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Latter-Day Saint Roots in the American Forest: Joseph Smith's Restoration Visions in Their Environmental Context

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Abstract: On 6 April 1830 Joseph Smith Jr. legally established what he claimed to be the restored Church of Jesus Christ that had existed previously during the New Testament times. This bold claim was bolstered by stories of angelic visitations in the hemlock–northern hardwood forest of New York and Pennsylvania by biblical and nonbiblical figures alike. In one of Smith's supernatural encounters he claims that immediately prior to his theophany the Devil tried to intercede and prevent his communion with God. Thus, Smith and his followers have embraced a complex worldview concerning the nineteenth-century American forest, host to both the Divine and the Devil. The nineteenth-century American forest was complicated by its dangerous elements, its economic opportunities, and the sublime quality popularized in landscape paintings. Forests existed as environments that were equal in their ability to leave one desolate, well-provisioned, or inspired. Navigating these sometimes paradoxical views, Joseph Smith's stories of otherworldly visitations in forest settings have resonated with many people seeking understanding in a confusing world. The founding story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and artistic depictions thereof demonstrate an evolving view of the American forest. The American forest is a malleable, liminal space in which Latter-day Saints have continually combined elements of faith and memory to create a unique faith tradition with roots in a transformative place in American society. This interdisciplinary paper examines the physical appearance of the hemlock–northern hardwood forest, the socioeconomic climate, shifting sentimental values, and the philosophical ideas popularized by transcendentalists and the Hudson River School of painters that provided the scaffolding for this resilient religious movement's origin story.

Keywords: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day SaiChurch of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mormon Church; Joseph Smith's First Vision; Sacred Grove; Restorationism; Hudson River School of painters; transcendentalists; American forest

Citation: Palfreyman, Samuel R. 2022. Latter-Day Saint Roots in the American Forest: Joseph Smith's Restoration Visions in Their Environmental Context. *Religions* 13: 232. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13030232

Academic Editors: George Handley, Kristen Blair and Anna Thurston

Received: 18 January 2022
Accepted: 16 February 2022
Published: 9 March 2022

1. Introduction

On 6 April 1830 Joseph Smith Jr. legally established what would later be renamed The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Fayette, New York, with a membership of six people. This newly organized Church claimed to be the restored Church of Jesus Christ that existed during the New Testament times led by the Twelve Apostles, which had been destroyed by apostasy (or corruption and rebellion) some hundred years after the time of Christ. It claimed to be "the only true & living Church upon the face of the whole Earth" (Joseph Smith Papers Revelation 1831, p. 126 [D&C 1:30]). Such bold claims were bolstered with mystical stories of angelic visitations in the hemlock–northern hardwood forest of New York and Pennsylvania by biblical figures and nonbiblical figures alike. One such figure, the angel Moroni, revealed an ancient American scripture that would be miraculously translated into the Book of Mormon as tangible proof of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. Perhaps even more significantly, Joseph Smith claimed that God the Father and His son Jesus Christ appeared to him in the woods of his father's farm near Palmyra, New York in 1820. In Smith's supernatural story he claims that immediately prior to his theophany Satan tried to intercede and prevent his communion with God. Thus, Smith and by extension his

followers, who believe in his visions, have embraced a complex worldview concerning the nineteenth-century American forest, host to both the Divine and the Devil.

Nineteenth-century Americans relied on forest trees to provide personal shelter, warmth, and fuel; however, they also began to harvest timber and tree byproducts to achieve greater economic prosperity and promote geographic expansion. In other words, personal and remote forest experiences became more expansive and connected across American geographies and cultures. Additionally, as the Hudson River School of painters and transcendentalist philosophers demonstrated through their popular works, nineteenth-century Americans began to appreciate a sublime spiritual element in natural forest landscapes; the American forest increasingly became a place emblematic for its manifestations of the Divine. The American wilderness was complicated by its dangerous elements, its economic opportunities, and the sublime quality popularized in landscape paintings. Forests existed as environments that were seemingly equal in their ability to leave one desolate, well-provisioned, or inspired at any given point of contact. Navigating these sometimes paradoxical views, Joseph Smith's stories of otherworldly visitations in forest settings have resonated with many people seeking understanding in a confusing world. Although not uniform among all Americans and their diverse denominations and beliefs, the evolution of contemporary cultural values allowed for many nineteenth-century Americans to be open-minded to the idea of supernatural visitations occurring in a forest setting. By relating vision narratives that included nuanced interpretations of this liminal space, Joseph gave a meaningful purpose to his eventual followers in understanding their significance in their particular time and place. The hemlock–northern hardwood forest of New England and the mid-Atlantic states provided an exceptional setting for mystical occurrences in the lives of nineteenth-century Americans, due in large part to the socioeconomic, emotional, and religious changes of the time (Figure 1).

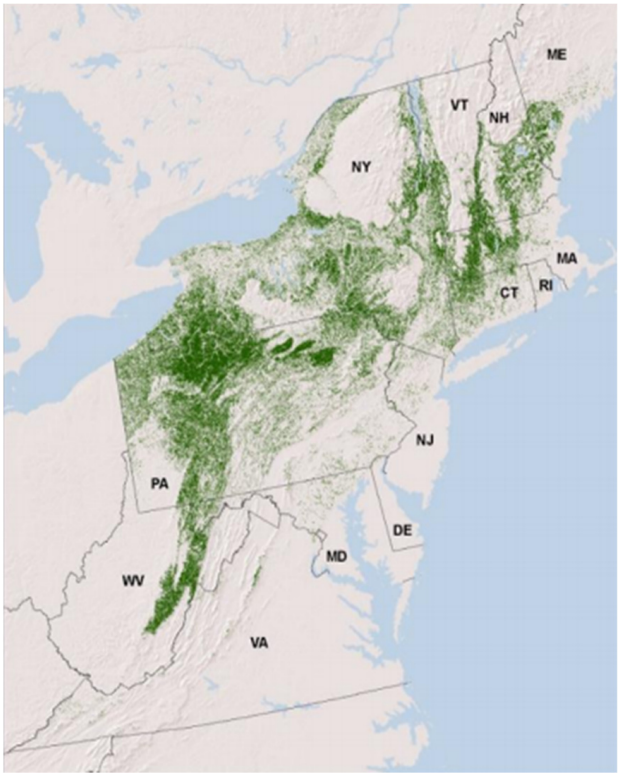


Figure 1. Map of the hemlock–northern hardwood forest. The Nature Conservancy, 2018.

Before considering these cultural changes it is important to first provide some environmental context by conveying a general sense of the physical appearance of the hemlock–northern hardwood forest in which these changes took place. American values related

to the forest in socioeconomic, sentimental, and philosophical terms will then provide a scaffolding with which to understand how this forest environment was changing in the broader American cultural context, including ideas popularized by transcendentalists and the Hudson River School of painters. With this framework in place, a discussion of the founding story of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and depictions thereof will demonstrate that the Latter-day Saint culture, along with its broader American cultural context, gradually shifted away from viewing the American forest as solely a wild frontier to be subdued by human intervention and toward a more nuanced and romantic view of certain natural environments as being significant places for spiritual reflection.[1] Through narrative, art, and historic site preservation, Latter-day Saints have continually viewed the American forest as a malleable, liminal space in which faith and memory combine to create a unique and evolving faith tradition with roots in a transformative place in American society.

2. The Physical Appearance of the Hemlock–Northern Hardwood Forest from 1800–1870

In order to roughly determine the size, density, and overall physical appearance of the hemlock–northern hardwood forest of New York during the first half of the nineteenth century, scientific data from modern old growth stands of the forest will be combined with an analysis of artistic renderings from period works depicting the way things were. In Susy Svatek Ziegler's research article she lists the dominant, characteristic, and other common species found in one stand of the old-growth forests: eastern hemlock, sugar maple, American beech, yellow birch, red spruce, balsam fir with striped maple, hobblebush, and coarse woody material (Ziegler 2000, p. 377). Another document written in 1850 mentions other species of trees that were present in upper-state New York's forests, including pine, oak, elm, sycamore, and ash (Cooper 1850, p. 210).[2]

With respect to the arrangement and structure of the hemlock–northern hard wood forest during the nineteenth century, several images and written sources imply a rather dense arrangement and a four-layered structure. For example, in Worthington Whittredge's 1864 painting *The Old Hunting Grounds*, set in New York's Catskill Mountains, sun rays barely find a place to trickle through the forest's dense canopy in the foreground, while the brighter background suggests a density of growth with occasional cleared spaces usually caused by human intervention: an American Indian trail to the old hunting grounds in this case (Figure 2). The pattern arrangement is primarily random in this mostly deciduous forest, which reflects the windy dispersal of seeds leading to "the careless position of every tree" (Cooper 1850, p. 205).

With respect to the relative heights of the trees, Jasper F. Crospey's 1858 painting *The Backwoods of America* suggests that evergreen varieties, chiefly hemlock and red spruce, formed the upper tree layer, within an estimated range of 45 to 75 feet high, whereas deciduous varieties, including maple, beech, and birch, tended to be more within the height range of 20 to 35 feet as part of the lower tree layer (Figure 3). Ziegler validates these visual estimations in her article, noting that maple and beech trees are "shade-tolerant" and therefore capable of regenerating under a closed canopy in the lower tree layer (Ziegler 2000, p. 374). In some old-growth stands unexposed to agricultural clearing it would not be uncommon for some trees to reach heights above 100 feet. With this physical setting in mind, one can begin to understand the context for how nineteenth-century Americans could have viewed the forest paradoxically with awe, as ancient and pristine, yet also with derision, as a wild place in need of clearing and cultivation in order to settle and survive.

Figure 2. *The Old Hunting Grounds* by Worthington Whittredge 1864. Oil on canvas. Reynolda House Museum of American Art.

Figure 3. *The Backwoods of America* by Cropsey 1858. Oil on canvas. Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

3. The Socioeconomic Aspects of New York's Forest from 1800–1870

In the four decades following the American War of Independence, many Americans sought to expand westward into the forests of New York and other frontier territories for economic opportunity; they were continually thwarted, chiefly by their fear of American Indians. American troops paved the way for territorial expansion through bloody conflicts. As early as 1779, following one such violent episode, returning military troops advertised the western New York forest frontier as an ideal place for American citizens to settle, being rich in fertile land, water, and game.[3] Americans, hungry for cheap land during the post-war depression, readily received this propaganda as fact. Nevertheless, first settlement was difficult. It involved venturing into heavily wooded land, slashing trees, and burning trunks. Although clearing the land of timber for agricultural pursuits was a labor-intensive process, the burgeoning American population provided cheap labor that led to eventual economic success in the region. This rapid population increase in America greatly contributed to westward expansion and vice versa; "the population of the trans-Appalachian West was approximately 0.1 million in 1790, it had risen to 1.1 million in 1810, 3.7 million in 1830, and 9.9 million in 1850" (Williams 1989, p. 111). These figures represent all of the western states, but a sizable amount of the population growth occurred in western New York, where Americans were busily "transforming the virgin forest into productive communities" (Williams 1989, p. 22). Intensive conversion of forests into farmlands continued to accelerate in the hemlock–northern hardwood forest following infrastructure developments in the 1820s and 30s.

The rapid population growth in America led to an ever-increasing demand for construction lumber and other commodities, such that the northern forest alone could not supply the demand. Hardwood lumber, ideal for furniture construction, was in far less demand than white pine, the preferred wood for most construction because of its softer, more workable nature.[4] To remedy the deficiency, canal digging opened access routes to the extensive pine forests surrounding the Great Lakes. In 1825 the completion of the Erie Canal, which ran 325 miles from Albany to Lake Erie, provided a convenient accessway for many commodities, of which lumber was chief, from Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan to New York City as well as the rest of the Atlantic seaboard (Williams 1989, p. 178).The economic transformation induced by the canal's construction was staggering: the journey between Buffalo and New York City was reduced from 20 days to six, and the cost of shipments from USD 100 a ton to USD 8 a ton (Backman 1971, p. 45). This new infrastructure, bolstered even further by the construction of railroads beginning in the 1830s, allowed for greater economic opportunities in agriculture in the western territories and states as well as the accelerated economic success of industrial factories in eastern cities.

In William Harvey's *Epitome of the Historic Progression of the United States* from 1841, Harvey depicts men chopping trees down and creating copious piles of timber at the foot of tall deciduous trees that reach heavenwards toward an opening in the clouds where two hands clasp one another (Figure 4). This image symbolically portrays the economic exploitation of the American forest, which contemporaries viewed not only as a testament of social progress but also as divine evidence that America was a choice land favored by God.

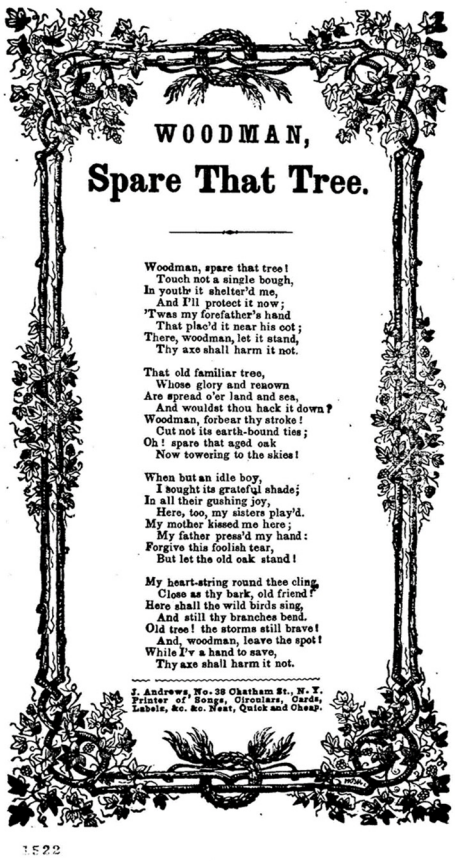
During the second quarter of the nineteenth century these extensive economic changes contributed to the widespread abandonment of agricultural lands, which in turn led to an interesting feedback loop of economic interdependence between the Eastern and Midwestern states. As the geographer Hugh M. Raup summarizes: tenants of New England farms abandoned their farms for other more opportunistic locations in the Midwest, leading to the secondary succession of these fallow farmlands in which sizeable white pine trees sprung up in significant numbers within a few decades of abandonment (Raup 1966, p. 4). Raup goes on to tell how these pines provided the lumber to make the wooden barrels and crates demanded by western farmers to ship their agricultural products to eastern markets (Raup 1966, p. 5). These Midwestern farmers lived much closer to the forests that had been overharvested in a short period of time in a similar fashion by which the forests of New

York had been several decades earlier. Thus, the secondary succession of white pines in abandoned farms of New York and New England provided timber for settlements where timber was scarcer. The economic cycles of America were of course much more complicated than this example suggests, but it does demonstrate the intense, sustained demand for timber as well as the narrow human view of timber as an inexhaustible resource. During the nineteenth century the forests of New York were first and foremost sources of life and livelihood in a very economic sense, but they gradually became viewed with greater reverence and admiration in this century of westward expansion and religious revivals.

Figure 4. *Epitome of the Historic Progression of the United States* by William Harvey 1841. Engraving, title page of George Harvey, Washington Irving, W. J. Bennett, and Charles Vinten's *Connected Series of Forty Views of American Scenery*. 1841. New York: Charles Vinten.

4. Transitioning toward More Sentimental Views of the Forest

Throughout most of the nineteenth century Americans continually prioritized the economic value of their forests over virtually all other considerations; however, there is cultural evidence that suggests that sentimental values toward surrounding trees began to enter the American imagination during this same period. A widely published poem turned popular song from the first half of the nineteenth century suggests a nuanced cultural shift from thinking of the forest as a purely practical resource for exploitation. The four-verse poem called "Woodman, Spare that Tree", written by George P. Morris in 1837, tells the story of an unnamed man who protests a woodman's intention to hew down an old oak tree (Figure 5). The proponent of the tree appeals to the emotional connections he has experienced with the tree as justifying why the tree must remain in order to dissuade the woodman from doing what he does nearly indiscriminately: chop down trees for timber. Morris uses personification and imagery to argue that an old oak tree is not merely a resource for consumption, as a typical nineteenth-century American would view it, but a much more complex and important figure in the human landscape.


WOODMAN,

Spare That Tree.

Woodman, spare that tree!
Touch not a single bough,
In youth it sheltered me,
And I'll protect it now;
'Twas my forefather's hand
That plac'd it near his cot;
There, woodman, let it stand,
Thy axe shall harm it not.

That old familiar tree,
Whose glory and renown
Are spread o'er land and sea,
And wouldst thou hack it down?
Woodman, forbear thy stroke!
Cut not its earth-bound ties;
Oh! spare that aged oak
Now towering to the skies!

When but an idle boy,
I sought its grateful shade;
In all their gushing joy,
Here, too, my sisters play'd.
My mother kissed me here;
My father press'd my hand:
Forgive this foolish tear,
But let the old oak stand!

My heart-string round thee cling,
Close as thy bark, old friend!
Here shall the wild birds sing,
And still thy branches bend.
Old tree! the storms still brave!
And, woodman, leave the spot!
While I've a hand to save,
Thy axe shall harm it not.

J. Andrews, No. 38 Chatham St., N. Y.
Printer of Songs, Circulars, Cards, Labels, &c. &c. Neat, Quick and Cheap.

1522

Figure 5. *"Woodman, Spare That Tree"* by George P. Morris and Henry Russell, 1837. J. Andrews, No. 38 Chatham St., New York. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The man protecting the tree from the woodman uses language that implies that the tree is more "human-like" than the woodman has been willing to consider. In a sense, the woodman can represent the inherited mindset of the typical nineteenth-century American in New York: wild forests were to be tamed and subdued by humans, and trees were God-given resources that provided humans with fuel, warmth, and shelter. The man advocating for the oak's preservation, however, sees the tree as more than a means of physical consumption. His sentiments represent a changing mindset of many Americans during the nineteenth century. The speaker of the song relates how it was his "forefather's hand that placed" the tree near his family's dwelling place (Morris 1837). This image of ancestral linkage connects to the former image of how the tree provided shelter in the man's youth, which emphasizes a continual image of the tree's power to provide shelter. The tree of the song is also mentioned as the setting where his sister played and where his parents showed him affection. These emotionally charged memories reinforce the nostalgic value that saving the tree would provide. Morris understands that these feelings are probably hard-won by the woodman, for he asks him to "forgive this foolish tear" (Morris 1837). This image of a shed tear for an inanimate object might have seemed absurd to many during the nineteenth century in New York, but the author hopes that this "foolish" action may not only be forgiven but also understood by the woodman as legitimate evidence that the tree has significance beyond its monetary value.

In composing the lyrics to this poem, it would be imprudent to surmise that Morris intended to promote the preservation of all trees; rather, his song reveals the start of a gradual and nuanced cultural shift. Ironically, while the man of the poem defends the old oak that shelters him, the mentioned "cot"—or cottage—of the poem that his forefather built and his family lived in nearby was undoubtedly constructed of wood from other, similar trees in the surrounding area. Nevertheless, the poem seems to persuade humans

to be more aware of the forest and its provisions; in other words, the man's defense of the oak tree calls upon people to consider the significance of each tree cut down rather than to hew them down without any thought or restraint. This is telling of a significant shift in how Americans viewed and valued the trees and forests they lived among.

5. The Spiritual Aspects of New York's Forest from 1800–1870

Related to emotive ties to the forest, a characteristic spiritual component of forests became a frequent topic taken up by contemporary writers and artists in the Northeastern United States. The transcendentalist philosophers and Hudson River School of painters both championed this spiritual resonance in natural settings, specifically in their local forests, in their respective works. Prior to these schools of thought and even mixed within them to a degree, the American notion of the forest, and wilderness in general, was largely steered by "the Puritan pioneers who thought that morality stopped on the edge of the clearing" (Godfrey 2021, pp. 16–17. See also Godfrey 2021, pp. 149–66). William Bradford's original description of Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620 derided it as "a hideous and desolate wilderness" (Bradford 1620). Although this notion of pejorative danger and savagery lingered to a degree throughout the nineteenth century with respect to the uncivilized forests, transcendentalist philosophers perpetuated a novel view that true morality could be obtained through habitual wanderings and meditation in American forests. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, wrote that "in the woods, we return to reason and faith", suggesting that meditation in the forest may provide spiritual relief from the hectic and confusing trappings of civilization (Emerson 1836, p. 8).[5] To put it more simply, Emerson identifies a need for a spiritual reawakening for Americans in response to the dirty and morally detrimental effects of the industrial revolution.

Another transcendentalist, as well as a friend to Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, spoke even more clearly about his spiritual inclination to escape the stifling conditions of dense civilization and live in a remote cabin in the woods. He wrote:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (Thoreau [1854] 2004, p. 6)

Thoreau speaks here of simplifying his life by living in the woods as a form of spiritual purification: not by ceremonial baptism, as prescribed by religion, but by personal reflection accentuated by nature. He retreated to the woods in the hopes that it would yield the purification from civilization that he sought. Now, to be sure, his sojourn into the wilderness was not without some furnishings from civilization: namely a cabin for shelter as well as tools for obtaining food. However, overall, his removal from an urban setting to the forest precipitated a personal reflection on spiritual matters that he felt were enhanced by nature's tranquility and purity. From his perspective, life was incomplete, or at least unsatisfactory, if it was not purified by the virtues of the forest. These sentiments were expressed with equal fervor through the paintings, as well as writings, of the Hudson River School of painters.

The Hudson River School of painters depicted northeastern American forests in such a way as to not only promote individualism and self-reliance but also suggest a divine presence in nature. As can be seen in Thomas Cole's *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonhaugh in the Distance* from 1826, Cole depicts a pastoral landscape of domesticated animals, including white sheep, perhaps a subtle reference to New Testament parables (Figure 6).[6] The inclusion of domesticated animals in addition to the reflecting quality of

the lake softens an otherwise haunting setting of dense forest in the background and a mangled tree stump in the foreground. With the power and terror of nature readily in mind, the overall effect of the painting evokes a sense of spiritual reflection.

Figure 6. *Landscape, the Seat of Mr. Featherstonhaugh in the Distance* by Thomas Cole 1826. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

In another example from the Hudson River School of painters, Jasper F. Cropsey composed *The Backwoods of America* from 1858, arguing that the American forest, and nature in general, was not to be wholly dismissed as "savage", "dangerous", and "evil", but, conversely, there were manifestations of the Divine to be found in it (See again, Figure 3). Although there are still some qualities in this painting suggesting dangerous elements, there is also a sublime quality of a large mountain in the background that evokes a heavenly presence: a sort of Mt. Sinai, from which man may be reassured that God is watching. Thus, what might otherwise be a terrifying image of a lone woodsman walking through the forest is instead a relatively peaceful image emanating a cozy sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Although these painters did not blatantly contend for a specific denomination, they framed their paintings for their Christian audience. The reverential awe in natural landscapes was not simply self-serving, as the painters wanted to "convert" Americans to their way of thinking: American landscapes can help people commune with God. In 1836 Thomas Cole chronicled a biblical pattern of connections between unspoiled nature and spiritual revelation when he wrote:

> It has not been in vain—the good, the enlightened of all ages and nations, have found pleasure and consolation in the beauty of the rural earth. Prophets of old retired into the solitudes of nature to wait the inspiration of heaven. It was on Mount Horeb that Elijah witnessed the mighty wind, the earthquake, and the fire; and heard the "still small voice"—that voice is YET heard among the mountains! St. John preached in the desert;—the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak of God. The solitary Anchorites of Syria and Egypt, though ignorant that the busy world is man's noblest sphere of usefulness, well knew how congenial to religious musings are the pathless solitudes. (Cole [1836] 1980, p. 5)

Thus, these painters revealed their Christian worldview, yet reminded the Christian world that nature was a source of spiritual communion and not just an uncivilized realm

of danger. This fundamental shift in viewing nature did not occur all at once, nor was the element of terror intended to disappear from nature. It was in this transitional climate of viewing nature as a source of evil and good that Joseph Smith framed a miraculous account of how he was called to reestablish the biblical Church of Jesus Christ.

6. The Socioreligious Circumstances of Joseph Smith's Family from 1800–1830

Born in Vermont in 1805 as the fourth child in a family that would eventually total ten children, Joseph Smith Jr. was the son of a struggling farmer who moved his family to New Hampshire in 1811 and then to New York to better provide for his family. In 1816, Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith moved their family to Farmington (now Manchester), just outside of Palmyra, cleared about 30 acres of a heavily wooded region for farming in one year, and constructed a one-and-a-half-story log house with sawed slabs (Backman 1971, pp. 40–41). As had their peers, who were discussed earlier, the Smith family relied on intensive physical labor to clear the land by slashing and planting enough agricultural produce to feed the family and provide for other manufactured goods through trade. The Smith family sold cordwood, potash, and maple syrup from the forest, and planted corn, wheat, and other small-scale crops to meet their financial needs (Bushman 2005, p. 33). They were a common family among many others seeking a living through agricultural production in the forests of New York. According to the 1820 census, "748 persons were engaged in agriculture, 190 in manufacturing and 18 in commerce in the town of Palmyra (which included Macedon)" (Backman 1971, p. 39). Amidst this agricultural economy that was just beginning to establish itself, a great religious movement known as the "Second Great Awakening" swept through the Northeastern states.

The Second Great Awakening (1810–1850) was a religious episode in American history in which different Christian denominations contended for membership by debating various doctrines and scriptures to secure a more correct understanding of and adherence to Christian living.[7] According to the Woman's Society of the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra in 1907, six churches representing six denominations were constructed in Palmyra during the century following the American Revolutionary War: the Western Presbyterian Church (1797), Baptist Church (1800), Methodist Episcopal Church (1811), Zion Episcopal Church (1823), St. Ann's Roman Catholic Church (1849), and Reformed Dutch Church (1887) (The Woman's Society[Pamphlet] 1907, p. 39). Church buildings either had not been established yet for certain denominations or else were too small to contain the large audiences drawn by circuit riders during this frenzied time of revival meetings. This strain necessitated outdoor "camp meetings" in the forest. Western New York, including the Smith family's farm, was known as the "burned-over district" because of the high frequency of travelling ministers who contended to win converts to their denomination (Backman 1971, p. 77).

In these gatherings, known as "camp meetings", local farmers gathered along the "edge of a grove of trees or in a small clearing in the midst of the forest" to hear a sermon concerning Christian doctrine and reform (Backman 1971, p. 71). The drawing below, *Meeting in the West,* 1830–35, depicts a crowd of Christians gathered in the forest around a makeshift pulpit on simple wooden benches (Figure 7). The depicted event was partially enveloped by the canopies of the forest rather than man-made ceilings, which provided a heavenly ambiance of sorts. Some people in this depiction appear to be skeptical of the sermon, whereas others are fully engaged in it. In the foreground women sway and swoon in response to the lively religious fervor of the sermon, while in the background numerous tents reveal that many people have traveled some distance to necessitate overnight accommodations for the temporary gathering. This drawing illustrates both the importance of the forest setting in this religious movement, known as the Second Great Awakening, as well as the general excitement in which the Smith family experienced and participated in.

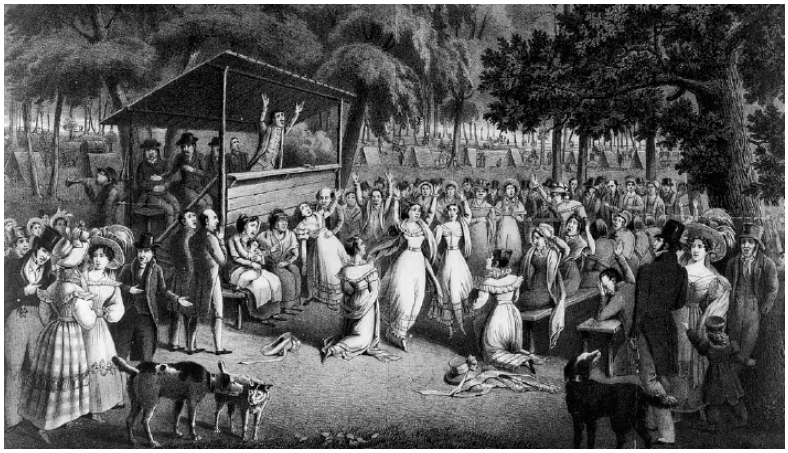


Figure 7. *Meeting in the West* by A. Rider 1830–1835. Ink drawing. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

7. The "First Vision", or Theophany, of Joseph Smith in 1820

Amidst this religious setting of revival and contestation, the teenaged Joseph Smith prayed vocally to God to know his spiritual standing and received what he called a divine vision in answer to his private prayer. In the four accounts Joseph Smith gave of this event throughout his life he consistently alluded to the forested location of this visionary experience. In the 1832 account he wrote that "the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness". (Joseph Smith Papers History 1832, p. 1).[8] In 1835 he noted that "I retired to the silent grove" (Joseph Smith Papers Journal 1835–1836, p. 23). In the most cited 1838 account he said "I retired to the woods to make the attempt [at vocal prayer]" (The Joseph Smith Papers History 1839–1841, p. 2). Additionally, in the Wentworth Letter written in 1842, Joseph Smith chronicled this event as follows: "I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord" (Joseph Smith Papers History 1842, p. 706). Finally, in a secondhand record of Joseph's First Vision from an interview published by David Nye White in 1843, it says that Joseph "immediately went out into the woods where [his] father had a clearing, and went to the stump where [he] had stuck [his] axe, when [he] had quit work, and [he] kneeled down, and prayed, saying, O Lord, what Church shall I join?" (Joseph Smith Papers Interview 1843, p. 3). All accounts allude to a retreat into the woods for privacy or serenity, or a combination of the two. David White's account in particular reveals that the place of his prayer was on the fringe of the clearing: the axe symbolizing the border between the "civilized" land cleared for farming and the "untamed" forest beyond. It was at this critical border, this liminal space between the known comforts of the homestead and the unknown recesses of the forest, that Joseph Smith experienced his transformative "First Vision".

According to Joseph Smith's now canonized account from 1838, two very different powers exerted their influence on him in the woods: first, a "thick darkness", understood by Joseph as the Devil, and second, a "pillar of light", in which God and His Son Jesus Christ appeared and talked to him. These polar opposite manifestations of powers of evil and goodness embodied a paradoxical view of the forest: it held the potential for physical destruction but also contained the ultimate source of spiritual reassurance and salvation. The former view of the forest might have resonated more with the fearful puritanical American past, while the latter would have fallen more in line with the emerging belief that the Divine abounds in nature. Although traditional transcendentalism championed a more abstract connection between nature and heavenly powers, the retelling of Joseph Smith's theophany benefitted from the growing sentiment that God could be found in nature if one would simply seek Him there.

8. Making the First Vision Foundational to the Latter-Day Saint Movement

While First Vision artwork has flourished in the past half century, depictions of this event were uncommon in the first 150 years of Church history (Sweat 2020). Although very little Latter-day Saint art has been preserved from early Church history, it is unlikely that many paintings were made to depict Joseph Smith's "First Vision" during the nineteenth century. The reasons for this are multiple, but the chief reason is that the Latter-day Saints were continually in transit during their early history. Establishing the core of their religious community first in New York in 1830, thousands of "saints" moved to Ohio during the next decade and thousands more to Missouri, before ultimately all were invited to gather in Illinois within the fourteen-year period of Joseph Smith's leadership. Following Joseph Smith's death in June 1844 the majority of Latter-day Saints made their final trek to what is now present-day Utah, which was virtually uninhabited by European settlers prior to the Latter-day Saint arrival in 1847. Thus, it is easy to imagine why artists in Latter-day Saint communities would be hard-pressed to either have the time to commit themselves to long hours of creation or the practical capabilities to preserve art that they may have created during the transient early years of the religion.

The earliest known surviving visual depiction of Joseph Smith's "First Vision" is contained in Thomas Brown Holmes Stenhouse's *Rocky Mountain Saints*, published in 1873 (Figure 8. Stenhouse was a member of the Godbeites, a group of Latter-day Saints that parted ways with Brigham Young and the Latter-day Saint Church in 1869, but still held on to Joseph Smith's founding story (Stenhouse 1873, p. 57). Stenhouse's wood etching depicts a small boy kneeling before two angelic figures in a dark, encompassing forest. The forest is endowed with a darkness that would be wholly overwhelming were it not for the two angelic men shedding light down upon the boy. The stark contrast between darkness and light is emphasized in this black and white medium, and highlights the puritan-like fear of the forest that is only made safe by the grace of God. The theophany is thus depicted without much reference to the pastoral beauty of nature common in later twentieth-century depictions commissioned by the Latter-day Saint Church (Figure 9).

As the nature of theophanies is religious, they are heavily contested by believers and nonbelievers; Joseph Smith's theophany is no exception to criticisms. In the early nineteenth century, when he related his vision and conversion to a Methodist preacher shortly after his experience the Methodist preacher responded with contempt, dismissing his vision as impossible since he believed that the gift of visions ceased after the apostolic dispensation (Bushman 2005, p. 41). The preacher's contempt should not be confused with outrage at an unfamiliar, unheard of claim by the young boy, but rather it was a contempt held for a relatively common claim by various people of the time by which the preacher, and the Methodist sect at large, dismissed as earthly rather than heavenly dreams. For example, in 1776, Jemima Wilkinson, the "Public Universal Friend", claimed to be God's messenger to preach repentance to the people of Rhode Island. However, due to repeated rejection and persecution, in 1788 she and her followers moved to western New York near Seneca Lake, where she presided over the New Jerusalem Society until her death in 1819 (Backman 1971, pp. 8–9). Wilkinson settled within a hundred miles or so of Palmyra, located within the same hemlock–northern hardwood forest in which Joseph had his theophany. This is just one additional example of scores in which people claimed to have otherworldly, revelatory visions during this period of religious transformations and reinterpretations in the Northeastern United States. This commonness of visions has been further analyzed by other scholars (Quinn 1987, pp. 113–14; Bushman 2005, pp. 40–41).

Figure 8. *Joseph Smith's First Vision* by Unknown Artist, 1873. Published in Thomas Brown Holmes Stenhouse's *The Rocky Mountain Saints*. Stenhouse 1873. New York: D. Appleton and Company, p. 5.

In 1967, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, historical researchers with a clearly stated theological opposition to the Latter-day Saint Church, made an exhaustive study of the four various accounts of the "First Vision" recorded by Joseph Smith during his lifetime, suggesting its fabrication or at very least misrepresentation by the modern Latter-day Saint Church (Tanner and Tanner 1967, pp. 6–13). The Tanners also point out the historic evidence that the "First Vision" was little talked about during the nineteenth century, while it has moved to the forefront of missionary discussions since the beginning of the twentieth century. The historian D. Michael Quinn has explained this historiographic development as follows:

> The commonness of a theophany like Smith's among young people during the religious revivals of early America is probably the most compelling reason for its not having been used to interest potential converts. In other words, [nineteenth-century] Americans may have been so accustomed to tracts describing visions of God and Christ by evangelical Protestants (many of whom became preachers and ministers after the theophany) that it would have been ineffective in the 1830s to use Smith's vision as a basis for a claim of exclusive prophetic leadership or for organizing office. On the other hand, even to persons well acquainted with revivalistic conversion experiences, the visions connected with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as new scripture would have amounted to an extraordinary religious claim. Thus, the Book of Mormon visions were used for proselytizing from the beginning of Mormonism, but Joseph Smith's first vision

> became a missionary tool only after Americans grew to regard converse with God as unusual. (Quinn 1987, pp. 113–14)

In summary, Joseph Smith's "First Vision" played a much more important role in the founding story of the Latter-day Saint Church beginning in the early twentieth century than it did in the nineteenth century (See also Flake 2004). The angelic visitations connected with The Book of Mormon, which also occurred in the New York Forest near Palmyra, however, have played a relatively continual, central role in the Church's founding story.

Figure 9. *The First Vision* by Delwin Oliver Parson 1988. Courtesy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (© By Intellectual Reserve, Inc.).

9. Angelic Visitations Associated with The Book of Mormon and Priesthood Restoration from 1823–1830

Following his miraculous "First Vision", Joseph Smith claimed to have several more spiritual revelations in the hemlock–northern hardwood forest; chief among these heavenly appearances were those associated with producing the new volume of scripture known as The Book of Mormon. According to Smith, the angel Moroni appeared to him multiple times, including inside his home, beginning in 1823 and showed him a place three miles from his home, known as the Hill Cumorah, where ancient scriptures written by the ancestors of the American Indians were buried in the ground amidst a small clearing on a forested hill. Although he had to wait four years from the time of Moroni's first appearance until he was able to obtain the "golden plates", he would eventually receive them and translate its contents into The Book of Mormon. As Joseph recorded in 1838:

> [On] the twenty second day of September, One thousand Eight hundred and twenty-seven, having went as usual at the end of another year to the place where they were deposited, the same heavenly messenger delivered them up to me with this charge that I should be responsible for them. (Joseph Smith Papers History 1838–1856, p. 8)

In 1835, Oliver Cowdery, Joseph's primary scribe for most of the translation process of the Book of Mormon, described the place where the ancient record was recovered as follows:

> The hill of which I have been speaking, at the time mentioned, presented a varied appearance: . . . As you passed to the south you soon came to scattering timber, the surface having been cleared by art or by wind; and a short distance further

> left, you are surrounded with the common forest of the country. It is necessary to observe, that even the part cleared was only occupied for pasturage, its steep ascent and narrow summit not admitting the plow of the husbandman, with any degree of ease or profit. It was at the second mentioned place where the record was found to be deposited, on the west side of the hill, not far from the top down its side; and when myself visited the place in the year 1830, there were several trees standing: enough to cause a shade in summer, but not so much as to prevent the surface being covered with grass which was also the case when the record was first found. (Joseph Smith Papers n.d.a)

As in the case of the First Vision, the sacred location where the golden plates were revealed was in a liminal space, this time not cleared by the axe but by sheep or cattle for pasturage. However, the commonality is that the sites of these divine manifestations were in partially forested places immediately adjacent to, but not at the center of, human developments. These passages claim that an angelic messenger showed Joseph Smith where an ancient record of scriptures written before and during the time of Christ was physically stored. The significance of this story lies in its linking the American continent to Jerusalem, and more specifically linking the Latter-day Saint Church to the Christian Church and the Jewish authority of the Old Testament before it. The hemlock–northern hardwood forest was therefore a physical location with worldwide religious and historic importance; it contained the physical "word of God". Whereas the Bible's writings ended in the second century A.D., the Book of Mormon spoke at greater length concerning Christ's gospel over three centuries beyond the biblical terminus.

Carl Christian Anton Christensen, a Danish immigrant and Latter-day Saint convert during the mid-nineteenth century, portrays this monumental event in his mural *The Hill Cumorah*, in which Joseph Smith kneels on the slope of a hill and the angel Moroni presents him with the golden plates (Figure 10). This large mural was the second produced in a series of twenty-three 6′6″ by 9′9″ murals called "Mormon Panorama" in 1878 to visually chronicle the early history of the Church.[9] Its composition parallels the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai (Jensen and Oman 1984, p. 92). The darkness of the forest is illuminated by the angel's glory, and thus transforms the forested hill from a seemingly mundane place to one of sacred significance, the repository of God's word to man. In a similar manner to Stenhouse's depiction of the First Vision five years earlier, the composition captures a dark wilderness made glorious by an angelic presence. As for the hill itself, by the early twentieth century locals of Palmyra referred to it as "Mormon Hill", as it was virtually "a Mecca for [Joseph's] disciples [as the supposed site where] the Mormon Bible appeared" (The Woman's Society[Pamphlet] 1907, p. 28).

Similar to Joseph's forest encounter with the angel Moroni and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood occurred through the angelic administration of John the Baptist in the woods "aside from the abodes of men" in Harmony, Pennsylvania.[10] Additionally, the angelic restoration of the Melchizedek Priesthood through Peter, James, and John occurred "in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county" (Joseph Smith Papers Revelation 1844, p. 428 [D&C 128:20]). For Joseph Smith and the foundational events of the Restoration, divine manifestations abounded in the forest adjacent to the boundaries of the built environment.

The contents of the translated Book of Mormon offer further evidence that forests, and nature in general, were to be revered and treated with awe as well as prudence. As the Book of Mormon prophet Alma contends with Korihor, an anti-Christ who preaches a sort of atheism, he offers the following statement:

> . . . the scriptures are laid before thee yea & all things denote there is a God yea even the earth & all things that are upon the face of it yea & its motion yea & also all the planits [sic] which move in their regular [sic] form doth witness that there is a supreme creator. (Joseph Smith Papers Revelation 1829–1830, pp. 247–48 [Book of Mormon, Alma 30:44])

Figure 10. *The Hill Cumorah* by Carl Christian Anton Christensen 1878. Mural painting. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

This verse from the Book of Mormon argues that natural and cosmic creations should be taken as clear evidence that God exists. In other words, natural wonders upon the earth testify of God's existence. Alma's argument aligns closely with the Hudson River School of painters who attempted to demonstrate the sublime qualities of nature that bespoke a divine presence. In a more pragmatic excerpt concerning nature from the pages of the Book of Mormon, Helaman, a leader of the Nephites, God's chosen people on the American continent, spoke of his people's forest management in this manner:

> . . . & they did suffer whatsoever tree should spring up upon the face of the land that it should grow up, that in time they might have timber to build their Houses, yea, their cities & their Temples & their Synagogues & their Sanctuaries & all manner of other buildings & it came to pass as timber was exce[e]ding[ly] scarce in the land Northward they did send forth much by the way of Shipping). (Joseph Smith Papers Revelation 1829–1830, p. 334 [Book of Mormon, Helaman 3:9]

This passage reveals two important views of the forest. First, it reveals an acknowledgement that at this point in the narrative this particular group of people believed that cutting down trees before they reach full maturity was a wasteful practice that should be prevented; second, it relates a practice of "shipping" timber from regions where there were many trees to build in regions where there were few.[11] These scriptural teachings reinforced the American experiences and evolving beliefs within the nineteenth-century context in which Joseph Smith presented them. Furthermore, the teachings of the Book of Mormon explicitly labeled America as a "promised land" that had precious, God-given resources that man was responsible for managing prudently and efficiently.[12] This environmental ethos of being good stewards of the earth has been interpreted in multiple directions by members and leaders alike in the Latter-day Saint Church, but there remains a theological impulse in the faith tradition to at very least appreciate if not conserve natural resources (Rogers and Godfrey 2019).

10. Conclusions: Exodus to Utah and the Adaptive Legacy of the "Sacred Grove"

Following the lynching of Joseph Smith by a local militia in June of 1844, Smith's successor Brigham Young led most of the Latter-day Saints across the Great Plains and into the Salt Lake Valley in 1847. They hoped their relocation would prove a permanent

end to persecution so that they could exist independently and worship freely. Even the disappointing setback of losing their founding prophet fed into the Church's narrative of being a "choice and a favored people" who were being tried and prepared to inherit a "choice land".[13] The persecution and "exodus" to Utah that they endured bonded them together, as they identified with the Israelites who were made to leave Egypt and wander in the desert. Despite their exile from the lusher forests of the Eastern United States, the Latter-day Saints continued to view nature as God's handiwork, as later names such as "Zion National Park" in Southern Utah would suggest. Many of their landscapes and cities received hopeful names, such as the city of "Bountiful", in an attempt to not only tie themselves to the history of God's "chosen people" in the Book of Mormon but also to demonstrate a gratitude for the land that they believed God gave them.

As mentioned earlier, the "First Vision" would be moved to the forefront of the Church's proselytizing efforts in the early twentieth century, where it would remain into the twenty-first century. Not only was the Hill Cumorah bought by the Church and turned into a historic site, but Smith's original Manchester farm was bought and converted in a similar fashion to emphasize the significance of Joseph Smith's "First Vision".[14] The patch of forest beyond the reconstructed Smith Farm is now known as the "Sacred Grove", and since the 1990s great efforts have been taken to restore it to its nineteenth-century appearance (Boatright 2021, pp. 167–84).[15] As Don Enders describes it in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, the "Sacred Grove" is:

> a grove of trees on the Joseph Smith, Sr., farm near Palmyra, New York, . . . revered by Latter-day Saints as the vicinity where Joseph Smith experienced his First Vision, the divine manifestation of God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ that began the Restoration of the gospel in this dispensation . . . The grove is part of a forest that once covered the Smiths' 100-acre farm in Manchester Township as well as much of western New York. The forest was some 400 years old when the family moved to the site . . . The large trees of the forest—maple, beech, elm, oak, and hickory—reached heights of up to 125 feet and diameters of 6 feet or more. Beneath this natural canopy grew hop hornbeam, wild cherry, and ash. The woodland floor was carpeted with leaves, fern, grasses, wildflowers, and clumps of chokeberry and dogwood. The Smiths cleared the trees from sixty acres of their property. The Sacred Grove was part of a fifteen-acre wooded tract at the farm's west end, reserved as a sugarbush, where trees were tapped for making maple syrup and sugar. (Enders 1992, p. 1247)

Even though this is an encyclopedia entry rather than a missionary pamphlet, Enders' diction reflects the reverential treatment modern Latter-day Saints associate with the "Sacred Grove". Not only is it observed to be the site of the beginning of the Restoration of Christ's Church, but it is also romanticized for its age and beauty. The "Sacred Grove" figures as "400 years old", with a woodland floor that is "carpeted" with various flowers and shrubbery. The encounter with the Devil, conveniently edited out here—and in various other twentieth-century Church-produced products, including paintings, videos, and missionary lessons—so as not to distract from the ideal setting and significance, has only recently been restored to twenty-first century public-facing accounts of the First Vision in an effort to be more transparent and holistic in interpreting this sacred event and site.[16]

This twentieth-century editing-out and shifting of focus was most clearly revealed in artistic depictions, including Delwin Oliver Parson's painting *The First Vision*, which was commissioned by the Church in 1988 (See again Figure 9).[17] Compared to Stenhouse's depiction that was discussed earlier, the figures of God the Father and Jesus Christ are still brilliant, but much more approachable, as they seem more to stand in the air barely above the ground rather than hover or float high up in the air. Likewise, the forest is no longer dark and foreboding, but conversely it is colorful and pleasant. Thus, by the end of the twentieth century, Church-commissioned artwork and missionary lessons presented a much more sanitized version of the American forest and its relation to the First Vision than

the more nuanced position understood by nineteenth-century followers of the Latter-day Saint tradition. The holdovers of the puritanical view that "dangers" and "devils" lurked in the wild woods were omitted, and a more purely transcendentalist, if not romantic, view of the forest prevails, in which God's presence is welcomed by the forest's intrinsic, majestic beauty.

Despite the fact that the Latter-day Saint Church was founded in New York and gained most of its initial followers from the Eastern forested states, Latter-day Saints are chiefly known for the growth and dissemination of their Church and culture from Utah, a much more arid climate, where forested landscapes are sparser. However, the Church has neither forgotten nor forsaken its historic roots in the Northeastern American forests. In the early twentieth century the Church began to purchase sites of historic significance, including the Smith family's original Manchester farm, the Hill Cumorah, and eventually the Priesthood Restoration Site. These historic sites have been restored and interpreted to emphasize the significance of Joseph Smith's "First Vision", the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, and the restoration of the Aaronic and Melchizedek priesthoods, respectively. Each year tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints travel from their homes throughout the United States and beyond to visit these historic sites located in the forests of New York and Pennsylvania. Even though Joseph Smith and Latter-day Saints largely left their homes among these forests with a vision for Zion that included building temples and cities to facilitate divine communion and personal revelation, the historic visions and heavenly manifestations foundational to the Restoration of the Church and gospel in the latter days will always be rooted in the hemlock–northern hardwood forest of New York and Pennsylvania. The forest served as the threshold between heaven and earth, the threshold of the Restoration.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 This is not to suggest that the "nature as exploitable resource"paradigm has disappeared in Latter-day Saint or American culture, but rather, it is to suggest that this enduring paradigm became more complicated by additional ways of viewing nature, including the idea that individuals could commune with God in natural settings untouched by human "improvements".

2 This is not to say there were no other tree varieties in the entire northern forest, but rather, it is to suggest that the majority of tree species in the forests of New York likely consisted of these characteristic species. Surely other tree species could be found in different areas of the entire forest, but the aforementioned species comprise the dominant and common tree species present in the hemlock-northern hardwood forest between 1800 and 1870.

3 These militaristic and expansionist currents, as well as a global environmental catastrophe—the eruption of the Tambora volcano in Indoneisa that caused "the year without a summer"—influenced the Smith family's relocation from Vermont to New York, as will be explored in greater detail later in this essay.

4 White pine also endures transportation with greater ease than hardwood that is more susceptible to damage.

5 Emerson also hints at an American loss of "reason and faith" by using the phrase "return to," which connects to ideas associated with the "Second Great Awakening" discussed later.

6 For Biblical parables about sheep, see Matthew 18:10–14 and Luke 15:3–7.

7 The movement is so named because it followed the First Great Awakening, which occurred approximately between 1739–1745.

8 For a chronological listing of all First Vision accounts referenced in this paragraph, see Joseph Smith Papers n.d.b

9 The first mural in the "Mormon Panorama" depicted of the First Vision, but it was lost a hundred years ago.

10 In Latter-day Saint theology, the priesthood—or divine authority to administer in the name of Jesus Christ is divided into the lesser Aaronic Priesthood and the greater Melchizedek Priesthood. Both of these terms are biblical, but they have particular meanings to Latter-day Saints that can broadly be categorized as follows: the Aaronic Priesthood is cheifly concerned with overseeing the temporal wellness of Church members and the Melchizedek Priesthood focuses primarily administering to the spiritual needs of its congregants. The Aaronic Priesthood was restored by John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus and the Melchizedek Priesthood was restored by Peter, James, and John, apostles to the Savior Jesus Christ who Latter-day Saints believed

presided over the early Christian church and held the authorized priesthood keys to do so. This same priesthood authority was believed lost on the earth following the martyrdom of the apostles and only restored to the earth beginning in 1829.

[11] Although this text cannot necessarily be treated as a reliable documentation of ancient American forest management, it may be interpreted as evidence that Latter-day Saints were primed for the conservation movement by teachings in The Book of Mormon.

[12] See The Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi 17:38; 2 Nephi 1:5-9; and Ether 2:9–12.

[13] See The Book of Mormon, 2 Nephi 1:19, 2 Nephi 10:19, Ether 2:7, 12, Ether 13:2, and Doctrine and Covenants 101:4–5 and 136:31.

[14] The most recently developed historic site, the Priesthood Restoration Site in Oakland Township, Pennsylvania, was dedicated in 2015. It interprets restored properties including a forested area where the angelic restoration of the Aaronic Priesthood was said to have occurred under the hands of John the Baptist on 15 May 1829.

[15] At present, the Church History Department has begun similar forest rehabilitation efforts that were so successful at the Sacred Grove at the nearby Hill Cumorah. The Church is removing pageant infrastructure that has accumulated over the past eight decades in order to re-forest the landscape to a more natural setting similar to its appearance at the time of Joseph Smith's encounters with the angel Moroni there.

[16] In the twenty-first century, the Church has made efforts to reintroduce Joseph's encounter with the Devil immediately before his theophany in several of its public-facing products. These include the missionary-oriented twenty-minute DVD titled *The* Restoration (2004), the hour-long film *Joseph Smith: Prophet of the* Restoration (2005), and the seven-minute presentation of the First Vision in "The Heavens Are Opened" exhibit at the Church History Museum in Salt Lake City, which opened in 2016.

[17] For a thorough discourse on the development of First Vision art, see again Sweat 2020.

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