



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** Looking at Artifacts at New York's Hill Cumorah

**Author(s)**

**Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (2005): 50-51.

**ISSN** 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

**Abstract** Landon Smith gives an account of artifact hunting in the fields surrounding Hill Cumorah, near Palmyra, New York. He presents evidence that the archaeology of New York does not support the idea that Book of Mormon peoples lived in that region of that New York's Hill Cumorah was the scene of the final battles between the Nephites and Lamanites.

# LOOKING FOR ARTIFACTS AT NEW YORK'S HILL CUMORAH

*The following account of artifact hunting in the fields surrounding Hill Cumorah, near Palmyra, New York, is from a letter by Langdon Smith of New Haven, Vermont, and addressed to John E. Clark, professor of anthropology at Brigham Young University and director of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, based in Chiapas, Mexico. The letter has been slightly edited and is used with the author's permission. Mr. Smith wrote the letter in response to Dr. Clark's article "Archaeology and Cumorah Questions" (JBMS 13/1-2, 2004), which presents evidence that the archaeology of New York does not support the idea that Book of Mormon peoples lived in that region or that New York's Hill Cumorah was the scene of the final battles between the Nephites and the Lamanites. —Ed.*

On my dairy farm in Vermont in the mid-1950s, while harrowing in the spring, I saw a black, pointed object. It was a black chert "knife." Wow! I have always been interested in historical things. So I looked all around, but that was it. Several years ago I found another point. My farm efforts were winding down, so I had more time to look.

Since retiring, I have worked on some state site digs with professionals. By myself I have also found over 378 new Native American sites, obtaining Vermont State site numbers for all of them. I have made out all the required survey forms and sent the relevant information to the state offices.

At this time, I have close to 5,000 arrowheads with all the other tools—bifaces, preforms, knives, scrapers, and so on. Altogether I have 17,000 pieces. Each piece has been traced, with the site number and catalog numbers painted on. Maps are made of each site with X marks locating where each piece was found.

In working with the state, I get to see things that I'm probably not supposed to see—like a New York State site map. Around Syracuse and the areas in eastern New York State there are many sites

recorded, as there are around and south of Rochester in western New York. But around the Hill Cumorah area, the closest site numbers are about 60 miles away.

Wherever early American sites are, collectors will find them, plowed fields being the best place to look. Having been to the Hill Cumorah Pageant at other times, I knew that there were plowed fields nearby. Since I had the experience of searching and finding sites, my interest in finding sites of possible Nephite/Lamanite arrowheads was high. There were also stories of how Brother Willard Bean found arrowheads by the basketful around the hill and sold them to tourists. If battles took place at the hill, and a lot of people took part—everything sounds about right—the area should be covered with all kinds of artifacts.

I have made the seven-hour drive twice in the past few years. Both times I traveled to Palmyra during the early planting season—fields just plowed and harrowed, following a good rain to wash the dirt off any artifacts.

There are some areas that are not plowed and cannot easily be hunted, including the seating area

west of the hill and the car parking area on the west side of the highway. North of the hill there is a gully going west to east with trees growing along it, circling from west of the road past the north end of the hill to the east side. Along the whole east side of the hill is a large plowed field. To the north of the gully with trees is the farm that is owned by the Clark family. They have several plowed fields in the area.

Arriving at Cumorah, I have asked workers on the grounds around the visitors' center and people inside the center about arrowheads. Their comments were: "Oh yes, people find them around here all the time." I would ask, "Have you found any yourself?" "Well, no." "Do you know anyone who has found some?" "No." "Have you seen any actual pieces found by others?" "No."

I have walked to the big meadow east of the hill. I have searched it thoroughly. I was thinking, "There have to be remains here, but where?" No artifacts—not even flint chips of any kind. So I went north to the Clark farm. I stopped and asked the owner's wife if I could walk over the corn field. "What are you looking for?" "Looking for arrowheads—is it okay?" "Well, sure." "You must get pestered a lot by people wanting to go out there looking around." "We've been here over 40 years, and you're the first to come and ask to hunt for arrowheads."

If there are artifacts out there, collectors will find them, and they and their friends will be all over that area. The Clarks' fields yielded the same as the one east of the hill: not one single arrowhead and not one single piece of flint chipping. Crisscrossing all those plowed fields, which are hundreds of acres, I found no evidence of any kind. If a large group of people came to this hill and had a big battle, they would have been making and sharpening more tools—artifacts. If there are no arrowheads, what about all of the broken pieces, the chips, the flakes—leftovers from making and sharpening? Some of these pieces would be smaller than a little fingernail. Where are these pieces? People do not generally pick up this trash.

There is an old pond in our area of Vermont which has old sites around it. The University of Vermont has created a chart that pictures 26 different styles of points found in this area (the points date from 11,000–12,000 BC up through the time of European contact). I have found at least one, usually many, of each type from that site. When I first started looking, I made the friendship of nine

gentlemen who had large collections (5,000 to 6,000 pieces each). On asking these men, "Where do you get most of them?" their answer was something like, "Oh, half from around the pond." That half would include 2,000 pieces for each of the nine persons, or about 18,000 pieces. I look each year and find 25 to 30. Plus, there are other people hunting there—they're finding stuff too. It's more than just a good place to take a walk. But when that spot is put up against the history of events at "Cumorah," it should pale into insignificance.

On this old site in Vermont, even if all of the arrow points were picked up, there are still all of the chipping areas—big or small, they are present. In these areas a person should find broken arrowheads that were damaged while being made. Then we should also find the flakes, slabs, and chips in the various work areas that can be seen throughout the plowed parts.

Before my first trip to Palmyra, I received the name from a friend of a Mr. J. Sheldon Fisher, who lived in the small town of Fishers, about 10 miles southwest of the hill (he passed away in 2002). He owned what is called the Valentown Museum. The museum barn has one floor devoted to early American artifacts; the second floor is full of all types of antiques. He was a great historian of the happenings down through time in that area. He supplied most of the early-1800s furniture used in the area's visitors' centers. There was an article about him in the 3 March 2001 *Church News* on his finds about an old Brigham Young home (Shaun D. Stahle, "Excavating Brigham Young's mill site"). He worked as a professional archaeologist for the state of New York for over 30 years. So he knew what he was doing.

He said that he had a standing agreement with all of the bulldozer and backhoe people in the county. They would call him when they were about to start jobs in the area. Many times, he said, "I'd beat them to the site—I'd get there before they would." He always watched the soil as they dug it or pushed it around. But he never found any artifacts of any kind. I have spent evenings on both trips to Palmyra talking with him about the area and its history. His comment on my last trip was, "Oh, I hope this doesn't shake your faith." I answered, "No, it doesn't. The Church is still true. The Book of Mormon is true. And those plates came out of that hill. 'The battle'—well, it must have been at some other hill." ■