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## This Date in History — The Bicentennial of Joseph Smith's Birth

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December 23, 2005 marks 200 years since the birth of Joseph Smith. Smith, the founder of Mormonism, was born in Vermont, but was raised in the region of western New York known as the “Burned-Over District” because of the fierce religious debates that scalded the area in the wake of the Second Great Awakening. As historian and biographer Robert Remini remarked, “Joseph Smith, Jr., was born into a wildfire of religious frenzy that raged over large parts of the United States in the early nineteenth century and influenced virtually every aspect of American life and thought.”

Remini goes on to remark: “During the first half of the nineteenth century, countless sects and other permutations of Christian belief suddenly appeared, bringing with them an assortment of new messages that allegedly has divine sanction. These messages frequently conveyed the idea of a New Zion to be built and ranged from spiritualism to millennialism to socialist utopianism. The number of different religious options, many of which involved withdrawing from society and forming separate communities, was bewildering.”

Offended by theological controversies among the established Christian denominations, young Smith claimed his first vision at age 14. In subsequent years, he would go on to claim that he had received and interpreted what he called the *Book of Mormon*. Smith, then age 17, claimed that an angel named Moroni had led him to a hill where a set of golden plates had been buried. He also claimed that messages written in an ancient written language like Egyptian hieroglyphics was on the plates, which he was led to interpret through the use of certain stones and lenses.

Eventually, Smith would establish what he called the “Latter Day Saints” — a movement presented as the definitive revelation of God, combining elements of Christianity, Judaism, spiritualism, and various other elements. He also established the practice of polygamy, taking as many as 40 wives (at least some of them already married to other men). He led his growing movement through several transitions and locations, and was eventually murdered by a mob of angry citizens in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1844. Under the leadership of Brigham Young, the movement eventually relocated to Salt Lake City, Utah, which still serves as the group's headquarters.

The movement is officially known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the group has been highly successful in branding itself as allied with Christianity. Nevertheless, Mormon teachings are not consistent with Christian theology and the group, now claiming millions of adherents, is not a Christian church.

For Christians, the anniversary of Joseph Smith's birth is an opportune moment for reflection on the challenge posed by Mormonism and other contemporary belief systems. Furthermore, the origins of Smith's religious confusion and early experiences should remind thinking Christians of the danger of substituting religious frenzy and emotional experience for the substance of biblical Christianity. Joseph Smith's formative years in the “Burned-Over District,” shaped by the excesses of the Second Great Awakening, were central to his spiritual quest. When the Christian church sends an uncertain sound, replaces revelation with intuition, and becomes preoccupied with displays of emotionalism, disaster looms.

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