

The New England Common School Experience of Joseph Smith Jr., 1810–16

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Historians commenting on the early life of Joseph Smith consistently point out his lack of formal education. For those who accept his message, the Prophet's limited education provides evidence of God's hand in his work. They reason that one so "ignorant" and lacking in education could not have written the Book of Mormon without God's help.¹ From a different perspective, those critical of the Prophet also cite his lack of education as evidence that he could not have written the Book of Mormon.² But instead of accepting any claim of divine intervention, they suggest other explanations for the authorship of the Book of Mormon. Ironically, both perspectives use the Prophet's lack of formal education to strengthen their respective views.

While much has been made of the Prophet's limited education, little has been said about what education he did have. The purpose of this paper is to look beyond the simplistic conclusion that Joseph Smith was uneducated to a consideration of the common school education he received before the age of twelve. An examination of the educational context in which Joseph Smith first learned to read and write may provide added insight to his childhood experiences between 1810 and 1816. Such an analysis may demonstrate how the common schools of New England contributed to his preparation for his calling as a prophet.³

In 1810 the family of the Prophet Joseph Smith lived in Royalton, Vermont.⁴ Here, in a school required by state law,⁵ Deacon Jonathan Rinney instructed the boy Joseph Smith Jr. in his first lessons in reading and writing.⁶ The following year the Smith family moved to Lebanon, New Hampshire. Reflecting on this period in

the family's history, Joseph's mother remembered that the children who were old enough⁷ attended a neighborhood school on Poverty Lane⁸ while their older brother Hyrum attended Moor's Charity School located on the Dartmouth College campus in nearby Hanover.⁹ The Smith family's situation would have allowed for some consistency in the children's education over the next two years.

After two years in Lebanon, Joseph, then seven years old, became gravely ill from typhoid fever and likely had little opportunity to continue his education at that time.¹⁰ A complication from the disease necessitated an operation on his leg that left him weak and frail for several months.¹¹ The possibility of returning to the local school was hindered when his parents sent him to his uncle's home in Salem, Massachusetts, to aid in his recovery. In 1814 the Smith family moved to the community of Norwich, Vermont, where they lived until moving to New York two years later. When considering this period in Joseph's life, it seems consistent to assume that his mother would have again encouraged him and his siblings to attend public school.¹² By the time the family moved to New York, Joseph was almost eleven years old and had lived in several communities—each with an established tradition of public school supported by several decades of state legislation.

While the opportunity for public school existed, the limitations caused by family moves and sickness may have limited Joseph's actual participation in school. An exact chronology is impossible, but it appears that Joseph began school in Royalton, Vermont, in 1810.¹³ After the family's move to Lebanon, New Hampshire, Joseph attended school there until he became ill in 1813. His recovery from the operation likely prevented him from returning to school until after his family's move to Norwich, Vermont, in 1814. He then again had an opportunity to attend school until 1816, when they moved to New York. While his public school experience was limited because of illnesses and difficult family circumstances, Joseph later recognized that his New England education provided him with basic instruction in reading and writing.¹⁴

It is interesting to consider what the Prophet's early common school experience would have been like. Beginning in the 1600s, the New England region had demonstrated a consistent commitment

to public education. It is evident from existing records that many of the New England states, including Vermont and New Hampshire, had passed school legislation by the end of the eighteenth century. By the time Joseph was old enough to enter school, publicly funded neighborhood schools were common throughout the region. It is also possible to determine from available sources the educational practices common during this period. A review of the history and practices of these early New England public schools will provide insight into the Prophet's educational experience during his formative years.

Early Public Schools in New England

The history of public education in colonial America began with the concern religious leaders felt for the spiritual well-being of their parishioners. These men firmly believed that Satan personally led a determined effort to destroy God's work in the new land. The church leaders at the time also considered many parents negligent in their duty to teach their children to read the scriptures. Essentially they promoted public education to provide religious instruction. Therefore, in 1642, the General Court of Massachusetts legislated the beginnings of a public school system.¹⁵

The law ordered the leaders of each town to be responsible for establishing community schools that would teach children reading skills and basic religious tenets. Communities that did not establish such schools violated the law and were to be charged and fined. But while the legislation required children to be educated, it left the details of that education to local communities.

Education as a religious responsibility. Colonial religious leaders did not view education as being primarily an intellectual exercise, but rather as a way to strengthen children for their personal battle against temptation and evil. Their interest in public education was based on a religious doctrine that considered man's basic character to be evil and in need of correction. The school was to act as an agent of change by promoting the ability to read and understand the Bible. According to the prevailing Protestant teaching of the time, the ability to read the scriptures was an essential prerequisite to overcoming Satan and living in conformity with God's law.

This perspective is plainly evident in a clause in the first sentence of the second Massachusetts Educational Law, which was passed in 1647: "It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures."¹⁶ This law ordered every township of fifty or more to appoint a teacher who could teach local children to read and write. Towns of one hundred or more were also to establish a grammar school and hire an appropriate teacher for that level of instruction.¹⁷ The teachers' wages were to be paid by members of the communities.

As evidence of a consistent interest in public education, a third law was passed one year later that specifically provided for the enforcement of the previous laws. Officers were appointed to ensure that public education was available in each community, and penalties were imposed upon the communities that did not comply. The intent was to address a perceived lack of progress in establishing public schools throughout the colony. Finally, the law provided that children from the homes of negligent families would be placed with masters who would see to their education.¹⁸

Education as a civic responsibility. One significant factor in the development of public education during the colonial period was the establishment of the town rather than the church as the basic unit of government and the center of the political, economic, and social life of the people.¹⁹ As business and industry became more important, the rising middle class began to exert a secular influence on local town politics. This new perspective directly influenced the public school by transforming its original religious intent to one more specifically suited for participation in the growing economy. It was in keeping with this enlarged vision of public education that the states of New Hampshire and Connecticut, among others, first adopted compulsory education legislation.²⁰

The period following the Revolutionary War prompted a growing interest in democratic ideals. This movement reinforced the move to secularize the schools. The purpose of education was not only to prepare individuals to participate in a growing economy but also to create an educated citizenry capable of self-government.²¹ However noble these interests in public education, the reality was that the war had drained the nation's resources, resulting in a lack of funding for public schools.

Sensing a great need, Thomas Jefferson and others led the fight for an expanded system of public education.²² In the years following the Revolutionary War, Jefferson championed a crusade against ignorance and was the first to suggest a plan to establish a tax-supported national public school system. Noah Webster, conservative by Jefferson's standards, called for an "association of American patriots for the purpose of forming a national character."²³ His objective was to create a school system that would encourage political orthodoxy throughout the nation. Webster's schoolbooks and dictionaries are reflective of his determination to standardize the American identity. National leaders proposed these two and several other plans to Congress in an effort to strengthen public education. While such efforts failed at a national level, they did influence state legislatures to act in support of public education.

Public funding for education. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the constitutions of seven states provided support for public education. One of the first was New Hampshire, which had passed laws affecting education and literacy late in the seventeenth century. Following the example of Massachusetts, the New Hampshire legislature required all towns to maintain a reading and writing school.

In spite of increased penalties for noncompliance, communities were sometimes slow to respond. This was not the result of lack of interest in education but rather a reflection of the economic realities that made it difficult to hire a teacher and maintain a schoolhouse.

In 1795 Connecticut began selling portions of its public land to support public education. This controversial practice led to the establishment of the state's first public school fund. Schools supported by the fund came under government control and were subject to specific directives. This precedent opened the way for other states to use taxes and other public resources to fund state-mandated schools.

As the states explored various funding sources, they also searched for alternative school models. One example was the introduction of "moving schools."²⁴ Until this point, schools had been identified with towns, but there was a growing need for schools in the more rural areas. The "moving school" system involved hiring an itinerant teacher who traveled throughout the district surrounding the town to provide instruction wherever children could gather together. Taxes

to fund this type of school were imposed on residents of the town as well as on those living in the outlying areas. As time passed, the moving schools of New England evolved into today's school district system.

Hanover, New Hampshire, organized its public education in typical New England fashion.²⁵ Beginning in 1790 school districts were organized and funded by a public tax. Leaders were appointed to manage the districts and collect the relevant taxes. By 1805 a district system was widespread, and each town received the authority to purchase school buildings and conduct its own educational affairs. In 1808 each local school district selected an administrative committee of three individuals who were to inspect the schools in the district and ensure that they met expected standards. These committees were the forerunners of today's school board and district administrators.

Public Education in Vermont

Joseph Smith first learned to read and write in the public schools of Vermont and New Hampshire. A review of these early years suggests that he had a greater opportunity to attend schools in Vermont. However, it is apparent from available histories that the schools in Vermont and New Hampshire were similar because of their geographical proximity and shared history. This conclusion is supported by the generally high level of commitment to public education in both states as reflected in their educational laws. Given the similarity between early Vermont and New Hampshire public schools, the remaining discussion will focus on the documented history of Vermont public schools. This will enable greater focus in an attempt to describe the most likely first public school experiences of the boy Joseph Smith.

As early as 1764 the colony of Vermont demonstrated its commitment to public education by legislating that lands originally granted for "propagation of the gospel in foreign parts" be used for the support of public schools.²⁶ Later, when the republic of Vermont declared its independence from Great Britain, its citizens approved a progressive constitution that not only prohibited slavery and granted the vote to all adult males but also provided for the

establishment of a public school system as noted below.²⁷ In keeping with the 1764 law, the constitution affirmed that property first granted by royal charter for the support of religious education could be used to fund public education.²⁸

In 1787 the republic of Vermont acted to strengthen public schools by empowering communities to organize school districts, designate trustees, and tax citizens for the support of public education.²⁹ Ten years later, after achieving statehood, Vermont passed an important act to further encourage public education.³⁰ The legislation required that each town have at least one school to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, communities would organize school districts and elect trustees, who would appoint schoolmasters, raise tax funds to meet educational expenses, and handle all matters related to local schools. The intent of the legislation was to ensure that all children between the ages of four and eighteen had an opportunity to attend school. Finally, the legislation provided penalties for those communities that did not comply with the legislation.

It was fortunate for the Smith family that they made their home in Windsor County, one of the more educationally active counties in Vermont. By 1785 the first school district was organized there, and by 1798 twelve more were added.³¹ Windsor County also established its first country grammar school in 1785.³²

The legislature remained supportive as Windsor County educational demands increased. Growing interest in grammar schools and academies led to numerous legislative acts establishing such schools where appropriate. In 1807 a special act established a county grammar school at Norwich, near where the Smith family lived between 1814 and 1816.³³ The act appointed trustees and gave them full power to raise the funds necessary for the school. The year of 1807 also saw the establishment of the first public academy at Royalton, further evidence of the progressive attitude of Windsor County leaders.³⁴ An academy school provided another level of educational opportunity in addition to the neighborhood common school and the county grammar school. At the time the Smith family lived in Norwich, the neighborhood common schools, the Norwich grammar school, and the academy at Royalton would have all been in operation.

The Typical New England Common School, 1810–16

A neighborhood school building was the first indication of the growing interest in public education. Faced with legislated penalties, communities built inexpensive one-room schools. Teachers were not much better prepared than the schoolhouses in which they taught. They lacked training and preparation and frequently considered teaching a temporary job. Because teachers were untrained, the early nineteenth-century reading and spelling textbooks determined much of the educational content.

Any attempt to define Joseph Smith's early educational experiences must take into account the above factors. It would be helpful to consider what a typical schoolhouse was like in his community and what types of textbooks were used. A consideration of these factors, along with the educational practices common at this time, will help define what school would have been like for young Joseph.

The school building. As communities matured they were usually anxious to move their school from homes, barns, and churches to a "proper" schoolhouse. Most school buildings were built on land that had little value, the only requirement being a location near the geographical center of the neighborhood.³⁵

The typical New England school building was small, typically less than twenty feet square, with a very low ceiling. The walls were of rough construction sometimes plastered with lime. If the building had windows, they were too small to allow much light into the room.³⁶ A large fireplace or Franklin stove heated the room in the winter. There were no traditional desks, but planks were fixed to the walls for use as writing surfaces. The children sat on backless benches pulled up to the planks. The schoolmaster stood at a large table at one end of the room.³⁷

An early description of the first schoolhouse in Lebanon, New Hampshire (1807), illustrates the similarities among early neighborhood school buildings.

The walls were of upright plank. . . . The entrance to the school house was at the corner, passing through a hall as far as the chimney, at which place the door opened into the school room, and opposite the door was the school master's headquarters. . . . Opposite . . . was the old fashioned fire place, which in the winter was fortified with monster back

logs in a state of combustion, and in summer, with evergreen shrubbery and wild flowers. On the right and north end of the house, were the seats for the boys in two divisions of four seats each. . . . The opposite or south side next to the sunshine, was very properly set apart for the girls, and the seats were arranged in the same order.³⁸

Rural communities in the nineteenth century had few resources to expend on education. Schoolhouse architecture was simple in design, demonstrating the frugality required by the communities' economic circumstances, and the lack of commercial resources available to most schools. Neighborhood schools in New England were built of logs, with either puncheon or bare earth floors. The roofs of the buildings were frequently made of bark and the windows of paper.³⁹

Classrooms were sparsely decorated and furnished, and members of the community took responsibility for their upkeep. Farmers supplied the wood or other fuel for the stove to keep the classrooms warm during the winter months.⁴⁰ Parents helped furnish the schoolhouse by constructing desks and benches, and they also took turns cleaning and stocking the stables that housed the horses the children used to get to and from school.

Further parental involvement was demonstrated in the practice of moving the school building so that it was closer to the students' homes. Fathers of school children would hitch their horse teams to the building and drag it to its new location. This action was sometimes taken by one faction in the school district without the knowledge of another. In Norwich, Vermont, the parents in the northern part of the district moved the school building to their neighborhood without the knowledge of the people living in the southern part. This forced the southern parents to find a new place for their children to attend school. Feelings ran high at such times.⁴¹

In an 1833 text an unknown author provided additional information in his detailed description of the public school he had attended years before.⁴² He described the building as being constructed of unpainted clapboard with six windows for light. One entered the school by a step made of a large unhewn rock brought from a neighboring pasture. In the winter, ice would collect on the

rock step, making it most treacherous. Upon entering the school one noticed a large pile of pinewood next to a second door, which led into the classroom. At the end of the room was a platform raised one foot from the floor. The schoolmaster's desk was placed on this platform. The fireplace was on the right wall next to a door leading to a closet where the girls put their cloaks and dinner baskets. This closet was also used as a "dungeon" for misbehaving students. The students sat at long benches with writing tables, and they were seated according to their ages, with the youngest students in the front.

The school day. Attendance at rural schools varied from day to day and from district to district. During the winter months enrollment increased, and during the summer months, when there was farm work to be done, attendance was more sporadic. Because there was no standard age for starting to attend school, many two- and three-year-olds were sent to school along with their older brothers and sisters.⁴³ Such diversity in age and attendance required teachers to be patient and flexible and to possess innovative time management skills.

The typical school day commenced early in the morning and ended in the early afternoon. The daily routine began with a reading of the New Testament followed by writing and arithmetic. While the older students read and studied from the Bible, the younger children would repeat and recite sentences from their primers or spelling books. During the morning, the children were permitted a short recess during which they could socialize with friends and play games. When the time came for class to resume, the teacher would stand at the school entrance and ring a handbell. Students needed to be within earshot to hear the bell and were expected to respond immediately or risk punishment for tardiness.⁴⁴ As they returned from recess, the students were allowed to drink from a cup and pail of water located at the entrance of the classroom.⁴⁵

The afternoon began with reading and a "general spell" period. During this time the teacher read aloud words from a spelling book and the pupils spelled them vocally. The teacher also corrected and instructed students on improved use of grammar, spelling, articulation, and pronunciation during this exercise. The school day ended with instruction in topics such as abbreviations, currencies, weights,

and measures.⁴⁶ Before dismissing school, the teacher called role and reminded the boy whose turn it was to make the fire the following morning to do so.⁴⁷

Common Teaching Practices

The religious beginnings of public education continued to influence educational practices into the nineteenth century. Schools were to Americanize and civilize children by teaching virtue, respect, loyalty, and love of God and country. The schoolmaster was to see that obedience was the first order of school.⁴⁸ Teachers demanded strict obedience and often resorted to corporal punishment to enforce order. Often schoolmasters spent a good deal of their time disciplining students. Whipping, striking the students' palms with a ruler, and forcing them to hold books at arm's length for long periods of time were methods used to punish those who misbehaved.⁴⁹

Teachers were instructed to "govern from a sense of right and justice when you *can*, from a feeling of fear when you *must*."⁵⁰ The methods of punishment for disobedience varied, but harsh, frequent punishments were not uncommon.⁵¹ Instructors believed themselves to be proficient if their students were quiet and disciplined. One teacher wrote concerning this matter, "I believe it was generally understood . . . that I was a smart teacher, by which was meant that I kept the school very quiet; and this, in those days, was regarded by many, as the very summit of pedagogic excellence."⁵²

Learning to read was the primary objective of the school. During the nineteenth century there were seven primary methods of reading instruction: (1) alphabet memorization, (2) letter recognition within words, (3) recognition and use of two-letter syllables, (4) word memorization and spelling, (5) reading from a primer, (6) reading from the Bible, and (7) elocution and articulation in oral reading.⁵³ Penmanship was also important in the curriculum but was considered separate from reading instruction.

The alphabet method. Children were first taught to memorize the alphabet "by rote, forwards and backwards." Students learned one letter at a time, understanding its shape, how it was written and what position it held in the alphabet. One exercise teachers often

used was to point to a letter of the alphabet and ask the students to write it or recite it in chorus. A variety of other methods were used:

The usual way to begin a child when he is first brought to Schoole is to teach him to know his letters in the Horn-book, where he is made to run over all the letters in the Alphabet or Christ-cross row both forwards and backwards, until he can tell any of them, which is pointed at, and that in the English character. . . . The greatest trouble at the first entrance of children is to teach them how to know their letters one from another. . . . Some have therefore begun with one single letter, and after they have shewed it to the childe in the Alphabet, have made him to find the same anywhere else in the book, till he knew that perfectly; and then they have proceeded to another in like manner, and so gone through the rest. . . . Some have contrived a piece of ivory with twenty-four flats or squares, in every one of which was engraven a single letter, and by playing with a childe in throwing this upon a table, and shewing him the letter only which lay uppermost have in a few days taught him the whole alphabet. . . . Some have made pictures in a little book or upon a scroll of paper wrapt upon two sticks within a box of iceing-glass and by each picture have made three sorts of that letter, with which its name beginneth; but those being too many at once for a childe to take notice on, have proved not so useful as was intended. . . . Some likewise have had pictures and letters printed in this manner on the back side of a pack of cards, to entice children, that naturally love that sport, to the love of learning their books.⁵⁴

The Syllabarium. After mastering the alphabet, children were introduced to syllables. Instruction in syllables was known as the “Syllabarium.” This method required students to group and recite the pronunciation of a consonant with a vowel (as in *ba*, *be*, *bi*, *bo*, and *bu*). Students would usually start at the beginning of the alphabet and continue grouping letters, reciting and pronouncing syllables until the teacher was satisfied.⁵⁵

The use of primers. After learning the alphabet and understanding the use of syllables, children continued their reading progress by applying what they learned in reading exercises found in their primers. These textbooks helped students associate letters and syllables, developing their skill to recognize, read, spell and pronounce basic words.

Most primers used spelling as the foundation of reading instruction. However, most students did not enjoy spelling, as it required many hours of memorizing exercises such as the following poem:

“And so you do not *like* to *spell*
Mary, my dear? O, *very well*;
'Tis *dull* and *troublesome*, you say,
And you had rather be at *play*.
Then bring me all your *books* again;
Nay, Mary, why should you *complain*?
For as you do not choose to *read*,
You shall not have your *books*, *indeed*.
So as you *wish* to be a dunce,
Pray go and fetch me them at *once*.
For as you will not learn to *spell*,
'Tis vain to think of *reading* well.⁵⁶

Elocution. In addition to their exercises in reading and memorization, students were taught the art of elocution. Teachers believed that elocution would not only help improve student reading and spelling but also create a greater unity in the American language. The belief was that when students memorized passages from the primers, they would be influenced by the primers' nationalistic-moralistic content and consequently became respectable citizens.

To develop elocution skills in their pupils, teachers required students to read passages having moral themes from the Bible and their textbooks. James H. Kendrick, a student of the “Old School House” in Lebanon, New Hampshire, remembered learning rhymes such as the one below to practice and improve his eloquence:

“A was an angler and fished with a hook.
B was a blockhead, and ne'er learned a book.”⁵⁷

Teachers believed that children should not be allowed to read aloud in a monotonous manner. They should be taught how to read and speak in a way that interested those who were listening.⁵⁸

Penmanship. While not part of basic reading instruction, penmanship in the early 1800s was considered very important. Students were required to use quill, ink, and parchment in an attempt to imitate the teacher's penmanship. The beginning steps of learning to write required students to draw straight lines and then to practice copying the teacher's examples of “hooks and trammels.”⁵⁹

Once they mastered basic line and quill techniques, the students practiced full word and page reproduction. To facilitate this, the

teacher composed written exercises with moral messages such as, “Procrastination is the thief of time,” or “Contentment is a virtue.” The objective of the written experience was to help each student prepare an exhibition of original work.⁶⁰ The compositions would be shown to visitors and the community during the final weeks of school. Perceiving the beauty of their penmanship to be more important than literary accuracy, students spent considerable time working to meticulously prepare aesthetically pleasing exhibitions.

School Supplies and Textbooks

Schools in the nineteenth century provided students with few if any school supplies and rarely had blackboards.⁶¹ Slates were not introduced in the classroom until about 1820, and lead pencils were not used until several years later. Students were accustomed to writing with pen, ink, and paper. In the early 1800s, paper was very costly because of its scarcity, and poorer communities were forced to use birch bark instead. If paper was available, it came in foolscap size (215mm by 330mm) and was dark, unruled, and very rough.

Families were responsible for providing their children with basic supplies, which typically included a penknife, quills, paper, ink, a Bible, and a ruler.⁶²

Textbooks. Puritan and Calvinist doctrine influenced the primers and readers used in the public schools. These early textbooks taught students about Christian ideals, attributes of godliness, immortality, the omniscience of God, the relation between God and man, repentance, sin, punishment, positive virtues of man, the Golden Rule, and how to read, study, and apply the Bible.⁶³ The authors’ objective in such texts were, first, to teach children how to read, and, second, to inspire them to “live noble lives.”⁶⁴

The hornbook. The first commonly used primer was called the hornbook. It was made up of a wooden paddle-like frame with a single piece of parchment attached. On the parchment were printed the letters of the alphabet, simple words, and a verse or two from the Bible. A transparent cover made from cow horn protected the parchment sheet, and a small handle attached to the frame enabled the children to hold the hornbook while reading. Students fre-

quently tied strings to these handles, allowing them to attach their hornbooks to their belts.

New England Primer. The *New England Primer* contained several catechism lessons, which students memorized and recited to their minister.⁶⁵ The majority of the text was derived from the Bible, but the primer's author, Benjamin Harris, also included other passages teaching moral lessons.⁶⁶ The primer contained 104 pages and was traditionally bound in oak and leather.

Its first lessons comprised the alphabet, vowels, consonants, double letters, italics, and capitals, followed by a syllabarium of two-syllable to six-syllable words. Next came an introduction to alphabet verses or couplets that taught religious or moral themes. The primer concluded with "An Alphabet of Lessons for Youth" containing sentences and passages from Biblical text, for example: "Rachel doth mourn for her first born." This particular sentence was illustrated with a picture of a young girl weeping over the death of her first child. The sentences were ordered alphabetically, and the first letter of each was bolded and arranged in an ornamental style. The final pages of the primer listed the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.

English Reader. Another school text that became popular in America was the *English Reader*, which was first published in England by Lindley Murray.⁶⁷ Murray wrote his reader in 1799, building on the success of his previous publication, *English Grammar*. The popularity of the *English Reader* led to several American editions during the following decade, and many schoolchildren throughout the New England states learned to read using Murray's reader.

English Reader is typical of the texts written to promote the type of values important in post-revolutionary America. While not overtly nationalistic like the later texts of Webster and others,⁶⁸ Murray's reader did promote a definite moral perspective. The stated goals of the book included not only "to improve youth in the art of reading," but also "to elevate their language and sentiments" and "to inculcate some of the most important principles of piety and virtue."⁶⁹ The reader included a variety of literary passages as well as numerous prose passages designed to teach moral principles, such as, "Virtuous youth gradually brings forward accomplished and

flourishing manhood.”⁷⁰ While it was successful, the *English Reader* was not as widely used as some other readers.

American Spelling Book. Noah Webster’s *American Spelling Book*, Caleb Bingham’s *Columbian Orator*, and Lyman Cobb’s *North American Reader* were three of the most popular texts during the early 1800s,⁷¹ but the *American Spelling Book* was considered “the most popular of the three readers.”⁷² Frequently referred to as the “Blue-back Speller,” it was printed on four-inch by six-inch cream-colored paper pages of medium weight, with a wood cover and a leather spine binding. The first portion of the book was dedicated to rules and instruction, and these were followed by the alphabet, syllables, and lists of words ordered according to their number of syllables. Seventy-four of the book’s 158 pages contained lists of original words and syllables. The latter part of the book contained moralistic advice, historical and geographical information, rules for correct spelling and reading, realistic stories, fables, poetry, and patriotic dialogues.⁷³

Noah Webster purposely included moral and patriotic themes in his speller to attain his goal of purifying the American language and instilling in students the ideals of the new republic. He believed that what the students read at school made a difference, and therefore he proposed that they read passages that would develop sentiments of liberty and patriotism.⁷⁴

The success of Webster’s speller enabled him to continue his quest to purify the language. From the profits he made on the *American Speller* he was able to support himself and his family while he completed his first dictionary.

The Smith Family Textbooks

In 1990, representatives of the Wilford C. Wood family donated three textbooks to the Museum of Church History in Salt Lake City, Utah. Wood had obtained these texts in a public auction in New York early in the twentieth century.⁷⁵ The textbooks are typical of those used in schools early in the 1800s, and it was Wood’s contention that they belonged to the Joseph Smith Sr. family. The three books are the *English Reader*, the *First Lines of Arithmetic*, and an unknown volume published in Edinburgh, Scotland, that con-

tains sonnets and other pieces of literature. The arithmetic book is particularly interesting because on one of the cover pages is written “Joseph Smith’s book January 31, 1818,” and on the back of the same page the name “Catherine” appears, written in a different hand. Wood believed that these notations supported his contention that the Joseph Smith Sr. family had used the book. While this is a possibility, analysis by the curators at the Museum of Church History has not yet confirmed this conclusion.

The copy of the *English Reader* is also of interest in this discussion because of the popularity and availability of the text during the time that Joseph attended public school. Although the cover is missing, the book can be readily identified as an original copy of the *English Reader* in common use in the early 1800s. While it cannot be proven that Joseph read from this particular copy, the textbook does represent the type of reader that the Prophet would have used.

Conclusion

Reflecting on his childhood, Joseph Smith recognized that while his parents “spared no pains” in seeing that he received proper instruction, circumstances limited his education to an understanding of the “Christian religion” and basic instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic.⁷⁶ While Joseph had not received a complete education by the time he moved from New England, he had acquired those three basic skills. He also understood the importance of education and had started what would become a lifetime love of learning.⁷⁷

Given the nature of the schools in early nineteenth-century New England, one can assume that Joseph not only learned basic skills but also received some indoctrination in the principles of the new nation. Those who mandated public education expected to instill in children both the skills and the values necessary for the success of the new democracy. It is likely that Joseph learned these first lessons in a local one-room common school. There he first learned the alphabet and then the use of syllables from an early primer. Given the time he spent in school, he likely would have also used a basic reader to further his skills. By the time he moved from New England, Joseph would have not only begun to read and

write but also most likely received beginning lessons in elocution and penmanship. Typical for the time, his instruction would have always proceeded from a moralistic and nationalistic context.

Considering the importance and value Joseph's family placed on becoming literate, it is not surprising that one of the first glimpses we have into Joseph Smith's early life finds the young boy at home searching for answers to his questions in the Bible. He would have been prepared for this by the common practice of using the Bible to improve reading and elocution skills.⁷⁸ Given the moralistic emphasis of public education, his desire to do the right thing should be of no surprise to serious observers of history.

The education of the Prophet Joseph Smith began well before the First Vision and extended beyond the influence of his family. His early public schooling may have played a more important part in preparing him for his prophetic role than previously supposed. It is important to recognize that the Lord's prophet was not educated solely at home nor in the schools of the privileged, but rather in the common public schools envisioned by Jefferson and others as the heart of the new nation. This fact cannot be dismissed in any serious study of the life of the Prophet. Rather than being ignorant and uneducated, Joseph Smith had not only learned to read and write, but had also experienced these first lessons in a community public school. His education, while limited by some standards, was typical for his time. It served its purpose by providing young Joseph with the basic skills necessary to read and ponder for himself the admonition of James (see James 1:5). It was this simple ability that led him to an experience with God essential to his important role in the latter-day Restoration.

NOTES

¹See Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Answers: Straightforward Answers to Tough Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 43; see also Stephen L. Richards, in Conference Report, October 1936, 32–33.

²One of the first critics to suggest that the Book of Mormon was not solely the work of Joseph Smith was Eber D. Howe in his text, *Mormonism Unveiled*

(Painesville, OH: Eber D. Howe, 1834). A discussion of Howe's proposed origin of the Book of Mormon can be found in Lester E. Bush Jr., "The Spalding Theory Then and Now," *Dialogue* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1977): 40–69.

³The New England common school was typically a neighborhood school responsible for teaching basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. The next level of sophistication in the school system was the grammar school, usually located in a city or town. It expanded the basic curriculum from reading and writing to include other subjects. The curriculum it provided was more like that of modern elementary schools than the more basic curriculum of the common school. The academies taught subjects as well as basic skills and were the New England secondary or high schools.

⁴See Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 169. For the purposes of this discussion, this edited edition of Lucy Mack Smith's account will be used for details related to the boyhood of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

⁵State law required that schools be established in each organized town in Vermont for the instruction of youth between the ages of four and eighteen; see Joseph Fay, "An Act for the Support of Schools," *Laws of the state of Vermont*, chapter 54, section 1, October 31, 1797 (Rutland, VT: 1798), 494.

⁶Donna Hill reports that Joseph attended the Dewey Hill School in Royalton, Vermont, under the tutorship of Deacon Jonathan Rinney (see Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* [New York: Doubleday, 1977], 35; see also Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 169).

⁷Lucy felt that her children had not received sufficient education and implied that an attempt to rectify this was made in Lebanon (see Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 300). One author suggests that Joseph (age five) did not attend the neighborhood school in West Lebanon, New Hampshire, with Alvin (age fourteen) and Sophronia (age eight) (see Scot Facer Proctor and Maurine Jensen Proctor, eds., *The Revised and Enhanced History of Joseph Smith By His Mother* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1998], 68). This is inconsistent with what is known about the state legislated expectations and public practices related to schools in 1811. The typical age to begin school at this time was five years old or younger. Information from a contemporary of the Prophet Joseph indicates that it was not uncommon for children to begin school at age three to learn their ABCs (see Warren Burton, *The District School As It Was, by One Who Went to It* [Boston: Carter, Hendee, 1833], 5). This fact and the Anderson and Hill findings cited above support the conclusion that Joseph first entered school prior to arriving in Lebanon. Combined with the stated intent of Mother Smith to see that her school-aged children were properly educated, this refutes the claim that Joseph was not placed in public school upon arriving at Lebanon.

⁸In 1784 the Lebanon area was organized into eight school districts. The neighborhood known as Poverty Lane was located in the Third District (see Rev. Charles A. Downs, *History of Lebanon, N.H., 1761–1887* [Concord, NH: Rumford, 1908], 154). The schoolhouse was located a short distance from the Smith

home, near what is now known as State Highway 20 (see LaMar C. Berrett and others, eds., *Sacred Places: New England and Eastern Canada* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999], 1:71).

⁹For more on Hyrum (age twelve) attending Moor's Charity School, 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" (PhD diss., Brigham Young University, 1971), 25; see also Richard K. Behrens, "Hyrum Smith in Moor's School at Dartmouth College, 1811–1815: Early Influences on Mormonism?" unpublished manuscript in author's possession.

¹⁰For a discussion of Joseph's illness and operation, see LeRoy S. Wirthlin, "Joseph Smith's Boyhood Operation: An 1813 Surgical Success," *BYU Studies* 21, no. 2 (1981): 131–54.

¹¹Joseph reported that during this time he had lost sufficient weight that his mother could carry him with ease (see Joseph Smith, "Manuscript History of the Church," Church Historian's Office, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Book A-1, Note C, 131, as cited in LeRoy S. Wirthlin, "Nathan Smith [1762–1828]: Surgical Consultant to Joseph Smith," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 3 [1977]: 320).

¹²Evidence for the Smith family's interest in public education is noted in several comments made by Lucy in her history. The fact that Joseph Smith Sr. had worked as a schoolteacher for a short time in Sharon, Vermont, also demonstrates the family's interest in education (see Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, 35; Porter, "Study of the Origins of the Church," 7; and Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 299).

¹³The birthdate of Joseph Smith Jr. is December 21, 1805. During most of 1810 Joseph would have been four years old, or in his fifth year.

¹⁴See Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989–92), 1:3–5.

¹⁵See Massachusetts Educational Law of 1647, as cited in David B. Tyack, ed., *Turning Points in American Educational History* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell, 1967), 14–15.

¹⁶Massachusetts Educational Law of 1647, in Tyack, *Turning Points*, 15–16; spelling standardized.

¹⁷Grammar schools provided education beyond basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Along with academies, grammar schools were another level in the educational system of the time.

¹⁸See Massachusetts Educational Law of 1648, in Tyack, *Turning Points*, 16–17.

¹⁹See Sheldon S. Cohen, *A History of Colonial Education; 1607–1776* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 34.

²⁰See Cohen, *A History of Colonial Education*, 81.

²¹See Joel Spring, *The American School: 1642–1985* (New York: Longman, 1986), 28.

²²See John D. Pulliam and James Van Patten, *History of Education in America*, 6th ed. (Columbus, OH: Prentice Hall, 1995), 49–50.

²³Tyack, *Turning Point*, 83.

²⁴Cohen, *A History of Colonial Education*, 90.

²⁵See John King Lord, *A History of the Town of Hanover, N.H.* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth, 1928), 218–23.

²⁶“An Act, directing the appropriations of the lands in this state heretofore granted by the British government,” *Laws of the state of Vermont*, October 1794, chapter 17 of the Public Lands No. 1 (Randolph, VT: Sereno Wright, 1808), 227–35.

²⁷See Section XL of the Plan of Government, as cited in Edward Demming Andrews, “The County Grammar Schools and Academies of Vermont,” *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* 4, no. 3 (1936): 121.

²⁸The intent of the charter was to provide land that could be used by the Church to promote religious education. It was originally under the direction of the local minister who in turn was responsible to the Church of England. Following the Revolutionary War such lands became the property of the state.

²⁹See “An Act for Appointing and Supporting Schools,” *Laws of the state of Vermont*, March 8, 1787 (Rutland, VT: Josiah Fay, 1798), 158.

³⁰See “An Act for the Support of Schools,” 494.

³¹See M. E. Goddard and Henry V. Partridge, *A History of Norwich, Vermont and Hanover, New Hampshire* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth, 1905), 103.

³²The school served the community until 1807, when it was moved to Royalton. During that time the only teacher in Norwich and then in Royalton was Ashur Hatch, who moved with the school to Royalton to continue his service (see Goddard, *A History of Norwich*, 106).

³³See “An act establishing a County Grammar School at Norwich, in the County of Windsor,” *Acts and Laws passed by the Legislature of the state of Vermont: at their session at Woodstock, on the second Thursday of October, one thousand eight hundred and seven*, November 11, 1807, chapter 126 (Randolph, VT: Sereno Wright, 1807), 173–75.

³⁴See Andrews, “The County Grammar Schools,” 166.

³⁵See Clifton Johnson, *Old-time Schools and School-books* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1999), 102.

³⁶See Johnson, *Old-Time Schools*, 36.

³⁷See James Axtell, *The School upon a Hill* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 170–71.

³⁸C. C. Benton, “The Old School House on the Plain,” in *Historical Sketches of Early Lebanon, New Hampshire*, comp. Ethel Rock Millen (Canaan, NH: The Reporter, 1965), 23–25.

³⁹Most schoolhouses did not have glass windowpanes; instead they often used lard-greased paper. The grease made the paper more transparent and less vulnerable to cold and wet weather conditions (see Johnson, *Old-time Schools*, 37).

⁴⁰The Hanover, New Hampshire, school committee accepted the recommendation of Dr. Nathan Smith (the same who operated on Joseph Smith) that fireplaces be replaced by metal stoves. The reasons for this expensive innovation were health and comfort. The cost of the stove was \$112, a considerable sum at the time (see Lord, *A History of the Town of Hanover*, 229).

⁴¹See Goddard, *A History of Norwich*, 106.

⁴²See Burton, *The District School As It Was* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, 1833).

⁴³Elizabeth Buffum, born in 1806 and raised in Rhode Island, wrote, "When I was two years old, . . . I began to be taken to the Quaker meeting as well as to school. . . . When I was three years old I could read very well." Some of the younger children were sent to school "to relieve the mothers of their care at home," and not particularly to learn (Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society* [New York: Hill and Wang, 1983], 15).

⁴⁴Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century wooden canes were used to enforce discipline in the classroom. The leather strap and hickory switch (a narrow branch of green wood) were introduced in the 1850s. The threat of these devices was used to maintain class discipline.

⁴⁵Schools were often located far from most students' homes, making it impractical to return home during the recess for lunch. Therefore, students brought their lunches to school in sturdy metal buckets, containing meat sandwiches or bread with jam, hard-boiled eggs, and dill pickles.

⁴⁶See Johnson, *Old-time Schools*, 133. By the 1800s the required studies were reading, spelling, writing, arithmetic, geography, and grammar. Algebra, Latin, and French were introduced if the teacher had the appropriate education.

⁴⁷See Johnson, *Old-time Schools*, 115.

⁴⁸See Axtell, *The School Upon a Hill*, 143–45.

⁴⁹See Burton, *The District School As It Was*, 42–43.

⁵⁰Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 20; emphasis in original.

⁵¹"Although not all women teachers abstained from corporal punishment, they were less likely to beat their students than men, partly because of gentler feminine stereotypes and partly because the older boys were often stronger than they were. It was for this latter reason that female teachers were in many districts employed only during the summer sessions, when the older children were generally working" (Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 19).

⁵²Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 18; emphasis in original.

⁵³See Nila Banton Smith, *American Reading Instruction* (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1974) 67–73.

⁵⁴Charles Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching School* (Syracuse, NY: C. W. Bardeen, 1912), 32, as cited in Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 32; original spelling retained.

⁵⁵Simple reading exercises such as this were first published in the Hornbook and Lyman Cobb's *Juvenile Reader*, No. 1. The title of Cobb's first reader stated, *Cobb's Juvenile Reader, Containing Interesting, Moral, and Instructive Reading Lessons, Composed of Easy Words of One and Two Syllables. Designed for the Use of*

Small Children, in Families and Schools (see John A. Nietz, *Old Textbooks* [Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1961], 68).

⁵⁶Joshua Leavitt, *Easy Lessons in Reading* (Keene, NH: J. & J. W. Prentiss, 1839), 34–35.

⁵⁷Ethel Rock Millen, comp., *Historical Sketches of Early Lebanon, New Hampshire* (Canaan, NH: The Reporter, 1965), 26; spelling standardized.

⁵⁸See Leavitt, *Easy Lessons in Reading*, 6.

⁵⁹Johnson, *Old-time Schools*, 111. Hooks and trammels were curved lines which received their name from their resemblance to hooks found on the kitchen fireplace from which pots and kettles were hung.

⁶⁰Johnson, *Old-time Schools*, 111–12. “Ordinarily they did the work on a sheet six by eight, or eight by ten inches in size; but some of the more ambitious used paper four or five times larger. The sheet would contain a sentence, or several sentences, or, it may be, a short essay on such subjects as Happiness, How to Get Riches, Spring, Resignation, Friendship; and there was a decorative border and flourishes, and often colored drawings of birds, flowers, pens, houses, ships, or other objects” (112–13).

⁶¹The first blackboard used in a school was in Philadelphia in 1809. Early blackboards were made from pine lumber and covered with a mixture of egg white and carbon from charred potatoes. Teachers and students wrote with chunks of chalk and erased with cloth rags. The accompanying chalk dust was the bane of all teachers.

⁶²See Johnson, *Old-time Schools*, 38. Each family was not only responsible for providing the ink for their children, but often were forced to manufacture the ink themselves. “The usual process was to dissolve ink-powder; but many of the country folk gathered the bark of swamp-maple, boiled it in an iron kettle to give it a more perfect black color, and when the decoction was thick added copperas. These home-made inks were often weak and pallid, and sometimes they dried up.”

⁶³“When he can read any whit readily, let him begin the Bible, and read over the book of Genesis (and other remarkable Histories in other places of Scripture, which are most likely to delight him) by a chapter at a time; But acquaint him a little with the matter beforehand, for that will entice him to read it, and make him more observant of what he reads. After he hath read, ask him such general Questions out of the Story, as are most easy for him to answer, and he will the better remember it. I have known some, that by hiring a child to read two or three chapters a day, and to get so many verses of it by heart, have made them admirable proficient, and that betimes, in the Scriptures” (Hoole, *A New Discovery*, 52–53; spelling standardized).

⁶⁴Nietz, *Old-time Schools*, 53–56.

⁶⁵Paul Leicester Ford explained: “Here was no easy road to knowledge and to salvation; but with prose as bare of beauty as the whitewash of their churches, with poetry as rough and stern as their storm-torn coast, with pictures as crude and unfinished as their own glacial-smoothed boulders, between stiff oak covers which symbolized the contents, the children were tutored, until, from being

unregenerate, and as Jonathan Edwards said, ‘young vipers, and infinitely more hateful than young vipers’ to God, they attained that happy state, when as expressed by Judge Sewall’s child, they were afraid they ‘should goe to hell,’ and were ‘stirred up dreadfully to seek God” (quoted in Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 20).

⁶⁶Benjamin Harris was said to have first printed the New England Primer in London around 1747, under the council of Protestant church leaders. He was a printer by trade and a devoted Protestant (see Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 24).

⁶⁷See Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 58–60; see also Lindley, Murray, *English Reader* (New York: Isaac Collins, 1799).

⁶⁸Included among the texts that promoted nationalism were Noah Webster’s, *The American Spelling Book* (Boston: Isaiah Thomas and Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1789) and Caleb Bingham’s, *The Columbian Orator* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1797).

⁶⁹Murray, *English Reader*, introduction.

⁷⁰Murray, *English Reader*, 31; Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 59.

⁷¹Other examples of earlier primers were *The Uncles’ Present, a New Battle-door*, printed in 1810: a small book printed on a folded sheet of stiff paper with copper engraved alphabet letters and pictures; *Little Harry’s Ladder to Learning*, printed in New York in 1800 and considered an advanced reader because it used large words such as “Xanthornus” to teach children the alphabet; *My Little Primer*, composed by Howland in 1800, containing the popular rhymes of the day like “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and “Jack and Jill”; *The Child’s First Book*, one of the first primers to be printed with paper pages and a very popular early reader even though it was “crudely printed and bound on low quality paper”; and *Cobb’s Juvenile Reader, No. 1*, written for two audiences, the family and school; *Infantime Knowledge* and *The Baby’s Own Alphabet* were two early readers that taught the alphabet by using more pictures and less text (see www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/exhibits/child/primers.htm).

⁷²Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 45.

⁷³See, for example, one of the moralistic passages: “Be a good child; mind your book love your school; strive to learn. Tell no tales; call no ill names; you must not lie, nor swear, nor cheat, nor steal. Play not with bad boys. Play no tricks on those that sit next to you; for if you do, good boys will shun you as they would a dog they knew would bite them.”

⁷⁴See *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking* (Philadelphia: David Hogan, 1809), A-2; as cited in Smith, *American Reading Instruction*, 49.

⁷⁵The textbooks obtained by Wilford C. Wood at a New York auction are located in the Museum of Church History, Salt Lake City, Utah. The collection consists of a copy of *First Lines in Arithmetic* (1818), access no. LDS 90-12-3, *English Reader* (circa 1799), access no. LDS 90-12-4, and a book of gospel sonnets of an unknown title and date, access no. LDS 90-12-5.

⁷⁶Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 3–4.

⁷⁷One of Joseph's teachers later described the boy's early love of learning, saying, "Joseph was the calf that sucked three cows. He acquired knowledge very rapidly" (Ray B. West Jr., *Kingdom of the Saints* [New York: Viking, 1957], 61).

⁷⁸Paul Alan Cox observed that while Joseph "referred to himself as 'an unlearned boy,' [he] was able not only to recognize excerpts from Malachi 4, Isaiah 11, Acts 3, and Joel 2 when quoted to him by the angel Moroni, but [he] also noticed subtle changes in these texts during Moroni's recitations." For Cox this provides evidence of the Prophet's educational preparation (Paul Alan Cox, "Journey to City Creek: Adding Scholarship to Disciplineship," in *On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar*, ed. Henry B. Eyring [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1995], 26).