

# FANNY ALGER AND JOSEPH SMITH'S PRE-NAUVOO REPUTATION

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FOR OVER 150 YEARS, skeptics from E. D. Howe to Fawn Brodie and beyond have painted a picture of Joseph Smith, even before Nauvoo, as that of a man who at least sometimes trespassed the bounds of marital fidelity. Such writers present data and their interpretations of it that support about a decade of intermittent dalliances before 1839 that seemed to contravene Joseph's own publicly proclaimed standards of chastity. Such an image obviously depends, at least to some extent, on reading backward from the practice of polygamy in Nauvoo to the earlier period. But how accurate is that picture? If we were listening to the gossip in Quincy, Illinois, in May of 1839 about the Mormon prophet, who had been allowed to escape a month earlier by his Missouri jailors, and if we were to read descriptions by non-Mormon writers in local newspapers, what sexual morals would be ascribed to the Mormon prophet? Would the clamor of previous amours mar affirmations from believers that he was a prophet? Or would the complaints of naysayers focus on other issues?

In this article, I briefly examine all the extant accusations regarding sexual impropriety and plural marriage against Joseph Smith—a total of nine—occurring before his 1839 arrival in

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Nauvoo.<sup>1</sup> I evaluate each reported incident for its credibility and also for its potential to have influenced the Prophet's reputation during the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> I give particular attention to Joseph Smith's relationship with Fanny Alger and its aftermath. My conclusion, after analyzing the available evidence, suggests that, prior to Nauvoo, the Prophet's general reputation did not include allegations of either li-

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<sup>1</sup>Included here are all of the accusations based upon even moderately credible evidence that I have been able to locate. I readily acknowledge that my research may not have been complete or that additional pertinent historical data may be discovered in the future. Therefore, I do not condier this study to be the final word regarding issues it addresses

<sup>2</sup>I exclude two allegations as not credible. The first is an anonymous article, "One of the Priesthood," in *Saintly Falsity* (Salt Lake: Salt Lake Tribune Office, 1885), 1, 2, which claims: "In a meeting of a Female Relief Society, in 1853, in this city, Mrs. Whitney told the sisters present that she had been sealed to Joseph four years before the date of the revelation as given [1839]; Mrs. J\_\_\_\_\_ [Zina Huntington Jacobs?] said she was sealed to him six years before that [1837]; Mrs. B\_\_\_\_\_ [Presendia Huntington Buell?] said she was sealed to him nine years before that [1834]; and Eliza R. Snow Smith Young arose and declared that she was sealed to him long before any of them [pre-1834]." A second is from an even later publication by A. Theodore Schroeder in *Some Facts Concerning Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1898), 3, 9, which repeats some of the faulty information from *Saintly Falsity*: "At or prior to 1835, the Prophet had taken into his household Eliza R. Snow who admits herself to have been a polygamous wife of the Prophet. . . . She goes out of her way to justify her presence in the Smith household by saying that she 'Was teaching the Prophet's family school. . . .' The real truth doubtless is that she was even in 1835, a plural wife of the Prophet. According to apostates, Eliza R. Snow stated in 1853, before a meeting of the 'Female Relief Society,' that she was sealed to Joseph Smith nine years before the date of the revelation [D&C 132, written July 12, 1843], making it 1834. . . . As early as 1833 [the conduct of the Saints] was such as to make their neighbors believe that they were practically polygamists, and although Rigdon as early as 1835 took a plural wife, which must have been known to the prophet, and notwithstanding that[,] probably Smith had already entered the polygamic state with Eliza R. Snow." The historical inaccuracies in these two documents are too numerous to justify serious consideration, beginning with the fact that the Relief Society had not been reconstituted in 1853. However, these types of statements are not uncommon in the historical record and were apparently believed by many.

centiousness *or* polygamy.

### NINE ACCUSATIONS OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

A thorough search of available historical records identifies nine such accusations. In brief overview, here are the names of the women reportedly involved, the individual alleging the relationship with Joseph Smith, the year of the alleged incident, and where it supposedly occurred.

1. Eliza Winters, according to Levi Lewis allegedly quoting Martin Harris, became involved with Joseph Smith in 1827–29 in New York.

2. Josiah Stowell's daughters, according to the Broome County (New York) prosecutor, became involved with Joseph Smith in 1830 in New York.

3. William Bond alleged that Joseph Smith was involved with "a certain woman" in 1829–30 in Pennsylvania.

4. Marinda Nancy Johnson, according to Clark Braden, became involved with Joseph Smith in 1832 in Ohio.

5. Vienna Jacques, according to Nancy Maria Smith Alexander, became involved with Joseph Smith in 1833 in Ohio.

6. Fanny Alger was reportedly involved in a relationship with Joseph Smith in 1835 in Kirtland according to several different individuals. Because this episode was substantive and generated considerable commentary and controversy, I will discuss it last, out of order, after dealing with the other eight allegations.

7. According to Sidney Rigdon's modern biographer, Richard S. Van Wagoner, Athalia and Nancy Rigdon, two of Rigdon's daughters, had a relationship with Joseph in 1837 in Ohio.

8. According to Wilhelm Wyl, Sarah Pratt told him that Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris was involved with Joseph Smith in 1838 in Missouri.

9. Mary Ettie V. Coray Smith claimed that Presendia Huntington Buell was involved with Joseph Smith in 1939 in Missouri.

### ELIZA WINTERS

Two of the allegations reportedly occurred while the Prophet resided in New York. The first is a one-sentence statement in Eber D. Howe's *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834), the first anti-Mormon book to reach print: "Levi Lewis states, that he has been acquainted with Joseph Smith Jr. and Martin Harris, and that he has heard them both say, adul-

tery was no crime. Harris said he did not blame Smith for his (Smith's) attempt to seduce Eliza Winters etc."<sup>3</sup> Technically, Lewis's statement is not a charge of illicit sexual activity, but a report of an "attempted" (therefore unsuccessful) seduction, probably coming third-hand from two antagonistic sources. This statement is sometimes misquoted reporting that Levi Lewis accused Joseph Smith of trying to seduce Eliza Winters, rather than Lewis allegedly quoting Martin Harris.<sup>4</sup>

Whether successful or not, such a charge is a serious accusation when leveled at a religious leader, but the alleged statement is problematic for several reasons, including plausibility. If, in fact, Joseph Smith stated that "adultery was no crime," it was a very singular statement that he contradicted repeatedly and consistently in his subsequent teachings on the subject. Neither is there any record that the Prophet reacted to this allegation during his lifetime. It appears that he either was unaware of it or believed it unworthy of response.

Born in Delaware in 1812, Eliza Winters apparently moved to Harmony prior to 1829. I have found no evidence that she interacted with Joseph Smith or his family there. One late recollection states that she was a friend of Emma Smith.<sup>5</sup> Eliza herself left no statement concerning the reported seduction attempt which purportedly occurred in the late 1820s. However, during her lifetime, she had at least two perfect opportunities to corroborate Lewis's alleged statement, but failed in both instances to do so. The first occurred in 1833 when Martin Harris accused her of having given birth to a "bastard child." Eliza

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<sup>3</sup>Eber D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled: Or, A Faithful Account of That Singular Imposition and Delusion from Its Rise to the Present Time* (Painesville: Author, 1834), 268.

<sup>4</sup>See for example, George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage,"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 29; Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 4:296, and his *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 178; Grant H. Palmer, "Sexual Allegations against Joseph Smith, 1829-1835," 1, n.d. [after 1999], unpublished manuscript, H. Michael Marquardt Collection, Marriott Library Special Collections, University of Utah, photocopy in my possession.

<sup>5</sup>Rhamanthus M. Stocker, *Centennial History of Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: R. T. Peck and Company, 1887), 557; quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:346.

retaliated by suing Martin.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the court proceedings, no one, including Eliza herself, mentioned a seduction attempt by Joseph Smith, and the case was dismissed due to jurisdiction problems.

Nearly fifty years later, the seventy-year-old Eliza Winters had another chance to disparage Joseph Smith when newspaperman Frederick G. Mather interviewed her in Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, specifically to gather derogatory statements about the Prophet from his former acquaintances. In the interview, Mather recorded Eliza as saying “Joe Smith never made a convert at Susquehanna, and also that his father-in-law became so incensed by his conduct that he threatened to shoot him if he ever returned.”<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding her negative recollections, she failed to make any accusation regarding Joseph Smith’s personal conduct toward her. Her apparent reticence to incriminate the Prophet on that occasion is puzzling if the Lewis allegation was true.<sup>8</sup>

As noted, the allegation was published in 1834. However, it was seldom, if ever, republished during the rest of the decade, suggesting that it did not influence Joseph Smith’s pre-Nauvoo reputation to any great extent. Richard Lyman Bushman observed: “Considering how eager the Palmyra neighbors were to besmirch Joseph’s character, their minimal mention of moral lapses suggest libertinism was not part of his New York reputation.”<sup>9</sup> Marvin Hill concurred: “[It is a] fact that none of the earliest anti-Mormon writers, neither Dogberry

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<sup>6</sup>Mark B. Nelson and Steven C. Harper, “The Imprisonment of Martin Harris in 1833,” *BYU Studies* 45 (Fall 2006): 114–15.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted in Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:358; see also 314, 297 note 3.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 4:346, characterized her apparent silence on the topic as “an accusation she neither confirmed nor denied.” It seems likely that, if Winters had denied the accusation, Mather would not have included that admission in his article, as it did not suit his purposes of disparaging Joseph Smith. Regardless, while Vogel’s assessment in *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 178, 619, may be technically true, there is no way of knowing whether the subject was even mentioned. Vogel treats Lewis’s report as somewhat credible. See also Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 4:296–97.

<sup>9</sup>Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 323. Bushman continued: “One of Emma’s cousins by marriage, Levi Lewis, said Martin Harris spoke of Joseph’s at-

or E. D. Howe, charge Smith with sexual immorality.”<sup>10</sup>

### THE STOWELL SISTERS

The second incident of alleged sexual impropriety took place in 1830 in Broome County, New York, where Joseph Smith was being tried, though the exact nature of the charge is unknown since no records have been located. As part of the proceedings, the local prosecutor accused Joseph Smith of improper conduct with two of Josiah's daughters, probably Rhoda and Miriam, ages twenty-five and twenty-three respectively.<sup>11</sup> Joseph later recalled: “The court was detained for a time, in order that two young women (daughters to Mr. Stool [sic]) with whom I had at times kept company; might be sent for, in order, if possible to elicit something from them which might be made a pretext against me. The young ladies arrived and were severally examined, touching my character, and conduct in general but particularly as to my behavior towards them both in public and private, when they both bore such testimony in my favor, as left my enemies without a pretext on their account.”<sup>12</sup>

Since no criminal activity was discovered or prosecuted, its appeal to newspaper readers would have been minimal. Also, its effect upon Joseph Smith's reputation would have been either positive or neutral.

### “A CERTAIN WOMAN”

A third accusation against Joseph Smith appeared sixty years after its alleged occurrence when William Bond, a resident of Erie County, Pennsylvania, published what he called a “history” of Mor-

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tempt to seduce Elizabeth Winters, a friend of Emma's in Harmony. But the reports are tenuous. Harris said nothing of the event in his many descriptions of Joseph, nor did Winters herself when interviewed much later.”

<sup>10</sup>Marvin S. Hill, “Secular or Sectarian History? A Critique of *No Man Knows My History*,” in Newell G. Bringham, ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 80.

<sup>11</sup>Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 1, Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:254 note 2.

<sup>12</sup>Joseph Smith, “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 4 (December 15, 1842): 41. See also Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents*, 1:118.

monism in 1890. He claimed:

In about the year 1829–30, Joseph Smith visited Erie County, Pennsylvania, often as he was passing from Ohio into western New York, and held meetings to gain proselytes in the Mormon faith. . . . Some of the old and more substantial citizens, Henry Teller, Ranson Bromley, Henry Slator, and others, noticed an improper intimacy between Joseph Smith and a certain woman, which led to a further investigation of Smith's character, and finally exposure of his improper conduct before one of these assemblies. Smith, however, having friends, still declared his innocence. The next evening a wooden horse was found before the inn where Smith was lodging, and on the horse was written: "Assistance will be given by twelve gentlemen to mount this horse (he being high), and if the seat is hard a quantity of feathers and tar shall not be withheld to make the journey pleasant, as he is a fast rider." I need not inform you Smith was seen no more in that vicinity.<sup>13</sup>

This very late account is problematic in several respects. Most seriously, the chronology of Joseph Smith's travels contradicts the allegations. Joseph's first trip through Erie County was with Emma when they were westbound from Fayette, New York, in 1831. Erie, Pennsylvania, is located about eighty miles east of Kirtland, Ohio. It is true that Joseph traversed this area several times in ensuing years. Since Bond identifies proselytizing as one of Joseph's purposes in entering the county, the most likely visit for this wooden horse incident would have been in October 1833, when, accompanied by Sidney Rigdon and Freeman Nickerson, Joseph visited Springville, Erie County, for two days. He wrote: "A large and attentive congregation assembled at Brother Rudd's in the evening, to whom we bore our testimony."<sup>14</sup> The next day, he crossed the county, arriving at Elk Creek, still in the county. No extant records suggest that anything untoward occurred or that Joseph was harassed by locals who wished to retaliate for some current or previous indiscretion. In addition to this visit, Joseph also came into the county (1) in October 1832, accompanied by Newel K. Whitney to acquire goods for a store in Kirtland; (2) in February 1834

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<sup>13</sup>William Bond, *The Early History of Mormonism* . . . (Portland, Ore.: Schwab Brothers, 1890), 18–19.

<sup>14</sup>Joseph Smith et al., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, edited by B. H. Roberts, 7 vols., 2d ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1948 printing), 1:416.



accompanied by Parley P. Pratt to assemble volunteers for Zion's Camp, and (3) in August 1836, accompanied by Hyrum Smith, Sidney Rigdon, and Oliver Cowdery in an unsuccessful effort to raise funds to stabilize the Kirtland Safety Society.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Cheryl Hamon Bean, who researched LDS baptisms in Erie County between 1831 and 1833, identifies at least 122 new members and found no evidence that Joseph Smith had earlier been accused of improprieties in the county.<sup>16</sup>

As a second difficulty with Bond's allegations, it seems unlikely that such an event, which occurred semi-publicly and involved at least twelve notable members of the community, had remained unmentioned for more than fifty years. Erie was geographically close to Kirtland. It seems improbable that the improprieties described would have gone unnoticed by Joseph's enemies like Philastus Hurlburt, E. D. Howe, or Grandison Newell. The account states that "substantial citizens, Henry Teller, Ranson, Bromley Slator, and others" were informed.<sup>17</sup> In addition, an "assembly" discussed Joseph's improper conduct and determined a course of action, including the threat of "tar and feathers." But again, except for Bond, no record of this community event exists, either in connection with Joseph Smith or, as far as I have been able to learn, with anyone else. In short, this allegation rests solely upon Bond's unsupported memory.

### MARINDA NANCY JOHNSON

The fourth accusation regarding Joseph Smith involved Marinda Nancy Johnson, born June 28, 1815, the daughter of John and Elsa Johnson of Hiram, Ohio. Joseph and Emma lived at the Johnson home during two separate periods, from September 1831 to April 1832 and again from July to September 1832. Joseph had healed her mother of a disability that prevented her from using her arm, and most of the family had joined the Church in 1831. Two of her brothers, Lyman and Luke, were among the first Twelve Apostles chosen in

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<sup>15</sup>J. Christopher Conkling, *A Joseph Smith Chronology* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 36, 53, 92.

<sup>16</sup>Cheryl Hamon Bean, "LDS Baptisms in Erie County, Pennsylvania 1831–1833," *Nauvoo Journal* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 59–102, esp. 64–65.

<sup>17</sup>Research confirms that these men were indeed in the area during the time in question, but none left any negative record concerning Joseph Smith.





*Drawing by unknown artist, published in Charles Mackay, ed., The Mormons, or Latter-day Saints; with Memoirs of the Life and Death of Joseph Smith, the American Mahomet, 4th ed. (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1851), 55; 1851 edition in my possession.*

1835, though both later became disaffected. Luke reaffiliated with Mormonism while Lyman did not.

Marinda's brother Luke, wrote an account of the mobbing, published in 1864:

In the fall of [sic; should be spring of] 1832, while Joseph was yet at my father's [John Johnson], a mob of forty or fifty came to his house, a few entered his room in the middle of the night, and Carnot Mason dragged Joseph out of bed by the hair of his head; he was then seized by as many as could get hold of him, and taken about forty rods

from the house, stretched on a board, and tantalized in the most insulting and brutal manner; they tore off the few night clothes that he had on, for the purpose of emasculating him, and had Dr. Dennison there to perform the operation; but when the Dr. saw the Prophet stripped and stretched on the plank, his heart failed him, and he refused to operate.<sup>18</sup>

Luke's account does not attribute the intent to emasculate Joseph to sexual impropriety on his part; but Fawn Brodie retells the story, tellingly casting it as hearsay, "It is said that Eli Johnson demanded that the prophet be castrated, for he suspected Joseph of being too intimate with his sister, Nancy Marinda."<sup>19</sup> In fact, Eli was Marinda's uncle (her father's brother), not one of her own brothers. Furthermore, Brodie was quoting Clark Braden, a Church of Christ (Disciples) minister, who made the allegation of immorality in an 1884 debate with E. L. Kelley, counselor in the Presiding Bishopric of the RLDS Church.<sup>20</sup> From my research, Braden seems to have been the very first person to assert sexual impropriety as a motive for the mob. The accusation was not included in any publication printed during the fifty-two years prior to Braden's 1884 debate with Kelley, even though many reported the tarring and feathering episode.

For example, in their 1861 publication, *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City*, Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley fail to accuse Joseph Smith of any sexual impropriety when discussing the 1832 mobbing.<sup>21</sup> Antagonistic author John H. Beadle accuses Joseph Smith of "attempting to

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<sup>18</sup>"History of Luke Johnson," *Millennial Star* 26 (December 31, 1864): 834. See also *Millennial Star* 27 (January 7, 1865): 5-7.

<sup>19</sup>Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 119.

<sup>20</sup>E. L. Kelley and Clark Braden, *Public Discussion of the Issues between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Christ (Disciples) Held in Kirtland, Ohio, Beginning February 12, and Closing March 8, 1884, between E. L. Kelley, of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Clark Braden, of the Church of Christ* (St. Louis: Clark Braden, 1884), 202.

<sup>21</sup>Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City*, 2 vols. (London: W. Jeffs, 1861), 1:282. This allegation is also not mentioned in the anonymous *History of the Mormons* (London: William and Robert Chambers, 1853), 16; A. M. Pigott, *Mormonism: Its History, Doctrines, and Practices* (London: Aldine Chambers and Paternoster Row, 1853), 14, and

establish communism, . . . forgery and dishonorable dealing.”<sup>22</sup> If immoral conduct were involved, reticence about it on Beadle’s part would have been most uncharacteristic of his typically sensational approach.

Accordingly, it seems improbable that Braden in 1884 had discovered evidence of a motivation unknown for more than fifty-two years. Most likely, he simply read the account, which was available in LDS and RLDS publications, and assumed that, since emasculation was mentioned, at least some of Joseph Smith’s offenses were sexual in nature. If Braden had evidence beyond his own assumptions, he never shared it with anyone. Neither has any supporting documentation since been identified in the historical record. Importantly, Symonds Ryder, one of the mob leaders later wrote:

When they [Joseph Smith and other leaders] went to Missouri to lay the foundation of the splendid city of Zion, and also of the temple, they left their papers behind [in Hiram, Ohio]. This gave their new converts an opportunity to become acquainted with the internal arrangement of their church, which revealed to them the horrid fact that a plot was laid to take their property from them and place it under the control of Joseph Smith the prophet [through the law of consecration]. This was too much for the Hiramites. . . . Determined not to let it pass with impunity; and, accordingly, a company was formed of citizens . . . in March, 1832, and proceeded to headquarters in the darkness of night, and took Smith and Rigdon from their beds, and tarred and feathered them both, and let them go. This had the desired

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Amos S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1875), 220–21. Hayden explains the causes of the mobbing at length, basically attributing it to “a plot . . . laid to take their [the mob members’] property from them.”

<sup>22</sup>J. H. Beadle, *Polygamy; or Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (Philadelphia: N.p., 1870), 37. Other authors after the 1884 debate who failed to include sexual improprieties in their critiques of Joseph Smith, but who mentioned the Hiram mobbing, include James H. Kennedy, *Early Days of Mormonism: Palmyra, Kirtland and Nauvoo* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 105; and William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons from the Date of Their Origin to the Year 1901* (1923; rpt., Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 135–37. Reverend Samuel F. Whitney (Newel K. Whitney’s brother, who did not share his commitment to Mormonism), Affidavit, in Arthur B. Deming, ed., *Naked Truths about Mormonism* (Oakland, Calif.), 1, no. 1 (January 1888): 104, col. 1, states that the mob intended castration but did not allege sexual misconduct as a motive.

effect, which was to get rid of them. They soon left for Kirtland.<sup>23</sup>

Todd Compton, who has done the most extensive research on Joseph Smith's plural wives, comments: "There is no good evidence supporting the position (found in Brodie . . . ) that Joseph Smith was married to Marinda Johnson . . . or had an affair with her, in 1831, and was mobbed by 'her brother Eli' and others as a result."<sup>24</sup> Marinda herself recalled in 1877 at age sixty-two after a lifetime of faithful membership: "I feel like bearing my testimony that during the whole year that Joseph was an inmate of my father's house I never saw aught in his daily life or conversation to make me doubt his divine mission."<sup>25</sup>

### VIENNA JACQUES

The fifth accusation regarding Joseph Smith involves Vienna Jacques (possibly pronounced "jack-ways"<sup>26</sup>), who was born in 1787. This charge originated with a statement by a former Mormon, "Mrs. Warner Alexander," who quoted Polly Beswick as saying: "It was commonly reported, Jo Smith said he had a revelation to lie \with/ Vienna Jacques, who lived in his family, Polly told me, that Emma, Joseph's wife, told her that Joseph would get up in the night and go to Vienna's bed. Polly said Emma would get out of humor, fret and scold and flounce in the harness. Jo would shut himself up in a room and pray for a revelation, When he came out he would claim he had re-

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<sup>23</sup>Symonds Ryder, "Letter to A. S. Hayden," February 1, 1868, quoted in Amos Sutton Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase and Hall, 1875), 220–21. See also Max Parkin, "The Nature and Cause of Internal and External Conflict of the Mormons in Ohio between 1830 and 1838" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1966), 254; Samuel F. Whitney, Affidavit, 104.

<sup>24</sup>Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 642.

<sup>25</sup>Marinda Johnson Hyde, quoted in Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: n.pub., 1877), 404.

<sup>26</sup>Samuel H. Smith, who was serving a mission in the Boston area, wrote on July 18, 1832: "Went about five miles to Wm. Angel's, who[se] wife was a sister to Sister Viena Jacways." Samuel was apparently writing her surname phonetically. Modern pronunciation is sometimes "jakes." Samuel spelled her name as "Jacques" on July 10 and possibly "Lacways" on July 18.

ceived one and state it to her, and bring her around all right.”<sup>27</sup>

Research suggests that “Mrs. Warner Alexander” was Nancy Maria Smith, daughter of William Smith (no relation to Joseph Smith) and Lydia Calkins Smith, born December 1, 1822. She married Justin Alexander on September 4, 1850, at Kirtland, Ohio, making her “Mrs. Justin Alexander” or “Mrs. Nancy Alexander.”<sup>28</sup> It is not clear how her name got mistranscribed, but other internal references also corroborate Nancy as the author.<sup>29</sup>

The historical record shows that the Joseph Smith family was living in the Kirtland area from 1831 to 1838. In 1831, Vienna traveled from her home in Boston to Kirtland, where she met the Prophet and was baptized. She stayed in Ohio about six weeks, then returned to Boston where she became the means of converting many of her family who were also baptized.<sup>30</sup> Vienna journeyed again to Kirtland in early 1833. She may have stayed with the Smiths, although I’m unaware of any documentation to that effect. On March 8, the Prophet received a revelation telling her to gather to Missouri (D&C 90:28–31). She apparently left in June because he addressed a letter to her in Missouri dated July 2, then residing in that state. (See Figure 1.) These two brief periods are the only times that Vienna and the Smiths lived in the same town.

Accordingly, if Nancy Alexander’s statement is true, Joseph Smith would have needed to accomplish one of two difficult tasks in

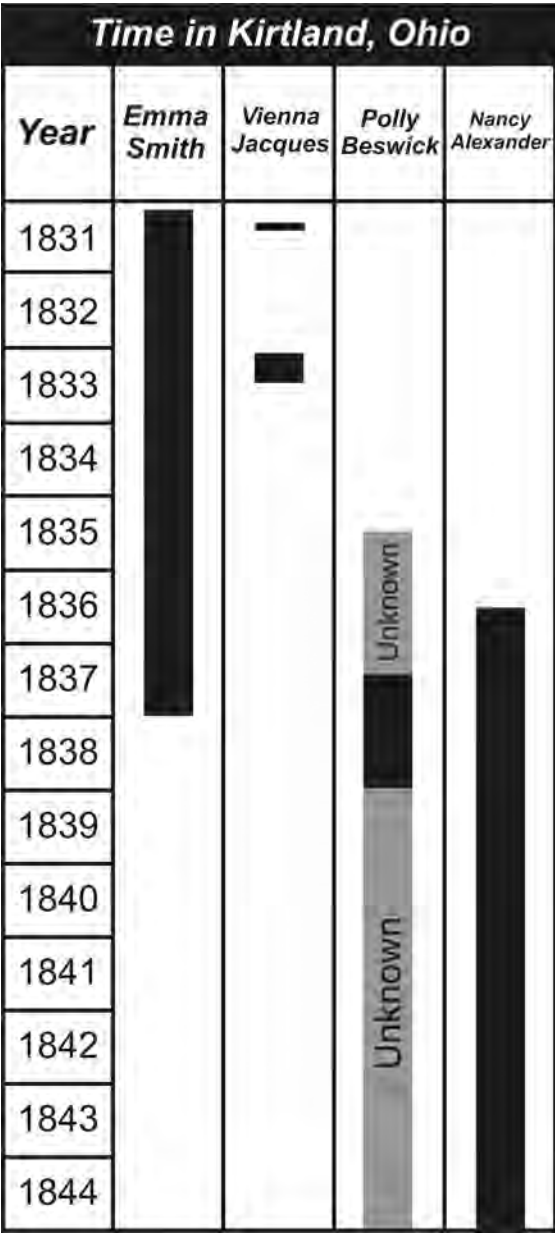
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<sup>27</sup>Mrs. Warner Alexander, Statement, [1886?], original in Stanley B. Kimball Papers, Southern Illinois University; typescript copy in Linda King Newell Collection, MS 447, Box 11, fd. 3, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah (hereafter Newell Collection). The editorial marks \ . . . / indicate words added interlinearly.

<sup>28</sup>Nancy Smith Alexander, data on Ancestral File webpage, <http://www.familysearch.org> (accessed May 16, 2009).

<sup>29</sup>The account was apparently published as an article entitled: “Mrs. Alexander’s Statement,” but the available copy is cropped, thus omitting any information about its source or date of publication. At the bottom is a handwritten name “Mrs Nancy Alexander,” A. B. Deming Papers, PAM 9687 (described as copies of pamphlets from the Chicago Historical Society), Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City.

<sup>30</sup>Jerri W. Hurd, “Vienna Jacques: The Other Woman in the Doctrine and Covenants,” 2, unpublished manuscript, Newell Collection, MS 447, Box 4, fd. 1.



*Figure 1. Analysis of Times of Proximity between Emma Smith and Vienna Jacques.*



the span of three or four months in early 1833. He would have needed to confirm Vienna Jacques's conversion when she arrived in Kirtland, baptize her, convince her of the appropriateness of polygamy, and immediately marry her (although the form such a sealing would take is not known), while at the same time either convincing Emma to let him have a plural wife share their home or concealing this relationship from Emma but conducting it in their home. (This option contradicts Nancy Alexander's description of Emma as soothed by repeated "revelations.") The second alternative is that Joseph succeeded in persuading Emma to allow him to conduct a physical relationship with Vienna (without a plural marriage ceremony) under their own roof. Neither proposal seems very likely.

In addition, the evidence supporting Joseph Smith's personal involvement with polygamy prior to 1835 is controversial. (See discussion in the "Fanny Alger" section.) Also, as a woman possessing conservative moral values, there is little indication that Emma would ever have approved of her husband having sexual relations with a woman to whom he was not married. Emma struggled mightily in 1843–44 to accept plural marriage. All records from the Kirtland period demonstrate that she did not then believe that God-approved plural marriage had then been restored. Accordingly, she would have considered any polygamous intimacy as adultery and would not have sanctioned contact between the two as described by Nancy.

Many other problems with the account can be identified.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, while Nancy Alexander and her husband apostatized, it appears that Polly Beswick Cook remained an active member of the Church throughout her life. It strains probability that she would have remained silent about this early case of polygamy after there was extreme encouragement to defend the practice after it was announced in 1852. In this situation (a known case of early polygamy), it also seems unlikely that she would have spoken of it only once and only to a woman who was not a reliable confidante. Second, if Polly considered the situation to be not polygamy but adultery, it also seems unlikely that she would have continued to accept Joseph Smith as a prophet and remain attached to his religious movement.

In either case, this allegation was apparently unknown until decades after Joseph Smith's death. Accordingly, it would not have been

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<sup>31</sup>See the discussion in my *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, forthcoming), Appendix E4.



part of his public reputation during the 1830s.

### SIDNEY RIGDON'S DAUGHTERS, NANCY AND ATHALIA

Chronologically speaking, the next allegation of sexual impropriety involves Fanny Alger. Because her case is much more substantive, I am discussing it last out of the nine and am dealing with the remaining three allegations first. In his biography *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess*, Richard S. Van Wagoner writes: "Gossip in Ohio's Western Reserve linked Smith to Athalia and Nancy Rigdon, Sidney's sixteen- and fifteen-year-old daughters."<sup>32</sup> Born in 1821, Athalia would have been sixteen in 1837, and Nancy would have been fifteen. Wagoner is not explicit about the "link" but his mention of "gossip" implies a sexual connection. As documentation, Van Wagoner offers an 1884 affidavit from a man named William S. Smith<sup>33</sup> (no relation to Joseph) recorded March 15th, one week after the last session of the 1884 debate between Clark Braden and E. L. Kelley and included in the appendix of the published text of the debate:

Q. [Clark Braden] Is it your recollection or your impression, Mr. Smith, that you have heard of the sealing of women to men here in Kirtland, and the sealing of Nancy Rigdon to Joseph Smith? A. My impression is I have. . .

Q. [E. L. Kelley] Did you ever hear it talked of while the Saints lived here? A. I say I have heard it talked of. My impression is that I have heard it talked of here in Kirtland, and that the story obtained that the difficulty between Joseph Smith and Sydney [sic] Rigdon was in consequence of the wish or the manifestation on the part of Joseph Smith that Rigdon's daughter Nancy should be sealed to him.

Q. Will you say that was between Joseph Smith and Rigdon, and that it was a difficulty occurred here in Kirtland. Who did you hear talk about their having trouble here in Kirtland? A. I cannot tell.

Q. Was it any of the Saints? A. I can not tell you that.

Q. Do you not know, Mr. Smith, that there was not any report of

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<sup>32</sup>Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 291; see also Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 634.

<sup>33</sup>Van Wagoner mistakenly lists the name as "William C. Smith" but cites a deposition from a "William S. Smith." I have not been able to find any more information about William S. Smith. Interestingly, Nancy Maria Smith's father was named William, but I'm quite certain they are two different people.

any such thing as that as of Nancy Rigdon being sealed to Joseph Smith while the Saints were here in Kirtland? A. My impression is that that report was here in Kirtland. I went to school with Athalia Rigdon, and there was talk among the boys about sealing. I think there was difficulty between Joseph Smith and Rigdon with reference to having Rigdon's daughter sealed to Smith. I would not positively say it was so; that is my impression.

Q. How old was Nancy Rigdon at that time? A. I do not know; I went to school with Athalia Rigdon.

Q. How old was she? A. I cannot tell. Nor can I tell how old I was. Nancy Rigdon was the oldest. I do not know how much older than Athalia. [In fact, Athalia was older.]

Q. Did you ever hear any of them talk about sealing? A. Yes, I am positive that I heard that language used among the boys.

Q. Did they not talk about the sealing of the Holy Spirit. Is not that what you heard them talk about? A. No, the sealing was in some way or other with the women. My impression is that I have heard that story of the quarrel between Rigdon and Smith talked of here in Kirtland.

Q. Is it not probable that they were talking [about] those things after they went to Nauvoo. You got it mixed. A. It may be, but I give you my best recollection.<sup>34</sup>

It appears from the transcript that Athalia Rigdon's name came up simply because the witness, William S. Smith, had attended school with her. Accordingly, it seems that utilizing Smith's comments to imply a "link" (sexual or otherwise) between Joseph and Athalia would be an extreme interpretation of William Smith's admittedly shaky memory. Connecting Nancy Rigdon with Joseph is somewhat more understandable because, in Nauvoo in early 1842, Joseph Smith did propose a plural sealing to her. However, Nancy Rigdon recalled in 1884: "I never heard of such a thing in Kirtland as sealing. . . . I heard about this first about the year 1842."<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, no credible evidence exists to support marriage sealings in Kirtland, so it is more probable that William S. Smith was simply confused, a possibility he freely admits.

In any case, it appears that Van Wagoner was the first to imply a "link" between Joseph and Athalia Rigdon in his 1994 biography. I have found no credible evidence establishing a relationship between

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<sup>34</sup>Kelley and Braden, *Public Discussion*, 391.

<sup>35</sup>Joseph Smith III and Heman C. Smith, *The History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, 1805–1946*, 8 vols. (Rpt., Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1967–76), 4:452.

Nancy Rigdon and the Prophet in Kirtland. Thus, William S. Smith's little-known 1884 statement was not relevant to Joseph Smith's reputation in the 1830s.

### LUCINDA PENDLETON HARRIS

At least three authors suggest that two women were involved with Joseph Smith in Missouri, one of whom was Lucinda Pendleton Morgan Harris.<sup>36</sup> (The second, Presendia Huntington Buell is discussed next.) Three pieces of evidence are available supporting the possibility that at some point she and Joseph Smith were sealed in matrimony. The first is a proxy sealing of Lucinda to Joseph Smith performed in the Nauvoo Temple on January 22, 1846.<sup>37</sup>

The second is found in a May 24, 1839, letter from Joseph to George W. Harris, in which the Prophet wrote: "I have selected a town lot for you just across the street from my own, and immediately beside yours, one for Mr. Cleveland."<sup>38</sup> Todd Compton sees this invitation to reside near the Smiths as "immediate evidence of a close bond," which is undoubtedly true.<sup>39</sup> However, that same day, Joseph Smith wrote a second letter to Judge John Cleveland and his wife, Sarah. He had never met the Clevelands but was similarly welcoming: "We have selected a lot for you, just across the street from our own, beside Mr. Harris."<sup>40</sup> Several months earlier, beginning on February 15, 1839, Emma Smith and her children had found refuge with the Clevelands in Quincy, Illinois, and had been grateful for their hospitality while Joseph was incarcerated in the Liberty Jail.

Third, Lucinda is included on a list compiled by Andrew Jenson (later an assistant Church historian) of twenty-seven women who were

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<sup>36</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 4, 49. See also Harry M. Beardsley, *Joseph Smith and His Mormon Empire* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931), 229, and Klaus J. Hansen, *Quest for Empire: The Political Kingdom of God and the Council of Fifty in Mormon History* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1967), 53.

<sup>37</sup>Lisle G Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: A Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841–1846* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), 282.

<sup>38</sup>The letter is reprinted in *History of the Church*, 3:362, but erroneously lists the recipient as "E. W. Harris."

<sup>39</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 51.

<sup>40</sup>*History of the Church*, 3:362.

sealed to the Prophet.<sup>41</sup> Jenson lists her third and designates her as “one of the first women sealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith.” Jenson’s personal files include a note: “Harriet Cook Young is positive that [Lucinda] was married to Joseph in Missouri.”<sup>42</sup> The source of Harriet’s information is unknown; and tracing Lucinda’s name through Jenson’s various rough draft lists indicates that he vacillated about whether to include her and that Eliza R. Snow did not identify her as a wife. Further compromising Harriet’s accuracy is that she was not a Mormon during the Missouri period. Born November 7, 1824, and baptized at age seventeen on May 1, 1842, she was sealed on November 2, 1843, to Brigham Young by Joseph Smith. She was therefore a Nauvoo polygamy insider before Joseph’s death and it is not beyond the realm of possibility that either Lucinda or another knowledgeable person confided the information to her.<sup>43</sup> If Harriet’s assertion was true, Lucinda’s sealing to Joseph Smith would have been the second after that of Fanny Alger. However, my study of Nauvoo polygamy suggests that no sealings were performed prior to Louisa Beaman’s in April 1841.<sup>44</sup>

These three observations provide a useful argument that Joseph and Lucinda were sealed at some point although the timing is not confirmed. Despite Harriet Cook Young’s recollection, however, the most likely time and place appear to be Nauvoo in 1842. My analysis

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<sup>41</sup>Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 233–34. Thomas Milton Tinney, *The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr.* (Salt Lake City: Tinney-Greene Family Organization, 1973), 41, 136, also lists Lucinda as a plural wife of the Prophet. However, Tinney may have simply been repeating Jenson’s claim.

<sup>42</sup>“Harris,” Document 2, in Andrew Jenson Papers (ca. 1871–1942), Ms 17956, Box 49, fd. 16, LDS Church History Library. Don Bradley discovered this note in his research in Jenson’s papers. Harriet was sealed to Brigham Young on November 2, 1843, as a nineteen-year-old convert. Joseph F. Smith, Affidavit Book 1:50, Ms 3423, fd. 5, LDS Church History Library.

<sup>43</sup>Her obituary stated: “‘Aunt Harriet’, as she was commonly called, was an eccentric character, but a woman of more than ordinary intelligence.” *Journal History*, November 5, 1898, in Richard E. Turley Jr., ed., *Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, December 2002), 2:22.

<sup>44</sup>I discuss this issue in detail in *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History*, chaps. 8–9.

of geographical and chronological considerations further reduces the likelihood of a marriage in Missouri. Lucinda and her second husband, George Harris, were living in the new Mormon town of Far West by 1837, date of arrival unknown. In March 1838, Joseph and his family moved to Missouri, staying in the state until the Mormon War broke out in October. Joseph was imprisoned the following month. Thus, the only time available for a plural marriage was the seven months between March and October. The *History of the Church*, written in the voice of Joseph Smith, records his arrival at Far West on March 14: "Many of the brethren came out to meet us, who also with open arms welcomed us to their bosoms. We were immediately received under the hospitable roof of Brother George W. Harris, who treated us with all possible kindness, and we refreshed ourselves with much satisfaction, after our long and tedious journey."<sup>45</sup> The Smiths stayed with the Harris family until mid-May—over two months. Joseph would have had to conduct his courtship, such as it was, in a cabin crowded with two families, persuade Lucinda to accept polygamy as a correct principle, and either conduct a sealing by unknown means or persuade her to accept a sexual relationship that was not formalized by a sealing—all this during that nine-week period.

On November 2, 1837, a special council of Church members and leaders in Far West transacted several items of Church business but had to leave unresolved "a matter between Oliver Cowdery, Thomas B. Marsh" and the Prophet.<sup>46</sup> I think that the logical topic was Oliver's perception of Joseph's "immoral" relationship with Fanny Alger. The matter remained unresolved until the Far West High Council excommunicated Oliver Cowdery on April 12, 1838—right in the middle of the two months when the Smiths were boarding with the Harrises—for several improprieties, one of which was accusing Joseph Smith of adultery. Given these heightened sensitivities to moral questions resulting from Oliver's accusations, it seems highly unlikely that Joseph Smith would have selected this period to teach such an explosive doctrine to his hostess. After May 1838, Joseph was in and out of Far West, nearly always in the company of other priesthood leaders, and especially as tensions with the old

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<sup>45</sup>*History of the Church*, 3:8–9. See also Scott H. Faulring, ed., *An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 160.

<sup>46</sup>*History of the Church*, 2:521.

Missouri settlers increased in intensity.

To complicate matters, however, both Brodie and Compton use a fourth document that points to an 1838 date for a relationship that was not a plural marriage but adultery.<sup>47</sup> This fourth piece of evidence involves a statement attributed to Sarah Pratt years after she had left the Church. In 1885 when she was sixty-seven and had been separated from her husband, Apostle Orson Pratt, for seventeen years, hypercritical author Wilhelm Wyl interviewed her. According to his account, Sarah announced: "Mrs. Harris was a married lady, a very great friend of mine. When Joseph had made his dastardly attempt on me, I went to Mrs. Harris to unbosom my grief to her. To my utter astonishment she said, laughing heartily: 'How foolish you are! I don't see anything so horrible in it. Why I AM HIS MISTRESS SINCE FOUR YEARS!'"<sup>48</sup> Both Brodie and Compton therefore date the relationship as occurring during March-May of 1838.

Assuming that Wyl quoted Sarah Pratt correctly, the account strikes a false note in several ways. First, Sarah Pratt claimed that the above conversation with "Mrs. Harris" occurred prior to her husband's return from his mission to England on July 19, 1841.<sup>49</sup> Counting back four years establishes Lucinda's "mistress-hood" as beginning some months prior to July 1837. However, Joseph Smith did not meet Lucinda until March of 1838, when the Smith family moved permanently from Ohio to Missouri.

Second, Victorian standards in the 1830s made discussions of marital sexuality between even such intimates as mothers and daughters matter of great delicacy and reticence. Hearty claims of extramar-

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<sup>47</sup>See Todd Compton, "Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith's Plural Wives and Polygamy: A Critical View," in Newell G. Bringhurst ed., *Reconsidering No Man Knows My History: Fawn M. Brodie and Joseph Smith in Retrospect* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1996), 167. Neither Brodie nor Compton reference the Harriet Cook Young statement from Jensen's files.

<sup>48</sup>Wilhelm Wyl [pseud. of Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits: Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family, and His Friends* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), 60, emphasis Wyl's (hereafter *Mormon Portraits*). Wyl contemplated a series titled *Mormon Portraits*, of which *Joseph Smith the Prophet . . .* was the first and only volume published.

<sup>49</sup>John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 230–31; *History of the Church*, 4:389.

ital sexual activity on the part of respectable, well-educated women are rare to the point of virtual non-existence.

Third, the need for complete secrecy about plurality in Nauvoo—both because of danger from other Church members and from outsiders—meant that Joseph's plural wives used great care when speaking of their involvement with him. Indeed, we have no contemporary records from any of them directly acknowledging their relationship at the time they were involved in it before his death or describing their relationship until much later.<sup>50</sup> One might assume even greater reticence in the case of illegitimate intimacy. In fact, the avidity of the gossipy disclosures of disaffected former members like John C. Bennett provide some negative evidence of how quickly and how far first-hand accounts of unconventional sexual behavior would have spread, particularly if such behavior were attached to the Mormon prophet himself.

Fourth, the flippant tone of this alleged confession is another false note. The high councils in Kirtland, Missouri, and Nauvoo took a very serious view of sexual immorality and excommunicated participants who did not manifest serious evidence of repentance. To admit on-going adultery in the situation Sarah described would have been more than just embarrassing. It would have been a grievous moral sin and regarded as such by the community within which both women were living.

Fifth, Sarah Pratt herself had experienced a compromised reputation in the spring of 1841. Ebenezer Robinson reported: "In the spring of 1841 Dr. Bennett had a small neat house built for Elder Orson Pratt's family [Sarah and one male child] and commenced

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<sup>50</sup>For example, Emily Dow Partridge Young's reluctant acknowledgment that she shared Joseph's bed on at least two occasions was forced out of her under adversarial questioning during the Temple Lot litigation in 1892. Temple Lot Transcript, Part 3, pp. 371, 384, questions 480–84, 747, 751–62. The full citation is *United States Circuit Court (8th Circuit) . . . The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Complainant, vs. the Church of Christ at Independence, Missouri . . . Complainant's Abstract of Pleading and Evidence*; originals at the Eighth Circuit Court, Kansas City, Kansas; copies at the Community of Christ Archives and microfilm at LDS Church History Library; digitized copy in my possession (hereafter cited as Temple Lot Transcript). The case is in four parts; Part 2 is the complainants' testimony and Part 3 is the respondents' testimony.



boarding with them. Elder Pratt was absent on a mission to England.”<sup>51</sup> By mid-1842, Sarah had been excommunicated along with Orson, but with no public scandal attached to Lucinda’s name at any time, and she was sixteen years older than Sarah. Would she have chosen to “comfort” Sarah by making her a confidante?

Sixth, as witnesses, Sarah Pratt (at least as quoted by Wyl) and Wyl himself seemed willing to repeat any rumor so long as it was derogatory to Joseph Smith. When Wyl asked her about the rumor that “Joseph had eighty wives at the time of his death,” she replied: “He had many more, my dear sir; at least he had seduced many more, and those with whom he had lived without their being sealed to him, were sealed to him after his death.”<sup>52</sup> While it is true that numerous women were sealed to Joseph Smith posthumously, no records have been found from any woman asserting that Joseph Smith seduced her. Five years before her interview with Wyl, Pratt is quoted in an anti-polygamy newspaper as saying: “An elder once said to me: ‘Sister Sarah, you are a regular Satan,’ I had been giving my views in regard to polygamy and polygamists. I answered him, there are only two classes of women in Utah, devils or fools.”<sup>53</sup> Insightfully, Compton observes that Sarah’s recollection of Lucinda’s statement “is antagonistic, third-hand, and late.”<sup>54</sup>

Both Sarah Pratt and Wilhelm Wyl made allegations that were demonstrably untrue. Non-Mormon writer Thomas Gregg commented about Wyl’s interviews: “The statements of the interviews must be taken for what they are worth. While many of them are corroborated elsewhere and in many ways, there are others that need verification, and some that probably exist only in the mind of the narrator.”<sup>55</sup> When I queried Richard Bushman about his appraisal of Wyl’s accuracy, he pointed out the high level of “hearsay” and summarized: “Personally I found all the assertions about the Prophet’s promiscuity

<sup>51</sup>Ebenezer Robinson, “Items of Personal History of the Editor,” *The Return* (St. Louis), 1, no. 11 (November 1890): 362.

<sup>52</sup>Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 54.

<sup>53</sup>Athena [pseud.], “The Women of Utah,” *Anti-Polygamy Standard* 1 (June 1880), 18. Quoted in Jennie Anderson Froiseth, *The Women of Mormonism; Or, the Story of Polygamy As Told by the Victims Themselves* (Detroit, Mich.: C. G. G. Paine, 1882), 40.

<sup>54</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 650.

<sup>55</sup>Thomas Gregg, *The Prophet of Palmyra: Mormonism Reviewed and Ex-*

pretty feeble. Nothing there [was] worth contending with.”<sup>56</sup>

However, regardless of its problems of credibility, it does not appear that Sarah Pratt's claim affected the Prophet during his lifetime. Current research confirms that it was unknown during the 1830s. Probably Wyl in his 1886 book was the first to make the allegation.

### PRESENTIA HUNTINGTON BUELL

Fawn Brodie also accuses Joseph Smith of fathering a child in 1839 (with or without a prior marriage ceremony) with Presendia<sup>57</sup> Huntington Buell, then the wife of Norman Buell, a sometime Mormon.<sup>58</sup> Brodie asserts that Oliver Norman Buell, born January 31, 1840, was Joseph's son:

The extreme informality attending Joseph's earliest marriages (at least as it appears in the available records) is even more evident in the story of the prophet's relationship with Presendia Huntington Buell. During the Missouri troubles of 1838–39 her husband, Norman Buell, temporarily left the church. About this time Presendia bore a son. She admitted later that she did not know whether Norman Buell or the prophet was the father. But the physiognomy revealed in a rare photograph of Oliver Buell seems to weight the balance overwhelmingly on the side of Joseph's paternity.<sup>59</sup>

It is true that the photographs Brodie displays show a resemblance between Oliver Norman Buell and some of the sons of Joseph

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*amed in the Life, Character, and Career of its Founder* (New York: John B. Alden, 1890), 504.

<sup>56</sup>Richard L. Bushman, Email to Brian Hales, August 23, 2007.

<sup>57</sup>Martha Sonntag Bradley and Mary Brown Firmage Woodward, *Four Zinas: A Story of Mothers and Daughters on the Mormon Frontier* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), xxiii note 1, comment: “The spelling of Presendia appears in a variety of forms in both legal and personal documents—Presenda, Presendia, [and] Precindia among others.” In 1869 she signed an affidavit as Presendia. Joseph F. Smith, Affidavit Books, 1:7, 4:7. The “i” is clearer in 4:7 than in 1:7.

<sup>58</sup>Presenda Huntington was sealed to Joseph Smith on December 11, 1841. Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, 1:19.

<sup>59</sup>Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 301–2.

and Emma Smith.<sup>60</sup> Compton observes: "It would help to have pictures of Norman Buell and George Buell [another son of Presendia] to see if there were family resemblances there."<sup>61</sup> Despite the obviously subjective nature of a photographic resemblance to Joseph Smith (of whom no photograph and few other contemporary images exist), Brodie was so confident that Joseph Smith was Oliver's biological father that she wrote to fellow historian Dale Morgan in 1945: "If Oliver Buell isn't a Smith, then I'm no Brimhall."<sup>62</sup>

However, significant problems exist that undercut the credibility of this assertion. Presendia's "admission" that she did not know who fathered her child is both third-hand and indirect. Mary Ettie V. Smith (b. 1827) was the sister of Howard Coray, who served as a clerk to Joseph Smith. The Coray family were converted in Perry, Pike County, Illinois, in 1840 and moved to Nauvoo. Ettie wrote in 1860: "I heard the latter woman [Presendia] say afterwards in Utah, that she did not know whether Mr. Buell [sic] or the Prophet was the father of her son."<sup>63</sup> She says that she heard this information directly from Presendia; but like Lucinda Harris's alleged boast to Sarah Pratt, such a statement would be surprising in the context of the time. Issues regarding sexuality or implied sexuality were seldom voiced, especially to strangers. Compton writes skeptically: "One wonders if Presendia would have said such a thing. Talk of sexuality was avoided by the Victorian, puritanical Mormons; in diaries, the word 'pregnant' or 'ex-

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., two photos immediately preceding p. 299.

<sup>61</sup>Compton, "Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith's Plural Wives and Polygamy," 167.

<sup>62</sup>Fawn Brodie, Letter to Dale Morgan, March 24, 1945, quoted in Newell G. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer's Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 97. Fawn Brodie's mother's surname was Brimhall. Morgan responded skeptically: "Your chain of reasoning looks logical, but it is attended by a string of ifs all along the line . . . and the probability of error increases as the chain of reasoning lengthens." Ibid. See also Compton, "Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith's Plural Wives and Polygamy," 166.

<sup>63</sup>Nelson Winch Green, ed., *Fifteen Years among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith* (New York: D. W. Evans, 1860), 35. Brodie quotes her in *No Man Knows My History*, 301.

pecting' is never or rarely used."<sup>64</sup> In addition, there is nothing in Presendia's writings or history to support an intimate friendship with Mary Ettie where such a conversation might naturally occur. Stanley S. Ivins, arguably the most extensive researcher on early Mormon polygamy, dismissed Mary Ettie V. Smith's report as "inaccurate and of no value."<sup>65</sup> Similarly, anti-Mormon writer Fanny Stenhouse described Ettie Smith in 1875 as "a lady who wrote very many years ago and in her writings, so mixed up fiction with what was true, that it was difficult to determine where the one ended and the other began."<sup>66</sup>

As an example of Mary Ettie's confusion, only ten pages later she states that Presendia Buell became pregnant with Joseph Smith's child while she was living "at Lima, Illinois."<sup>67</sup> If she is remembering this detail correctly, then the son Presendia allegedly referred to could only have been Oliver's younger brother, John Hyrum, born July 13, 1843, at Lima, Illinois, three years after Presendia and Norman left Missouri.

Born January 31, 1840, Oliver would have been conceived approximately May 10, 1839. The chronology and geographical locations of Joseph and Presendia pose important problems with Brodie's assertions. Joseph Smith's Missouri jailors allowed him to escape on April 16, 1839.<sup>68</sup> At that time he was about twenty-five miles southeast of Adam-ondi-Ahman, traveling with a sheriff and deputies to

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<sup>64</sup>Compton, "Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith's Plural Wives and Polygamy," 166.

<sup>65</sup>Stanley S. Ivins, Notebook 4, p. 63, Ivins Collection, Utah State Historical Society.

<sup>66</sup>Fanny Stenhouse, *"Tell It All": The Story of a Life's Experiences in Mormonism* (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington & Co., 1875), 618.

<sup>67</sup>Green, *Fifteen Years among the Mormons*, 45.

<sup>68</sup>B. H. Roberts adds a footnote in *History of the Church*, 3:321, quoting Hyrum Smith, Affidavit, made before the municipal court of Nauvoo, July 1, 1843: "There we bought a jug of whisky, with which we treated the company, and while there the sheriff showed us the mittimus before referred to, without date or signature, and said that Judge Birch told him never to carry us to Boone county, and never to show the mittimus; and, said he, I shall take a good drink of grog, and go to bed, and you may do as you have a mind to. Three others of the guards drank pretty freely of the whisky, sweetened with honey. They also went to bed, and were soon asleep and the other guard went along with us, and helped to saddle the horses. Two of us

ward Boone County in central Missouri. Brodie writes incorrectly: "Joseph's journal entries make it clear that after his escape he was mingling with the last Mormon group to leave Far West, which included the Huntington family."<sup>69</sup> In fact, Joseph Smith's journals contain no entries for the April 16–22 period.<sup>70</sup>

Inaccurately, Brodie assumes that immediately after gaining his freedom, Joseph went west (not east to Illinois) through the Missouri countryside to join Church members at Far West. As an escaped prisoner, he was risking his freedom and his life. The previous fall, Mormons had been slain at the Battle of Crooked River and Haun's Mill. Others had been beaten with clubs and whipped. Neither is there evidence that Presendia was in Far West at that time. Regardless, according to Brodie, the Prophet allegedly fathered her child (with or without a marriage ceremony). According to Brodie's reconstruction of the events, Joseph then backtracked to flee from the state, arriving in Quincy on April 22. Brodie's timetable also assumes that Oliver was two to three weeks premature at birth.

Furthermore, Joseph was not traveling alone. The *History of the Church* records for April 17, 1839: "We prosecuted our journey towards Illinois, keeping off from the main road as much as possible, which impeded our progress."<sup>71</sup> Hyrum Smith recalled that upon escaping: "Two of us mounted the horses, and the other three started on foot, and we took our change of venue for the State of Illinois; and in the course of nine or ten days arrived safely at Quincy, Adams county, where we found our families in a state of poverty, although in good health."<sup>72</sup>

For the rest of April and May 1839, Joseph remained in Illinois, while Presendia lived at Fishing River, in Ray County, Missouri, over 100 miles away. At that point, Norman Buell was no longer affiliated with the Church and operated a carding mill on Fishing River until

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mounted the horses, and the other three started on foot, and we took our change of venue for the State of Illinois."

<sup>69</sup>Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 461–62.

<sup>70</sup>Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:318; Faulring, *An American Prophet's Record*, 229, 234.

<sup>71</sup>*History of the Church*, 3:322.

<sup>72</sup>Hyrum Smith, Affidavit, July 1, 1843, in *History of the Church*, 3:321 footnote.

the fall of 1840.<sup>73</sup>

After critiquing Fawn Brodie's assessment of Oliver's conception, Todd Compton concludes: "Every link in Brodie's position that Oliver Buell was Joseph Smith's son is implausible, improbable, or impossible. There is no good evidence that Oliver Buell was the son of Joseph Smith, and thus there is no good evidence that Joseph had an affair with Presendia Buell before he married her in 1841."<sup>74</sup>

And conclusively, in 2007 genetics researcher Ugo Perego performed DNA testing on descendants of Oliver N. Buell, demonstrating a 57.5 percent disparity between the DNA loci of Joseph Smith and Oliver's male descendants on the Y-chromosome. This lack of correlation shows conclusively that Joseph Smith could not have been Oliver Norman Buell's father.<sup>75</sup> Taken together, this evidence supports the conclusion that there is virtually no likelihood that Joseph Smith was involved with Presendia in 1839.

#### FANNY ALGER

Undoubtedly the most important of the nine allegations listed above is Joseph Smith's relationship with Fanny Alger. Born in September 20, 1816, Fanny Alger was one of ten children born to Samuel Alger and Clarissa Hancock Alger. As a result of my evaluation of the evidence, I have concluded that Fanny was, in fact, the first plural wife of Joseph Smith and the only authorized polygamous relationship contracted during the Kirtland period by any Church member. Also I believe that very few people at the time were apprised of the details of the plural marriage, thus setting the stage for the spread of rumors that labeled the association as adultery.

Current research has identified twenty documents that refer to Joseph Smith's relationship with Fanny Alger in some way.<sup>76</sup> The numbered list below is arranged from the earliest reference to the latest, providing a brief summary of the writer or speaker's position (dis-

<sup>73</sup>Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 461–62.

<sup>74</sup>Compton, "Fawn Brodie on Joseph Smith's Plural Wives and Polygamy," 171.

<sup>75</sup>Ugo A. Perego, Jayne E. Ekins, and Scott R. Woodward, "Resolving the Paternities of Oliver N. Buell and Mosiah L. Hancock through DNA," *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 28 (2008), 128–36.

<sup>76</sup>I have eliminated from consideration a late nineteenth-century statement by Alfred Holbrook (b. 1816), an accomplished educator who ap-

cussed more fully below), and a complete citation.

1. Oliver Cowdery (January 21, 1838). Oliver did not believe that the relationship was a divinely ordained plural marriage, referring to it in tones of disgust as “a dirty, nasty, filthy affair.” Letter to Warren Cowdery, January 21, 1838, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

2. Ebenezer Robinson (April 12, 1838), clerk in Far West, recorded a high council meeting in which Joseph Smith explained, apparently to the council’s full satisfaction, a charge of “girl business,” probably an accusation of adultery. “Polygamy,” “plural marriage,” or “spiritual wifery” do not appear in the minutes. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 167–68.

3. Joseph Smith (July 1838) included several statements designed to rebut rumors of adultery. The untitled article does not mention polygamy. *Elder’s Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 45.

4. Fanny Brewer (1842) was quoted as denouncing “unlawful intercourse” between Joseph and a young girl. Although her statement has become a standard reference on Kirtland polygamy, she alleges adultery, not plural marriage. She is quoted in John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism* (Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842), 85.

5. William McLellin (1872). Writing to Joseph Smith III, McLellin quotes Frederick G. Williams and Emma Smith as evidence that Joseph was involved with “a hired girl” named “Miss Hill” and with Fanny Alger “in a barn.” It is not clear whether he is describing one or two relationships. Letter to Joseph Smith III, July 1872, Com-

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parently paid a visit to Kirtland, Ohio, in 1837 and included his recollections in his autobiography entitled: *Reminiscences of the Happy Life of a Teacher* (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing, 1885), 223–24: “I do not think, however, that Mr. Rigdon ever favored the idea of polygamy. . . . The doctrine was first broached in Kirtland by the revelation of Joe Smith, with reference to the daughter of one of the old inhabitants of Kirtland, who was sealed to Joe as his spiritual wife. It was not the prevalent doctrine, nor generally received as binding upon other persons than those who were called by a distinct revelation.” While Holbrook could be referring to Fanny Alger, the Alger family had settled in 1820 in Ashtabula, Ohio, some forty miles away, which would not qualify them as “old inhabitants of Kirtland.”



munity of Christ Archives.

6. William McLellin (1875) mentions a single relationship in which Joseph Smith was “sealed to a hired girl . . . in a barn.” Quoted by J. H. Beadle, “Jackson County,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 6, 1875, 4.

7. Martin Harris (1875) mentioned neither polygamy nor adultery, but “improper proposals” that Joseph made to “a servant girl.” Quoted in Anthony Metcalf, *Ten Years before the Mast* (Malad, Ida.: Metcalf, 1888), 72.

8. Ann Eliza Webb Young (1875) undoubtedly quoting her parents (Chauncy and Eliza Jane Webb) refers to a “sealing” to a girl named “Fanny” (surname of Alger not included) without mentioning adultery. *Wife No. 19, or the Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism, and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices, and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy* (Hartford, Conn: Dustin, Gilman & Co., 1875), 66–67.

9. Eliza Jane Churchill Webb (April 1876) was Ann Eliza’s mother. Fanny Alger reportedly lived with the family for a few weeks after leaving the Smith home. Eliza and Chauncy consistently referred to the relationship as a “sealing” and did not mention adultery. Eliza J. Webb [Eliza Jane Churchill Webb], Lockport, New York, to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876, P21, f11, item 7, 8, Community of Christ Archives.<sup>77</sup>

10. Eliza Jane Churchill Webb (May 1876). Eliza Jane repeated the same general information in writing to Mary Bond, May 4, 1876, P21, f11, item 9, Community of Christ Archives.

11. Historicus [pseud.]. This is the first published mention of Fanny Alger by name. The source of information may have been William McLellin, who died in 1883. “Sketches from the History of Polygamy: Joseph Smith’s [indecipherable] Revelations,” *Anti-Polygamy Standard* 2, no. 1 (April 1881): 1.

12. Clark Braden (1884), born in 1831, had no first-hand knowledge of his allegations and was motivated by polemical considerations and attracting publicity through sensational tactics. E. L. Kelley, and Clark Braden, *Public Discussion of the Issues between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Christ (Disciples)* (St. Louis: Clark Braden, 1884), 202.

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<sup>77</sup>Thanks to Ronald E. Romig and the Community of Christ Archives for locating the full transcript of these letters.

13. John Hawley (1885) refers to the relationship as a “sealing” in this second-hand, late account. John Hawley, *Autobiography*, January 1885, Community of Christ Archives, excerpts typed March 1982 by Lyndon Cook.

14. Alfred Holbrook (1885), who settled in the Kirtland area in 1837, would not have had firsthand knowledge of the events before that date. *Reminiscences of the Happy Life of a Teacher* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Elm Street Printing, 1885), 223–24.

15. Chauncy Webb (1886) spoke of a “sealing” that may have resulted in Fanny’s pregnancy. Quoted in Wilhelm von Wyl [pseud. for Wilhelm Ritter Von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits: or Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends: A Study Based on Facts and Documents* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), 57.

16. Andrew Jenson (before 1887), listed Fanny Alger as “one of the first wives Joseph married” on a biographical sheet titled “Alger, Fanny.” He does not identify his source. Document 10, n.d. [probably February–March 1887], Andrew Jenson Papers (ca. 1871–1942), MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16, LDS Church History Library.

17. Eliza R. Snow (before 1887), at Andrew Jenson’s invitation, identified Joseph Smith’s plural wives, among them Fanny Alger. Document 1, Andrew Jenson Papers (ca. 1871–1942), MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16, LDS Church History Library.

18. Andrew Jenson (July 1887) wrote: “Fanny Alger, one of the first plural wives sealed to the Prophet” for the first time in a Mormon periodical. He did not, however, give a date so few members may have dated it to the Kirtland period. Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 233.

19. Mosiah Hancock (1896) provides details of a marriage ceremony, doubtless quoting his father since Mosiah was born in 1834. Mosiah Hancock, *Autobiographical sketch*, 1896, LDS Church History Library.

20. Benjamin F. Johnson’s (1903) late recollection depicts the Joseph Smith–Fanny Alger relationship as the first plural marriage in the Church. Dean R. Zimmerman, ed., *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1976), 38–39.

An analysis of the various narratives shows that none is contemporary with 1835; thirteen were written at least thirty-seven years af-

ter the events occurred; ten of the accounts are second-hand.<sup>78</sup> Seven considered the relationship a plural marriage or sealing: Mosiah Hancock, the three Webbs (Chauncy, Eliza Jane, and Ann Eliza), John Hawley, Benjamin F. Johnson, and Andrew Jenson. Five considered it to be adultery: Oliver Cowdery, Fanny Brewer, William McLellin, Clark Braden, and "Historicus."

*The Eliza R. Snow Document*

Perhaps the most important new evidence to emerge is Eliza R. Snow's unequivocal inclusion of Fanny Alger among Joseph Smith's plural wives. Through the recent efforts of historians researching the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a large collection of previously uncataloged documents at the LDS Church History Library was made available for investigation. As a result, Don Bradley obtained access to a folder containing Andrew Jenson's research notes,<sup>79</sup> which he used to write "Plural Marriage," *Historical Record* 6 (July 1887): 6:219–40. Don has concluded that, as part of Jenson's own research, he first approached Malissa Lott and obtained information on thirteen of Joseph Smith's plural wives, writing their names on Document 1. He met with Eliza R. Snow who apparently took the paper into her own hands and penned thirteen additional names. Eliza's handwriting has many distinctive features and historian Jill Mulvay Derr, an expert on Eliza R. Snow, reviewed the document and concluded that the thirteen names have "every indication" of being penned personally by Eliza.<sup>80</sup> Clearly they are not in Andrew Jenson's handwriting. A second document in the collection dealing with Fanny Alger reads:

Alger, Fanny  
Joseph Smith's wife

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<sup>78</sup>See Richard Van Wagoner, "Joseph and Marriage," *Sunstone* 10, no. 9 (January 1986): 32–33. See also the summary in Todd Compton, "Truth, Honesty, and Moderation in Mormon History: A Response to Anderson, Faulring, and Bachman's Reviews of *In Sacred Loneliness*, section "The Date of Fanny Alger's Marriage," <http://www.geocities.com/athens/oracle/7207/rev.html> (accessed February 11, 2007).

<sup>79</sup>Documents 1–18, Andrew Jenson Papers, ca. 1871–1942, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16, LDS Church History Library.

<sup>80</sup>On July 25, 2008, Don Bradley, Jill Mulvay Derr, and I met at the LDS Church History Library to evaluate the documents where she made the comment; quoted by permission.

one of the first wives Joseph  
 married, ~~Emma made such a~~  
~~fuss about in~~  
 Sister \E R./ Snow was well acquainted  
 with her \as she/ ~~and~~ lived with the  
 Prophet at the time<sup>81</sup>

Bradley explains the significance of this information: (1) Not only did Snow actively participate in identifying Joseph Smith's plural wives but she may have served as Jenson's sole source on Fanny Alger. Indeed, Jenson's notes mention no second source, and the uniformity of his handwriting suggests that he produced the document at a single sitting. (2) Eliza was unquestionably knowledgeable, since she had lived in the Smith home during or near the time of Joseph's polygamous relationship with Fanny and when Emma expelled her. (3) Snow's testimony as a contemporary witness helps to break the scholarly deadlock about whether Joseph and Fanny were actually married as opposed to having an affair. If Snow had had any doubts whether the relationship was a marriage, she could simply have remained silent. It also demolishes the position, held by relatively few, that they had no relationship. (4) Snow remembered that Emma "made such a fuss" about it (for unknown reasons these words were crossed out presumably by Jenson), a reaction consistent with Emma's response to later relationships, including Snow's own plural sealing to Joseph.<sup>82</sup> He summarizes: "Eliza's late, but firsthand and friendly, testimony concurs on this point with Oliver Cowdery's hostile but roughly contemporaneous statements. When intimate friend and intimate foe

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<sup>81</sup>An unquoted portion of Jenson's notes (Document 10) suggests that Eliza knew of Fanny's later marriage and children, and also knew of "a brother Alger" in St. George.

<sup>82</sup>Probably because of Emma's outrage over the sealing, Fanny left Kirtland with her family in 1836 but disaffiliated with Mormonism and married another man on November 16, 1836. Jenson did not publish Eliza's information about Emma's "fuss" over Fanny. He also referred to the relationship as a "sealing," rather than a "marriage," a pattern he followed when he was aware that the woman was legally married to someone else during Joseph's lifetime. He also misrepresented Fanny as "a wife of Joseph the Prophet, who since his death married again in Indiana." Andrew Jenson, "Church Encyclopaedia," *Historical Record* 8 (December 1889): 942.

agree on the basic facts of Joseph Smith's behavior, we have reason to trust their accuracy."<sup>83</sup>

*More than One Woman Involved?*

Some researchers have observed inconsistency in details, suggesting that the various accounts describe more than one relationship.<sup>84</sup> William McLellin's 1872 letter to Joseph Smith III reported an 1847 visit to wife, Emma Smith and "a lengthy conversation with her . . . in the Mansion House."

I did not ask her to tell, but I told her some stories I had heard. And she told me whether I was properly informed. Dr. F. G. Williams practiced with me in Clay Co. Mo. during the latter part of 1838. And he told me that at your birth your father committed an act with a Miss Hill—a hired girl. Emma saw him, and spoke to him. He desisted, but Mrs. Smith refused to be satisfied. He called in Dr. Williams, O. Cowdery, and S. Rigdon to reconcile Emma. But she told them just as the circumstances took place. He found he was caught. He confessed humbly, and begged forgiveness. Emma and all forgave him. She told me this story was true!! Again I told her I heard that one night she missed Joseph and Fanny Alger. She went to the barn and saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through a crack and saw the transaction!!! She told me this story too was verily true.<sup>85</sup>

McLellin appears to be telling about two separate episodes of marital infidelity, one with Fanny Alger and a second with a "Miss Hill." However, four points suggest that McLellin was telling only one story and simply became confused in his attempt to persuade Joseph's son that his father had violated his marriage vows. First, Richard Lloyd Anderson states: "I cannot find a possible 'Miss Hill' in

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<sup>83</sup>Don Bradley, Analysis of Documents 1–18, Andrew Jenson Papers MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16; copy in my possession; used by permission.

<sup>84</sup>See, for example, Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 464, and H. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816–1844* (Longwood, Fla.: Xulon Press, 2005), 450–55.

<sup>85</sup>William E. McLellin, Letter to Joseph Smith III, July [no date], 1872, Community of Christ Archives; photocopy in LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City. See also Robert D. Hutchins, "Joseph Smith III: Moderate Mormon" (M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, 1977), 79–81.

Kirtland, nor is there any verification of the story.”<sup>86</sup> I have also found no additional evidence that Joseph Smith had a relationship with a woman named “Hill” at any time during his lifetime including the years spent in Kirtland.

Second, according to McLellin, Emma saw Joseph with both “Miss Hill” and “Fanny.” It seems unlikely that, after once repenting “humbly” and being forgiven for a first relationship, Joseph would have soon engaged in the same behavior with a second woman and been discovered in the exact same manner.

Third, as the quoted passage indicates, McLellin reports that Joseph met Fanny Alger “in a barn.” Three years after this letter was written, a sensationalist newspaperman, J. H. Beadle, interviewed McLellin on September 25, 1875. Beadle reported: “He [McLellin] also informed me of the spot where the first well authenticated case of polygamy took place, in which Joseph Smith was ‘sealed’ to the hired girl. The ‘sealing’ took place in a barn on the hay mow, and was witnessed by Mrs. Smith through a crack in the door!”<sup>87</sup> The story that McLellin, who was then seventy-nine, was told of a single woman: a “hired girl” (like “Miss Hill”) who met Joseph “in a barn” (like Fanny Alger).<sup>88</sup> Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery hypothesize that the aging McLellin “confused the hired girl, Fanny Alger, with Fanny Hill of John Cleland’s sensational 1749 novel and came up with the hired girl, Miss Hill.”<sup>89</sup>

Fourth, if McLellin had information on more than one alleged sexual impropriety, it seems likely that he would have shared it in other venues than one single confusing reference in his private 1872 letter. Beadle, for example, would have welcomed two examples of

<sup>86</sup>Richard A. Anderson, Letter to Dawn Comfort, May 9–15, 1998, photocopy of letter in Scott H. Faulring Papers, Box 93, fds. 1–3 (accn #2316), Marriott Library.

<sup>87</sup>J[ohn]. H[anson]. Beadle, “Jackson County,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 6, 1875, 4. McLellin also told Beadle that, when he visited Emma in 1847, “she then and there declared on her honor that it was a fact—‘saw it with her own eyes.’”

<sup>88</sup>Beadle, “Jackson County,” 4. Five years earlier, Beadle had published the lurid exposé *Life in Utah: Or, the Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism* (Philadelphia: National Publishing, 1870).

<sup>89</sup>Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1984), 66.

Kirtland-period polygamy.

After evaluating all available evidence, I conclude that Joseph Smith had a relationship with a single woman (Fanny Alger) in Kirtland in the mid-1830s. The variations in the documents are not unexpected.

### *Why Fanny Alger?*

Two closely linked questions must be considered: Why any relation with a woman other than his wife, and, in that case, why Fanny Alger? To consider the second question first, proximity may have played a role. She was close to the family, working as a hired girl, and reportedly young and attractive. However, Joseph may have considered other possibilities as well. Benjamin F. Johnson, in his late reminiscence, stated: "In talking with my mother . . . [Joseph Smith] told her that when the Lord required him to move in plural marriage, that his first thought was to come and ask her for some of her daughters; and I can now understand that the period alluded to was at Kirtland, where she had three unmarried daughters at home."<sup>90</sup>

### *Dating the Relationship*

Due to inadequacies in the documentary records, historians have assigned the marriage or relationship between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger to several different years.<sup>91</sup> Three scholars have suggested 1833 or perhaps even earlier.<sup>92</sup> Martin Harris, in a second-hand account from an 1875 interview, dates it "in or about the

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<sup>90</sup>Benjamin Johnson, *My Life's Review* (Rpt., Mesa, Ariz.: 21st Century Printing, 1992), 93.

<sup>91</sup>Van Wagoner, "Joseph and Marriage," 32-33. See also the summary in Compton, "Truth, Honesty and Moderation in Mormon History," section "The Date of Fanny Alger's Marriage."

<sup>92</sup>George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 22, 38, 222; Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 33; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 45, 587. Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 323, suggests that Joseph's involvement with Fanny Alger might have been "as early as 1831" but does not document the statement.



year 1833.”<sup>93</sup> William McLellin linked the episode to Joseph Smith III’s birth, which occurred on November 6, 1832.<sup>94</sup> Probably the strongest evidence for an 1833 marriage is circumstantial. Mosiah Hancock’s autobiographical sketch written in 1896 reports that, sometime in the early 1830s, Joseph told Mosiah’s father, Levi: “I want to make a bargain with you. If you will get Fanny Alger for me for a wife you may have Clarissa Reed.” Levi Hancock married Clarissa Reed on March 29, 1833. Todd Compton hypothesizes that the two marriages occurred close to each other, with Joseph’s marriage to Fanny taking place “in February or March 1833.”<sup>95</sup>

Other writers date the marriage to the 1835–36 period, which agrees with my research.<sup>96</sup> Marquardt dates this relationship “prior to the fall of 1836.” In an October 19, 1995, letter to Gary J. Bergera, Marquardt also observed: “Concerning Fanny Alger I have compiled some material relating to what has been said concerning her and Joseph Smith. . . . It appears that whatever occurred with Fanny Alger probably happened in the year 1836 with Fanny leaving Kirtland, Ohio. This year is closer to the events relating to Oliver Cowdery since Cowdery had discussed the matter with Joseph Smith and others in

<sup>93</sup>Martin Harris, quoted in Metcalf, *Ten Years before the Mast*, 72.

<sup>94</sup>William E. McLellin, M.D. to Joseph Smith III, July 1872, Community of Christ Archives. An anonymous writer, perhaps McLellin himself, wrote similarly, dating the event to “the time the present Joseph Smith [III] was an infant.” Historicus [pseud.], “Sketches from the History of Polygamy: Joseph Smith’s [indecipherable] Revelations,” *Anti-Polygamy Standard* 2, no. 1 (April 1881): 1.

<sup>95</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 33. See also Todd Compton, “Fanny Alger Smith Custer: Mormonism’s First Plural Wife?” *Journal of Mormon History* 22 (Spring 1996): 178, 195.

<sup>96</sup>Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1977), 187–88; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, The Mormons, and The Oneida Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 137–38; Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 66; Kimball Young, *Isn’t One Wife Enough?* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1954), 91. Particularly convincing is the research of Don Bradley. See his manuscript in progress “The Joseph Smith-Fanny Alger Relationships: Arguments for an 1836 Date” (working title).

the summer and fall of 1837.”<sup>97</sup> In a 1903 letter, the sixty-nine-year-old Benjamin F. Johnson dated the marriage to 1835.<sup>98</sup> After Fanny Alger left the Smith home, she reportedly stayed with Chauncy Webb and Eliza Jane Churchill Webb (Ann Eliza Webb Young’s parents). Eliza Jane wrote to a correspondent: “Fanny Alger’s mother says Fanny was sealed to Joseph by Oliver Cowdery in Kirtland in 1835—or 6.”<sup>99</sup> Mary Elizabeth Rollins at age eighty-six stated that Joseph told her an angel came three times commanding him to practice polygamy. The first of these visits according to Mary Elizabeth occurred in 1834: “[Joseph Smith] said God gave him a commandment in 1834, to take other wives besides Emma.”<sup>100</sup> Richard Van Wagoner asserts that it was not until 1835 that Fanny became the Smiths’ hired girl and

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<sup>97</sup>Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816–1844*, 451; H. Michael Marquardt, Letter to Gary J. Bergera, October 19, 1885, in H. Michael Marquardt Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah; photocopy of letter in my possession; used by permission.

<sup>98</sup>Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 38–39.

<sup>99</sup>Eliza Jane Churchill Webb, Letter to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876, Myron H. Bond Collection, P21 f11, Community of Christ Library-Archives.

<sup>100</sup>Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Letter to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, quoted in J. D. Stead, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Brighamism Exposed* (Lamoni, Iowa: RLDS Church, 1911), 217–18. See also Lightner, “Remarks, April 14, 1905, Brigham Young University,” MSS 363, fd. 6, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University (hereafter Perry Special Collections). Lightner also wrote: “[Joseph Smith] said I was the first woman God commanded him to take as a plural wife in 1834. He was very much frightened about [it] until the angel appeared to him three times.” Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Summer 1905, typescript, MS 282, LDS Church History Library. On another occasion, she recalled: “In 1834 [Joseph Smith] was commanded to take me for a wife. I was a thousand miles from him. He got afraid.” Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Statement, signed February 8, 1902,” original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne, Salt Lake City, photocopy of typescript in Juanita Brooks Papers, MSB 103, Box 16, fd. 13, Utah State Historical Society; photocopy also in Vesta Crawford Papers, MS 125, Box 1, fd. 11, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

lived in the Smith home.<sup>101</sup> Mark Lyman Staker informally constructs this scenario:

Mary Johnson [daughter of John and Alice [Elsa] Johnson, born in 1818] lived in the Smith home (Whitney Store) to provide assistance to Emma. She died March 30, 1833. Her death was unexpected and shook up the family. I believe Fanny Alger replaced Mary as household help for Emma. If that's the case, it is unlikely Fanny lived with the family while they were living at the store, and it is unlikely she assisted them before mid-1833. She most likely assisted between 1834 and 1836, in their home up near the temple. After that, Eliza R. Snow moved into the house on the hill and taught school for Joseph's children in the rear portion of the home.<sup>102</sup>

Joseph and Emma were living with other families in very cramped quarters until mid-1834 when they finally obtained their own residence. It seems next to impossible for Joseph and Fanny to have concealed a sexual relationship (plural marriage) from Emma, especially for as long as three years (which would be required by a marriage date of 1833 or earlier), and strongly improbable that Emma Smith would have tolerated such a relationship had she known about it. Available evidence suggests that as soon as Emma found out about the marriage, she sent Fanny out of the house.

### *Marriage or Affair?*

Benjamin F. Johnson, a close friend of Joseph Smith from the Kirtland period on, recalled in 1903:

And now as to your question, "How early did the Prophet Joseph practice polygamy?" . . . In 1835, at Kirtland, I learned from my sister's husband, Lyman R. Sherman,<sup>103</sup> who was close to the Prophet, and received it from him, "that the ancient order of Plural Marriage was again to be practiced by the Church." This, at the time did

<sup>101</sup>Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 14. He provides no reference for this conclusion. See also Newell and Avery, *Mormon Enigma*, 66; Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, "Review of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, by Todd M. Compton," in *FARMS Review of Books* (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, October 2, 1998), 78–79.

<sup>102</sup>Mark L. Staker, Email to Brian Hales, September 9, 2008.

<sup>103</sup>Sherman was called by Joseph Smith as an apostle but died before learning of the calling. See Lyndon W. Cook, "Lyman Sherman—Man of

not impress my mind deeply, although there lived then with his family (the Prophet's) a neighbor's daughter, Fannie Alger, a very nice and comely young woman about my own age, toward whom not only myself, but every one, seemed partial, for the amiability for her character; and it was whispered even then that Joseph loved her.<sup>104</sup>

According to Mosiah Hancock, writing in 1896, Joseph did not approach Fanny directly. Rather, he enlisted Levi Hancock, the brother-in-law of Fanny's father, to serve as an intermediary.<sup>105</sup> Levi asked Samuel Alger:

"Samuel, the Prophet Joseph loves your daughter Fanny and wishes her for a wife. What say you?" Uncle Sam says, "Go and talk to the old woman [Levi's sister and Fanny's mother] about it. Twill be as she says." Father goes to his sister and said, "Clarissy, Brother Joseph the Prophet of the most high God loves Fanny and wishes her for a wife. What say you?" Said she, "Go and talk to Fanny. It will be all right with me." Father goes to Fanny and said, "Fanny, Brother Joseph the Prophet loves you and wishes you for a wife. Will you be his wife?" "I will Levi," said she. Father takes Fanny to Joseph and said, "Brother Joseph I have been successful in my mission." Father gave her to Jo-

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God, Would-Be Apostle," *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (1978): 121.

<sup>104</sup>Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 38; punctuation and spelling standardized.

<sup>105</sup>A seemingly irresolvable question involves Fanny Alger's understanding of her relationship with the Joseph Smith. No historical data have been discovered providing her views. Even if a marriage ceremony was performed, did she understand any of the underlying doctrines concerning polygamy as later taught in Nauvoo? It seems unlikely that discussions of eternal sealings, the new and everlasting covenant of marriage, or a patriarchal priesthood order would have accompanied her introduction to plural marriage. Such doctrines were not disclosed until 1840. Was her willingness to proceed primarily based upon her faith in Joseph's prophetic calling? What role did her understanding that Old Testament plural marriage and the possible need to restore it play? Did Fanny receive a spiritual conversion experience, like those described by many women later in Nauvoo? What role, if any, did attraction play in forming the union? Did Joseph Smith tell Fanny about the angelic command? Perhaps additional manuscript documentation will be discovered in the future to help discern the details of this relationship.

seph, repeating the ceremony as Joseph repeated to him.”<sup>106</sup>

Several authors have written that there was no marriage, thus dismissing this narrative as apocryphal. Historian Janet Ellingson considers the Mosiah Hancock account to be “a bit much to swallow.” She apparently considers Joseph and Fanny’s relationship as a sexual liaison: “There is no contemporary evidence, in either Smith’s words or actions, that he thought of it as a marriage.”<sup>107</sup> Technically this is true, because no “contemporary evidence” of any kind exists “in either Smith’s words or actions” concerning the incident. In fact, nothing is recorded referring to the relationship until 1838. However, the

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<sup>106</sup>Levi Ward Hancock, “Autobiography with Additions in 1896 by Mosiah Hancock,” 63, MS 570, LDS Church History Library, punctuation and spelling standardized; cited portion written by Mosiah. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 32. I am indebted to Compton who discovered that both published versions of the journal are incomplete, having had all references to the Fanny Alger marriage removed. These published versions are *The Mosiah Hancock Journal* (Salt Lake City: Pioneer Press, n.d.), 74 pp., and *The Levi Hancock Journal* (N.p., n.d.), 58 pp. See also Compton, “Fanny Alger Smith Custer: Mormonism’s First Plural Wife?” 175 note 3. Mosiah Hancock, “Correspondence: The Prophet Joseph—Some of His Sayings,” *Deseret News*, February 27, 1884, 15, wrote: “Concerning the doctrine of celestial marriage the Prophet told my father [Levi] in the days of Kirtland, that it was the will of the Lord for His servants who were faithful to step forth in that order. But said Brother Joseph, ‘Brother Levi, if I should make known to my brethren what God has made known to me they would seek my life.’”

<sup>107</sup>Janet Ellingson, “Alger Marriage Questioned,” Letter, *Journal of Mormon History* 23 (Spring 1997), vi–vii. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 181–82, and Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 4, 13, also consider the story apocryphal and dismiss the possibility that a form of marriage occurred. Interestingly, Van Wagoner provided this commentary: “If one views Joseph Smith’s introduction of polygamy as a reversion to Old Testament practice rather than an expansion of Christianity, then it is not so shocking to consider the possibility of no formal ceremony being performed for the women prior to Louisa Beeman. No where in the Old Testament is a marriage ceremony mentioned. The custom seemed to be that after an initial contract between the two parties, the husband-to-be, merely ‘took her according to the Law of Moses and of Israel.’” Richard Van Wagoner, Letter to Newell, n.d., Box 11, fd. 4, Linda King Newell Collection, Marriott Library. The interior quotation does not occur in this form anywhere in the Old Testament.

lack of contemporary evidence from Joseph Smith does not support either interpretation.

Ellingson also comments, "In later nineteenth-century Utah, the Hancock and Alger families had everything to gain by remembering and promoting Fanny's relationship with Smith as a celestial polygamous marriage."<sup>108</sup> Again, this is probably true during the Utah period. But if there was no marriage in 1835, it seems unlikely that Fanny's parents, who apparently understood what was happening, would have continued to follow the Prophet in view of such obviously hypocritical behavior. According to Eliza Jane Churchill Webb, Fanny's mother told her: "Fanny was sealed to Joseph."<sup>109</sup> Supporting the idea that they continued to accept Joseph as prophet, they left for Missouri in September 1836, accompanied by Fanny.<sup>110</sup> Two months later in Wayne County, Indiana, Fanny married Solomon Custer on November 16.<sup>111</sup> Todd Compton comments: "One can only speculate on Fanny's motives for marrying a non-Mormon, after a courtship

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<sup>108</sup>Ellingson, "Alger Marriage Questioned," vi–vii.

<sup>109</sup>Webb, Letter to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876.

<sup>110</sup>Mosiah Hancock also adds an additional statement regarding Fanny Alger and the "apostates": "As time progressed the Apostates thought they had a good hold on Joseph because of Fanny and some of the smart ones confined her in an upper room of the [Kirtland] Temple determined that the Prophet should be settled according to their notions Brother Joseph came to Father and said 'Brother Levi what can be done'?—There being a wagon and a dry goods Box close by and Joseph being strong and Father active Father soon gained the window Sill and Fanny was soon on the ground Father mounts his horse with Fanny behind him and although dark they were in New Lyme forty five miles distant." Mosiah Hancock, "Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock with additions by Mosiah Hancock," 64. This account is confusing in two ways. The second-story windows of the Kirtland Temple are at least twenty feet off the ground, too high to allow the safe, stealthy exit that Mosiah describes. Second, Oliver Cowdery, who seemed to be a primary source of complaint, would not have been classified with any "apostate" group in mid-1836.

<sup>111</sup>"The clerk recorded: 'Dublin November 16th, 1836 This day married by me Levi Eastridge a Justice of the Peace for Wayne County and State of Indiana Mr Solomon Custer and Miss Fanny Alger both of this town.' Wayne County, Indiana, marriage license, photocopy of holograph in my possession. Benjamin Johnson reported this marriage but misdates it by

that could have only been a matter of weeks. Perhaps she felt that Smith had abandoned her after Emma ejected her from the household. It is also possible that she simply fell in love with Solomon, who, unlike Smith, was her own age—nineteen.”<sup>112</sup>

Fanny stayed in Wayne County and raised a large family, while her parents and at least one brother, John, continued on to Missouri, then followed the body of the Saints to Nauvoo in 1839. They also joined the migration west in 1846, and settled in southern Utah where they died in the 1870s.<sup>113</sup> This course would be less likely if Joseph had violated his own publicly declared standards of sexual morality with their daughter. Nothing in Joseph’s behavior with their daughter seemed to weaken the Algers’ faith in the restoration. To the contrary, according to Ann Eliza Webb Young, Fanny’s parents considered “it the highest honor to have their daughter adopted into the Prophet’s family, and her mother has always claimed that she was sealed to Joseph.”<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, Benjamin F. Johnson recalled that Apostle Heber C. Kimball introduced Fanny’s brother, John, as

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more than a year: “Soon after the Prophet’s flight in [the] winter of 1837 and 1838 [actually January 1838], the Alger family left for the west and stopping in Indiana for a time, Fanny soon married one of the citizens there.” Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 33.

<sup>112</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 37.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, 37, 40.

<sup>114</sup>Young, *Wife Number 19*, 67; see also Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 232. Susa Young Gates reports as a family tradition: “Father and the Twelve Apostles felt the death of the Prophet far more keenly than did the people; and as we believe that children are a part of the glory we inherit hereafter, it seemed a cruel thing that the beloved leader and Prophet should be stricken down in the prime of life, and left without issue in this Church. Father went to those noble women who had accepted the principle of celestial marriage with the Prophet as their husband, and he told them he and his brethren stood ready to offer themselves to them as husbands for time, and the widows might choose for themselves. Four of these young widows chose father, and he accepted the charge thus laid upon him. He felt the grand old Hebrew impulse, to be himself the instrument by which posterity for his dead brother might be born in this life.” “Joseph Smith ‘Left Without Issue in this Church,’” typescript, Susa Young Gates Collection, MS 8884, LDS Church History Library; microfilm of holograph, Utah State Historical Society, Reel 9, box 12, fd. 2. An Alger family tradition states: “Brigham



"brother of the Prophet Joseph's first Plural wife."<sup>115</sup> Johnson's memory is faulty in that the introduction reportedly occurred "in the Saint George Temple," since Kimball died before it was completed.

As for Fanny herself, according to Benjamin Johnson, "She did not turn from the Church nor from her friendship for the Prophet while she lived." Late in life she reportedly rebuffed questions about her relationship with Joseph Smith: "That is all a matter of my own, and I have nothing to communicate."<sup>116</sup> Johnson does not explain the source of his information. Research supports that she joined the Universalist Church in 1874 and remained a member until her death in 1889.<sup>117</sup>

The Mosiah Hancock narrative is not without its problems. He was born in 1834 and consequently could not have been an eye witness or participant. Furthermore, he recounted the story decades later in 1896. Todd Compton provides this useful assessment: "Mosiah's first-hand reminiscences are admittedly subject to the strengths and weaknesses generally found in Mormon and other autobiographies: inaccuracies in dates, misremembered events, an easy willingness to accept the miraculous, and a tendency to override idealize oneself or a hero such as Joseph Smith. Nevertheless, I accept it as generally reliable, providing accurate information about his own life, his family's life, and

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Young, accompanied by Fanny's brother, John Alger, did come to Indiana, before Fanny married Solomon Custer, to ask her to marry him. She answered him by saying, 'You are a fine young man but I want to be an only wife.'" Jo Kester, Email to Allan Alger, March 4, 2003, printout in my possession. It seems the only reason Brigham would have visited Fanny, if any of the traditions are true, would be to follow through with his commission to offer himself as a possible husband, for "time" to Joseph Smith's plural wives and that Fanny was indeed married to the Prophet.

<sup>115</sup>Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 45.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 33, punctuation and spelling standardized. The Lima Branch (Illinois) of the Church organized October 23, 1842, lists Fanny Custer as a member, but whether she was physically present there is not known. Emer Harris's Book of Patriarchal Blessings, no. 210, cited in Van Wagoner, Letter to Newell, n.d., Newell Collection, Marriott Library.

<sup>117</sup><http://www.algerclan.org/getperson.php?personID=1135&tree=alger> (accessed September 6, 2008).

Mormonism in Kirtland, Nauvoo and Salt Lake City.”<sup>118</sup>

The strengths of Mosiah’s account are its consistency with some of Joseph Smith’s later plural marriages, which involved an intermediary to teach and to ascertain the willingness of the woman.<sup>119</sup> The narrative also recounts how a marriage ceremony did indeed occur, even providing the name of his father as the officiator. It also clarifies that Fanny was a willing participant.<sup>120</sup>

Perhaps equally important is the behavior of eye witnesses Chauncy and Eliza Webb, who are described as “intimately acquainted with Joseph Smith and his family for eleven years” prior to his death.<sup>121</sup> They “offered to take her [Fanny] until she could be sent to her relatives” after she was sent away from the Smith home.<sup>122</sup> Eliza Jane recalled: “Fanny Alger had lived in Joseph’s family several years, and when she left there she came and lived with me a few weeks.”<sup>123</sup> Throughout their recollections, they (and their daughter Ann Eliza Webb Young) consistently maintained that a marriage ceremony of some kind was performed, referring to it as a “sealing.”<sup>124</sup>

In short, the Webbs apparently did not consider the union illicit or see the Prophet’s behavior as reprehensible. The Webbs followed

<sup>118</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 40.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 41–42, views this conversation as an “exchange of women” between Joseph Smith and Levi Hancock. Yet the assertion is weakened because Levi and Clarissa were already mutually attracted to each other.

<sup>120</sup>Ellingson, “Alger Marriage Questioned,” vi–vii, doubts that “Levi Hancock, a man who had no civil authority, willingly and quickly accepted Smith’s demand that he perform a ‘a marriage.’” Compton, “Response to Janet Ellingson,” *Journal of Mormon History*, 23 (Fall 1997): xviii, disagrees: “Ellingson finds it unbelievable that Levi Hancock would consent to perform a marriage without civil authority. Personally, I find it very believable—both that Smith would place his religious authority above civil authority and that one of Smith’s disciples would give him unquestioning obedience.”

<sup>121</sup>Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 7.

<sup>122</sup>Young, *Wife Number 19*, 67.

<sup>123</sup>Eliza J. Webb [Eliza Jane Churchill Webb], Lockport, New York, Letter to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876, Biographical Folder Collection, P21, f11, item 7, 8, Community of Christ Archives.

<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*; Young, *Wife No. 19*, 66–67; Chauncy Webb quoted in Wyl *Mormon Portraits*, 57.

the Church to Nauvoo, settling in a home on Granger Street, and were sealed in the Nauvoo Temple where Chauncy served as a temple worker.<sup>125</sup> They moved to Utah and settled near Tooele; and Chauncy served a mission in 1852.<sup>126</sup> These actions would be unexpected if they felt Joseph Smith was an adulterer.

*Authority to Perform the Marriage*

Another question related to the ceremony performed by Levi Hancock, as described by Mosiah Hancock, is the authority by which he acted. Obviously civil law would not ratify a bigamous marriage. Nor would the sealing keys be restored until April 1836 (D&C 110:13–16). Therefore, Levi was not acting with the authority by which plural marriages were later sealed in Nauvoo, even though “sealed” is the term used by Eliza Jane Churchill Webb.<sup>127</sup> “Sealing” in Ohio seems to have been used only in “sealing up to everlasting life.” Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner wrote in 1902: “I was sealed to Joseph Smith, the Prophet by commandment. In the spring of 1831, the Savior appeared and commanded him to seal me up to everlasting life.”<sup>128</sup> When Joseph performed marriages (as for Newell Knight and Lydia Goldthwaite Bailey in Kirtland in 1835), he reportedly claimed “the authority of the holy Priesthood” clarifying that “the Gentile law has no

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<sup>125</sup>Richard Neitzel Holzapfel and T. Jeffery Cottle, “The City of Joseph in Focus: The Use and Abuse of Historic Photographs,” *BYU Studies* 32, no. 1 (1991): 255. On March 31, 1841, Chauncy Webb performed the marriage of John Harvey and Eliza Everett. “Hymeneal,” *Times and Seasons* 2 (May 1, 1841): 405; Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings*, 326.

<sup>126</sup>“Quincy Branch, Tooele Stake, Tooele Co., Utah, consisted of a few families of Latter-day Saints residing in Skull Valley, including the Quincy Ranch. Skull Valley was used as a herd ground for cattle as early as 1857, when a man named Box located there and built a herd-house. Two years later Chauncy Webb also settled in what was then known locally as “The Dell.” Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson Company, 1941, 1901–36), 688. For his mission, see Stanley S. Ivins, Notebook 13, p. 163, Utah State Historical Society.

<sup>127</sup>Eliza Jane Churchill Webb, Letter to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876.

<sup>128</sup>Lightner, “Statement signed February 8, 1902.”

power to call me to an account for it.”<sup>129</sup> If Mosiah Hancock’s description is accurate, most likely “priesthood authority” was invoked to perform a ceremony that “gentile law” would not allow.<sup>130</sup>

### *Immediate Consequences of the Alger Marriage*

Although the historical record provides no record of the chronology and interactions between Joseph and Fanny, this first plural marriage could hardly have turned out worse. Both Emma and Fanny were traumatized, and Fanny left Mormonism, never to return. Oliver Cowdery was also alienated, the situation contributing to his eventual excommunication. In addition, accusations of “adultery” required specific damage control efforts by the Prophet himself to suppress an expanding crisis in the Church.

Chauncy Webb suggested that Emma learned about Joseph’s marriage to Fanny Alger when the girl became pregnant. According to Wilhelm Wyl, who interviewed “Mr. W.”: “In Kirtland, [Joseph] was sealed there secretly to Fanny Alger. Emma was furious, and drove the girl, who was unable to conceal the consequences of her celestial relation with the prophet, out of her house.”<sup>131</sup> There is no record that Fanny, in fact, had a child, but Emma’s angry reaction would be consistent with her later behavior under similar circumstances. She obvi-

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<sup>129</sup>“Sketch of the Life of Newel Knight,” typescript, Ms 767, fd. 3, LDS Church History Library. Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*, 88, 326 note 32, identifies this manuscript as a first draft. That designation does not appear on the document, but it is the shortest of several in the collection. Lydia Knight quoted Joseph as saying: “Our Elders have been wronged and prosecuted for marrying without a license. The Lord God of Israel has given me authority to unite the people in the holy bonds of matrimony. And from this time forth I shall use that privilege and marry whomsoever I see fit. And the enemies of the Church shall never have power to use the law against me.” See also Homespun (pseud. of Emmeline B. Wells), *Lydia Knight’s History: The First Book of the Noble Women’s Lives Series* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 31.

<sup>130</sup>The belief developed in Nauvoo that all eternal sealing ceremonies performed outside of a temple, whether monogamous or polygamous, would need to be repeated within temple walls (with the same individuals or by proxy) at some point. By this logic, the Joseph Smith-Fanny Alger plural marriage needed to be repeated in a temple to become an eternal marriage.

<sup>131</sup>Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 57. The use of “sealed” is anachronistic if he is referring to the sealing keys mentioned in D&C 110:13–16 and 132:7, 18,

ously did not consider it a genuine marriage.<sup>132</sup>

Ann Eliza Webb Young, whose source was doubtless her parents, provided this version of events in 1886:

Mrs. Smith had an adopted daughter,<sup>133</sup> a very pretty, pleasing young girl, about seventeen years old. She was extremely fond of her; no own mother could be more devoted, and their affection for each other was a constant object of remark, so absorbing and genuine did it seem. Consequently it was with a shocked surprise that the people heard that sister Emma had turned Fanny out of the house.

This sudden movement was incomprehensible, since Emma was known to be a just woman, not given to freaks or caprices, and it was felt that she certainly must have had some very good reason for her action. By degrees it became whispered about that Joseph's love for his adopted daughter was by no means a paternal affection, and his wife, discovering the fact, at once took measures to place the girl beyond his reach.

Angered at finding the two persons whom she loved most playing such a treacherous part towards her, she by no means spared her reproaches, and, finally, the storm became so furious, that Joseph was obliged to send, at midnight, for Oliver Cowdery,<sup>134</sup> his scribe, to come and endeavor to settle matters between them.

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19, as that sealing authority was not yet restored in 1835 and could not have been used to perform the marriage.

<sup>132</sup>There are certainly a number of scenarios (including miscarriage and stillbirth) by which Fanny could have been pregnant but had no child who made it into contemporary records. In 1878, William McLellin told Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt: "Emma Smith told him that Joseph was both a polygamist and an adulterer." Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 239. If Emma made such a statement and if McLellin reported it correctly (he would have been seventy-two in 1878), then it may mean that Emma accepted Nauvoo plural marriage as "polygamy," but rejected Joseph's Kirtland relationship with Alger, calling it "adultery."

<sup>133</sup>Ann Eliza Webb Young mistakenly believed that Fanny had been adopted by the Smiths. Other accounts incorrectly refer to her as an orphan. She was neither.

<sup>134</sup>Young, *Wife Number 19*, 66. On April 12, 1838, David W. Patten testified before the Far West High Council that "He [Oliver] said that Joseph told him, he had confessed to Emma." Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day*

What role Oliver played, if any, in trying to reduce the emotional storm is unclear.

As noted above, McLellin asserted that Joseph “confessed humbly, and begged forgiveness. Emma and all forgave him.”<sup>135</sup> Additional details of Emma’s reaction to her husband’s first plural marriage are unavailable. However, two letters that she wrote him in 1837 contain possible hints that she may not have accepted the Alger relationship as a true marriage. While he was in hiding on April 25, she closed her letter with: “I pray that God will keep you in purity and safety till we all meet again.” A letter dated a week later was signed similarly: “I hope that we shall be so humble and pure before God that he will set us at liberty to be our own masters.”<sup>136</sup> I find her mention in both closings of “purity/pure” of possible significance.

*Aftermath: Rumors of Adultery, Not Polygamy*

Although Joseph, Emma, Fanny, and Oliver—and perhaps a few others who were directly involved—did not leave personal statements of this crisis and were apparently silent on the topic, rumors about the event spread quickly. I hypothesize that the actual intensity and the composition of the rumors then in circulation may have been misunderstood down to the present. Benjamin F. Johnson uses the term “whispered” to describe the tale’s circulation in Kirtland.<sup>137</sup> Eliza Jane Churchill Webb wrote: “What a talk the whole affair made” at the time, suggesting more than whispers.<sup>138</sup> William

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*Saints, 1830–1844* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 167.

<sup>135</sup>McLellin, Letter to Joseph Smith III, July 1872; see also Hutchins, “Joseph Smith III: Moderate Mormon,” 79–81. McLellin confuses some names in this letter. Regardless, I believe Joseph Smith was involved with only one plural marriage in Kirtland—with Fanny Alger—so the details, if true, would be referring to that relationship.

<sup>136</sup>Emma Smith, Letters to Joseph Smith, April 25 and May 2, 1837, Joseph Smith Letterbook, Ms d 155, Box 2, fd. 2, LDS Church History Library, photocopy of holograph, Newell Collection, cited in Linda King Newell, “Emma Hale Smith and the Polygamy Question,” *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 4 (1984): 4.

<sup>137</sup>Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophet*, 38.

<sup>138</sup>Eliza Jane Webb, Letter to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876.

McLellin stated that it caused "some scandal."<sup>139</sup> Church member Fanny Brewer who traveled from Boston to Kirtland in the spring of 1837, wrote a letter in September 1842 in which she described "much excitement" about the Prophet's "unlawful intercourse" with the "young orphan girl residing in his family."<sup>140</sup> Published in John C. Bennett's exposé two months later, Brewer's much-reprinted assertion has become a standard quotation, an established reference to Kirtland polygamy.

Even though a handful of Ohio Saints were apparently aware of the eventual restoration of plural marriage, my conclusion from current research shows that the tales being "whispered" or causing "excitement" in 1837 were not about polygamy. Rather the rumored activity was *adultery*. In trying to reconstruct the emergence of plural marriage, this distinction is critically important.

Oliver Cowdery seems to have been the primary source of rumors about Joseph's alleged adultery. Apparently, he either did not know that some kind of marriage ceremony had occurred between Joseph and Fanny or did not think it valid. As late as September 1837, Oliver's brother, Warren, editor of the Church newspaper, *Messenger and Advocate*, wrote "to the inhabitants of Milton and Palmyra, Portage county Ohio" defending the character of Joseph Smith against "rumors [that] were afloat . . . that were derogatory" to him.<sup>141</sup> He does not describe these rumors and no supporting documents from Portage County specify their nature. Thus, they could have involved many forms of misconduct, but it seems doubtful that Warren would have defended the Prophet if he believed him

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<sup>139</sup>McLellin, quoted in Beadle, "Jackson County," 4.

<sup>140</sup>Fanny Brewer, Letter September 13, 1842, printed in Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 85–86. As already noted, Fanny Alger was not an orphan. A much later report from dissident Benjamin Winchester, "Primitive Mormonism—Personal Narrative of It," *Salt Lake Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1889, 2, stated: "[In 1835] there was a good deal of scandal prevalent among a number of Saints concerning Joseph's licentious conduct, this more especially among the women. Joseph's name was then connected with scandalous relations with two or three families."

<sup>141</sup>[Warren Cowdery], Editorial, *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (September 1837): 566. This editorial also defended Sidney Rigdon.



guilty of sexual misconduct.<sup>142</sup>

Even so, four months later on January 21, 1838, Oliver wrote to Joseph Smith clarifying the depth of their estrangement: "I hear from Kirtland, by the last letters, that you have publicly said, that when you were here I confessed to you that I had willfully lied about you—this compels me to ask you to correct that statement, and give me an explanation—until then you and myself are two."<sup>143</sup>

That same day Oliver also wrote to Warren, characterizing the Joseph Smith-Fanny Alger relationship as "A dirty, nasty, filthy affair."<sup>144</sup> This statement has formed an important part of the evidence of authors who take the position that there was no marriage and that Joseph readily engaged in extramarital trysts.<sup>145</sup> Regardless, my conclusion is that Mosiah Hancock's narrative, not Oliver's letter, gives the most probable account of the relationship between the Prophet and Fanny.

Oliver Cowdery is the only contemporary in Kirtland who accused Joseph Smith of adultery, and Joseph apparently tried to set things right between them, presumably by providing an explanation of the episode that satisfied Oliver and by trying to heal their friendship. On January 21, 1838, eight days after Joseph and Sidney Rigdon left for Missouri, Oliver wrote to Warren: "Just before leaving, [Joseph] wanted to drop every past thing, in which had been a difficulty or dif-

<sup>142</sup>Warren Cowdery's editorials mentioned polygamy only once. Editorial, *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (February 1837): 455, comments in the context of the Old Testament: "Polygamy and concubinage were allowable, but adultery was discountenanced."

<sup>143</sup>Oliver Cowdery, Letter to Joseph Smith, January 21, 1838, copied in Oliver Cowdery, Letter to Warren A. Cowdery, January 21, 1838, and Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, 80, Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.; also in Smith Research Associates, *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998). Oliver copied his letter to Joseph in its entirety in his letter to Warren, thus producing three copies: the original to Joseph, the copy written in Oliver's letter to Warren, and the copy in Oliver's letterbook.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup>See for example, Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 182. Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?*, 91, wrote that in 1835 "it was rumored that [Joseph Smith] had seduced Miss Alger, an orphan girl of 17 years whom Emma had taken into the family."

ference—he called witnesses to the fact, gave me his hand in their presence, and I might have supposed of an honest man, calculated to say nothing of former matters.”<sup>146</sup> That same day Oliver wrote a letter to Joseph indicating the offer was not accepted.<sup>147</sup>

During this period, several prominent Church leaders apostatized. David Whitmer, John Whitmer, and W. W. Phelps were disciplined by the Far West High Council in several sessions in late January and early February 1838.<sup>148</sup> On April 12, the Far West High Council brought nine charges against Cowdery. They did not include immorality or adultery,<sup>149</sup> but the second charge was: “For seeking to destroy the character of President Joseph Smith jr by falsely insinuating that he was guilty of adultery etc.”<sup>150</sup> During the trial, which Joseph attended but which Oliver did not, George W. Harris testified: “[Oliver] seemed to insinuate that Joseph Smith, Jr. was guilty of adultery.”<sup>151</sup> David W. Patten similarly reported: “he went to Oliver Cowdery to enquire of him if a certain story was true respecting J. Smith’s committing adultery with a certain girl, when he turned on his heel and insinuated as though he was guilty; he then went on and gave a history of some circumstances respecting the adultery scrape stating that no doubt it was true.”<sup>152</sup>

Thomas B. Marsh reported second-hand during the same hearing that he had heard this same account from Patten. “Patten asked Oliver Cowdery if he Joseph Smith Jr. had confessed to his wife that he was guilty of adultery with a certain girl, when Oliver Cowdery cocked up his eye very knowingly and hesitated to answer the question, saying he did not know as he was bound to answer the question

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<sup>146</sup>Cowdery, Letter to Warren A. Cowdery, January 21, 1838.

<sup>147</sup>Cowdery, Letter to Joseph Smith, January 21, 1838.

<sup>148</sup>Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 135–40.

<sup>149</sup>It is possible that allegations against Cowdery for adultery might have provoked him to disclose his knowledge and opinions concerning the Joseph Smith-Fanny Alger relationship, which he believed to be adulterous. Possibly the Prophet withheld accusations to avoid those disclosures, even though limited evidence exists supporting Oliver’s involvement with polygamy in the early 1830s.

<sup>150</sup>Cannon and Cook, *Far West Record*, 163.

<sup>151</sup>*Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>152</sup>*Ibid.*

yet conveyed the idea it was true.”<sup>153</sup> Then, moving to an area of personal knowledge, Marsh continued: “He heard a conversation take place between Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery when J. Smith asked him if he had ever confessed to him that he was guilty of adultery. When after a considerable winking etc, he said no. Joseph then asked him if he ever told him that he confessed to any body, when he answered no.”<sup>154</sup> Doubtless Oliver intended his “winking” to counter his denial; certainly, that is how Marsh interpreted it. At one point, Joseph told the council that “Oliver Cowdery had been his bosom friend, therefore he entrusted him with many things.”<sup>155</sup> He provided no details or examples.

Toward the end of the council meeting, the delicate issue of Oliver’s allegation regarding Joseph’s adultery was directly raised. According to the minutes, “[Joseph] then gave a history respecting the girl business.”<sup>156</sup> The minutes record no detail, but he likely gave a simple denial of adultery. He would have considered a ceremony, whatever its form, between him and Fanny as a legitimate marriage—not adultery.

No contemporary record shows that any high councilor called for further investigation, but it seems unlikely that they would have tolerated fornication or adultery in any Church member including their prophet-leader. Their attitude is important because the Far West High Council had authority to initiate proceedings against even the Church president should he transgress (D&C 107:82, 74–76).

Undoubtedly, Joseph realized that the high council (and the Church in general) was not ready for a restoration of the principle of plural marriage. Accordingly, there is no evidence that polygamy was ever discussed in the Far West High Council; thus, the question remains open about his response if he had been asked directly whether he had married Fanny as a plural wife. Regardless, Joseph’s explanation apparently satisfied the Far West high councilors and Bishop Edward Partridge. Six of the nine charges, including the second, were sustained against Oliver, and he was excommunicated.<sup>157</sup>

Concerned that rumors might spread, Joseph asked Thomas B. Marsh, George W. Harris, and George Hinckle to publish statements

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<sup>153</sup>Ibid.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 167–68.

<sup>155</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid.

<sup>157</sup>Ibid., 169.

in the next (July) issue of the *Elder's Journal* denying any rumors that might have originated with Oliver Cowdery.<sup>158</sup> Biographer Richard Lyman Bushman made this summary, with which I agree:

[Joseph Smith] contended that he had never confessed to adultery. . . . In contemporaneous documents, only one person, Cowdery, believed that Joseph had had an affair with Fanny Alger. Others may have heard the rumors, but none joined Cowdery in making accusations. David Patten, who made inquiries in Kirtland, concluded the rumors were untrue. No one proposed to put Joseph on trial for adultery. Only Cowdery, who was leaving the Church, asserted Joseph's involvement. On his part, Joseph never denied a relationship with Alger, but insisted it was not adulterous. He wanted it on record that he had never confessed to such a sin. Presumably, he felt innocent because he had married Alger.<sup>159</sup>

Before Oliver died in 1850, he was rebaptized, doubtless because of the power of his pre-1838 experiences; but he was apparently never reconciled to the practice of plural marriage, which also strongly argues against the possibility that he had personally engaged in the practice in the early 1830s.<sup>160</sup>

### LACK OF POLYGAMY RUMORS

#### *Reports from Kirtland*

As noted above in the discussion of Fanny Alger, some rumors circulated in Kirtland, after 1836–37, of adultery involving Joseph Smith; however, listeners seldom took them seriously because they were promulgated by dissidents and he vehemently denied all charges.

<sup>158</sup>[No title] *Elders' Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 45.

<sup>159</sup>Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, 324–25.

<sup>160</sup>On July 24, 1846, Oliver wrote to his sister, Phebe, and her husband, Daniel Jackson, in *New Mormon Studies*: “I can hardly think it possible that you have written us the truth—that though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of,—yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to as a public doctrine. Such may do for the followers of Mohamet; it may have done some thousands of years ago; but no people professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus, can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time, and be guilty of such folly—such wrong—such abomination. It will blast, like a mill-dew their fairest prospects, and lay the axe at the root of their future happiness.”

Also, no contemporary document associates Joseph Smith with polygamy in Kirtland, although once polygamy was known in Nauvoo, several authors “remembered” polygamy at Kirtland. However, during the Kirtland period itself, rumors of polygamy involving Joseph Smith were apparently unknown among the Saints and non-members alike.<sup>161</sup> For example, Church member F. C. Rich testified in 1884:

Q. Did you ever live in Kirtland? A. Yes, sir. I came here in 1831.

Q. Did you know, or were you acquainted with Joseph Smith, Martin Harris and Sidney Rigdon, or either of them? Did you know their reputation for truth and veracity in the neighborhood [of Kirtland, Ohio] at the time they lived here? And were you acquainted with their moral character? A. I knew nothing against them. I was but a boy however, but the outsiders persecuted them on account of their religious views.

Q. You had an opportunity to know? A. Yes, sir; my father was here in an early day and was connected with the church.

Q. Were you in their meetings frequently? A. Yes, sir. Brought right up in the church. The first meeting I recollect very much about was after the temple was finished [April 1836]. I attended meetings right along after it was completed. I was too young during its building to take any particular notice outside.

Q. Did you ever see anything of an immoral tendency in the meetings? A. Nothing that could be considered immoral. They shouted Hosannah, and seemed to enjoy their religion; and, of course, got ex-

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<sup>161</sup>Juanita Brooks, *On the Ragged Edge: The Life and Times of Dudley Leavitt* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1973), 53–54, includes an interesting account by Rachel Judd (b. 1822 in Canada) entitled “Polygamy in Missouri”: “My sister Mary was married to Thomas B. Marsh, one of the first Quorum of the Twelve chosen in 1835. He was a good man, very loyal and active. When the law of plural marriage was started, I became his first and only plural wife. But many other things entered in, and he became estranged and dropped out, so that he did not come West.” Thomas B. Marsh was excommunicated in 1839. If this recollection was accurate, plural marriage (beyond Joseph’s marriage to Fanny Alger) would have started in Ohio, not Illinois. However, Rachel’s memory is faulty. Thomas B. Marsh was never a polygamist, and he traveled west in 1857, dying there in 1866. Rachel’s sister Mary Judd was actually married to Apostle John E. Page. Page indeed was a polygamist in Nauvoo but did not remain with the Saints nor travel to the Rocky Mountains. Mary Page was violently opposed to plural marriage, remained in the Midwest, married William Eaton, and joined the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1874.

cited as other people do. . . .

Q. You may state whether they believed in having more than one wife? A. I never heard they were in favor of anything of the kind here.

Q. You heard them talk with your father, heard the elders preach, was in their meetings, and mixed with them in all the affairs of life; if there had been anything wrong or bad in their teachings and habits would you not have known it? A. I am perfectly satisfied that the church did not teach or practice polygamy, or any other immoral doctrine while they were in Kirtland.<sup>162</sup>

F. C. Rich was certainly centrally located to have heard scandal, had there been any, unless he missed it because of his youth.

Non-member A. E. Sanborn came to Kirtland in 1836. When asked if Church members were ever practicing polygamy, he replied: "Not that I knew of." When asked whether he would have known about it were it occurring, he responded: "I ought to, my father was a Mormon. . . . I attended meetings both in Nauvoo and here in Kirtland, both in the evenings and on the Sabbath, and I never heard anything of polygamy at all until after Smith's death."<sup>163</sup> Lorenzo Snow, who also joined the Church at Kirtland similarly affirmed that he "never once heard of . . . this plural marriage business" until he returned from England to Nauvoo in 1841.<sup>164</sup>

In 1844, Benjamin Winchester wrote that nothing was taught regarding plural marriage "from the time of the organization of the Church up to the year 1841." It was only after 1841 that "this flagitious [sic] doctrine of polygamy was introduced into the church."<sup>165</sup> Likewise, in an 1871 letter, William Law reflected: "In 1842 I had not heard of such teaching [of polygamy]. . . I think it was in 1843 that I

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<sup>162</sup>Kelley and Braden, *Public Discussion of the Issues*, 395. I have been unable to ascertain the full name of "F. C. Rich" or his birth date.

<sup>163</sup>*Ibid.*, 394.

<sup>164</sup>Lorenzo Snow, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondents' Testimony (part 3), pp. 116, 118, questions 124–26.

<sup>165</sup>Benjamin Winchester, Letter to the Editor, *New York Herald*, November 11, 1844. In 1889, the seventy-two-year-old Winchester further explained: "Up to the year 1843 'spiritual marriage' or polygamy had never been preached or inculcated as a doctrine of the church. Prior to that year my experience had been that the church was fully as strict and as pure with respect to virtue and morality as any other religious organization." Benjamin F. Winchester, "Primitive Mormonism—Personal Narrative of It," *Salt Lake Tribune*, September 22, 1889, 2.

first knew of the 'plurality doctrine.' I believe, however, it existed possibly as early as 1840."<sup>166</sup>

John H. Carter, who converted to the Church and moved to Kirtland in 1836, testified: "The polygamy doctrine was never taught in the early days up to 1843. I lived most two years with Joseph Smith in the one place and I have heard him preach, and the rest of the elders, Hyrum Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and the rest of them, and I never heard the doctrine of polygamy taught by any of them, never in the world did I hear it taught. . . . Polygamy was not taught from 1830 to 1843."<sup>167</sup>

When asked about the specific problems that Joseph Smith experienced in Kirtland, Williard Griffith, who was baptized in 1831, included no allegations of adultery or polygamy: "Some of the people were not satisfied with their position in the Church and others were not satisfied with the doctrine and so forth. There was dissatisfaction there at that time for five of the Quorum of the Twelve apostatized at one time and left the Church. . . . They persecuted him principally as I got the idea, because of his personal actions and the people or some of them were dissatisfied with his dignity and they dissented from it and were disfellowshipped."<sup>168</sup>

### *Reports from Missouri*

A search among reminiscences of Saints in Missouri again turns up no evidence that polygamy was practiced, taught, or even rumored. Emily Dow Partridge, daughter of Bishop Edward Partridge (died 1840) and a plural wife of Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, reported that she "never heard anything at all about [plural marriage] during the lifetime of my father. . . . I am certain that I never heard [Joseph Smith] teach or preach polygamy in any way at all" in Missouri.<sup>169</sup>

Born in 1807, Luman Shurtliff, joined the Church in 1836, and immediately moved to Kirtland with his family. He reported that, in

<sup>166</sup>William Law, quoted in T. B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1873), 198–99.

<sup>167</sup>John H. Carter, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Part 2, pp. 375–76, 378, 384, questions 25, 53, 134, 143.

<sup>168</sup>Williard Griffith, Deposition, *ibid.*, Part 4, pp. 68–69, questions 625–33, 639.

<sup>169</sup>Emily Dow Partridge Young, Deposition, *ibid.*, Part 3, p. 355, ques-



March of 1838 on their way to Missouri, after discussing polygamy, "Sister Williams had told Br [Frederick G.] Williams and They had talked it over and concluded it was ridiculous for an Elder to believe such an awful doctrin\e/."

Cyrus Wheelock was baptized in September 1839 in Pike County, Missouri. In 1892 he testified: "I never heard anything about it [plural marriage] at that time. . . . There was no practice of that kind then that I knew anything of."<sup>170</sup> When asked: Did you think when you joined the church that you could be permitted to have more wives than one?" He answered: "I did not know anything about it at all. They preached the doctrine of the church to me, and I accepted it, and there was nothing said about it at that time."<sup>171</sup>

When Bathsheba W. Smith was asked in 1892: "Did you not hear some rumors or whisperings of the plural wife doctrine in 1838 in Far West, or in Caldwell County [Missouri], when you were there?" she responded: "No, sir. . . . I am positive of that for I know I never heard of it."<sup>172</sup> Joseph Kingsbury agreed: "We never heard anything of the kind in those [Missouri] days at all."<sup>173</sup> Mercy Fielding Thompson, a British convert, in describing her stay in Missouri, recalled: "It [plural marriage] was not either taught or practiced until along about 1841 or 1842. . . . I did not hear anything about it before 1841."<sup>174</sup> These three all participated in polygamy in Nauvoo.

### *Lack of Newspaper Reports*

Particularly significant negative evidence is a lack of reports about Kirtland polygamy in the press. Don Bradley and I have conducted an exhaustive search of periodicals, books, and pamphlets published prior to July 1842, when John C. Bennett published claims

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tions 103, 108.

<sup>170</sup>Cyrus Wheelock, Deposition, *ibid.*, Part 3, pp. 544–45, questions 186–89.

<sup>171</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 545, question 197.

<sup>172</sup>Bathsheba B. Smith, Deposition, *ibid.*, Part 3, p. 295, questions 65–66.

<sup>173</sup>Joseph Kingsbury, Deposition, *ibid.*, Part 3, p. 208, question 665.

<sup>174</sup>Mercy Rachel Thompson, Deposition, *ibid.*, Part 3, pp. 238, 245, questions 21, 134–35.

of Joseph Smith's polygamy in the *Sangamo Journal*.<sup>175</sup> We have not located any, although newspapers often published items about Mormons and also mentioned polygamy from time to time; but the two subjects were not linked before 1842.

For example, the subscriber list in the *Cleveland Liberalist* for late 1836 and early 1837 included the names of several Kirtland men, among them Mormons.<sup>176</sup> An article in February 1837 advocated abolishing the law against polygamy, arguing:

It would be more desirable to be the second or even the third wife of a generous man than to remain an old maid, neglected and laughed at. It would relieve one wife from the burden of bearing many children and give the husband who had a barren wife the chance of having children by another. It would eminently lessen prostitution in one sex and ranging in the other. It would be no more expensive for a man to have two wives than to have one wife and hire a seamstress. It appears that a host of evils which now exist would at once cease.<sup>177</sup>

Eva L. Pancoast, in a 1929 thesis, accused Joseph Smith or some other Mormon of authoring the letter but offers no supporting evidence.<sup>178</sup> It seems obvious that if any tales of Joseph Smith and polygamy existed anywhere close to the ears of the *Cleveland Liberalist* writer, they would have been included, if not exploited. Other newspapers would have been equally eager to republish those details.

Commenting on the Missouri problems, the *Peoria [Illinois] Register and North Western Gazetteer* reprinted an article from *The Missourian* in November 1838: "It has been stated by diverse men, who stand fair in society, that the present difficulties with the Mormons amounts to a political quarrel."<sup>179</sup> The article makes no mention of moral issues. In fact, an unnamed correspondent in 1839 wrote a letter published in a Boston paper and reprinted by a New York City newspaper:

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<sup>175</sup>We also examined the copious sources included in the Stanley S. Ivins Collection, Notebooks 1–15, Utah State Historical Society, and the H. Michael Marquardt Collection, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

<sup>176</sup>"Subscriptions," *Cleveland Liberalist*, December 24, 1836, 11, and February 10, 1838, 162.

<sup>177</sup>"Enquirer," *Cleveland Liberalist*, February 4, 1837, 164.

<sup>178</sup>Eva L. Pancoast, "Mormons at Kirtland" (M.A. thesis, Western Reserve University, 1929), 108.

<sup>179</sup>Article from *The Missourian*, reprinted under the title of "From the

I have yet to learn that their faith taught them immorality. I have yet to learn that it encouraged disobedience to the laws or encroachment on the rights of any fellow-citizen.

The Mormons were in truth a moral, orderly and sober population. They were industrious farmers, and ingenious mechanics. They were busy about their own affairs, and never intermeddled in the concerns of their neighbors. They were exceedingly peaceful and averse to strife, quarrels and violence. They had established schools, they encouraged education; and they all had the rudiments of learning taught under our school system at the East. . . .

[The Missourians] were sagacious enough to know that their acts should have a "show of virtue," and they accordingly began to misrepresent the Mormons. The charges were at first general. The Mormons were a "mighty *mean* people." They were "great fools"—which in common acceptance is about as bad as being great villains. Then they were thievish (how ludicrous, when the Anti-Mormons had hardly anything worth stealing!) They "tampered with the negroes. . . ." Finally, a fellow burnt his own corn crib and charged it on the Mormons.<sup>180</sup>

The unnamed writer seemed familiar with the Mormons, but was apparently unaware of any polygamous accusations, or it seems likely that he would have included that information, even on the gossip level, with his other charges.<sup>181</sup>

*"Between the Lines" Readings of LDS Material?*

Our review of the Church's publications in Ohio also fails to demonstrate an emphasis on marital issues or a reactive stance to allegations of sexual misconduct that might be interpreted as preemp-

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Missourian," *Peoria Register and North Western Gazetteer*, November 10, 1838.

<sup>180</sup>From the *Boston Atlas*. Missouri and the Mormons. Letter from a Gentleman at the West to His Friend in Boston," *The Emancipator* (New York City), March 25, 1839.

<sup>181</sup>As late as 1881, newspapers bent on exposing Mormon polygamy were unaware of the Alger-Smith relationship. According to Historicus [pseud.], "Sketches from the History of Polygamy," 1, Louisa Beaman's sealing in April 1841 to Joseph Smith was his first polygamous marriage. However, after this assertion, the writer then hedged: "These were the first plural marriages [in 1841] of which anything authentic is known, although the fact was well established that if he had been consistent, Joseph should long before that have been sealed to a large number of women."

tive strikes against such accusations.<sup>182</sup> The *Messenger and Advocate* between October 1834 and September 1837 contained three references to “adultery” and three to “polygamy.”<sup>183</sup> Similarly, the *Elder’s Journal*, printed in 1837 and 1838 in Kirtland, contained two references to “adultery,” two to “more wives than one,” and none to “polygamy.”<sup>184</sup>

In summary, the level of excitement actually existing in Kirtland regarding Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger or the larger topic of polygamy evidently never expanded to newspapers, which certainly would not have been reticent to pass on sensationalistic gossip. Yet we have been unable to find a single published reference before July 1842. It is possible that further research will produce additional allegations, but the absence of such references suggests that Mormons in general and Joseph Smith in particular were not linked in the public mind with adultery or polygamy. It seems fair to say that, during the mid-1830s, a mere handful of individuals understood the relationship of Joseph and Fanny Alger as a plural marriage, and they were not talking about it. A larger circle heard rumors of adultery that were effectively neutralized by the Prophet’s damage control efforts, rendering them non-issues before the press could pick them up.

#### ACCUSATIONS OF WIVES “IN COMMON”

To this point, I have examined nine allegations of immoral behavior leveled at Joseph Smith before 1839: Eliza Winters (occurred in 1827, published in 1834), Josiah Stowell’s daughters (occurred in 1830, never published), William Bond and “a certain woman” (occurred 1829 or 1830, published in 1890), Marinda Nancy Johnson (occurred in 1832, published in 1884), Vienna

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<sup>182</sup>The Church’s earlier newspaper, the *Evening and the Morning Star*, published in Independence, Missouri (June 1832–July 1833) and then in Kirtland, Ohio (January–September 1834) contains no references to “adultery” or “polygamy.”

<sup>183</sup>“Adultery” appears in the issues of January 1836 (250), January 1837 (436), and February 1837 (455). “Polygamy” appears in the issues of August 1835 (163), February 1837 (455), and May 1837 (511).

<sup>184</sup>Adultery is mentioned in the issue of August 1838 (59); “more wives than one” appears in the issues of November 1837 (28) and July 1838 (43). Issues of the *Elders’ Journal* for October and November 1837 were published in Kirtland and issues of July and August 1838 in Far West.

Jacques (occurred in 1833, published in 1886?), Fanny Alger (occurred in 1835 or 1836, published unnamed in 1842, name first published in 1881), Athalia and Nancy Rigdon (occurred in 1837, published in 1994), Lucinda Pendleton (occurred in 1838 or 1837, published in 1885), and Presendia Huntington (occurred in 1839, published in 1860).

A broader search examined the single occasion on which the Church as an institution was accused of allowing inappropriate sexual behavior. In February 1831, the *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate*, published in Utica, New York, reported: "They [the Mormons] have all things in common, and dispense with the marriage covenant."<sup>185</sup> This allegation undoubtedly stemmed from rumors associated with early attempts to establish the law of consecration in Ohio and would follow the Church for years to come, resulting in several denials.<sup>186</sup> Historian John L. Brooke revived the charge in 1991: "Among the non-Mormons in Ohio there were suspicions that the community of property dictated in the 'Law of Consecration' included wives."<sup>187</sup>

Eventually, the charges were also leveled on the western frontier prompting W. W. Phelps to issue a denial in the April 1833 issue of the *Evening and the Morning Star*: "It has been reported that the church had settled in this country [Independence, Missouri], and

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<sup>185</sup>J. M. H., "Editorial Correspondence," *Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate* (Utica, N.Y.), February 5, 1831, 1.

<sup>186</sup>Parley P. Pratt, *Late Persecutions of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . with a Sketch of Their Rise, Progress, and Doctrine* (New York: J. W. Harrison, 1840) 10: "It is also a current report among the ignorant that we do away [with] matrimony, and that we allow unlawful intercourse between the sexes. Now this idea originated and has been kept alive by wicked and designing persons, and by the credulity of those who are more ready to believe falsehood than they are to believe truth. There has never been the shadow of anything to cause such a report." See also Erastus Snow, *An Address to the Citizens of Salem and Vicinity, by E. Snow and B. Winchester*. . . (Salem, Mass.: F. Nickerson, 1841), not paginated.

<sup>187</sup>John L. Brooke, "'Of Whole Nations Being Born in One Day': Marriage, Money and Magic in the Mormon Cosmos, 1830–1846," *Social Science Information* 30 (1991): 115.

were living as one family. This is not so.”<sup>188</sup>

In May 1837, the *Missouri Republican* published a story signed by Edmund F. Flagg, who claimed that, while traveling in Illinois in July 1836, he spent a day with a Mormon emigrant on his way to Jackson County, Missouri, with “a brace of wives and two or three braces of children, by way of stock in trade for community at Mount Zion.”<sup>189</sup> This intriguing story is highly improbable. If Mormon men were traveling openly with plural wives and commenting on their situation to casual wayside acquaintances, then there should have been more reports than this one; and certainly local newspapers would have had no reason to refrain from reprinting such an interesting tidbit widely and seeking additional tales. Even at Nauvoo, though rumors were rampant, plural marriage itself was a closely held secret. The scenario that Flagg describes was simply not possible, especially since the Mormons had left Jackson County in 1833; although they were founding new settlements in northern Missouri, new converts were more likely to be traveling to Kirtland to see the Prophet and the temple rather than heading straight for Missouri.

Joseph Smith addressed the role of consecration for families and married couples in a December 16, 1838, letter to the Saints:

The priests of the different sects hated us. The Generals hated us, the colonels hated us, the officers and soldiers hated us; and the most profane blasphemers, drunkards, and whoremongers hated us. And why? Because of the testimony of Jesus Christ. Was it because we were liars? Was it because we had committed treason against the government, or burglary, or larceny, or arson or any other unlawful act. . . .

Was it for committing adultery? We are aware that false and slanderous reports have gone abroad, which have reached our ears, respecting this thing, which have been started by renagades, and spread by the dissenters, who are extremely active in spreading foul and libelous reports concerning us; thinking thereby to gain the fellowship of the world, knowing that we are not of the world; and that the world hates us. But by so doing they only show themselves to be vile traitors and sycophants. Some have reported that we not only dedicated our property, but likewise our families to the Lord, and Satan taking ad-

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<sup>188</sup>“Rise and Progress of the Church of Christ,” *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (April 1833): 4.

<sup>189</sup>E[dmund] F[lagg], “Sketches of a Traveler,” May 24, 1837, *Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), [1?].

vantage of this has transfigured it into lasciviousness, a community of wives, which things are an abomination in the sight of God.

When we consecrate our property to the Lord, it is to administer to the wants of the poor and needy according to the laws of God, and when a man consecrates or dedicates his wife and children to the Lord, he does not give them to his brother or to his neighbor; which is contrary to the law of God, which says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not covet thy neighbors [sic] wife." "He that looketh upon a woman to lust after her has committed adultery already in his heart."—Now for a man to consecrate his property, his wife and children to the Lord is nothing more nor less than to feed the hungry, cloth[e] the naked, visit the widows and fatherless, the sick and afflicted; and do all he can to administer to their relief in their afflictions, and for himself and his house to serve the Lord. In order to do this he and all his house must be virtuous and "shun every appearance of evil.["] Now if any person, has represented any thing otherwise than what we now write they have willfully misrepresented us.<sup>190</sup>

### INDIVIDUALS GUILTY OF IMMORALITY

When individual Mormons trespassed the law of chastity and marital fidelity, their activities were not ignored by their non-member neighbors or by their Church leaders. In 1892, Church member John Taylor (no relation to the apostle) remembered that in Independence in 1832:

I went about visiting and teaching the people and visiting all the houses I saw. I went to a man by the name of Claudious Hendricks and there was a woman living in his house and I felt as though there was something wrong about it. . . . There was a man, this woman's husband [who] was an elder and he was sent . . . on a mission. And she stayed there at Hendricks' place and he went and got her with a child the same as old David and Uriah's wife. He got her with child while her husband was gone. And he was brought up and cut off from the Church for it.<sup>191</sup>

On February 3, 1834, Joseph Wood was excommunicated by the

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<sup>190</sup>"Communications," *Times and Seasons* 1 (April 1840): 85. This printing of the letter is different from the copy in Joseph Smith's *Scriptory Book*. Jessee, *Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2:292–96.

<sup>191</sup>John Taylor, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Part 2, p. 398, questions 70–72.



Kirtland High Council for fornication or some form of polygamy.<sup>192</sup> Oliver Cowdery wrote to a Brother Fosick regarding Wood's Church discipline:

We were very sorry to learn that Bro. J. Wood had gone so far astray and offered such violence to the pure principles of the Gospel of Christ. . . . After some investigation of the case of Bro Wood, in council, it was decided that he should be cut off from the Church. Accordingly the Council lifted their hands against him and he was excluded from the church on this 3rd day of Feb. 1834 for indulging an idle, partial, overbearing and lustful spirit and not magnifying his holy calling whereunto he had been ordained. These things were plainly manifest to the satisfaction of all the council, and the spirit constrained us to separate him from the church.<sup>193</sup>

Similarly, on September 28, 1835, the Kirtland High Council heard charges of adultery against Lorenzo L. Lewis "according to general report amongst the brethren." Lewis denied being guilty of adultery. Charged instead with "illicit intercourse with a female," he again declared that he was not guilty but admitted "that he had disgraced the girl, himself, and the Church, . . . had done wickedly and had made all the reparation he could." Lewis "requested his name to be taken off from the Church records, or dispose of him according to the mind of the Spirit" and he was "cut off."<sup>194</sup>

The next spring, on May 16, 1836, the Kirtland High Council heard a second-hand report from William E. McLellin via Joseph Smith that the defendant, Jenkins Salisbury (married to Joseph's sister Katharine) "had been intimate with every woman he could since he belonged to the Church."<sup>195</sup> Jenkins denied "the charge of unchastity to his wife" but was excommunicated.

Eighteen months later on November 29, 1837, the Kirtland el-

<sup>192</sup>Phillip R. Legg, *Oliver Cowdery: The Elusive Second Elder of the Restoration* (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1989), 80, considered Fosick's behavior a form of polygamy. Available details suggest that "adultery" may be a more accurate description.

<sup>193</sup>Oliver Cowdery, "Letter to Bro. Fosdick, February 3, 1834," H. E. Huntington Collection, microfilm #95, Community of Christ Archives; also available in *New Mormon Studies*.

<sup>194</sup>Fred C. Collier ed., *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 2002), 143. See also *History of the Church* 2:285.

<sup>195</sup>Collier, *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, 143; Legg, *Oliver Cowdery*,

ders' quorum heard Solomon Freeman accused of "the crime of polygamy." Freeman pled "not guilty," but two witnesses then testified. Dexter Stillman stated that Freeman had abandoned a wife in "Tollan township, County of Berkshire in Massachusetts," which Stillman had recently visited. The second witness, Harlow Redfield, testified that Freeman had "ackno[w]ledged before the quorum that he had left his first wife . . . and Soon Commenced living with another woman[.] He further Stated he did not know but his first wife was yet living. He further Stated he would not go across the room to obtain a bill [of divorce] from her. Elder Freeman Manifest a Car[e]less indifferent spirit."<sup>196</sup> He was also disciplined.

Doubtless, knowledge of these cases was not kept secret—in fact, Lewis admitted that his behavior "had disgraced . . . the Church." But if such reports circulated, so also should have the reports of disciplinary action.

### THE ARTICLE ON MARRIAGE

A development requiring particular attention involves the "Article on Marriage," which some historians have interpreted as Oliver Cowdery's attempt to hastily canonize a document on monogamous marriage that would have defused problems from Joseph Smith's plural marriage<sup>197</sup> or even his own.<sup>198</sup> Here is the background: Some of Lucy Mack Smith's relatives were living in Pontiac, Michigan; and Lucy's niece, Almira Mack, had been bap-

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172–73.

<sup>196</sup>Lyndon W. Cook and Milton V. Backman Jr., eds., *Kirtland Elders' Quorum Record, 1836–1841* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1985), 34–35; original record in Community of Christ Archives. Terminal punctuation and initial capitals added.

<sup>197</sup>Compton, "Fanny Alger Smith Custer: Mormonism's First Plural Wife?" 181, 196–97; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 137–38; Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 6.

<sup>198</sup>Brian C. Hales, "Guilty of Such Folly?": Accusations of Adultery and Polygamy against Oliver Cowdery," *Mormon Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 41–57; Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints*, 193. reported: "Brigham . . . made the damaging avowal that the Appendix [Article on Marriage] was written by Oliver Cowdery against Joseph's wishes, and was permitted to be published only after Cowdery's incessant teasing and Jo-

tized on a visit to Manchester, New York, in 1830.<sup>199</sup> The following year Lucy accompanied her son Hyrum and three missionaries to Pontiac where her widowed sister-in-law, Temperance Mack, and two more nieces were baptized. Encouraged by his mother, Joseph visited Pontiac in October 1834 and again in August 1835, leaving after August 11 and returning on August 23.<sup>200</sup> Frederick G. Williams, Joseph's counselor in the First Presidency, accompanied him on this second visit.<sup>201</sup>

Shortly after the Prophet's departure, possibly on Sunday, August 16, Associate Church President Oliver Cowdery and First Presidency Counselor Sidney Rigdon, called a general assembly (equivalent of today's solemn assembly) "for the purpose of examining a book of commandments and covenants, which [had] been compiled and written."<sup>202</sup> The meeting itself was held the next day, Monday, August 17, even though most Church leaders were absent—all of the Twelve, eight of the twelve Kirtland High Councilors, nine of the twelve Missouri High Councilors, three of the seven presidents of the Quorum of Seventy, Bishop Partridge, and, of course, Joseph and

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seph's warning to him of the trouble which his course would create. . . . for he [Oliver] insisted, Brigham says, upon adding to his [Oliver's] marital relations a young woman familiar with his family, and did hold the relation of husband to her. To silence the clamour and surmising that arose over this 'second wife' [of Oliver's], he wrote that Appendix."

<sup>199</sup>John Cumming and Audrey Cumming, "The Saints Come to Michigan," *Michigan History Magazine* 49 (March 1965): 12–13.

<sup>200</sup>*History of the Church*, 2:168.

<sup>201</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:253. Joseph Smith was in Kirtland until at least August 11, as he made a complaint to the high council on that date. *Journal History*, August 11, 1835. Regarding this trip, Richard Van Wagoner, Letter to Newell, n.d., commented, "Oliver Cowdery would seem to be the likely person to go with Joseph Smith to Michigan, but his wife Elizabeth gave birth to a daughter, Maria on 21 August 1835. Rigdon's health is still not good, and so the only other leader aware of the Fanny Alger situation is Frederick G. Williams, who accompanies Joseph to Michigan for this very quick 'missionary trip' (they are back in Kirtland only six days after the conference which has accepted the 'Article on Marriage')." It is unclear why Van Wagoner listed the journey as a "missionary trip." I have yet to find documentation that identifies Joseph's exact reason for the trip.

<sup>202</sup>Collier, *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, 122.

Frederick G. Williams.<sup>203</sup>

Regardless of the thin attendance, the assembly proceeded to its business: accepting the Doctrine and Covenants as binding on the Latter-day Saints. This 1835 edition expanded the 1833 Book of Commandments, the printing of which had been interrupted in Independence by mob action. The "Doctrine" portion of the renamed 1835 Doctrine and Covenants was the "Lectures on Faith" and an Article on Marriage, written by Oliver Cowdery. This article, which W. W. Phelps read aloud, specified: "Inasmuch as this Church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication and polygamy, we declare that we believe that one man should have one wife, and one woman but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again."<sup>204</sup> It was "accepted and adopted and ordered to be printed in said book, by a unanimous vote."<sup>205</sup> Accordingly, the marriage declaration was published in the next issue of the *Messenger and Advocate* (dated August 1835, but printed sometime in September) and was included in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants as Section CI (101).<sup>206</sup>

Neither Joseph nor Oliver provided any explanation or discussion of this episode. In 1869, Apostle Joseph F. Smith, who was born in 1838, recorded a statement in his journal by Brigham Young "saying Oliver Cowdery wrote it [the Article on Marriage], and insisted on its being inserted in the Book of D. & C. contrary to the thrice ex-

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<sup>203</sup>See H. Michael Marquardt, *The Joseph Smith Revelations: Text and Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 14; Robert John Woodford, "The Historical Development of the Doctrine and Covenants," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Brigham Young University, 1974), 1:44.

<sup>204</sup>*History of the Church*, 2:247. Critical writer Davis H. Bays, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Mormonism Examined and Refuted* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1897), 328, commented: "You may have observed the ingenious phraseology of that part of the document which is designed to convey the impression that the assembly as well as the entire church was opposed to polygamy, but which, as a matter of fact, leaves the way open for its introduction and practice."

<sup>205</sup>*History of the Church*, 2:246.

<sup>206</sup>"General Assembly," *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (August 1835): 162. 1835 Doctrine and Covenants CI (pp. 251-52). Section CI (the Article on Marriage) became Section 109 in the 1844 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. It was omitted from the 1876 edition when D&C 132 was added.

pressed wish and refusal of the Prophet Joseph Smith.”<sup>207</sup> Apostle Smith also declared in 1878: “The publication, by O. Cowdery . . . of an article on marriage, which was carefully worded . . . afterwards found its way into the Doctrine and Covenants without authority.”<sup>208</sup> A variant explanation is that Joseph, worried about embarrassing backlash from his relationship with Fanny Alger, arranged for Cowdery to present the Article on Marriage while he was absent. Todd Compton sees the Article on Marriage as “an effort to counter-act scandal and perhaps to defuse rumors of Fanny Alger’s marriage, possible pregnancy, and expulsion.”<sup>209</sup> Historian Max Parkin, without mentioning Alger, notes: “The ‘Article on Marriage’ was written because of rumors circulating concerning unorthodox marital relations among the Mormons. Although the Mormons continued to deny polygamy as a principle of faith, the complaint that it was being practiced among them was occasionally raised.”<sup>210</sup>

These explanations have a number of problems. First, although the timing of the action certainly begs for an explanation, it is not clear how Joseph’s absence during the canonization of the Article on Marriage benefitted him, undercutting the hypothesis that he arranged for Oliver to present it. On the other hand, if Joseph was avoiding possible associations of his relationship with Fanny Alger or some problem associated with the Article on Marriage itself, why did he return only six days later and allow the unpublished pages to be printed and to be immediately shipped to the bindery?<sup>211</sup>

The timing of the printing is, in fact, just as interesting as the timing of the general assembly. Six of the galley sheets for the Doc-

<sup>207</sup>Joseph F. Smith, Diary, October 9, 1869, LDS Church History Archives, in *Selected Collections*, 1:26.

<sup>208</sup>Joseph F. Smith, July 7, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London and Liverpool: LDS Booksellers Depot, 1855–86), 20: 29. See also Provo Utah Central Stake, General Minutes, Quarterly Stake Conference, March 4, 1883, Sunday afternoon session, 271–72, LR 9629 11, Reel 2, LDS Church History Library.

<sup>209</sup>Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 36.

<sup>210</sup>Parkin, “Conflict at Kirtland,” 171.

<sup>211</sup>H. Dean Garrett, “The Coming Forth of the Doctrine and Covenants,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio*, edited by Milton V. Backman (Provo: Utah: BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, 1990), 97.

trine and Covenants had been printed by May 26.<sup>212</sup> A galley sheet contains eight pages on each side, which are afterwards cut and sewn to create one signature. The various signatures are then bound together to form a book. Six galley sheets would comprise the first ninety-six pages. By August 15, W. W. Phelps, the publisher, had almost certainly finished ten more sheets for a total of fifteen (or 240 pages of the book's eventual 288 page length).<sup>213</sup> At that point, he had to stop because pages 255–57 (located on the sixteenth galley sheet) were designated to include an account of the general assembly, which had not yet convened.<sup>214</sup>

Presumably, after conference action on August 17, Phelps hastily completed printing the last three galley sheets comprising the final forty-eight pages. The next tasks were compiling a three-page ta-

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<sup>212</sup>W. W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, May 26, 1835, photocopy of holograph, W. W. Phelps Papers, Vault Mss 810, Box 2, fd. 1, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University; originals are in Box 1 (oversize). The "Lectures on Faith" comprise pages 5–74 and were part of these first six sheets. Accordingly, Joseph Smith was undoubtedly aware and supportive of their inclusion in the edition.

<sup>213</sup>Printing on the presses of the time allowed for eight book-size pages on one side of a large sheet of printing paper or sixteen pages per two-sided sheet, constituting a signature. After the ink dried, the pages would be cut, folded, and sewn in as a section of the book. The number of the sheet is found at the bottom of the first page of the sixteen pages being printed. Page 243 of the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants shows "16\*" at its foot, meaning that fifteen sheets of sixteen pages each had already been printed. The next sheet, "17\*" appears on the first page of the index, corresponding to page 259. Number 18 appears on the foot of p. 275 (roman numeral xvii of the index section). If the printing was done in numerical order, Section CI (109) was published prior to the last two sheets being printed, which would likely be at least a week or more.

<sup>214</sup>The account of the assembly contained in the *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, mentioned a "book . . . [with] 284 pages" (with four blank pages totaling 288, to make it divisible by 16. It seems probable that the number of pages was inserted by the scribe as he was transcribing the actual minutes weeks later. Since pages 255–57 include an account of the meeting itself, the book circulated during the meeting could not have contained those pages. Since the minutes clearly state that a "book" was passed around, it most likely consisted of 240 sewn but unbound pages from the first fifteen signature sheets then completed.

ble of contents (confusingly labeled “Index”) beginning on the seventeenth galley, and a twenty-five-page index (confusingly labeled “Contents”). The eighteen stacks of a thousand galley sheets each had to be cut and sewn. The unbound copies were then delivered to the Cleveland bindery by early September. On September 16, Phelps wrote: “We got some of the Commandments from Cleveland last week.”<sup>215</sup>

Given this compressed timeline, it seems unlikely, if not impossible, that the described work could have been completed in the nine days between August 17 and the 26 when Joseph returned. Doubtless the final pre-binding stages were accomplished after the Prophet’s return to Kirtland. Accordingly, he could have intervened to stop or delay the publishing of the Article on Marriage if he had felt it was necessary. He could even have called his own General Assembly to address the issue; such an assembly would arguably have had more Church leaders in attendance than this first gathering.

As a second problem with the hypothesis that Cowdery was trying to maneuver around Joseph Smith (or that Joseph authorized Cowdery to take action from which he could publicly disassociate himself), the Article on Marriage did not present any new doctrine for Church members who had always understood that fornication and adultery were forbidden. The article states that the marrying couple should keep themselves “wholly for each other, and from all others during your lives” (1835 D&C 101:2). This language was similar to a revelation received in February 1831: “Thou shalt love thy wife with all thy heart, and shall cleave unto her and none else.” That revelation was included in the Book of Commandments (44:22)<sup>216</sup> and was also published in the July 1832 edition of the *Evening and the Morning Star*.<sup>217</sup> Importantly, it was part of the same set of revelations Joseph and the committee had submitted to the General Assembly for approval for publication in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (13:7) and is Doctrine and Covenants 42:22 today.

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<sup>215</sup>W. W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, September 16, 1835, quoted in Bruce Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 566.

<sup>216</sup>*History of the Church*, 1:270; see also p. 222. The Book of Commandments was approved for publication by a council on May 1, 1832.

<sup>217</sup>“Revelations: Extract from the Laws for the Government of the Church of Christ,” *Evening and the Morning Star* 1 (July 1832): 9.



Another restrictive statement found in the Article on Marriage—that a man “should have one wife”—was part of a March 1831 revelation: “And again, I say unto you, that whoso forbiddeth to marry, is not ordained of God, for marriage is ordained of God unto man: Wherefore it is lawful that *he should have one wife*, and they twain shall be one flesh. . . .” (Book of Commandments 52:16–17; emphasis mine). These verses were published in the *Evening and the Morning Star* in Independence in November 1832<sup>218</sup> and were also included in the revelations approved by the assembly to be printed in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants (65:3). They appear in the current LDS Doctrine and Covenants 49:15–16.

In short, the Article on Marriage did not advance a new doctrine. In important ways, it had already been articulated in Joseph's earlier revelations and teachings, which were already published and circulated among the Mormons.

Third, there is a common assumption that the “crime of fornication and polygamy” mentioned in the Article on Marriage was in some way connected to Joseph Smith's behavior. However, as already discussed, it appears that very few members understood the Smith-Alger relationship to be the restoration of plural marriage, and they kept their knowledge to themselves.<sup>219</sup> The rumors at that time spoke of possible adultery (or fornication). If the article was designed to neutralize accusations spread about Joseph Smith and his alleged “crimes,” that crime would not have been “polygamy” because that was not the allegation being made. The disclaimer could only refute a charge of “fornication” against Joseph. In other words, the denial of polygamy in the Article on Marriage should not be used as evidence that people were talking about Joseph Smith's polygamy in Kirtland, unless other corroborating evidence can be located. While it is impossible to prove a negative and while those informed of Kirtland polygamy may have hypothetically maintained absolute secrecy, an

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<sup>218</sup>“Revelations: Revelation, Given May, 1831,” *Evening and Morning Star* 1 (November 1832): 47. This version mistakenly dates the revelation as being given in “May, 1831.” The correct date is March.

<sup>219</sup>Michael Guy Bishop, “The Celestial Family: Early Mormon Thought on Life and Death, 1830–1846” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Carbondale, 1981), 11–12, observed: “Very few Kirtland Saints actually had firsthand knowledge of this facet [polygamy] of their religion, and its practice was carefully circumscribed.”

in-depth review of available private journals and letters, published books, and periodicals fails to identify any allegations of polygamy against Joseph Smith during the 1830s.<sup>220</sup>

Fourth, it appears likely that other circumstances were responsible for the need for Church leaders to deny the practice of polygamy. For example, as already explained, nonmembers interpreted the law of consecration in 1831 to include a “community of wives” doctrine. Further, as already noted, some members like Joseph Wood and Lorenzo L. Lewis were engaged in adultery. These acts were known, punished, and very likely discussed in the community. Richard and Pamela Price, staunch defenders of the position that Joseph Smith was never a polygamist, propose a third uncorroborated possibility: “Polygamy entered the Church during the Kirtland period through the baptism of polygamous members of the sect known as Cochranites who were led by a man named Jacob Cochran. Those first Cochranite converts were baptized into the Church by two young missionaries, Orson Hyde and Samuel Smith, a brother of Joseph the Prophet.”<sup>221</sup>

Fifth, regardless of his feelings prior to leaving to Michigan, it appears that, after the Article on Marriage was implemented as part

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<sup>220</sup>A May 29, 1835, journal entry written by John Murdock, then on a mission, recorded: “[At] Rufus Harwood’s near Angelica [southwest New York]. Conversed with Anderson a Methodist Priest. He lied and scandalized Brother Joseph the Prophet and said he sanctioned and upheld whoredom and he bore testimony against him.” John Murdock, *Journal*, May 1835, 2:66, Ms 1194, LDS Church History Library. This is most likely a reference to the “common wives” or “community of wives” allegations made in conjunction with efforts to institute the law of consecration in Missouri and Ohio a few years earlier. It does not appear to be a direct accusation of polygamy or adultery against Joseph Smith himself. Angelica, New York, is more than two hundred miles from Kirtland, significantly removed from any rumors that might have been circulating there. William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons from the Date of their Origin to the Year 1901* (1902; rpt., Whitefish, Mont: Kessinger Publishing, 2007), 156–57, tries to bolster the charge that Joseph Smith practiced polygamy in Kirtland by quoting Fanny Brewer’s statement in Bennett’s *History of the Saints* and quotations from the *Elder’s Journal* and the *Messenger and Advocate*. Apparently he, too, was unable to locate a journal, letter, periodical, or other published work from the Kirtland period to substantiate his claims.

<sup>221</sup>Richard and Pamela Price, “Joseph the Martyr’s Testimony of Innocence Upheld by His Son, Joseph Smith, III,” *Vision* 56 (July 2007): 31.

of 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith respected it as authoritative. He referred to it in performing several marriage ceremonies in the months after the publication, which seems less likely if he had originally opposed it. For example, on December 5, 1835, he penned:

was invited with my wife to . . . join Warren Parrish and Martha H. Raymond in matrimony. We found a very pleasant and respectable company waiting when we arrived. We opened our interview with singing and prayer, after which I delivered an address upon the subject of matrimony. I then invited the ~~couple~~ /parties/ to arise who were to be joined in wedlock and solemnized the institution in a brief manner and pronounced them husband and wife in the name of God according to the Articles and Covenants of the /Church of the/ Latter Day Saints.<sup>222</sup>

On January 14 and 20, 1836, Joseph again officiated in performing marriages “according to the rules and regulations of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” a reference to Doctrine and Covenants 101.<sup>223</sup> These references would be surprising if Joseph Smith viewed the article as an unauthorized Cowdery intervention. In all likelihood, if Joseph Smith had been present at the general assembly called by Oliver Cowdery, he would have been the first to sustain the Article on Marriage since it simply echoed accepted revelations already published and clearly stated as official Church teachings.

Two related questions are the timing of Joseph’s visit to Michigan, and Oliver Cowdery’s evident haste in calling the assembly. I have been unable to document the activities of Joseph’s relatives in Pontiac or the status of its LDS branch. Thus, the question remains open that some Church or family concerns may have required his personal attention.

As to the second question, a possible explanation may lie in Phelps’s publishing activities. On November 14, 1835, he wrote to his wife: “My time and that of President John Whitmer is all taken up

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Price’s theory is problematic because the missionaries who interacted with the Cochranites did not learn of plural marriage until later in Nauvoo. If polygamy was mentioned in Kirtland meetings, Church members undoubtedly would have condemned the practice.

<sup>222</sup>Faulring, *An American Prophet’s Record*, 70.

<sup>223</sup>*Ibid.*, 104, 116. I am indebted to Michael Marquardt for bringing these additional marriages to my attention.

in the printing office. We have, when all are in the office, three apprentices and four journeymen, and we shall have to employ more men, as our work is so far behind.”<sup>224</sup> One factor that slowed down productivity and tied up needed resources was the unfinished Doctrine and Covenants. Its unbound pages cluttered the printing office work space and may have prevented the start of new projects.

The two-story printing office was located immediately behind the Kirtland Temple. Phelps was responsible for reprints of the *Evening and Morning Star* (Oliver Cowdery editor) and the more recently published *Messenger and Advocate* (editor switched from Oliver Cowdery to John Whitmer in May 1835). Undoubtedly both men were encouraging Phelps to keep up. I hypothesize that on Saturday, August 15, Phelps had either caught up with his printing obligations, or felt that the stagnated Doctrine and Covenants was an insurmountable roadblock to beginning any new project. As the former editor of one of the newspapers and the active editor of the other, Cowdery alone may have been personally motivated to also keep the printing presses working. If so, after Joseph Smith had departed for Michigan, Phelps, Cowdery, and Rigdon may have decided to finish the Doctrine and Covenants, whose galley sheets and sewn signatures were demanding much space and other resources. If this scenario is accurate—and I stress that it is speculative—then Cowdery and Rigdon would have announced the general assembly during Sunday meetings on August 16 and convened the assembly on Monday.<sup>225</sup>

The questions of when the decision was made to include the Article on Marriage in the Doctrine and Covenants and whether Joseph Smith was part of that decision cannot be conclusively answered at present. However, helpful clues are found by examining the twenty-five-page “Contents” at the back of the book. The “Contents” functions as an index and was evidently compiled after the decision was made to include the Article on Marriage (Section 101) in the Doctrine and Covenants because it contains four references to Section CI (101) under headings “Husband and wife,” “Marriage in this church,”

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<sup>224</sup>W. W. Phelps, Letter to Sally Phelps, November 14, 1835, quoted in Van Orden, “Writing to Zion,” 568.

<sup>225</sup>I am indebted to Michael Marquardt for his assistance in piecing together this interpretation of those events.

"One wife and one husband," and "Record all marriages."<sup>226</sup>

If we could ascertain the date the "Contents" was compiled, we could infer that the decision to include the article had occurred previously. The "Contents" index contains no page numbers, only sections and paragraphs. It seems likely that the compiler would have used page numbers, if they had been accessible. They were not available until the sixteenth galley was printed a few days after the document was accepted during the August 17 assembly.

If the "Contents" section was compiled prior to page numbers being available, how much earlier might it have been? On August 4, 1835, before leaving for Michigan, Joseph Smith referred "to the book of covenants, 2nd section, 2nd part, and 12, paragraph" in a letter."<sup>227</sup> This statement did not include a page number and is thus similar to the format in the "Contents." Whether the Prophet was working from unbound pages, a printer's copy, or some other collection is not known. However, his citation demonstrates that some form of an indexing system had been established at that point, perhaps even weeks before. If that indexing system included references to the Article on Marriage, then the decision to include it in the Doctrine and Covenants would have been made before Joseph Smith left of Michigan.

It is possible that Joseph and Oliver were at odds regarding the decision to include the Article on Marriage in the Doctrine and Covenants. Nevertheless, I conclude from the evidence currently available that any possible disagreement was resolved before the Prophet left for Pontiac and that he accepted the article after its adoption. Of particular importance for the focus of this article, Joseph Smith's absence from the August 17 general assembly was not a reaction to negative fallout from his plural marriage to Fanny Alger.

#### **ADDITIONAL DENIALS OF IMMORALITY AND POLYGAMY**

The 1835 Article on Marriage, however, can be viewed as the first of four authoritative denials issued between 1835 and 1838 about immorality and polygamy. The next three follow.

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<sup>226</sup>The "Contents" or functional index is repaginated with roman numerals. The headings are located on pages xii, xv, xvi, xix respectively.

<sup>227</sup>The text of the letter was copied into Joseph Smith's Letterbook and appears to be an epistle from the high council, although the recipient is unidentified. See August 4, 1835, Letterbook 1 (January 1834-August 1834 [sic; should be August 4, 1835], p. 91, in *Selected Collections*, 1:20.

1. On April 29, 1837, the Seventies at Kirtland: "Resolved: That we have no fellowship whatever with any elder belonging to the quorum of seventies who is guilty of polygamy in any shape and does not in all cases of like nature conform to the Laws of the Church as made known in the book Doctrine and Covenants and in the Bible."<sup>228</sup>

2. As the editor of the *Elder's Journal* in the November 1837 issue, Joseph Smith acknowledged twenty questions that were "daily and hourly asked by all classes of people whilst we are traveling" and promised a response in the next issue.<sup>229</sup> The seventh question was: "Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one?" In the next issue of the *Elder's Journal*, which was not printed until July 1838, the Prophet gave this answer: "No, not at the same time. But they believe that if their companion dies, they have a right to marry again."<sup>230</sup> Important context is Question 6: "Do the Mormons believe in having all things common? Answer. No." As noted above, the Latter-day Saints had been accused of having a community of wives in 1831, so the proximity of the two questions, while possibly coincidental, may have indicated a continuing belief that Mormons had "common wives."

3. In December 1838, the Prophet published a letter (quoted above) to Church members that also contained a denial of adultery: "Was it for committing adultery [that the Saints were mistreated]?"<sup>231</sup> Sociologist Thomas F. O'Dea commented: "It is curious also that in [Joseph Smith's] letters from Liberty Jail in Missouri [December 1838 to April 1839], when he answered charges that the gentiles had made against his people, Joseph Smith denied polygamy—curious because it was one of the few things that had not been charged against

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<sup>228</sup>"Minutes Book of the Seventy," April 29, 1837, LDS Church History Library; typescript in Alan H. Gerber, comp., "Church Manuscripts Collection," Vol. 2, not paginated, Perry Special Collections. This resolution was published as "To Our Readers," *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (May 1837): 511.

<sup>229</sup>Joseph Smith, Editorial, *Elder's Journal* 1, no. 2 (November 1837): 28–29.

<sup>230</sup>Joseph Smith, Editorial, *Elder's Journal* 1, no. 3 (July 1838): 43.

<sup>231</sup>Joseph Smith, "Communications: Liberty Jail, Missouri, Dec. 16, 1838," *Times and Seasons* 1 (April 1840): 84–85.

them.”<sup>232</sup> In fact, O’Dea had misread the letter. Joseph Smith was not issuing a denial of polygamy but a denial of adultery, a charge which he had also denied in Kirtland.

Authors throughout the decades have cited these few denials as evidence that “rumors of Kirtland polygamy” were perhaps “widespread.”<sup>233</sup> Fawn Brodie assured her readers: “Rumors of polygamy among the Mormons were not loud, but they were persistent.”<sup>234</sup> However, no documented accounts of such rumors from the rumor mongers themselves are quoted. Neither is specific evidence of the actual practice of polygamy among the Latter-day Saints found in private or published writings prior to 1842. In essence, the primary evidences for polygamy in Kirtland are comprised of denials by Church that it existed.

It is also important to realize that adultery and polygamy were just two of many allegations that were leveled at the Church and its members. Oliver Cowdery wrote in the *Messenger and Advocate* in 1836: “It would be a Herculean task to point out the innumerable falsehoods and misrepresentations, sent out detrimental to this society. The tales of those days in which Witches were burnt, and the ridiculous inconsistencies of those who directed the building of the funeral pyre, could be no more absurd than the every-day tales, relative to the conduct and professions of the ‘Mormons.’”<sup>235</sup>

### SUMMARY

This article has identified nine allegations of sexual misconduct against Joseph Smith between 1831 and 1839, before he and the Latter-day Saints settled in Nauvoo, Illinois where the practice of plural marriage was established. With the exception of the Fanny Alger relationship, the believability of the other eight accusations is seriously compromised. Only three of the nine charges were leveled during the

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<sup>232</sup>Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1957), 61.

<sup>233</sup>Compton, “Fanny Alger Smith Custer,” 181 note 24. See also A. Theodore Schroeder, *Some Facts Concerning Polygamy* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1898), 9.

<sup>234</sup>Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 186.

<sup>235</sup>Oliver Cowdery, Editorial, *Messenger and Advocate* 3 (October 1836): 395. Unfortunately, a sweeping and general denial is no more helpful than a sweeping and general accusation.



Prophet's lifetime. The Broome County prosecutor's allegations died quickly. E. D. Howe's third-hand accusation was not repeated in other 1830s publications often, if at all. Only the Fanny Alger relationship was talked about locally, but it was treated as adultery, not polygamy, and did not appear in the Gentile press.

In the decades after the Prophet's death, writers published six more accusations. However, there is no indication that any of them affected Joseph Smith while he was living. The shrewd and discerning William Law arrived in Nauvoo in November of 1839. After observing the Prophet for a year, he wrote to a close friend: "I have carefully watched his [Joseph Smith's] movements since I have been here, and I assure you I have found him honest and honourable in all our transactions which have been very considerable[.] I believe he is an honest upright man."<sup>236</sup>

In summary, then, I conclude that Joseph was able to enter a new chapter of his life in Illinois in April 1839, his reputation undamaged by credible accusations of previous immorality or even whispered allegations of restored plural marriage.

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<sup>236</sup>William Law, Letter to "Bro. Russell, Far West, Missouri," November 29, 1840, quoted in Lyndon W. Cook, "'Brother Joseph Is Truly a Wonderful Man, He Is All We Could Wish a Prophet to Be': Pre-1844 Letters of William Law," *BYU Studies* 20 (Summer 1980): 217–18.