

Joseph Smith, Now Cast in Bronze, Returns to New York City

Claudia L. Bushman

Latter-day Saints have been closely identified with the Mountain West, particularly with Salt Lake City and Utah, for more than 150 years. Yet they have an even longer connection with the state of New York, the place where the Smith family opened their farm after migrating to Palmyra. New York is the home of the Sacred Grove, the visits of angels, the Hill Cumorah, the first publication of the Book of Mormon, and the organization of the Church of Christ, as it was originally called.

Although less well recognized, New York City is also a significant Mormon site. Martin Harris traveled to New York City in 1828 to meet with the nation's foremost linguist, Charles Anthon, at Columbia College, a sheet of characters copied from the golden plates in his hand. He wanted justification that the characters were authentic ancient writing. Anthon apparently satisfied Martin that they were real, although Anthon later denied he had endorsed them. Joseph Smith and Martin Harris saw in this incident the fulfillment of prophecy in the Bible, Isaiah 29:11. Martin had delivered the ancient characters to "one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed" (Isaiah 29:11; see also 2 Nephi 27:15–18; Joseph Smith—History 1:64–65).

Later, in 1832, Joseph Smith visited New York City himself, traveling with Bishop Newel K. Whitney, who was purchasing stock for his dry-goods store in Kirtland, Ohio. The two stayed at the Pearl Street

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House, a boarding house at 88 Pearl Street, along with residents “from all parts of the world.” A drive-in parking garage is now on the site. Joseph noted “the inequity of the people . . . printed in every countenance.” Only their clothing made them look “fair and beautiful.” Joseph planned to hold some religious meetings in New York “to lift up my voice in this city,” and he may have done so. These quotations come from a letter he wrote to his wife, Emma Smith. “This day I have been walking through the most splendid part of the city of New York,” he wrote, and “the buildings are truly great and wonderful, to the astonishing of every beholder.”¹

He would not return again, but in the thirties, Church publications in the area and members gradually accrued. In May of 1842, the New York City Saints numbered two hundred, with more in the vicinity. They held a general conference for leaders from as far away as Boston and Tennessee at 245 Spring Street. The city was the point of embarkation for Apostles going on missions and the point of arrival of immigrants who had joined the Church and were heading west. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has had an almost continual presence in the city since the 1840s.²

The New York New York Stake recently celebrated its seventieth birthday. When the stake was organized in 1934, it included New York City, all of Long Island, the northern half of New Jersey, and all of Westchester County. Following the western exodus, it was the first stake of the Church east of Colorado and only the third (after Los Angeles and San Francisco) to be organized in the “mission field” outside the area of LDS pioneer settlement. President Heber J. Grant formally organized the stake in a conference at 316 West Fifty-Seventh Street, a location just a few blocks from the present location of the stake center at West Sixty-Fifth Street and Broadway and the Manhattan New York Temple.³ Now, the stake consists of fourteen units and fills the boundaries of the borough of Manhattan. Manhattan had a single chapel to meet in until the last few years when new chapels have blossomed in Inwood, Union Square, Harlem, and the East Side. In 2004, the temple was installed in the existing Lincoln Square Stake Center.

For all this growth, LDS history in New York is not generally known. But for the past seven years, President Brent J. Belnap has focused the stake on the city’s proud historical past. Under his direction, the New York New York Stake History Committee, headed by Richard Bushman, began to publish a quarterly newsletter, *The New York LDS Historian*, in 1998. Edited by Scott Tiffany and published by Kent Larsen, the newsletter attracted some skilled writers who turned out a dozen issues and, in 2004, the book *City Saints: Mormons in the New York Metropolis*, detailing

the past and present.

The first newsletter dealt with the sailing of the *Brooklyn*, the LDS immigrant ship. After Joseph Smith's murder in 1844, the Saints were urged to "get out from this evil nation." On 4 February 1846, nearly 250 LDS men, women, and children stepped aboard a ship in New York City and set out on a perilous six-month journey, twenty thousand miles down the eastern United States and South America, around Cape Horn, and back up the other side. Businessman Samuel Brannan led the group. By coincidence, that same day, the overland Saints crossed the frozen Mississippi from Nauvoo on their way west. When the *Brooklyn* arrived in Hawaii, the passengers discovered that the United States was at war with Mexico. When they arrived at Yerba Buena, later San Francisco, they discovered they were still in United States territory.⁴

This incident ignited the committee's interest. Scott Tiffany created a prize-winning documentary film. Ned Thomas, a city planner, thought that a plaque commemorating the sailing of the ship *Brooklyn* would be a fitting addition to the city's history. He determined a place, Old Slip, the filled-in dock from which the *Brooklyn* departed. A small park had been installed in the center of the street by the builders of an adjacent office building because the city had offered the opportunity to construct higher buildings to those who provided such public amenities as parks and plazas. This little park had plantings and benches but was an orphan, not really an official New York City park at all.

When Ned Thomas left town, I inherited the project, talking to many city agencies and officers. Any addition to the park was held up by problems with the Art Commission that could not approve the project and the Department of Transportation that was constructing a fan plant and tunnel for the subway system running from Old Slip and then under the East River to New Jersey. This elaborate construction under the little park, largely invisible from the surface of the park, continued for several years. The ship *Brooklyn* plaque project was approved by the Church long before the New York Mormons could find a place to put it.

The plaque finally found a home on an outside pillar at 32 Old Slip, a tall and handsome office building, the home of some of the offices of Goldman Sachs. Roger Newman, an officer with the company that manages the building, presented a proposal to the German owners that the Church be allowed to fasten the plaque to one of the columns fronting the building. The proposal was accepted and the plaque installed. All those involved were thrilled to feel they were symbolically retaking possession of some of the land where their forebears had made history.

All these things were on the minds of the Saints in New York City

as the two hundredth anniversary of Joseph Smith's birth approached. President Belnap had interested the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, in the person of Robert S. Clark, in some of the New York historical places. Clark and his family came to tour some of the locations of LDS history in the city. Surely the two hundredth anniversary would be a good time to unveil a plaque commemorating the Harris-Anthon confrontation. But Joseph was not even directly involved in that event. Could we put a plaque at the 88 Pearl Street boarding house location? A series of forays with map in hand located a couple of places where plaques might advantageously be placed. But was that enough? Were those big enough markers for the occasion? We had already done a plaque. Should we not reach for something more?

At this point, Mark Holden mentioned that he was on his way to Salt Lake City for a brief period to watch his wife run a marathon. I asked him if he could find out, while he was there, how much it would cost to commission a statue of Joseph Smith, in case we could ever raise enough money to pay for one and find a place to put it. Mark returned to report a very high figure. But he had met with various people and said that a consortium of Saints, who would prefer to remain anonymous, would be willing to donate a full-sized statue sculpted by Dee Jay Bawden, noted for his sculptures of Joseph Smith, for installation in New York City—if we could find a place to put it. Bawden, who works with Joseph Smith's death mask as a model, has created many statues and busts of the Prophet. Surely this was a sign that we should pursue the statue option. We would have to try very hard to find an appropriate location and get the necessary permissions to install a statue of Joseph Smith there. We chose as a design a view of the young Joseph in his New York state style, a young farmer in his worker's clothing with a long, broad axe for clearing the wilderness. This tall, handsome, golden Joseph was titled *The Frontier Prophet*.

Now, where to put it. No one had private land that would do. Church property was judged off limits, as officials said, "There is no precedent for statues inside or outside of Church buildings." Every square foot of public New York City is contested space. Neighbors are fussy about what is installed near them. Public agencies have overlapping jurisdictions. Programs are complex, daunting, and carefully restrictive.

A talk with the city's director of Art and Antiquities for the Parks Department, Jonathan Kuhn, was instructive. New York City, he noted, already had too many statues. The Parks people were completely uninterested in any new statues of people whose lives had no important, long-term, or direct relevance to the city and its neighborhoods. Given the

opportunity again, they would no longer accept statues of Joan of Arc, Robert Burns, Christopher Columbus, William Shakespeare, or most of the statues currently standing. They certainly did not want any already created statues. Any subject who met the required criteria of significant importance in the city would have to be presented to a group of sculptors for a design competition. The process would take years. Besides, who was Joseph Smith?

Discouraged by that route, we considered the guidelines for temporary installations. This program has brought lots of trendy contemporary art to the city for periods of several months. The Gates, the hundreds of structures flying saffron curtains created by artists Christo and his wife Jeanne-Claude, is the most noted of recent installations. Those gates flew furiously for three months, marking a time of goodwill and enchantment for those walking in Central Park. But even that installation, with famous artists and full funding, was on the boards for twenty-five years before it was approved.

The application for the Temporary Public Outdoor Art program called for an extensive written description of the proposed artwork, photographs or drawings, an artist's statement and resume, an installation budget, information on the sponsoring organization, the proposed duration of the exhibition, the requested location, and ten prints of the artist's previous work. We gathered that information and solicited letters of support from a significant politician and a historian of the city as well.

For a location, we requested a place in midtown Manhattan, in the center of New York City's great avenue Broadway, just across from the new Manhattan Temple at Sixty-Fifth Street. Broadway has a landscaped center strip about twenty feet wide above the subway tracks called the Broadway Mall. The Church contributes funds annually to provide plants and labor to keep that particular section attractive. We thought that *The Frontier Prophet* would look wonderful under a small tree near the intersection at Sixty-Fifth Street. There were nice echoes of the rural life and the Sacred Grove. As a backup, we suggested a nearby paved triangle named for Richard Tucker, a Metropolitan Opera tenor whose bust is erected there. This heavily trafficked little space exists because Columbus Avenue enters Broadway at an angle. There are trees, chairs, and big potted plants, and a Greenmarket sells fresh produce there twice weekly. This space is also close to the temple. We submitted an application for a temporary installation in June 2005. After a substantial wait, a phone call from the administrator said that our application and requests had been considered. The site in the Broadway Mall was dismissed. They did not want any statues on Broadway. They were also "extremely reluc-



*First proposed location for “The Frontier Prophet” statue, in the center of Broadway, in front of the Manhattan Temple and stake center. This site was rejected.
Photo courtesy Richard L. Bushman.*

tant” to approve any more statuary in the Richard Tucker Triangle, although they have had temporary installations there before. I feared that our project was dead.

But, the caller asked, would we be interested in considering a different site? When asked what she had in mind, she began to describe a small park in downtown Manhattan in the financial district near Wall Street, a place with some historical significance for us and a place that had recently been rehabilitated by the Transit Authority after the completion of the construction of a fan plant and a tunnel under the East River. By this time, I recognized the location. It was the little park at Old Slip, the same place where I had attempted to have the ship *Brooklyn* plaque installed and near its current location, a place just two blocks from 88 Pearl Street where Joseph Smith stayed in 1832. I said that that location would work just fine.

The little park has a round fountain, red brick pavers with pink granite accents, and two attractive seating areas with black iron benches where people lunch and sun. The park is kept clean and attractive by the local Downtown Alliance, and the plants and trees are watered by the adjacent Police Museum. The park is administered by DCAS, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services. NYC Transit has a

deep interest in the underground structure, the Department of Police uses it for frequent displays of historic vehicles, the Fire Department maintains the right to park fire-fighting vehicles there, the Parks Department oversees it, and, in all, some fourteen agencies have or claim some jurisdiction over it.

With this approval by the Parks Department and the City, we began to fulfill additional requirements. Meanwhile, back in Provo, Dee Jay Bawden began to sculpt a brand-new eight-foot “Frontier Prophet” for us, one with a long axe in one hand and an 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon in the other.

It was September before I was invited to the park with the program administrator, Clare Weiss, and Ralph Masolino, the supervisor of district parks, to choose an exact site to request. We decided on a central location, right in the middle of the little park. Artistically, this was the right place. And it seemed the least likely to interfere with anyone emerging from a hatchway, escaping from some underground disaster. Clare and I marked the exact spot, measuring out feet from the various identifying landmarks, and submitted our proposal to NYC Transit.

Transit responded that they wanted more and better maps with this and alternate locations marked to the inch. I provided these. They wanted detailed information on the method of installation. How would the statue be secured? What kind of heavy equipment was required? What licenses did the installers have? They were not happy until they had such information as the chemical formula of the adhesive and articles that described how well it worked. How much would the statue weigh? They thought that the bronze statue standing atop a marble base would be too heavy. Could we reduce the weight? A plan for a completely bronze statue design, incorporating the base into the whole, was substituted.

We next approached Community Board No. 1, the citizens’ group that oversees land use and other issues for the neighborhood. I made an appointment with the Art and Entertainment Committee that would have to sign off on the project before it could be presented to the full board. A group of Mormons gathered in a downtown office building with four members of the committee. The Mormons were wholesome and friendly and made a good impression. After I made a brief presentation about the significance of Joseph Smith for New York City and the state of New York, the significance of the place, and the significance of the date, the committee discussed the pros and cons—mostly the cons. Why this person and this place? Why a representative of any religion? What about the division between church and state? Why a historical piece at all when this area—which contained the wreckage of 9/11—should have

only cheerful and upbeat art works? Why not put the statue in front of the temple or one of our chapels? Enough negative talk had been generated that the proposal would surely have been voted down, but one man said that this was a temporary statue, that no proselytizing would be involved, and that it should be approved. Others agreed, and the motion passed three to one.

One requirement was that we take the plan to the Police Museum, the nearest neighbors. A visit to the director of the Police Museum, a former policeman, went well enough. He said he had no objections to the statue and liked the design. His museum had many bronze statues on display, so the art was in his style. I reported the Police Museum's approval.

With all these administrative details behind us, chances of passing the full Community Board at the next meeting looked good. The full board generally ratifies the work of the committees. So this time I did not pressure extra Mormons to come to the session. The only Latter-day Saint who came besides me had to leave early. Our proposal was the last thing on the agenda, coming after three hours of talks, presentations, discussions, comments, and other business. The group was tired, offhandedly approving everything that came before them—until, that is, the chairman of the Art and Entertainment Committee presented a proposal for a temporary statue of Joseph Smith. Then, the attention of the crowd was fully engaged. The first speaker said that this man was in no way worthy of a statue of any kind. Others asserted that the Church was founded on fake miracles. Hands shot up to make negative comments of all kinds. One man finally said that he knew little of the Church or its people but that he would rather give them the benefit of the doubt than vote them down like a bigot. The chair gaveled the meeting to order and called for a vote, long before the pent-up anger of the group was expended. The vote was eighteen to seven against the proposal, with four abstentions.

I said nothing during this debate and walked out of the meeting—stunned. The chairman of the Art and Entertainment Committee told me that he was sorry—that he had tried. The man who had supported the proposal in the committee said that the vote had been illegitimate, that the committee had no right to vote against the statue on the grounds they did. They could object to the artistic quality but not to the beliefs of the installing group. Religious discrimination was at work. He said that we should engage a lawyer and pursue the installation.

The chairperson of Community Board No. 1 wrote a letter to the public art coordinator of the Parks and Recreation Department that read as follows: "At our October 18th monthly meeting, Community Board #1 **did not** approve the proposed temporary installation of *The Frontier*

Prophet at Old Slip Park. Several Community Board members questioned the appropriateness of installing artwork in a City park to recognize the founder of a specific religious group. We therefore urge that you reconsider this proposal.”⁵

The incident was very painful to all of us involved. We had come head-on against the discrimination that Mormons and the Church seldom meet directly these days. How should we respond? A newspaper reporter called me the next day to ask about the incident. He had found it remarkable that the board had overruled its own committee. I said I did not know whether we lost more when we fought against such things or whether we ignored them. I made a few calls, wondering whether anything could be salvaged.

A few days later, the parks administrator called to say that she had conferred with her boss and decided that the project had already moved forward a long way and that it should proceed. Community Board approval was desirable—but not required. We could still work toward our installation.

But then NYC Transit was not happy with the proposed locations of the statue. They wanted someone to go to their archives, to the Outside Projects Microfilm Room, and get all the plans for the plant and determine for sure that the statue would not interfere with anything below ground. This request necessitated a trip into the bowels of the city storage areas and access to plans that were stored on microfilms and in the computer. I took on this project, although I was warned in official documents that entering required “ability to read and understand drawings.” I was also warned that at least two hours of search time should be allotted, that the archive should be visited before 3 p.m., and that the offices closed for an hour for lunch. Still, I did find the records of the installation, including a huge, round tunnel about twenty feet high, like the one in *Die Hard II*, and all sorts of stairways, vents, hatches, and equipment. Not knowing exactly what I was looking for, I printed out and brought home a huge sheaf of plans showing many details of the underground. It was a James Bondian experience, and as I carried home the secrets of that important underground facility, I could imagine some dangerous enemy getting hold of them, planting bombs, and destroying the subway system and the city.

Back in the days of working on the *Brooklyn* plaque, the person I visited most often was James Zethraeus, the city’s chief architect in the DCAS. We had become friends, so when I needed someone to look at the plans and interpret them for the location and the weight of the statue, I called on him. He was good enough to walk over one lunchtime and

meet me at the site. He flipped through the plans, interested in looking over all the layers down there. He immediately determined that the weight of the statue would be no problem. All the construction was heavy duty. In fact, that day a good-sized truck was parked in the center of the park. It weighed much more than the eight hundred to one thousand pounds or so of our statue. He looked over the underground equipment and recommended a couple of places that would interfere the least, including the place we had originally asked for. I submitted a report and detailed map.

All this time we had been working toward completing the requirements of the necessary and lengthy agreement with the Parks Department designed to cover every contingency, giving all responsibility and cost for installation, supervision, maintenance and removal to us. A significant security deposit of \$4,000 and insurance of \$3 million was required. There were limitations on publicity and directions for everything. Mormon Historic Sites Foundation, with a nonprofit foundation and a 401-C3 rating, was willing to be the legal entity sponsoring the statue. Robert S. Clark agreed to sign the eleven-page agreement for the foundation and arranged for the security deposit and insurance. Parks and Transit were both named for damages should they be incurred.

By then, we were in a race against time. We had to dedicate the statue on 23 December, the two hundredth birthday of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It had to be that day. We had been aiming at that date since the beginning. But every little detail and document associated with the agreement had to be completed and filed in the Parks Department office. We could not announce the installation or plan on it until the agreement had been executed. The money had to be in place, the documents signed, and the approvals given. The days inched on. The people in Provo were about to buy \$2,000 worth of airplane tickets. Were we on target to continue? *The Frontier Prophet*, now completed and cast in bronze, was about to set out. He would travel in the back of a pickup truck driven by Jack Branin. Could the journey proceed? We had to say yes. If we did not proceed as per plan, we would be unable to make up the time later. Mighty faith was called for. Finally, at the last minute, all the arrangements were completed and in time.

On Friday evening, 16 December, the Provo entourage arrived. On the next day, Saturday, we were guests of Mark Holden for lunch at New York City's Harvard Club. We dined on Eastern fare, talking as if we were all old friends. We had burned up the email lines with correspondence, although we had scarcely seen each other before. After lunch, on that frosty day, we taxied and subwayed to Old Slip to look over the site.

There was general agreement that it was a good site.

The next day, Sunday morning, we gathered again to install the statue. It was then that we had our first glance of *The Frontier Prophet*, a bronze effigy lying in the back of a truck. We could look up his hollow base into his feet and legs. Jack Branin, who had hauled the statue the twenty-two hundred miles from Utah in the back of his Chevy pickup, said the statue drew many curious glances along the way. People asked if the statue was for sale. He said that the farther east he got, the higher he raised the price.

At ten in the morning, having looked over the place, Steve L. Glenn, who had managed the creation of the statue, instructed the several strong young men who had traveled east with him to begin. Steve's sons, his proto sons, and the sculptor lifted the bronze prophet from the truck's bed. They put him down near the proper place and then measured more exactly—four feet from the proper granite marker and the four-foot-square area he was to occupy—and sighted the figure against the background landmarks. They urged the figure a little this way and that until all were satisfied with the position. Then, the group tipped the figure up so that the bottom with its four brass flanges was visible. One man spread the adhesive on the bottom of each flange, and the statue was restored to its upright position. It was installed. The parks administrator said she had never seen such an efficient operation.

Artist Dee Jay Bawden said that the occasion called for some music. He pulled out his harmonica and skillfully played a rendition of "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet." It was a magical moment. So Joseph Smith, in bronze, took up residence at Old Slip. He was in place five days



Photograph showing the Joseph Smith statue being put into place, December 2005. Photograph by Carl Glassman.

before the planned event.

The weather was brutal those December days. Would people come to the dedication, a couple of days before Christmas, in the terrible weather, at the last moment's invitation when we finally got the word out? Because the financial markets would be closed, the streets would be empty, as most people would have gone home early for holiday celebrations. However, we would likely have at least the faithful few.

During those last days, I ran from official office to office to secure the necessary permits for a public event that would have both amplified sound and artificial light. Fees were imposed, of course, and the one for the police required a money order for payment as well as much inconvenience.

Then, just when all had come together, the NYC Transit, for whom we had jumped through many hoops over the past months, promised to snafu the event entirely. Against the law, against the administration's wishes, against the better interests of the populace, the workers walked out on a transit strike. All the buses and subways New Yorkers depend on stopped running. The city was brought to its knees. Workers stayed home. Traffic was clogged. People walked. How could anyone get to Old Slip in Lower Manhattan without the subway? Well, we would walk, but would anyone else? But the strike lasted only three days. A truce was reached on Thursday night. On the necessary Friday, the trains were up and running again.

So, on the target date, Friday, 23 December, the two hundredth birthday of Joseph Smith, *The Frontier Prophet*, a heroic bronze statue in honor of the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, translator of the Book of Mormon, and significant citizen of the state of New York, was dedicated in Old Slip Park. About three hundred adults and many additional children made their way downtown for a 4 p.m. ceremony, gathering in the dusk. The weather was more moderate than before. Crews in nearby office buildings had spiffed up the little park. Some technicians were setting up sound and light systems for the dedication program. The Boy Scouts were practicing covering up the statue with a blue tarp and taking it off. They finally tied it up for the later revelation. The meeting began. Area Seventy Elder A. Kim Smith made opening historical remarks. As the Boy Scouts drew the tarp from the statue, the group sang hymns of the restoration to a brass accompaniment. President Brent J. Belnap pronounced a dedicatory prayer that made clear how the statue's presence in New York City was, in fact, a marvel:

We marvel that this striking image of the “farm-boy prophet,” who was born into poverty and sorely persecuted during his brief lifetime until his tragic martyrdom at the hands of a cursed mob, should stand here today at this prominent site in this great city—as a testament to the increasing stature of Joseph Smith as the great Prophet, seer, revelator and translator of the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ (see D&C 124:125), a latter-day Moses (see 2 Nephi 3; D&C 28:2), to whom was given “power to lay the foundation of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints] and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness, the only true and living church upon the face of the whole earth, with which . . . the Lord [is] well pleased”(D&C 1:30). . . . May its presence

in this diverse world-class city assist in fulfilling divine prophecy made by the Angel Moroni that, as the stature of Joseph Smith grows ever larger, the “name [of Joseph Smith] should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues, or that it should be both good and evil spoken of among all people.” Bless this memorial, that through it, “Millions [including right here in New York City] shall know ‘Brother Joseph’ again.”



“The Frontier Prophet” sculpted by Dee Jay Bawden, December 2005. Bawden donated the bronze statue. The statue is located in lower Manhattan at Old Slip Park, a small park just two blocks away from Pearl Street where Joseph Smith once stayed in 1832. The statue was dedicated on 23 December 2005, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith. Photograph by Michael Mills.

The short program was over. The statue was dedicated. Half of the group went into the nearby office building where they had refreshments and heard a brief presentation on Joseph Smith by scholar Richard

Bushman. The others lined up to have their pictures taken with *The Frontier Prophet*. Since then, local Church members, visitors, tourists, and the curious in generous numbers have traveled to Old Slip to see *The Frontier Prophet*. We are very happy to have him in town.

About two months after the dedication, an issue surfaced associated with the wording on the plaque at the base of *The Frontier Prophet*. When we initially considered the wording for the plaque, we wanted it to be factual and historical rather than religious. The aim was always to present Joseph Smith as a great New Yorker rather than as a visionary religious leader. We submitted the text to various leaders, going along with most of the suggestions. We proposed the following text to the Parks Department, and representatives there approved it:

Joseph Smith (1805–1844)

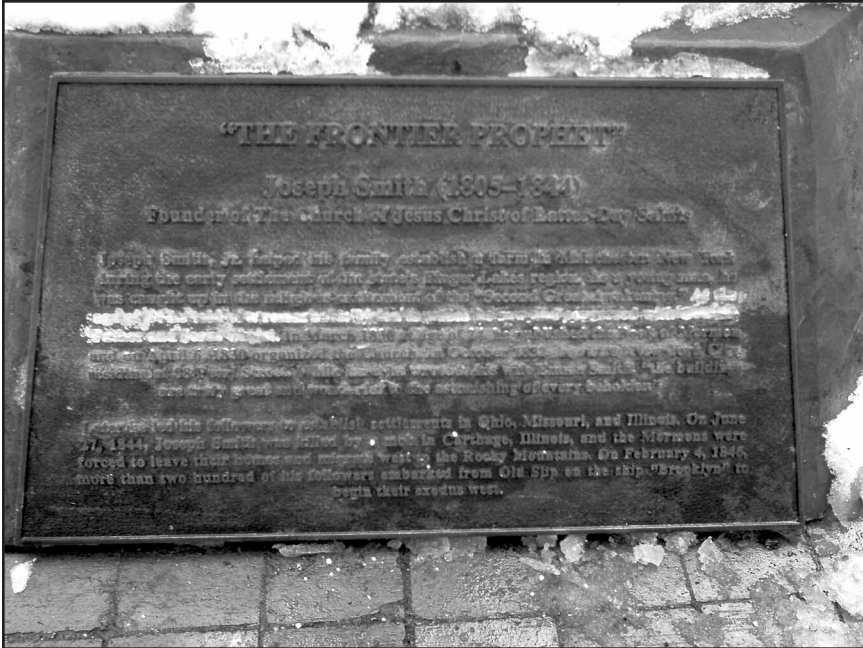
Founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Joseph Smith, Jr. helped his family open a farm in Manchester, New York, during the settlement of the Finger Lakes region. As a young man, he was caught up in the religious excitement of the Second Great Awakening. In March 1830 at age 24, he published the Book of Mormon and on April 6, 1830 organized the Church. In October 1832, he visited New York City and resided at 88 Pearl Street. While here, he wrote to his wife Emma Smith, “the buildings are truly great and wonderful to the astonishing of every beholder.”

On June 27, 1844 Joseph Smith was killed by a mob in Carthage, Illinois, and the Mormons were forced to leave their homes. On February 4, 1846, more than two hundred of his eastern followers embarked from Old Slip on the ship Brooklyn en route to California where they hoped to rendezvous with Brigham Young leading a party of Mormons west.

The plaque was affixed to the base of the statue, so reading it required stooping or kneeling. Always engaged in some other task, I never read it myself.

The statue had been in place for almost two months when I got an angry call from the Parks Department that they had received letters of complaint about the plaque’s wording. The letters complained about the third sentence of the plaque, which stated: “At the age of 14 he told of a remarkable vision in which he saw and conversed with God the Father and Jesus Christ.” That’s a fairly unremarkable comment for a Latter-day Saint—but one that sent some local citizens into the stratosphere. How could I have abused the trust of the Parks people, I was asked? How could I have inserted such a message? They had worked with me in good faith and even overruled the Community Board. I said I had no idea where



Base plaque of "The Frontier Prophet" statue, December 2005. The text for the plaque was approved by officials from New York City's Parks Department. However, in the interim, additional text material was added which read "At the age of 14 he told of a remarkable vision in which he saw and conversed with God the Father and Jesus Christ."

Because the city had not approved this particular sentence, it had to be removed.

Note the ground-off section of the plaque. Photograph by Colleen Wiest.

that wording had come from—somewhere between my desk and the foundry. In any event, I was told, the plaque would have to go or the statue would have to come down.

Then began the anguished calls. How do we "unwrite" in bronze? Could the plaque be removed? No, it was welded on. We finally got a maintenance man from an adjoining building to grind down the offending letters. That very afternoon the sentence was erased. Unfortunately, the plaque now looks as if someone made a very determined effort to deface the surface. Now I get shocked calls wondering if I know about this "outrage." Regardless, the handsome Joseph continues to survey the scene, serene and calm. He suffered a great deal in life. We hoped that he could be honored in death. Maybe in the future.

I write this account of the events in detail because I think it is useful to know how projects that seemed impossible are accomplished. We have to have very specific goals of what we hope to do. Then, we have

to be tenacious. We are grateful for the groups that stand willing to help with necessary aspects—in this case the donors who are responsible for the statue and the Mormon Historic Sites Foundation that provided necessary funds. The project could not have happened without them. We also had help from our guardian angels. As we patrol the boundaries where the organized Church meets the greater community, we have to try new, difficult things all the time. Sometimes we can bring them to fruition. When our projects do not succeed, we are better prepared for the next campaign. But that which we do not attempt to do never gets done.

Notes

1. Dean C. Jessee, ed. and comp., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 12–13; see also New York New York Stake LDS History Committee and Scott D. Tiffany, ed., *City Saints: Mormons in the New York Metropolis* (New York: New York Stake History Group, 2004), 12–13.

2. *City Saints*, 13–16.

3. *City Saints*, 35.

4. *City Saints*, 24–27.

5. Julie Menin to Clair Weiss, 1 November 2005.