseph III, cited at the beginning of this article, expressing her desire to extend the fence to include his "two little brothers," indicates that at least one and probably both of her babies who died in Nauvoo had been moved to the family plot.¹¹

What motivated the reburial of so many members of the Smith family? At least three factors were involved. First, Inez Smith Davis reported to Frederick Madison Smith that Joseph Fielding Smith connected the removal of some of the graves from the first Nauvoo Cemetery to the Smith Cemetery because of the plowing of the flats to plant grapes.¹² Second, there was an immediate threat to the remains, in addition to a general concern about the future. For example, Agnes Smith moved her dead (including apparently a daughter whose grave in the Pioneer Cemetery was not threatened by the plow) to a location next to the Homestead where Emma and her family could watch over them. Finally, it is likely that family members were gathered together to carry out the wishes of Joseph Smith, although as the events and circumstances unfolded, these plans did not materialize as the Prophet had planned.

Significantly, an actual tomb had been built as a place of interment for Joseph and his family near the temple. As expressed by him in 1842, "Let my father, Don Carlos, Alvin, and the children that I have buried be brought and laid in the tomb I have built. Let my mother, and my brethren, and my sisters be laid there also, and let it be called the tomb of Joseph, a descendant of Jacob. And when I die, let me be gathered into the tomb of my father."¹³ Concern about the potential desecration of the remains of Joseph and Hyrum caused the tomb to go unused. Instead, family members were moved and buried near the secret graves of the murdered leaders.

With the departure of the majority of the Latter-day Saints from Nauvoo in 1846, the pace of burials in the Smith cemetery slowed considerably. Lucy Mack Smith was placed in the cemetery in 1856.¹⁴ James and Savilla Gifford, friends and neighbors of the Smith family, buried four of their children in the cemetery by 1871.¹⁵ Evelyn Rebecca Smith was buried in 1859. She was joined by her uncle, Frederick Granger Williams Smith, in 1862 and her brother Joseph Arthur Smith in 1866. Emmeline Griswold Smith, wife of Joseph Smith III and mother of Evelyn and Joseph Arthur, died in 1869, and her body was laid "to rest beside those of her children, in the little God's Acre near the old home."¹⁶

Emma Smith Bidamon died in 1879, and some Nauvoo citizens raised questions about whether it would be appropriate to bury her in the private family burying ground or in the public cemetery. Joseph Smith III visited the

mayor of Nauvoo and received his blessing to bury Emma near her first husband, children, and grandchildren.¹⁷ The death and burial in 1891 of Emma's second husband, Lewis Bidamon, brought the active period of the cemetery to a close.¹⁸ The attention of the Smith family members and friends would soon turn to exploring appropriate ways to remember those who had gone before.

Joseph Smith III had made arrangements to mark Emma's grave in the days immediately following her funeral; and, at some point, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints had created a memorial fund "for the purpose of erecting a memorial or monument to the memory of the martyrs, Joseph and Hyrum Smith."¹⁹ However, little progress was made. Apparently frustrated by the lack of activity, delegates at the 1907 general conference passed a resolution creating a committee "to carry into execution the purposes for which this fund has been subscribed."²⁰ Members of the committee, including Joseph Smith III, met in Nauvoo in 1908 to explore the possibilities and to gauge interest among the Nauvoo citizens who, it was said, were interested in helping.²¹ It appears that nothing became of this attempt and that those reposing on the hillside would rest in peace for twenty years.

The mighty Mississippi was dammed below Nauvoo at Keokuk, Iowa, in 1913, forming Lake Cooper behind the dam. As the water level continued to rise through the 1920s, concerns were raised that the encroaching water might soon cover the unmarked graves of Joseph and Hyrum Smith. This concern, combined with frustration over confusion about the location of the final resting place of the brothers and a desire to build the monument that had been contemplated for so long, resulted in a partial excavation of the Nauvoo Smith Cemetery in 1928. Led by William O. Hands, the group hoped to locate the remains of Joseph and Hyrum and then rebury them in a location that would be safe from the rising water. A concrete tomb would then serve as the base for the new monument. As told by Barbara Hands Bernauer in her informative essay, "Still Side by Side,"²² the crew spent a week trenching, first near the river and later up the slope near Emma's marker. In the process, they inadvertently found the remains of Emma, who was buried just east of her marker. The wet and cold work came to an end on 16 January 1828 with the discovery of two skeletons near Emma's grave. As expected, the remains were side by side, within the foundation walls, and under the brick floor of what was once a small building. The bodies of Joseph and Hyrum, as well as that of Emma, were moved to the north and were reburied. The flat stone that had memorialized Emma was cut into pieces and then turned over and engraved with the name, year of birth, and year of death for each of the three.²³

During the ensuing years, commemorative services were held annually

at the grave site on the Sunday closest to the anniversary of the martyrdom. In 1951, the long-held dream of memorializing Joseph and Hyrum became a reality. A large slab of granite, measuring ten feet by ten feet by one foot, was placed on top of the three graves.²⁴ Descendants of Joseph and Hyrum joined together in 1990 to form the Joseph and Hyrum Smith Family Foundation. This foundation partnered with the RLDS Church to enhance, enlarge, landscape, beautify, and increase accessibility to the grave site and to provide funding for the ongoing maintenance of the area. During the spring and summer of 1991, the foundation placed a new headstone on top of the flat granite marker and installed brick walks, lights, benches, a new fence, and new interpretive information. Trees, grass, and flowers were also planted. The newly beautified cemetery was dedicated on 4 August 1991. Among the participants at the dedication were Wallace B. Smith, then president of the RLDS Church and a great-grandson of Joseph Smith Jr., and M. Russell Ballard of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve and a great-great-grandson of Hyrum Smith.²⁵

The Joseph and Hyrum Smith Foundation later grew into the Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family Foundation. Welcoming all who are descendants of "Father" and "Mother" Smith, the foundation recently took on the task of fulfilling Emma's wish to mark Joseph Sr.'s and Lucy's graves. One of the most significant obstacles that had to be overcome first, however, was to identify where they had been buried.

Interest in marking the graves was revived when Smith family researcher Buddy Youngreen read a reprint of a 1950 *Saints' Herald* article by L. G. Holloway, an RLDS missionary who served in Nauvoo on several occasions over a period of years. Concerning the graves of Joseph Sr. and Lucy, Holloway remembered the following:

[It was] several years ago that I learned of the exact location of these [Joseph Smith Sr.'s and Lucy Mack Smith's] graves. In company with Mr. Kendall, a brother-in-law of Alexander Smith, I visited these burial grounds. He took me to the spot where Joseph and Lucy Smith are buried. It was identified at the time by a grave dug for Emmeline Smith [died 1869], first wife of Young Joseph, son of the Martyr. While digging, Mr. Kendall found another grave and took from it some of the articles in the casket. These articles he showed to Emma, wife of the Martyr, who said they had belonged to Lucy [died 1856] who was buried beside her companion [died 1840 and moved to the riverbank about 1846]. Mr. Kendall informed me that he did not disturb these graves but simply started digging the new one about four feet west. This grave [Emmeline's] is clearly marked, so we have the identity of the last resting place of the father and mother of the prophet.²⁶

Hoping to find more documentation, family foundation members encouraged further research on the topic. They soon discovered that their ancestors had made the same search. Seeking information about the location



Grave marker of Hyrum, Joseph, and Emma Hale Smith Bidamon, Smith Family Cemetery, Nauvoo, Illinois, November 1999. The large foot-thick granite slab on the bottom is the marker placed over the 1928 grave site by the RLDS Church in 1951. The "angled" three-section granite stone marker seen in this photo was placed on top of the 1951 stone in August 1991. The inscriptions on the 1991 marker identify Hyrum's grave on the left, Joseph's in the middle, and Emma's on the right. However, research conducted in early 1990s by Ronald E. Romig, Henry Inouye, and Lachlan MacKay; and later by independent researcher Shannon M. Tracy, indicates that after discovering the remains of Joseph and Hyrum in 1928, William O. Hands and his research team misidentified Joseph's remains as being those of Hyrum's, and Hyrum's as being those of Joseph's. Therefore, Joseph's remains are probably on the left, and Hyrum's remains are in the middle. Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.

of Lucy's grave, Audentia Smith Anderson turned to her cousins in Utah for help in 1927. George A. Smith responded that he was "unable to find any information that is satisfactory with reference to the location of the grave of Lucy Mack."²⁷ Audentia also wrote to J. W. Layton, caretaker at the Mansion House in Nauvoo. Layton responded by telling her, "We are unable to find just the location of her grave but Soloman [sic] Salisbury [a grandson of Joseph Sr. and Lucy] told me that they (husband & wife) were burried just west of your father's first wife's grave."²⁸ Like the Holloway account, Layton places Lucy next to Emmeline Griswold Smith. Unfortunately, he places her west of Emmeline, whereas Holloway has her on the east.

It appeared that other documentary evidence was not likely to turn up soon, so the family foundation chose to explore other options in trying to

locate the graves. Foundation board members asked representatives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints whether the Church might make available the services of T. Michael Smith, an archaeologist on the staff of the Museum of Church History and Art, who was using a new ground-penetrating radar system in Kirtland, Ohio. Church officials graciously agreed to allow T. Michael and his crew to travel to Nauvoo to conduct a survey of the cemetery. It was hoped that the radar system would provide a noninvasive way of verifying the location of grave pits in relation to the grave of Emmeline.

The crew of three gathered in Nauvoo late in April of 2001 and spent the day laying out grids and surveying five areas. They discovered numerous probable grave pits scattered along the riverbank. There was no indication of a pit just west of Emmeline, but there were several pits just east. The radar



Left to Right: T. Michael Smith, Tom Smith, and Garth Norman, using radar to help locate Smith family graves.

Photograph courtesy of Community of Christ Church.

survey supports the Holloway account, and the final resting places of Lucy Mack Smith and Joseph Smith Sr. were likely identified.²⁹ With this information, funds were raised; and during the spring of 2002, the brick walk was extended, the deteriorating stones of Emmeline, daughter Evelyn, and son Joseph Arthur were replaced, and the graves of Lucy and Joseph were marked. Emma's "Smith relatives" have responded generously to her request for help.



Left to Right: T. Michael Smith and Tom Smith study data collected as part of a ground penetrating radar survey of the Smith Family Cemetery. Photograph courtesy of the Community of Christ Church.



Stones are placed for Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith. Photograph courtesy of the Community of Christ Church.



*Photograph showing the grave markers of Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith, and the newly replaced grave markers for (l-r) Evelyn Rebecca Smith, Joseph Arthur Smith, and Emmeline Griswold Smith, 28 September 2002.
Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.*



*Smith Family Cemetery marker, Nauvoo, Illinois, 23 August 2002. Research indicates that some 24 Smith family members and a few close family friends (including Joseph Smith's secretary Robert B. Thompson), are buried in the cemetery.
Photograph by Alexander L. Baugh.*



*Two tranquil views of the Smith Family Cemetery,
Nauvoo, Illinois, September 2002.
Photographs by Maurine C. Ward*

Notes

1. Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 2 December 1867, Community of Christ Library-Archives, Independence, Missouri (hereafter cited as Community of Christ Archives).

2. Paul DeBarthe, *The Joseph Smith Homestead Complex, Nauvoo, Illinois: A Focus on the Outbuildings* (Columbia, Missouri: The Joseph Smith Historic Center and University of Missouri, 1976), 77.

3. Inez Smith Davis to Frederick Madison Smith, 23 September 1930, Community of Christ Archives.

4. Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 251.

5. *Women's Exponent* 10, no. 6 (5 August 1881): 42, as reprinted in Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1997), 121. Whitney is almost certainly mistaken concerning Masonic rites. She is likely confusing military rites with Masonic burial customs. Don Carlos died before the Saints in Nauvoo embraced Freemasonry, and there is nothing to indicate that he joined as a boy in New York.

6. See Fred E. Woods, "The Cemetery Record of William D. Huntington, Nauvoo Sexton," *Mormon Historical Studies* 3, no.1 (spring 2002): 131–63.

7. For an examination of the burials of Joseph and Hyrum Smith, see Barbara Hands Bernhauer, *Still "Side by Side:": The Final Burial of Joseph and Hyrum Smith* (Parkville, Missouri: Arrow Press, 1994); also published as a separate article in *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 11 (1991): 17–33.

8. Inez Smith Davis to Frederick Madison Smith, 23 September 1930, Community of Christ Archives.

9. Inez Smith Davis to Frederick Madison Smith, 23 September 1930, Community of Christ Archives. See also Inez Smith Davis to Audentia Smith Anderson, 30 June 1930, Community of Christ Archives.

10. Agnes Coolbrith Smith to George Albert Smith, 3 June 1846, LDS Church Archives, Family and Church History Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter cited as LDS Church Archives).

11. Emma Smith Bidamon to Joseph Smith III, 2 December 1867, Community of Christ Archives.

12. Inez Smith Davis to Frederick Madison Smith, 23 September 1930, Community of Christ Archives.

13. Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record*, 251.

14. L. G. Holloway, "Experiences of a Missionary, Part XI," *The Saints' Herald* 97, no. 45 (6 November 1950): 1073. For the date of Lucy's death, see Buddy Younggreen, "The Death Date of Lucy Mack Smith: 8 July 1775–14 May 1856," *BYU Studies* 12, no. 3 (spring 1972): 318.

15. A marker is still visible for Wilber W. Gifford, who was born and died in 1853.

16. For information placing Evelyn Rebecca, Joseph Arthur, and Emmeline Griswold in the family plot, see Joseph Smith III, "Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832–1914)," *The Saints' Herald* 82, no. 9 (26 February 1935): 273–74. For details on Frederick Granger Williams Smith, see Joseph Smith III, "Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832–1914)," *The Saints' Herald* 82, no. 19 (7 May 1935): 590; and Inez Smith Davis to Audentia Smith Anderson, 30 June 1930, Community of Christ Archives.

17. For details on Emma's death, funeral, obituary, and memorial service, see *The Saints' Herald* 82, no. 48 (26 November 1935): 1519–20. Joseph III again refers to only two of Emma's children being buried on the hillside, raising questions about whether both babies were moved over from the cemetery on Durphy Street.

18. Joseph Smith III, "Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832–1914)," *The Saints' Herald* 83, no. 34 (29 August 1936): 1073.

19. RLDS General Conference Resolution No. 589, 12 April 1907.

20. RLDS General Conference Resolution No. 589, 12 April 1907.

21. Joseph Smith III, "Memoirs of President Joseph Smith (1832–1914)," *The Saints' Herald* 84, no. 24 (12 June 1937): 753.

22. The full citation of Bernauer's publication is given in note 7.

23. The three stones are part of an exhibit in the Community of Christ, Joseph Smith Historic Center, in Nauvoo. Emma's year of birth was mistakenly listed as 1803 on early stones marking her grave. She was buried as "Emma Smith Bidamon," but "Bidamon" was dropped in 1928. It now appears likely that the remains of Joseph and Hyrum were misidentified in 1928. One of the skulls had a notch in the bone on the right side of the nose. Those involved apparently concluded that the notch was a bullet hole and that the remains were Hyrum's. However, an examination of Hyrum's death mask shows that the bullet entered on the other side of the nose. Researchers Ronald Romig, Henry Inouye, and Lachlan Mackay compared images of the skulls with the death masks and noted striking similarities between the skull traditionally identified as Hyrum's and the death mask of Joseph and between the skull traditionally identified as Joseph's and the death mask of Hyrum. They concluded that the remains traditionally identified as Hyrum were most likely those of Joseph and that those traditionally identified as Joseph were probably Hyrum. See Ronald E. Romig and Lachlan Mackay, "No Man Knows My Image," unpublished manuscript, 43, copy in possession of the author. Researcher Shannon Tracy was given photographs of the skulls to conduct research but was not told of the suspicions or findings of Romig, Inouye, and Mackay. Working independently, Tracy's research led him to also question the traditional identification of the remains. See Shannon M. Tracy, *In Search of Joseph* (Orem, Utah: KenningHouse, 1995), 60. It is probable that Hyrum's remains are currently under the stone marked "Joseph" and Joseph's remains are under the stone marked "Hyrum."

24. For examples of a few of the services, see "Memorial Services at Nauvoo June 29," *The Saints' Herald* 88, no. 28 (12 July 1941): 890; and "Nauvoo Memorial Service 1956," *The Saints' Herald* 103, no. 31 (30 July 1956): 741. For details on the 25 October 1951 placing of the marker "without ceremony," see "New Granite Markers," *The Saints' Herald* 99, no. 2 (14 January 1952): 28.

25. Sheridan R. Sheffield, "Cemetery Dedication a Fulfillment of Dreams," *Church News* 61, no. 32 (10 August 1991): 3, 6; also Sheridan R. Sheffield, "Cemetery Project Increases Fellowship, Unity," *Church News* 61, no. 32 (10 August 1991): 7–8.

26. Holloway, "Experiences of a Missionary, Part XI," 1073.

27. George A. Smith to Audentia Smith Anderson, 18 June 1927, Community of Christ Archives.

28. J. W. Layton to Audentia Smith Anderson, 24 May 1927, Community of Christ Archives.

29. T. Michael Smith, "Grave Pit and Burial Assessments at the Smith Family Cemetery, Joseph Smith Jr. Homestead Property, Nauvoo, Illinois," unpublished manuscript, copy in possession of the author.