

Constructing Helen: Absences, Ambiguities, and Adjustments in the Historiography of Helen Mar Kimball

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Twelve-year-old Helen Mar Kimball still loved dolls and found ways to play with them by sewing clothes and dressing them for the younger girls. A few of her favorite china dolls—gifts from England where her father, Heber C. Kimball, was serving a mission—stood proudly on display in her home. One summer day, Joseph Smith visited the Kimball home to hear a letter from Heber read aloud. While there, he accidentally dropped one of Helen’s precious dolls. Apparently failing to appreciate the importance of a special doll to a young girl, Joseph used the opportunity to issue a prophecy: “As that has fallen, so shall the heathen gods fall.” Helen, too young “to understand or appreciate the prophetic words,” simply “thought them a rather weak apology for breaking my doll’s head off.”¹ Two years later, according to prevailing historical understanding, this doll-loving girl would become a plural wife of the thirty-seven-year-old Joseph Smith.²

Among the many accounts of early Mormon polygamy, none has provoked more disapprobation than the story of Helen Mar Kimball’s 1843 sealing to Joseph Smith. According to the currently accepted narrative, when Helen was just fourteen years old, her

*Links in this paper are live at journalofmormonpolygamy.org.

¹Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 10, no. 5 (Aug. 1, 1881): 34, [LINK](#).

²Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith* (Vintage Books, 1995), 336, [LINK](#); Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 1997), 499, [LINK](#).

father, Heber C. Kimball, taught her “the principle of Celestial marriage,” then asked her to be sealed to Joseph Smith. Heber “offered” Helen to Joseph out of a “great desire to be connected with the Prophet.” Despite Helen’s mother’s “bleeding heart” and Helen’s own deep reluctance, when Joseph came the next day and promised eternal salvation for her and her entire family in exchange for the sealing, Helen agreed and “willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward.”³ This depiction of Helen’s constrained marriage to the decades-older man she had been taught to revere as the prophet of God tends to make even faithful believers in Joseph Smith’s divine mission uneasy,⁴ while critics tend to interpret the story as a predatory abuse of power and spiritual manipulation.⁵

Despite its vivid detail and near-universal acceptance, the dominant narrative of Helen Mar Kimball’s May 1843 sealing to Joseph Smith rests on a documentary foundation that warrants closer examination. Because Helen’s story is generally presented as straightforward and unambiguously documented, the historiographical processes through which it emerged, evolved, and solidified have received little sustained scrutiny. Understanding how these processes unfolded is essential for assessing the narrative’s evidentiary foundations.

This paper traces the historiographical development of the narrative of Helen Mar Kimball as Joseph Smith’s fourteen-year-old wife, from its emergence in scattered nineteenth-century sources to its eventual crystallization as an established historical consensus through successive generations of scholarship. This analysis demonstrates that from the nineteenth century to the present, institutional claims and retrospective interpretations have frequently been privileged over Helen’s own voice, while chronological inconsistencies, documentary tensions, and evidentiary discrepancies have often been minimized or resolved through interpretive harmonization.

³Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Autobiographical Letter, March 30, 1881, MS 744, LDS Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT, hereafter CHL, [LINK](#).

⁴See, for example, Brian Hales and Laura Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding* (Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 101.

⁵For example, see Sandra Tanner, “Joseph Smith as a Sexual Predator,” YouTube, June 20, 2009, [LINK](#); John Dehlin and Bill Reel, “Joseph Smith: Predator or Prophet?” Mormon Stories Facebook video, July 24, 2023, [LINK](#). See also J. Spencer Fluhman, “‘A Subject That Can Bear Investigation:’ Anguish, Faith, and Joseph Smith’s Youngest Plural Wife,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 41, [LINK](#).

This study argues that the prevailing narrative rests on an imbalanced documentary foundation. A single late-appearing document (the 1881 letter), first catalogued in 1975, lacking clear prior provenance, and standing in tension with other documents, has come to function as the primary interpretive lens through which other sources are read. Meanwhile, Helen’s extensive published and personal writings—spanning decades of autobiographical articles, pamphlets, correspondence, and journals—have been brought into alignment with that framework through reinterpretation and selective citation rather than evaluated as independent historical evidence capable of shaping chronological or interpretive conclusions. Evidence of a sealing has likewise been inferred from contemporary documents that do not explicitly mention it, such as Helen’s May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing, while documentary tensions that might complicate the inherited chronology have more often been harmonized than carefully scrutinized.

By tracing these patterns across the development of the narrative, this study argues that its apparent cohesion reflects accumulated interpretive choices rather than broad documentary consensus. As a work of historiography, this study does not attempt to adjudicate underlying historical questions of when or whether a sealing between Helen Mar Kimball and Joseph Smith occurred. Rather, it examines how that historical conclusion was constructed, stabilized, and transmitted within the scholarly literature—a process that raises important methodological questions about evidentiary standards, source weighting, and the centering of women’s voices in historical reconstruction.

Early Claims and Documentary Silence, 1848–1886

The first published claim that Helen Mar Kimball married Joseph Smith appeared in Catherine Lewis’s 1848 exposé, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons*.⁶ Lewis arrived in Nauvoo shortly before temple ordinance work began in December 1845,⁷ well after Joseph Smith’s June 1844 death. Since she never met Joseph and was not present in 1843, her claim that “the

⁶Catherine Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons: Giving an Account of Their Iniquities* (Lynn, MA: Author, 1848), 19, [LINK](#).

⁷Connell O’Donovan, “Mormons of Essex County MA (Salem, Beverly, Lynn, Newbury, Rowley, Gloucester, Danvers, etc.),” 111, Connell O’Donovan website, [LINK](#).

daughter of Kimball was one of Joseph's wives" was not based on firsthand knowledge. Rather, it appears to have resulted from her interpretation of a conversation she reported overhearing during her four months in Nauvoo.⁸

Lewis did not recall Helen's name, but after explaining that, "Kimball and Young took most of . . . Joseph's wives after his death," she described hearing "her say to her mother, 'I will never be sealed to my Father, (meaning as a wife) and I would never have been sealed (married) to Joseph, had I known it was any thing more than ceremony.'"⁹ Lewis's parenthetical additions indicate that her identification of Helen as Joseph's wife reflects her own interpretation of the reported conversation rather than Helen's actual words.

The context in which Lewis situated the exchange introduces additional interpretive ambiguities and further complicates its evidentiary value. Lewis placed the exchange approximately a year and a half after Joseph Smith's death, when, according to her account, Helen's prior sealing to Joseph was being invoked to pressure her to submit to an unwanted new sealing. In this setting, the claimed earlier sealing functions less as evidence of a clearly defined 1843 marital relationship than as a precedent being invoked in 1845-1846 to justify and enforce later institutional expectations. The focus of the passage therefore appears to be less on Joseph Smith's relationship with Helen than on the authority dynamics and evolving sealing practices of Heber C. Kimball and Brigham Young in the years after Joseph Smith's death.

Additionally, Lewis's report indicates that Helen had initially understood the sealing to be nothing "more than ceremony." The timing and context of her realization that others were treating it as something more remain unclear. The objection Lewis attributed to Helen appears as a novel argument presented in this specific moment of conflict rather than as a longstanding and repeatedly voiced complaint. If Helen had understood the sealing as an actual marriage in 1843, no contemporaneous objections are recorded, and Lewis provided no indication that such concerns had been expressed in the intervening years. Instead, Helen's reported objection surfaced only in this later context—well after Joseph Smith's death

⁸Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons*, 20.

⁹Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons*, 19.

had already ended any such relationship and at the moment when the ordinance was being used to compel further compliance. This temporal gap raises significant interpretive questions and suggests that Helen's statement may reflect her response to a post-1844 reinterpretation of a potential sealing rather than her understanding at the time it was performed.

Lewis continued her account, reporting that Helen said, "I was young, and they deceived me, by saying the salvation of our whole family depended on it. I say again, I will never be sealed to my Father; no, I will sooner be damned and go to hell, if I must. Neither will I be sealed to Brigham Young."¹⁰ This statement introduces further ambiguity, as it does not specify who "they" were. Given the section's focus on the actions of Kimball and Young and the plural "they," on both grammatical and contextual grounds, "they deceived me" could more plausibly refer to Kimball and Young rather than to Joseph Smith.

However, the most significant historiographical challenge Lewis's account presents is that, while historians have repeatedly cited it as early evidence of Helen's sealing to Joseph Smith,¹¹ they have been slower to acknowledge that accepting Lewis's framing of "sealing" as literal marriage regarding Joseph also requires accepting her claim that Heber C. Kimball sought to literally marry his own daughter, since both conclusions arise from the same interpretive assumption. This troubling element of Lewis's account has generally been omitted or summarily dismissed as unreliable.¹² The common practice of utilizing the former while rejecting the latter illustrates the selective use of Lewis's account in later historiography. This methodological inconsistency further undermines the passage's evidentiary value and raises concerns

¹⁰Lewis, *Narrative of Some of the Proceedings of the Mormons*, 19.

¹¹See, for example, Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Signature Books, 1986), 53, [LINK](#); Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 501; George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage"* (Signature Books, 2008), 202; Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 2:296; 3:200.

¹²Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 501, acknowledges but dismisses the claim: "However, the allegation that Helen might have been pressured to marry her own father—if that is what is implied—is not credible." See also Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3:200. Although Hales does not address Lewis's allegation that Heber sought to marry Helen, he similarly rejects another implication drawn from Lewis, writing, "The portion of Lewis's account claiming that Helen accused Joseph Smith and her father of having 'deceived' her seems less plausible."

about how sources are evaluated: if Lewis's claim about Heber cannot be trusted, on what grounds should her claims about Joseph be accepted? Lewis's account, therefore, reveals far more about the leadership dynamics and sealing practices of Kimball and Young after Joseph Smith's death than about Joseph Smith himself. For nearly four decades, however, this ambiguous and secondhand report remained the only published claim that Helen had been married to Joseph Smith, shaping the early contours of the narrative that later historians would elaborate and refine.¹³

More than thirty years later, in 1880, Helen began to write and publicly share her own history. From May 1880 through August 1886, her series of autobiographical reminiscences appeared in the semi-monthly periodical, the *Woman's Exponent*.¹⁴ She also published two pamphlets—*Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph*¹⁵ (1882) and *Why We Practice Plural Marriage*¹⁶ (1884)—and left extensive journals and correspondence. These writings formed part of a late-nineteenth-century effort among Latter-day Saints to defend plural marriage and to affirm Joseph Smith's role in its introduction.

Throughout her writings, Helen vigorously defended plural marriage and refuted Joseph Smith III's claims that his father, Joseph Smith Jr., had not practiced polygamy. Helen wrote extensively about her experiences in Nauvoo, her family, her interactions with Joseph Smith, and her father's practice of polygamy. She also openly shared her own experiences with polygamy, giving multiple accounts of the conversation when her father first introduced the principle to her. She freely expressed her reactions and feelings, describing her "sudden shock," her "first impulse [of] anger," and her "sense of personal injury and displeasure" toward what she called an "utterly repugnant" doctrine. She explained that only her father, whom she knew loved "his only daughter . . . too well to teach me

¹³Joseph F. Smith, "Celestial Marriage—Now and When the Revelation Was Given," *Deseret Evening News* 19, no. 151 (May 20, 1886): 2, [LINK](#).

¹⁴Helen Mar Whitney, "Autobiographical articles," *Woman's Exponent* (May 15, 1880 – Aug. 15, 1886), CHL, [LINK](#).

¹⁵Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph: A Reply to Joseph Smith, Editor of the Herald* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1882), [LINK](#).

¹⁶Helen Mar Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage: By a "Mormon" Wife and Mother* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), [LINK](#).

anything that was not strictly pure, virtuous and exalting in its tendencies” could have convinced her to believe it.¹⁷

In this account, as across her writings, she consistently placed this conversation with her father in the summer of 1843. In one account she recalled, “The principle was first introduced to me by my father, who one morning in the summer of 1843, without any preliminaries, asked me if I would believe him if he told me that it was right for married men to take other wives.”¹⁸ She specified that “[t]his was just previous to his starting upon his last mission but one to the eastern states,” which situates the conversation in the days immediately preceding his departure on June 10, 1843.¹⁹ Another time she similarly wrote, “it was not till the summer [of 1843] . . . that I learned of the existence of the plural order of marriage.”²⁰ She also shared her own experiences as a plural wife. For example, in 1882, thirty-two years after her husband, Horace, took a second wife,²¹ she wrote, “I have been a spectator and a participator in this order of matrimony for over thirty years, and being a first wife, I have had every opportunity for judging in regard to its merits.”²²

Despite her extensive and often personal focus on polygamy and her explicit defense of Joseph Smith’s involvement in the practice, Helen did not identify herself as one of his wives in any of these publications. She named several other women she said were wives of Joseph Smith, pointing to them as firsthand witnesses who could testify of his involvement in polygamy. Yet when writing about the wives of Joseph Smith, she did so in the third person, mentioning other women, but never herself.²³ Helen published

¹⁷Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (Aug. 1, 1882), 39-40. [LINK](#).

¹⁸Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (1 Aug. 1882): 39-40.

¹⁹Heber C. Kimball, *On the Potter’s Wheel: The Diaries of Heber C. Kimball*, ed. Stanley Kimball (Signature Books, 1987), 50. [LINK](#).

²⁰Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo After the Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 19 (Mar. 1 1883): 146. [LINK](#).

²¹Horace K. Whitney married Lucy Amelia Bloxham in October 1850; U.S. Census, 1850, Great Salt Lake County, Utah Territory, household of Horace K. Whitney, [LINK](#); Frederick Clifton Pierce, *The Descendants of John Whitney, Who Came from London, England, to Watertown, Massachusetts, in 1635* (Chicago: published by the author, 1895), 602. [LINK](#).

²²Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph*, 27. [LINK](#).

²³See, for example, Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14, no. 2 (Jun. 15, 1885): 11. [LINK](#): “There are a dozen or more

her writings at the height of the LDS Church's efforts to prove that polygamy originated with Joseph Smith and amid opposition from both the Smith family and the United States government. It was also a time when Joseph Smith's wives experienced "great prestige"²⁴ in Utah, and when other women were actively claiming to have been polygamously married to him. This context makes her silence regarding any claim to have been married to Joseph Smith in her many published writings striking and difficult to explain. Despite its implications, Helen's public silence is not widely recognized and has rarely been foregrounded in historical treatments of Nauvoo polygamy.

The absence of any assertion that Helen had been one of Joseph Smith's wives continued with Augusta Joyce Crocheron's 1884 *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches To Accompany the Picture Bearing the Same Title*.²⁵ Crocheron included Helen Mar Kimball as the nineteenth of twenty-one "spiritual laborers . . . selected by the precedence they hold," "to represent the Latter Day Saints Women's Organizations."²⁶ Each woman sat for a portrait and contributed information for her biographical sketch. Crocheron thanked "the ladies of the

of his wives still living in Utah, besides scores of men and women who can testify that this principle was taught and practiced by him, and that he commanded others to enter into it;" Helen Mar Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents After the Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch," *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 19 (Mar. 1, 1883): 146, [LINK](#): "My father . . . he took the first opportunity to introduce Sarah Ann to me as Joseph's wife. This astonished me Beyond measure . . . I saw, or could imagine, in some degree, the great trial that she must have passed through, and that it had required a mighty struggle to take a step of that kind, and had called for a sacrifice, such as few can realize but those who first rendered obedience to this law . . . No earthly inducement could be held forth to the women who entered this order. It was to be a life-sacrifice for the sake of an everlasting glory and exaltation. Sarah Ann took this step of her own free will;" Whitney, *Plural Marriage*, 14-15, [LINK](#): "Their names were Maria and Sarah Lawrence, who are now dead, and two daughters of Bishop Partridge, Eliza and Emily, the two latter are now living in Utah, and are still true and faithful advocates of the principle of celestial marriage as taught them by the Prophet Joseph Smith. Being aware of this fact, and knowing that there are a dozen or more of his wives still living and dwelling in Utah, who were sealed to him in Nauvoo, besides hundreds of others that were aware of these things, it would be useless for me or any one to undertake to deny it even if we wished to."

²⁴Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *A Widow's Tale: The 1884-1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney*, ed. Charles M. Hatch and Todd M. Compton (Utah State University Press, 2003), 20, [LINK](#).

²⁵Augusta Joyce Crocheron, *Representative Women of Deseret: A Book of Biographical Sketches To Accompany the Picture Bearing the Same Title* (J. C. Graham & Co., 1884), [LINK](#).

²⁶Crocheron, *Representative Women*, "Introductory."

picture” for their “kindness and confidence.”²⁷ Helen explicitly noted her involvement in a March 31, 1885, journal entry in which she commented on her photograph.²⁸ Crocheron’s inclusion of extensive original quotations from Helen, along with the parallel themes and chronology shared by the biography and Helen’s own publications, further indicates her direct involvement.

Helen’s biographical sketch reflects this collaboration. It highlights her “literary efforts” and her leadership as “Counselor in the Relief Society of this stake of Zion.”²⁹ Consistent with her own writings, Crocheron’s biography focuses heavily on Helen’s parents’ polygamy and openly acknowledges Helen’s status as a plural wife to Horace Whitney: “I have encouraged and sustained my husband in the celestial order of marriage because I knew it was right.” The sketch openly discusses the emotional cost of plural marriage within her family. Helen described her initial hatred of polygamy, attributing it to the suffering it caused her mother: “I had, in hours of temptation, when seeing the trials of my mother, felt to rebel. I hated polygamy in my heart.”³⁰ Despite this frank and open discussion of her early experiences with polygamy, Helen included no indication that she had been married to Joseph Smith. When confessing her hatred of polygamy, she attributed it to the pain she witnessed her father’s polygamy cause her mother, making no mention of any challenging experiences of her own as a teenage plural wife. The biography thus provides an additional intimate firsthand account of Helen’s experiences with polygamy—one that, like her published writings, contains no acknowledgment of a marriage to Joseph Smith.

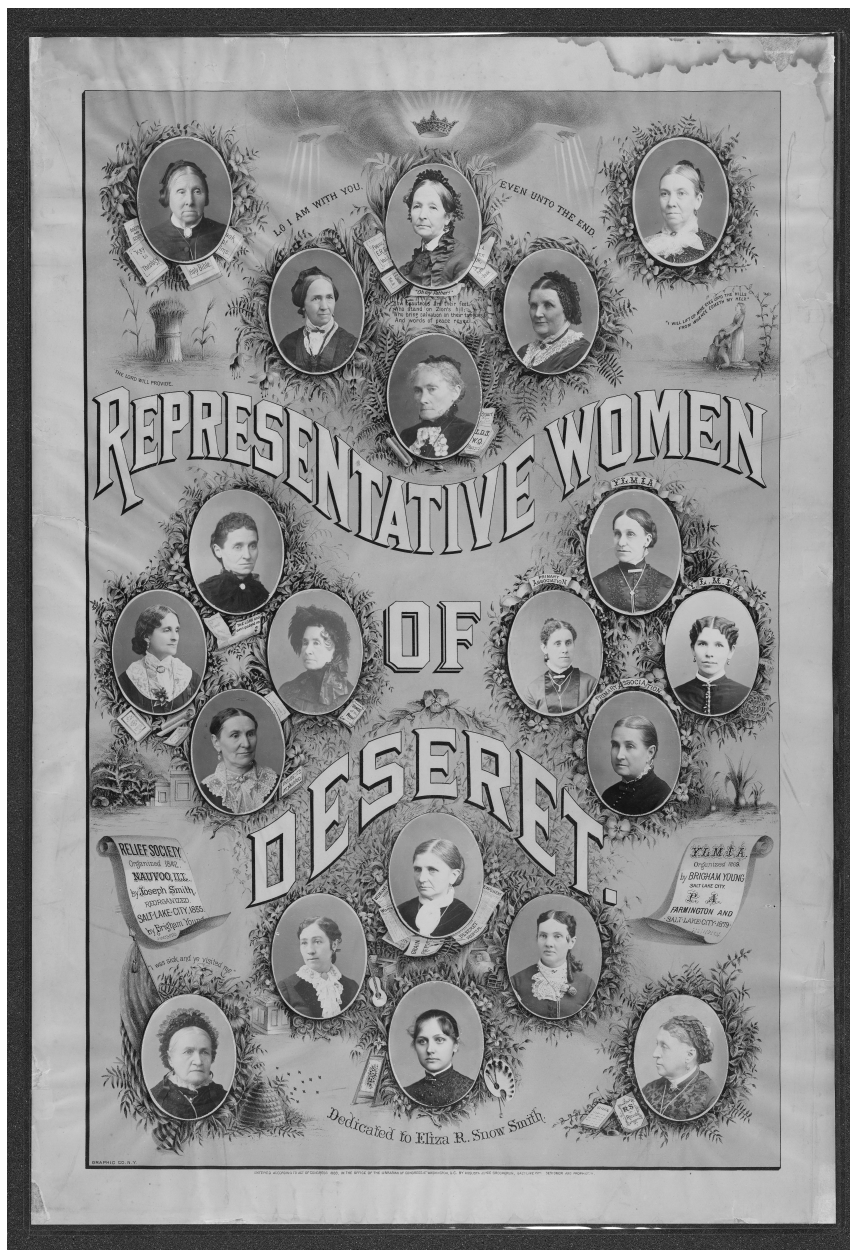
The significance of this silence becomes clearer when considered alongside Crocheron’s treatment of other women in the volume. While Crocheron specified that her selection of women was based on their positions of leadership and other contributions in Salt Lake City rather than their connection to Joseph Smith, she nevertheless explicitly identified women considered to have been his wives. For example, she wrote: “Eliza was at this time the wife of the

²⁷Crocheron, *Representative Women*, “Preface.”

²⁸Helen Whitney, *A Widow’s Tale*, 78.

²⁹Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 114-115.

³⁰Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 112.



"Representative Women of Deseret," 1883 Lithograph with montage of individual portraits of women serving in general presidencies of Relief Society, Primary, and Young Ladies' MIA in 1883, along with other accomplished women of that period. PH 2657, CHL, [LINK](#).



"Helen Mar Whitney, daughter of Heber C. Kimball, and writer of Church history and biographies; also First Counselor of the Relief Society of the Salt Lake Stake of Zion." From Augusta Joyce Crocheron's "Explanatory," Representative Women of Deseret, 130-131, [LINK](#).

Prophet,”³¹ and “Sister Zina . . . was sealed to the Prophet for time and eternity, after the order of the new and everlasting Covenant.”³² She described Prescendia in more ambiguous language, but still identified her as one of the “noble, self-sacrificing women, who through the providence of God helped to establish the principle of celestial marriage” before “the Prophet and Patriarch were foully murdered.”³³ The absence of any similar statement regarding Helen indicates that, at least until 1884, contemporaries did not identify Helen Mar Whitney as one of Joseph Smith’s wives. Taken together with Helen’s published writings, the Crocheron biography constitutes an additional clear instance in which Helen related her experiences of polygamy without any acknowledgment of a marriage to Joseph Smith.

Additionally, Crocheron’s *Representative Women of Deseret* contributes a chronological detail of considerable historiographical significance. The sketch specifies that “Helen knew nothing of the order till June, 1843, when her father revealed it to her.”³⁴ While this portion of the biography is written in the third person, Helen’s close involvement with the project has already been noted, and this June dating aligns with her other accounts, which consistently place the conversation with her father in summer 1843—more specifically, in the days “just previous”³⁵ to June 10, 1843. This June dating, presented in a collaborative and publicly circulated biography, provides an important chronological anchor that establishes how Helen herself and her contemporaries understood and represented her introduction to polygamy—a detail that will prove significant as later institutional accounts introduced a competing timeline.

Institutional Codification and Timeline Establishment, 1886–1888

The first time Helen’s name appeared in print as one of Joseph Smith’s wives since Catherine Lewis’s 1848 exposé was in May 1886, when then-apostle and member of the First Presidency, Joseph F. Smith, published William Clayton’s 1874 affidavit in the *Deseret*

³¹Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 2.

³²Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 12.

³³Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 30.

³⁴Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 110.

³⁵Helen Whitney, Autobiographical Letter, March 30, 1881.

Evening News.³⁶ Helen was not involved in the preparation of this affidavit and was not consulted prior to its publication.³⁷ The affidavit was originally drafted by Joseph F. Smith himself (who was four years old in 1843) before being recopied and signed by William Clayton.³⁸ While the affidavit names Helen as Joseph's wife, William Clayton's journals—which make frequent references to Heber C. Kimball, Clayton's "particularly close" friend,³⁹ and the Kimball family, including at least ten direct references to Helen before, during, and after the time the sealing is said to have occurred—include no indication of Helen being married to Joseph Smith.⁴⁰ Moreover, despite Joseph F. Smith's concerted effort beginning in 1869 to document Joseph Smith's polygamy by gathering affidavits from women identified as his wives, there is no evidence that he ever sought a statement from Helen.

The Clayton affidavit's 1886 publication occurred more than six years after William Clayton's death and after Helen had spent over six years consistently publishing her own history, which included extensive descriptions of her experiences with polygamy. It marked the first time Helen was identified as one of Joseph's wives in an LDS publication. It also provided the first indication of when the sealing was supposed to have occurred. Following the claim that Clayton performed a sealing between Joseph Smith and Lucy Walker on May 1, 1843, the affidavit states, "During this period the prophet Joseph took several other wives." It then lists five specific women claimed to be "among the number I well remember" as Joseph's "lawful, wedded wives, according to the celestial order."⁴¹ The list includes Helen. The publication of this affidavit marked a significant shift in the documentary tradition, introducing an institutional claim that identified Helen as Joseph

³⁶Joseph F. Smith, "Celestial Marriage, Now and When the Revelation was Given," *Deseret Evening News* 19, no. 151 (May 20, 1886): 2, [LINK](#).

³⁷Helen's journal entry for May 20, 1886 makes it clear that she learned her name had been included after the paper had been published.

³⁸Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle Brady Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits," *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025): 10, [LINK](#).

³⁹James Allen, *No Toil nor Labor Fear: The Story of William Clayton* (Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 36.

⁴⁰William Clayton, Nauvoo Journals, typescripts prepared by James B. Allen and Dean C. Jessee, entries dated June 8, 1843; October 30 and December 4, 8, and 11, 1843; January 21, 25, and 26, 1844; June 14 and July 21, 1845.

⁴¹William Clayton, Affidavit, Feb. 16, 1874, 3, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

Smith's wife without her knowledge or participation, and beginning a pattern in which ecclesiastical sources would increasingly shape her historical representation.

In July 1886, two months after the publication of the Clayton affidavit, W. Wyl (Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal), published *Joseph Smith the Prophet: His Family and His Friends*, a rhetorically charged anti-Mormon polemic, intended to be the first of a series entitled *Mormon Portraits*.⁴² After alleging that Joseph required all of his apostles to “consecrate” their wives to him, Wyl claimed that Heber Kimball, “apologizing to the prophet for his wife’s reluctance,” offered his “young daughter only getting out of girlhood” as a “proxy.” In Wyl’s telling, “Joe replied that she would do just as well, and the Lord would accept her instead. The half-ripe bud of womanhood was delivered over to the prophet.”⁴³

Wyl’s account represents a notable development in the narrative. While earlier sources provided only sparse or secondhand claims, Wyl supplied detailed dialogue, psychological motivations, and a dramatic scenario in which Helen was offered as a substitute for her mother—elements that do not appear in earlier sources. Wyl himself was a young child living in Vienna during the Nauvoo period and had no firsthand knowledge of the events he described.⁴⁴ He asserted in his preface that he had gathered information from individuals familiar with Nauvoo. However, he did not identify any specific source for this story. The private nature of the reported conversations makes it unlikely that there would have been a witness to reliably report the details, particularly over four decades later. The strongest support Wyl provided for his account was the Clayton affidavit, which he reprinted, asserting that it “confirms all my statements,”⁴⁵ despite its lack of the specific details Wyl described. The highly polemical tone of the work further underscores the ideological context in which this expanded narrative emerged.

In 1887, Andrew Jenson reinforced the emerging narrative of Helen as a wife of Joseph Smith in volume six of *The Historical*

⁴²W. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits: Or the Truth About the Mormon Leaders from 1830 to 1886* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Company, 1886), [LINK](#).

⁴³Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 71–72, 94.

⁴⁴Ludwig Julius Fränkel, “Wymetal, Wilhelm Ritter von,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, vol. 44 (Duncker & Humblot, 1898), 395, Wikisource edition, lists his birthdate as December 27, 1838, [LINK](#).

⁴⁵Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 71–72, 94.

Record. He printed his own list of twenty-seven wives—including Helen—and reprinted the full Clayton affidavit. He also supplied a more specific timeline, stating that Helen was “married to Joseph in May, 1843.”⁴⁶ Jenson provided no citation for this dating, but his reliance on the Clayton affidavit—the only source in his volume that names Helen as a wife—strongly suggests that he based his chronology on its assertion that Joseph took Helen as a wife “during [the] period” of “the 1st day of May, 1843.”

Jenson’s choice of sources is historiographically significant. By the time he compiled his list, Helen had already published multiple autobiographical accounts, both in the *Woman’s Exponent* and in her two pamphlets, and she had collaborated with Augusta Joyce Crocheron’s *Representative Women of Deseret*. As has been shown, in each of these publications she discussed her history with polygamy extensively, without naming herself as a wife of Joseph Smith. Additionally, she consistently placed her first introduction to plural marriage in the summer of 1843, more specifically in June, rendering a May sealing difficult to reconcile with her own chronology. If Jenson engaged Helen’s writings, he neither cited nor deferred to them. Instead, he derived his information, including his timeline, from his interpretation of an institutional affidavit produced under the direction of Joseph F. Smith. Jenson’s adoption of a timeline that differed from Helen’s own published accounts established a pattern that would often characterize the historiography: when differences appeared in the documentary record, claims of institutional authorities repeatedly took precedence over the testimonies of the woman whose life they sought to describe.

In his effort to document Joseph Smith’s wives, Jenson collaborated with Eliza R. Snow in compiling a list of women to investigate.⁴⁷ The surviving document includes names in both Snow’s and Jenson’s handwriting, with Helen’s name written by Snow. While Snow’s contributions to the list have sometimes been interpreted as evidence that she possessed independent knowledge

⁴⁶ Andrew Jenson, ed., *The Historical Record: A Monthly Periodical* 6 (Andrew Jenson, 1887), 224–226, 234.

⁴⁷ Andrew Jenson, “Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives,” undated manuscript list, MS 17956, CHL, [LINK](#).

of Nauvoo sealings,⁴⁸ the documentary record does not clearly establish the basis of her information. Although Snow and Helen were good friends in Utah, Helen reported that they did not become acquainted until “after our expulsion from Nauvoo.”⁴⁹ In 1876, following a prolonged illness, Helen asked Snow to visit and minister to her. Snow arrived accompanied by Margaret Smoot. Helen recounted that she “told some of my experience,” and as a result, “Sister Smoot told me she thought I would be a great benefit to the young sisters to hear my history & she considered it my duty to tell them.”⁵⁰ At the time of this conversation, Snow was gathering women’s histories for Edward Tullidge’s *Women of Mormondom*, published the following year in 1877. While the volume did not claim to record a comprehensive list of Joseph Smith’s wives, it did defend the claim that Joseph had practiced polygamy by naming several women known as his plural wives.⁵¹ Helen was not included among them.

It is notable that Jenson’s efforts to gather information, and Snow’s addition of Helen’s name to his list, occurred only after the *Deseret Evening News* published the Clayton affidavit,⁵² pointing to that document as a plausible source for both Snow’s and Jenson’s information and complicating the assumption that Snow’s addition of Helen’s name reflects independent recollection of Nauvoo events.

⁴⁸See, for example, Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy* 2:263–65, 299; Don Bradley, “How Did Andrew Jenson Create His List of Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives? Piecing Together His Process from His Research Notes,” paper given at the *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* conference, Mar. 21, 2025; Don Bradley, “Mormon Polygamy before Nauvoo? The Relationship of Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger,” in *Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Newell G. Bringham and Craig L. Foster (John Whitmer Books, 2010), 23–24.

⁴⁹Helen Mar Whitney, “Life Incidents,” *Woman’s Exponent* 9, no. 22 (Apr. 15, 1881): 179, [LINK](#). “I never knew Sister Eliza intimately until after our expulsion from Nauvoo . . . The first time I remember of meeting her there she was lying sick with a fever in a poorly covered wagon . . . Our intimacy began the first winter after we came to this valley.” (Helen arrived in Utah October 1848.)

⁵⁰Helen M. Whitney, 1876 Reminiscences and Diary, 22-23, MS 9670, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵¹Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York, n.p., 1877), 367–368, [LINK](#). Tullidge identified Eliza R. Snow, Emily and Eliza Partridge, and Sarah Ann Whitney as plural wives of Joseph Smith. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney appears only briefly in connection with her father’s experience (246) and is not presented as one of Joseph Smith’s wives.

⁵²Joseph F. Smith, “Celestial Marriage, Now and When the Revelation was Given,” *Deseret Evening News* 19, no. 151 (May 20, 1886): 2, [LINK](#); Bradley, “How Did Andrew Jenson Create His List of Joseph Smith Plural Wives?” 2, 10. Bradley notes, “Jenson appears to have begun his research . . . with an impromptu visit to . . . [Malissa Lott Willes] in November 1886.” Jenson’s interview with Snow followed that visit.

Helen's recorded interactions with Jenson provide further evidence that she was not the source of his information. She documented two visits from him in her diary, in May and June 1887. During each visit, he requested that she write her "testimony concerning plural marriage as wife of the Prophet Joseph" for his forthcoming history.⁵³ Helen did not provide her own biography as Joseph's wife, but instead "gave him a few incidents of Flora Gove's life who *was* a wife of Joseph Smith,"⁵⁴ and *The Historical Record* was published without a biographical sketch of Helen.

Jenson's history marked another important moment in the development of the Helen Mar Kimball narrative. Jenson actively sought Helen's voice in support of his belief that she had been Joseph's wife, but when he was unable to obtain her personal testimony, he constructed his narrative from other sources. This process resulted in a historical record that diverged in significant ways from Helen's published and collaborative accounts of her own experiences.

While, at first glance, Jenson's May dating of the sealing might appear insignificant since May is adjacent to summer or June, the timing Helen consistently cited for her introduction to polygamy, chronological proximity is not the issue. Rather, the critical question is whose voice is centered and prioritized in the construction of a woman's history, and which accounts are treated as authoritative. By privileging the Clayton affidavit while neglecting Helen's published and collaborative accounts, Jenson contributed to a developing historiographical pattern in which institutional claims gradually displaced a woman's repeated and public telling of her own history. This pattern would shape subsequent scholarship, as historians increasingly relied on these mediated sources while Helen's extensive writings remained comparatively underutilized.

In 1888, Helen's son, Orson F. Whitney, published a reverential biography of his grandfather, Heber C. Kimball.⁵⁵ In describing the "grand and glorious principle" of polygamy, he wrote, "An angel with a flaming sword descended from the courts of glory and . . . commanded him in the name of the Lord to establish the

⁵³Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 236, 246, [LINK](#).

⁵⁴Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 246, emphasis added; Jenson, *The Historical Record* 6: 234.

⁵⁵Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball, an Apostle: The Father and Founder of the British Mission* (Salt Lake City: The Kimball Family, 1888), [LINK](#).

principle so long concealed from the Saints and the world.” Despite “the youthful prophet’s” knowledge of “the danger of his task” and “the peril and penalty of disobedience . . . he bowed to the inevitable, and laid his life . . . upon the altar of duty and devotion.”⁵⁶

Among those to whom Joseph confided this great secret, even before it was committed to writing, was his bosom friend, Heber C. Kimball. Well knowing the integrity of his heart, so many times tested and found true, he felt that he ran no risk in opening to Heber’s eyes the treasured mysteries of his mighty soul.⁵⁷

In addition to asserting the prominence and faithfulness of his ancestors, Orson appears to have sought to absorb and reframe the negative stories Wilhelm Wyl had published about his family. Rather than ignoring or refuting Wyl’s hostile narratives, Orson transformed them into faith-affirming accounts. He recast the troubling story of Joseph requiring Heber to surrender his wife, Vilate, as a heroic test of obedience that demonstrated Heber’s worthiness to be entrusted with the secret knowledge. In emotive language, he described Heber’s “superhuman resolve” as “with a broken and a bleeding heart, but with soul selfmastered for the sacrifice, he led his darling wife to the Prophet’s house and presented her to Joseph.”⁵⁸ Both Heber and Helen recorded extensive personal and family histories, including detailed accounts of Heber’s and Vilate’s introduction to polygamy,⁵⁹ yet neither mentioned any such episode.

Unlike in Wyl’s telling, Orson decoupled the story of Heber’s and Vilate’s sacrifice from an immediate sealing to Helen. Instead, after quoting extensively from one of Helen’s Exponent articles, which says nothing about her being sealed to Joseph, he wrote:

Soon after the revelation was given, a golden link was forged whereby the houses of Heber and Joseph were

⁵⁶Orson Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 331–332.

⁵⁷Orson Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 332.

⁵⁸Orson Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 333–335. It is important to note that Orson Whitney is the sole source for this story. Neither Heber nor Vilate recorded or ever referred to it and it is entirely absent from all of Helen’s writings.

⁵⁹For example, Heber C. Kimball, Discourse, Sept. 2, 1866, George D. Watt Papers, CR 100 912, CHL, transcribed from Pitman shorthand by LaJean Purcell Carruth, [LINK](#); Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 10, no. 10 (15 October 1881): 74, [LINK](#).

indissolubly and forever joined. Helen Mar, the eldest daughter of Heber Chase and Vilate Murray Kimball, was given to the Prophet in the holy bonds of celestial marriage.⁶⁰

Orson provided no citation for this claim, and no discussion of Helen's sealing to Joseph has been identified in the extensive correspondence between mother and son. Notably, Orson's romantically narrated account was written two years after the publication of the Clayton affidavit identified Helen as one of Joseph Smith's wives.

Another important consideration is the chronology Orson assigned to the marriage. He placed it "soon after the revelation was given," meaning the revelation on plural marriage, currently canonized as section 132 of the LDS Doctrine and Covenants. William Clayton claimed to have recorded the revelation on July 12, 1843. However, Heber C. Kimball, who would have arranged and performed the sealing,⁶¹ was on a mission from June 10 to October 22, 1843.⁶² This presents a significant chronological tension in Orson's account. Heber C. Kimball was absent from Nauvoo throughout the summer and early autumn of 1843. A generous interpretation of "soon after" might accommodate the four-month window until Heber's late October return. However, a late-autumn or winter sealing is more difficult to reconcile with the Clayton affidavit, which places the sealing "during th[e] period" of May 1, 1843. Helen dated her introduction to polygamy to the days just before June 10, 1843, and no source or account situates a sealing between Helen and Joseph Smith in the late fall of 1843 or at any later time.

Given the chronological tension in his account, the absence of corroboration from any of the participants, and the hagiographic tone of the work, Orson's biography of his grandfather functions as a devotional family narrative that emphasizes his ancestor's faith, sacrifice, and proximity to the prophet. This is further underscored by the fact that he described events that occurred more than a

⁶⁰Orson Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball*, 335–339.

⁶¹Orson F. Whitney, *Through Memory's Halls: The Life of Orson F. Whitney As Told By Himself* (Zion's Printing and Publishing Company, 1930), 18.

⁶²See Heber C. Kimball, *On the Potter's Wheel*, 50, [LINK](#); "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843–29 February 1844," 22 October 1843 entry, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, hereafter JSP, [LINK](#).

decade before he was born and did not identify the sources on which his reconstructions depended.

Orson F. Whitney's biography of his grandfather represents an additional instance of someone other than Helen attempting to reconcile the claim that she had been married to Joseph Smith, despite its absence throughout her published histories. Rather than preserving Helen's own narrative, these accounts reflect successive layers of institutional and devotional interpretation, further reinforcing the pattern in which her voice was mediated, interpreted, and displaced. Neither the May 1843 timeline, established through Joseph F. Smith's and William Clayton's institutional affidavit construction and Andrew Jenson's subsequent interpretation, nor Orson Whitney's post-July 12, 1843 framework, apparently grounded in the reported chronology of the polygamy revelation, align with Helen's repeated statement that her father first taught her the principle just before his departure on June 10, 1843. Perhaps due to the wider circulation of Jenson's history and the assumed reliability of the Clayton affidavit, Jenson's dating of May 1843 gained traction and became the dominant chronology in subsequent scholarship.

Obscurity, Resurgence, and Documentary Recovery, 1889–1975

In 1889, just a year after Orson Whitney's pro-polygamy biography of his grandfather and two years after Jenson published his list of Joseph Smith's wives, mounting legal and political pressure compelled church leaders to begin distancing the institution from the public defense of polygamy. As part of this shift, "President Wilford Woodruff had the Endowment House razed as a sign of his resolve to curtail new plural marriages."⁶³ The following year, Woodruff issued the first of two official manifestos, ostensibly ending polygamy in the Church.⁶⁴ In the midst of these initial efforts, the legal challenge of the Temple Lot Case temporarily intensified

⁶³"Endowment House," Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website, [LINK](#).

⁶⁴Wilford Woodruff's 1890 Manifesto was followed by Joseph F. Smith's "Second Manifesto" in 1904, after which church discipline for new plural marriages intensified. Polygamy continued to be gradually phased out of church practice until Heber J. Grant's 1933 loyalty pledge effectively ended the practice in the LDS Church.

the Church's efforts to defend Joseph Smith's role in introducing polygamy.

In 1892, in an effort to block the RLDS Church from claiming possession of property in Independence, Missouri, where Joseph Smith had prophesied the temple of Zion would be built, the LDS Church entered what effectively became a legal contest over which branch of Mormonism was the true successor to the church Joseph Smith had founded. Because polygamy was the most prominent difference between the two movements, the question of whether Joseph Smith had introduced the practice became central, and women believed to have been his plural wives were called to give depositions testifying to his involvement. Significantly, despite living in Salt Lake City, where the depositions were taken, being the youngest of Joseph Smith's supposed wives, and having established herself as a vigorous public defender of both polygamy and Joseph Smith's practice of it, Helen Mar Whitney was not called to testify. She was aware of the case and recorded developments in her journal, yet her entries do not indicate that she viewed herself as a direct witness to the events under dispute or that she expected to testify.⁶⁵ Helen's notable absence from the LDS Church's most concentrated institutional effort to legally document Joseph Smith's plural marriages is consistent with her absence from the affidavits gathered by Joseph F. Smith decades earlier, and with her silence on this topic in her body of published writings and personal correspondence.

In the decades that followed, public discussion of Nauvoo polygamy diminished, and the question remained largely dormant for more than half a century, until it was revived in new form by the 1945 publication of Fawn Brodie's influential psychological biography *No Man Knows My History*.⁶⁶ This book brought renewed scholarly and public attention to Joseph Smith's polygamy. Brodie was the first author to utilize the Nauvoo Temple sealing records, which she relied upon as one of her principal sources in compiling her list of Joseph Smith's wives. She wrote: "In January 1846, eighteen months after his death, thirty women were sealed to the prophet 'for eternity' in the Nauvoo temple, and to various other

⁶⁵Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 793 n. 15; see also Helen's references to the Temple Lot Case, 491, 494–95.

⁶⁶Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), [LINK](#).

men ‘for time.’”⁶⁷ Helen appears in that register as being sealed for eternity to Joseph Smith and for time to her husband, Horace K. Whitney, in the early morning hours of February 4, 1846, the final day the temple was in operation just before being stripped of its furnishings.⁶⁸

Crucially, this same entry records both Helen and Horace being sealed by proxy to deceased persons as well as to one another. Just as Helen was sealed for eternity to Joseph Smith, Horace was sealed for eternity to Elizabeth Ford Sikes.⁶⁹ Elizabeth Sikes was the wife of *Nauvoo Expositor* participant Wilson Law. Sikes and Law were married in 1842,⁷⁰ and contemporary reports of her death two years later indicate that they were still married when she died.⁷¹ No evidence suggests that Horace had been married to Elizabeth Sikes during her lifetime. Horace’s proxy sealing to a deceased woman who had not been his wife demonstrates that posthumous proxy sealings performed in the Nauvoo Temple do not necessarily represent literal premortem marriages. In her 1883 reminiscence of that evening, Helen recalled being summoned by her father to come to the temple with Horace and, while passing “through the little graveyard at the foot of the hill,” entering into “a solemn covenant . . . to cling to each other through time and, if permitted, throughout all eternity.”⁷² She added, “this vow was solemnized at the holy altar.”⁷³

Brodie treated the posthumous sealing records as fully reliable evidence of Joseph’s wives during his lifetime, writing, “Since it is clear from other records that more than two thirds of these

⁶⁷Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (1995 ed.), 334.

⁶⁸Helen Mar Whitney, “The Last Chapter of Scenes in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 11 (Nov. 1, 1883): 81, [LINK](#).

⁶⁹A Book of Proxey, Nauvoo Temple proxy sealings, Jan. 7 to Feb. 5, 1846, 69–79, Special Collections, Family History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, UT, reproduced in Todd Compton Polygamy sources.pdf P129 f13, 26–27, Community of Christ Library and Archives, Independence, MO. (The record spells her name Elizabeth Sykes).

⁷⁰Marriage Certificate for Wilson Law and Elizabeth Sikes, Dec. 25, 1842, 1, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁷¹William D. Huntington, Report, circa Apr. 1, 1844, 3, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁷²Helen’s qualification “if permitted” reflected standard Mormon theology that eternal blessings were contingent on righteousness rather than guaranteed. Similar conditional language appears throughout hers and others’ writings when discussing eternal prospects.

⁷³Helen Whitney, “The Last Chapter of Scenes in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 11 (Nov. 1, 1883): 81, [LINK](#).

women had already been married to Joseph during his lifetime, it can be assumed that for all thirty women the sealing was simply a new solemnization of an earlier ceremony.”⁷⁴ This assumption is undermined, however, by the inconsistent correlation between women recorded as sealed by proxy to Joseph Smith in 1846 and the currently accepted lists of his wives: of the thirty women sealed to Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Temple, twenty-three are commonly listed as his plural wives, while seven are not. Conversely, nine women frequently identified as Joseph Smith’s plural wives were not sealed to him in the Nauvoo Temple.⁷⁵ For example, Cordelia Morley Cox was sealed to Joseph Smith in the Nauvoo Temple by proxy, but not during his lifetime. Her September 12, 1890, reminiscence explains that she was not sealed to Joseph Smith until she was visited by some of his friends after his death, asking her to be sealed to him by proxy “for he now was gone & could do no more for himself.”⁷⁶ Taken together, these cases highlight the methodological challenges involved in relying on 1846 proxy sealing records to independently establish premortem Nauvoo marriages.

Brodie listed Helen as the twenty-seventh of the forty-nine wives she attributed to Joseph Smith and, despite mistakenly recording her age as fifteen rather than fourteen, described her as his youngest wife.⁷⁷ Brodie cited Helen’s accounts and correctly noted that, despite writing “vigorously in defense of polygamy,” Helen “never mentioned her marriage to Joseph.”⁷⁸ While she noticed and acknowledged Helen’s silence, she did not explore its implications. She also cited Crocheron’s biography, but while that account states that “Helen knew nothing of the order till June, 1843, when her father revealed it to her,” Brodie gave May 1843 as the marriage

⁷⁴Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 334.

⁷⁵See Lisle G. Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: A Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841-1846* (The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2006), 285, [LINK](#); Cheryl L. Bruno, “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Rediscovered List of Joseph Smith’s Wives,” *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 2, no. 1 (2026): 71-73, 93, [LINK](#). The women no longer regularly included in lists of Joseph Smith’s wives include Mary Ann Frost Pratt, Olive Andrews, Jane Tibbets, Phebe Watrous, Sophia Woodman, Sally Ann Fuller Gullely, and Cordelia Calista Morley.

⁷⁶Cordelia Morley Cox, reminiscence, Sep. 12, 1890, MS 21091, CHL, [LINK](#). I am grateful to Cheryl Bruno for bringing this source to my attention.

⁷⁷Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 335-337, 479. (Brodie cites Helen’s correct birthday but miscalculates her age).

⁷⁸Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 479-80.

date.⁷⁹ Despite encountering differences between Helen's accounts of her own life and institutional sources produced without her involvement, Brodie prioritized the institutional accounts. Relying on the Nauvoo Temple sealing record and Jenson's timeline, she included Helen among Joseph's wives and assigned the May 1843 sealing date, lending additional historical authority to these claims. This episode illustrates a historiographical pattern that would continue to develop: when institutional and personal accounts diverged, institutional sources tended to be treated as authoritative.

The next major development in Helen's historiographical narrative came three decades later with Danel Bachman's 1975 master's thesis, *A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith*.⁸⁰ Bachman's work marked a historiographical turning point by introducing a previously unknown document that would come to dominate historical understanding of Helen Mar Kimball's experience and shape the interpretation of other sources. Like Brodie, Bachman cited Helen's age as fifteen. However, unlike both Brodie and Jenson, he provided no clear timeline for the marriage.⁸¹ Notably, Bachman introduced into the historiography a previously unknown letter, dated March 30, 1881, and written from Helen to her posterity.⁸² The letter was first catalogued at the Church History Library in 1975, the same year Bachman encountered it, and has no known earlier provenance.⁸³ Significantly, it is the only known text attributed to Helen that describes a sealing to Joseph Smith. As has been noted, Helen dedicated years to writing her history and vigorously defending both polygamy and Joseph Smith's practice of it. Across her many accounts of her experiences with the Church's founding prophet and her history with polygamy—beginning with

⁷⁹Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 336. See also 479, where Brodie's footnote reads, "William Clayton swore in 1874 that Joseph took Helen Kimball for a wife in the spring of 1843. *Historical Record*, Vol. VI, p. 225."

⁸⁰Danel W. Bachman, *A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith* (M.A. thesis, Purdue University, 1975), [LINK](#).

⁸¹See, for example, Bachman, *Study*, 118, 326.

⁸²Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Autobiographical Letter, March 30, 1881, MS 744, CHL, [LINK](#); Bachman, *Study*, 119, 150–152, 303–305.

⁸³According to CHL staff, the earliest known cataloging of this document in the Church History Library occurred in 1975, coinciding with the library's relocation the Church Office Building, and its provenance prior to 1975 is undocumented. It appears to fit well within a collection of Relief Society Jubilee Box Letters and should be studied further.

her 1876 autobiography and continuing through more than six years of articles, pamphlets, correspondence, speeches, as well as the journals she kept throughout the final twelve years of her life—Helen never claimed to have been sealed or married to Joseph Smith. The newly discovered 1881 letter therefore stands as a striking outlier within an extensive and otherwise consistent body of self-authored history.

The letter describes Helen's father, Heber C. Kimball, arranging a sealing between her and Joseph Smith as a means of forging his own personal connection with the prophet. It recounts Joseph promising Helen that the sealing would secure "eternal salvation and exaltation" for herself, her father's household, and all her kindred. It also depicts the "misery" polygamy caused both Vilate and Helen, detailing Helen's deep reluctance and grief over her sacrificed youth and her eventual spiritual submission. The letter places the event "just previous to my father's starting upon his last mission but one, to the Eastern States," when Helen had "scarcely seen her fifteenth summer."⁸⁴ Bachman titled the letter, "Helen Mar Kimball Smith Whitney to her children, March 30, 1881." Bachman also cited "a newly found poem," which he titled "Helen Mar Kimball's Retrospection about Her Introduction to the Doctrine and Practices of Plural Marriage in Nauvoo at Age 15."⁸⁵ Although the poem is part of the letter, Bachman treated it as a separate document, citing it separately from the letter and saying, "she wrote [it] in later years." Bachman included a transcript of the poem as Appendix D,⁸⁶ but the full letter remained unpublished and largely unknown to the public for several more years.

The 1881 letter's evocative and dramatic depiction of Helen's marriage to Joseph Smith profoundly shaped subsequent historiographical interpretations. Its emotional immediacy, detailed narrative, and first-person voice lent it significant evidentiary weight. As a result, the letter quickly became a central interpretive lens through which historians read both contemporaneous Nauvoo documents and Helen's later writings. Based on the letter, Bachman portrayed Helen's experience in terms of "trauma" and "agony" for both her and her mother, describing a "cruel" sacrifice that caused

⁸⁴Helen Whitney, *Autobiographical Letter*, March 30, 1881.

⁸⁵Bachman, *Study*, 152.

⁸⁶Bachman, *Study*, 337.

grief so deep that “none but God & his angels could see my mother’s bleeding heart.” The letter emphasized Vilate’s pain as she watched her daughter make a choice that “was almost more than she could endure,” knowing from her own experience what Helen would suffer. Drawing extensively on the letter, Bachman highlighted how Helen likened herself to a “ewe lamb, willingly laid . . . upon the altar,” and discussed her “shattered” youth and loss of freedom. He drew attention to how “she saw her teenage companionships grow cool in the face of twittering gossip” and how she likened herself to a “fettered bird” whose only hope lay in future promises “associated with her marital status.”⁸⁷

The inclusion of the 1881 letter in Bachman’s thesis marked a pivotal moment in the historiographical development of Helen’s story, introducing to the academic community Helen’s only known firsthand declaration that strongly affirmed her 1843 sealing to Joseph Smith. From its first appearance in the documentary record, the 1881 letter rapidly came to dominate interpretations of Helen’s experience, shaping how historians read both contemporaneous Nauvoo documents and Helen’s later published writings, and at times contributing to expansive readings of related documents. For example, Bachman claimed that in a June 9, 1844 letter to Helen from her father, “Heber Kimball counseled his daughter to say nothing about her marriage to Smith to her young acquaintances because they might betray her.”⁸⁸ In reality, neither this letter nor Heber’s earlier letter to Helen, written weeks after the sealing is believed to have occurred, makes any reference to a marriage to Joseph Smith. The passage referred to appears in a section of general parental counsel and reads, “If you should have feelings in your heart, keep them to your self and tell them to no creature on Earth but your Father and mother; if you do, you will be betrade [sic] and Exposed, to your hurt.”⁸⁹

Bachman’s introduction of the 1881 letter established it as a central source for understanding Helen’s experience. The letter’s vivid detail, emotional force, and alignment with previous histo-

⁸⁷Bachman, *Study*, 149, 151-152.

⁸⁸Bachman, *Study*, 152.

⁸⁹Heber C. Kimball, Letter to Helen M. Kimball, Washington D. C., MS 6241, CHL, [LINK](#). See also, Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 14 (15 Dec. 1882): 105–106. (Page 105 is mislabeled as 107 in the original.)

rians' narratives made it a compelling document, and Bachman treated it as authoritative despite its late appearance, lack of earlier provenance, and divergence from Helen's consistent descriptions across her many other writings. This interpretive framework—centering the 1881 letter as the definitive account of Helen's sealing to Joseph Smith—shaped how Bachman read other documents, at times leading him to treat sources that do not explicitly mention such a relationship as evidence of it. Bachman's thesis thus established a pattern: the 1881 letter would serve as the primary lens through which Helen's full body of writings and Nauvoo-era documents were interpreted, while complexities or ambiguities were often minimized or reinterpreted.

The Ascendancy of the 1881 Letter, 1981–1997

After Bachman's thesis, the 1881 letter began to circulate more widely among historians, appearing next in Stanley B. Kimball's 1981 biography of his great-great-grandfather, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer*.⁹⁰ Though not primarily focused on Joseph Smith or polygamy, Kimball's biography was the first published work to cite the 1881 letter, which he titled "Helen Mar Kimball Smith Whitney [to her children], Mar 30, 1881."⁹¹ In his careful and somewhat apologetic treatment, Kimball corrected earlier errors, noting that Helen was "nearly fifteen" when Heber taught her the principle, which he dated to "the summer of 1843," in alignment with Helen's own reports. Unlike previous historians, he did not include a May 1843 chronology for the sealing. Like Bachman, he based his assessment of Helen primarily on the 1881 letter. However, unlike Bachman, Kimball downplayed its emotional weight, writing only that the marriage "brought no immediate earthly happiness," and that Helen, "saw herself as a 'fetter'd bird' without youthful friends and a subject of slander."⁹² Kimball's primary use of the letter focused on a single line in the poem, which he interpreted to mean the marriage was "'for eternity alone' that is, unconsummated." He generalized this interpretation to all of "Joseph Smith's several pro forma marriages to the

⁹⁰Stanley B. Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball: Mormon Patriarch and Pioneer* (University of Illinois Press, 1981), [LINK](#).

⁹¹Stanley Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 109.

⁹²Stanley Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 97–98, 109.

daughters of his friends,” describing them as “anything but sexual romps.”⁹³

Stanley Kimball introduced a previously unknown letter from Heber C. Kimball to Helen, written weeks after she would have been sealed to Joseph Smith. Like the later letter cited by Bachman, this document includes no direct allusions to a recent sealing, and it engages with Helen as a dependent child rather than a married woman. However, Kimball interpreted it as Heber’s “effort to ease Helen’s mind” regarding her new marriage to Joseph Smith. The excerpts he cited, including “My Dear Helen . . . You have been on my mind much since I left home . . . learn to be meek and gentle, and let your heart seek after wisdom”⁹⁴ may be broadly read as Heber’s attempt to comfort Helen weeks after what the 1881 letter portrays as her submission to an unwanted marriage he had arranged for her. However, Heber wrote letters to both of his oldest children—William and Helen—at this same time,⁹⁵ and when read in full, the letter more plausibly functions as a father’s spiritual counsel and plea to his adolescent children to behave and be good to their mother in his absence. Heber continued, “and always speak kindly to your dear mother and listen to her counsel while you have her with you, for there is no one that feels the care for you that she does.”⁹⁶

Like Brodie, Stanley Kimball acknowledged that Helen “never alluded to her marriage to Joseph,” despite being “regarded as a staunch advocate of plural marriage.” He addressed this silence by asserting that “her personal affairs were not for the public.”⁹⁷ This effort to account for the absence of firsthand confirmation in Helen’s writings represents an important historiographical moment, as Kimball appears to be the only historian to explicitly address the lack of reference to a sealing in Helen’s broader body of writing. However, his explanation that Helen did not publicly share “her personal affairs,” even regarding polygamy, is challenging

⁹³Stanley Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 98.

⁹⁴Stanley Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 98.

⁹⁵Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (1 Aug. 1882): 40, [LINK](#), “I wrote one to William, and hope that he has received it.”

⁹⁶Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (1 Aug. 1882): 39.

⁹⁷Stanley Kimball, *Heber C. Kimball*, 98.

to sustain. Throughout her writings Helen freely shared domestic arrangements, emotional struggles, and marital tensions she faced as a plural wife. In her 1876 autobiographical sketch, for example, she discussed in candid detail the challenges of living with her sister wife and the strain this placed on her health and marriage, leaving her feeling that she “could hardly live.”⁹⁸

In her published writings, she described jealousy, sacrifice, and the practical realities of plural family life. In each account, she consistently framed her experience only as the first wife of Horace Whitney, writing:

If I did not know that my husband was actuated by the purest of motives and by religious principle I could not have fortified myself against that ‘demon Jealousy,’ . . . at times it was like the tearing of my very heart-strings, and it took much prayer and struggling to overcome. Yet through it all I have stood as a pillar by the side of my husband.⁹⁹

Helen similarly lauded Joseph Smith’s virtue in her public writing, but only as a righteous polygamist husband to other women. With the exception of the 1881 letter, in her public and private writings, Helen spoke openly of her marriage to Horace Whitney, but gave no indication of a prior marriage, and did not identify herself as a wife of Joseph Smith. This absence persists across both public and private writings, suggesting not a general reluctance to disclose personal experience but a sustained pattern of absence.

Stanley Kimball’s biography corrected errors regarding Helen’s age and chronology and further stabilized an interpretive framework centered on the 1881 letter. His work also introduced explanatory models that would shape later apologetic treatments, such as describing Helen’s age as “nearly fifteen” and reading “eternity alone” as evidence of Joseph Smith’s non-sexual, eternity only plural marriages. Notably, Kimball uniquely acknowledged Helen’s silence as requiring explanation. However, by attributing her silence to a

⁹⁸Helen Mar Whitney, *Reminiscences and Diary*, MS 9670, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁹⁹Helen Mar Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage*, 9. See also Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 114; Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph*, 27.

desire for privacy rather than treating it as potentially significant evidence, his work contributed to a historiographical pattern of resolving documentary tensions through interpretation rather than sustained documentary inquiry.

Although Stanley Kimball had corrected the earlier misstatement of Helen's age and neither he nor Bachman assigned a specific May 1843 date to the sealing, these developments were not consistently incorporated in subsequent scholarship. In his 1986 *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, Richard S. Van Wagoner described Helen as "the fifteen-year-old plural wife of Smith" and consistently dated the marriage to May 1843. Van Wagoner drew primarily from the 1881 letter, relying on it alongside Catherine Lewis's earlier account to support and describe Helen's 1843 sealing.¹⁰⁰

The year 1997 marked another important stage in the consolidation of the Helen Mar Kimball narrative. In January, Jeni and Richard Holzapfel published *A Woman's View*, a compilation of Helen's *Woman's Exponent* writings that made her publications far more accessible than they had previously been. The volume also included, for the first time, a full transcript of the 1881 letter, designating it as the "Helen Mar Kimball Whitney 1881 Autobiography,"¹⁰¹ substantially increasing scholarly and public access to this source. In an apparent effort to reconcile Helen's consistent retrospective dating of her introduction to polygamy in the summer of 1843 with the increasingly standardized May 1843 chronology, the Holzapfels wrote that Helen "consented to be sealed to Joseph Smith as a plural wife some time in May or June 1843." They cited Todd Compton's then-forthcoming *In Sacred Loneliness* in support of this expanded timeframe.¹⁰²

When Compton's book appeared in December 1997, it offered the most richly detailed and widely influential biography of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney to date.¹⁰³ It synthesized earlier claims into what became the dominant scholarly narrative of her marriage to Joseph Smith. Like Stanley Kimball, Compton correctly identified

¹⁰⁰Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 53.

¹⁰¹Jeni Broberg Holzapfel and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, eds., *A Woman's View: Helen Mar Whitney's Reminiscences of Early Church History* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 481-487, [LINK](#).

¹⁰²Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *A Woman's View*, ix–xlvi, fn. 17.

¹⁰³Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 1997).

Helen as fourteen, not fifteen, at the time of the sealing. However, despite Jeni and Richard Holzapfel's citation, Compton reaffirmed Jenson's dating, stating that "the ceremony took place in May 1843, when Helen was two or three months away from fifteen years of age."¹⁰⁴ As Brodie had done, Compton cited Helen's published writings and referenced Crocheron's account, which dated Helen's first introduction to polygamy to June 1843. Yet he ultimately adopted Jenson's and Brodie's May 1843 chronology for the sealing, lending it further scholarly and popular authority.¹⁰⁵ Compton also explicitly addressed the question of sexuality between Helen and Joseph. While he argued that "'sealing' also meant 'marriage' and therefore sexual relations," he acknowledged that "the evidence [of sexuality] for Helen Mar is entirely ambiguous." While Stanley Kimball had rejected the possibility of sexuality between Joseph and Helen, Compton maintained that although "it is possible that Joseph had some marriages in which there were no sexual relations, there is no explicit or convincing evidence for this."¹⁰⁶

As the most comprehensive account of Helen's life and sealing to Joseph Smith, Compton's volume represented the first published study of Joseph Smith's polygamy to fully incorporate the 1881 letter, employing it not merely as one source among many, but as the central interpretive lens through which he read all of Helen's writings. As Bachman had done, Compton treated the 1881 letter as authoritative, allowing it to shape his reading of other texts. This approach effectively gave interpretive priority to the one account that diverges from Helen's many other writings, in which she consistently described Nauvoo polygamy as a witness rather than as a participant. Compton did not address Helen's broader silence regarding a marriage to Joseph Smith or explore its historiographical implications. Rather, he interpreted Helen's other recollections as "supportive accounts" of the 1881 letter.¹⁰⁷

For example, based on the letter, Compton portrayed Helen as socially isolated, restricted, "upset and dejected," and depressed following the marriage, writing, "the poem shows that Helen's 'blissful hopes' of teenage romantic freedom were dashed," and that

¹⁰⁴Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 499.

¹⁰⁵Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 6.

¹⁰⁶Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 22, 14–15.

¹⁰⁷Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 497.

“the marriage to Smith . . . must have been devastating to her.”¹⁰⁸ Compton incorporated Helen’s *Woman’s Exponent* account of being kept home from dances into this interpretation, presenting the prohibition as a consequence of her newly-married status: “She was apparently coming to realize that her secret marriage to Joseph entailed time as well as eternity. A severe depression ensued—she felt that her life’s happiness had ended completely—and she ‘brooded over the sad memories of sweet departed joys and all manner of future woes.’”¹⁰⁹ However, Helen’s *Woman’s Exponent* account made no mention of a sealing to Joseph, and her very next words explained that her disappointments at missing some dances “were of short duration, my bump of hope being too large to admit of my remaining long under the clouds.” She summed up the episode saying, “A moral may be drawn from this truthful story. ‘Children obey thy parents,’ etc.”¹¹⁰ In its full context, Helen’s account does not lend itself to being read as evidence of a sealing-induced bout of deep depression. Instead, it reads as an older woman’s bemusement as she looked back at her fourteen-year-old self imagining her life was over and believing she was “a much abused child,” because, in “a very unkind act,” her father had refused to let her go to the rest of the dances held at the Nauvoo Mansion that winter.¹¹¹

A more significant challenge with Compton’s framing is the chronological discrepancy it introduced. While he dated Helen’s marriage to May 1843, and portrayed her restriction from dances as a consequence of “her secret marriage to Joseph,”¹¹² he did not mention that Helen’s attendance at these dances did not come to an end until at least eight months after the marriage was supposed to have occurred. Helen wrote, “During the winter of 1843, there were plenty of parties and balls . . . The last one that I attended there that winter, was on Christmas Eve.”¹¹³ According to Compton’s timeline, Helen was married in the spring, yet she was allowed to attend the

¹⁰⁸Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 501–502.

¹⁰⁹Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 502.

¹¹⁰Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 12 (15 Nov. 1882): 90, [LINK](#).

¹¹¹Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 12 (15 Nov. 1882): 90. These “parties and balls” were not put on or hosted by Joseph Smith. The Nauvoo Mansion served as a cultural center that could be rented out.

¹¹²Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 502.

¹¹³Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 12 (15 Nov. 1882): 90.

“parties and balls” until Christmas Eve. This crucial chronological detail undermines interpretations that link the prohibition to a May 1843 sealing.

In addition to the misaligned chronology, Helen’s own explanations for the restriction introduce further interpretive challenges. In her *Woman’s Exponent* articles, she reported that in January 1843, in an attempt to remedy “the follies of youth and the temptations to which they are exposed . . . and their too frequent attendance at balls, parties, etc.,” her father had instituted “the young gentlemen and ladies Relief Society.” At the meetings, “Elder Kimball addressed them . . . exhorting them to lay aside their vanity, light-mindedness, pride and frivolity . . . advising them to shun evil company . . . and to be obedient to their parents.” A recurring theme in the meetings was warnings “against frequenting balls and such places, which . . . would generally lead to many evil practices.” The hope was that “instead of the young people spending their evenings at parties, balls, etc., they would now leave all, and attend to their meetings.”¹¹⁴

Heber’s prohibition against dances was part of a much larger effort that was not specific to Helen. Based on her account that many “parties and balls” were held “during the winter of 1843,” nearly a year after Heber’s initial attempts to squelch them, his efforts were apparently ineffective. Helen explained that “Some of the young gentlemen got up a series of dancing parties, to be held at the Mansion once a week.” Heber had intended to keep both Helen and her older brother William at home, but William found a way to evade his father’s protective ban, by putting “his name down before asking father’s permission” and claiming “that he must pay the money for himself and lady, whether he went or not, and that he could not honorably withdraw from it.” Helen’s lament that William “carried the day” while she “had to stay home” reflected her resentment of her father’s unfair double standard, which she “felt quite sore over.”¹¹⁵ Her statement that “the Prophet” had warned Heber “to keep his daughter away . . . because of the blacklegs and certain ones of questionable character who attended there,” explains

¹¹⁴Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 6 (15 August 1882): 47–48, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁵Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1882): 90.

Heber's unwillingness to yield, but does not necessarily imply a marital relationship.¹¹⁶ Rather, the episode reflects ordinary nineteenth-century paternal authority and protective social norms.

Notably, while Compton quoted lines from the 1881 letter asserting that Helen was the subject of gossip as "poisonous darts from sland'rous tongues were hurled,"¹¹⁷ her published account of this time period presents a markedly different situation. Writing in 1882, Helen explained that although some Nauvoo youth became the subjects of scandal in 1843 and 1844, her father's restrictions protected her reputation. She expressed gratitude for her "good and wise" father "who had taken counsel and thus saved me from evils, which some others in their youth and inexperience, were exposed to," adding that "the busy tongue of scandal did not spare them." Her concluding morals emphasized the importance of reputation: "'Have regard to thy name; for that shall continue with you above a thousand great treasures of gold,'" and "'A good life hath but few days; but a good name endureth forever.'"¹¹⁸ Compton did not note this contrast between Helen's retrospective emphasis on preserving her reputation and the 1881 letter's assertion that she endured reputational damage.

While Compton's groundbreaking volume did much to move the discussion of Nauvoo polygamy forward, his treatment of Helen's story exemplified a pattern increasingly evident throughout the developing historiography: once the 1881 letter entered the documentary record, it functioned as the primary analytical filter through which other sources were understood. Silences and ambiguities in the record were treated as reconcilable through interpretation, and documents that contained no clear indication of a sealing between Helen and Joseph Smith were interpreted as support of it. Like Bachman and Stanley Kimball before him, Compton read evidence of Helen's sealing to Joseph into Heber's 1843 and 1844 letters to her, although those letters contained no direct mention of such a relationship. Similarly, his interpretation of Helen's account of being kept from dances imposed a framework derived from the 1881 letter onto a text that made no reference to a

¹¹⁶See pages 71-73 of this paper

¹¹⁷Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 500.

¹¹⁸Helen Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo," *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1882): 90.

sealing and that, when examined chronologically and contextually, resisted such a reading.

By placing the 1881 letter at the center of his reconstruction of Helen's life, Compton synthesized earlier claims into a coherent and compelling narrative that would shape both scholarly and popular understandings of her for decades. His work gave renewed authority to Jenson's May 1843 chronology and helped stabilize interpretive assumptions regarding Helen's age, sexuality, and emotional experience. At the same time, this synthesis also had the effect of minimizing chronological tensions and alternative explanations preserved in Helen's own writings. Rather than addressing these tensions as historiographical problems, Compton's influential study tended to treat them as reconcilable through an interpretive framework that privileged the 1881 letter. Nearly three decades after its publication, *In Sacred Loneliness* continues to shape both academic and popular narratives.

Scholarly Entrenchment and Interpretive Expansion, 2003–2013

In 2003, Compton followed *In Sacred Loneliness* with *A Widow's Tale: 1884-1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney*, a transcribed compilation of Helen's journals that he collaborated on with Charles M. Hatch.¹¹⁹ This volume made Helen's daily writings in her last years widely accessible for the first time, becoming an important resource for scholars examining her life. In their introduction, Compton and Hatch briefly summarized Helen's marriage to Joseph Smith, generally following Compton's perspective, and citing only the 1881 letter. Curiously, while this volume does not provide a specific timeline for the marriage, the introduction states, "within a year, Joseph Smith was killed."¹²⁰ Compton had previously given May 1843 for the marriage date, which would place the marriage approximately thirteen to fourteen months before Joseph Smith's June 27, 1844, death. Compton continued to date the marriage to May 1843 in his later writings, so it is unclear whether this was an editorial error or a collaborative

¹¹⁹Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *A Widow's Tale: The 1884–1896 Diary of Helen Mar Kimball Whitney*, eds. Charles M. Hatch and Todd M. Compton (Utah State University Press, 2003), [LINK](#).

¹²⁰Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 2.

compromise, possibly reflecting Orson Whitney's post-July 12, 1843, dating. Whether the discrepancy reflected editorial oversight or differing interpretive frameworks, it could suggest that even among leading scholars the chronology of Helen's reported marriage remained unsettled.

More significant is the assertion by Compton and Hatch that Helen was widely recognized and honored as Joseph Smith's wife throughout her life. They wrote that as "a widow of the prophet, Helen would be venerated for that reason till her death," and, "Helen Mar had great prestige because of her marriage to Joseph Smith." They based this assessment on a handful of entries that record instances when "historians and visitors to Salt Lake City called on her to hear her experiences with polygamy in Nauvoo."¹²¹ While Helen recorded these visits (which will be discussed below), the available evidence does not indicate that she was publicly honored as one of Joseph Smith's wives. Records exist of numerous events and memorials where women believed to have been Joseph Smith's wives were seated on the stand, recognized, given opportunities to speak, called on to testify, and otherwise honored. For example, celebrations were repeatedly held on Joseph Smith's birthday with speakers and honored guests reported in the newspapers. These celebrations often included women believed to have been wives of the prophet, most commonly Lucy Walker, but also Zina D. H. Young, Eliza R. Snow, and Melissa Lott. Thorough reports were published of several of these memorials,¹²² and Helen mentioned one in her journal,¹²³ but there is no indication that she was included among the women who were recognized and honored as Joseph Smith's wives.

Perhaps most telling, in late nineteenth-century Utah, a woman's reported marriage to Joseph Smith was generally highlighted in her obituary. As just a few examples, Melissa Lott's 1898 obituary began, "A widow of the Prophet Joseph Smith died at Lehi

¹²¹Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 2, 20.

¹²²See, for example, S. Y. Gates, "The Prophet's Birthday," *Deseret News*, 14, no. 35 (Jan. 4, 1881): 4, [LINK](#); "A Reunion. Festival of Nauvoo Saints in Provo. In Honor of the Prophet's Birthday," *The Territorial Enquirer* 10, no. 103 (Dec. 24, 1886): 2, [LINK](#); "Joseph the Prophet, Services on the Eighty-Ninth Anniversary of his Birth," *Deseret News* 28, no. 28 (Dec. 24, 1894): 1, [LINK](#); "In Honor of Joseph Smith, Anniversary of his Birth Celebrated in the Sixteenth Ward," *Deseret News* 50, no. 30 (Dec. 25, 1899): 2, [LINK](#).

¹²³Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 686

yesterday.”¹²⁴ Eliza Partridge’s 1886 headline read, “Sister Eliza M. Lyman, a former wife of the prophet Joseph Smith, passes from this life.”¹²⁵ And Emily Partridge Young’s 1899 obituary described her as, “one of the first women to accept and enter into the order of plural marriage. She became the wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith with the full and free consent of his wife, Emma Smith.”¹²⁶ Helen’s 1896 obituaries and death announcements made no mention of a marriage to Joseph Smith.¹²⁷ In sum, the available evidence does not substantiate Compton and Hatch’s portrayal of Helen as publicly “venerated” as “a widow of the prophet.”

Compton cited several of Helen’s diary entries as additional evidence of her sealing to Joseph Smith.¹²⁸ In the first of these, written May 20, 1886, the day Joseph F. Smith first published the Clayton affidavit in the *Deseret Evening News*, Helen recorded going to pick up a few copies, as she had learned that her name had been included as one of Joseph’s wives.¹²⁹ The entry dated July 11, 1886, six weeks later, records Helen telling her half-brother Hyrum Kimball, “some news—that I was sealed [sic] to the Prophet in Nauvoo,” adding that he “was astonished & so was I that he was ignorent [sic] of this fact.”¹³⁰ Helen’s emphasis on “news,”

¹²⁴“Melissa Lott Smith Willes,” *Deseret News* 31, no. 197 (Jul. 14, 1898, [LINK](#)). See also “Two More Pioneers Gone. Mrs. Melissa Willis,” *The Lehi Banner* 8, no. 8 (Jul. 19, 1898): 1, [LINK](#); J. M. P. Farnsworth, “A Tribute to Aunt Melissa,” *Woman’s Exponent* 27, no. 11, (Nov. 1, 1898): 61, [LINK](#); “Temple and Tabernacle,” *The World* 5, no. 34 (Jul. 23, 1898): 3, [LINK](#).

¹²⁵Edward Partridge, “Death of a Good Woman,” *Deseret News* 19, no. 93 (Mar. 13, 1886: 4, [LINK](#)).

¹²⁶“Death of Mrs. Emily D. P. Young,” *Deseret Evening News* 50, no. 17 (Dec. 9, 1899): 7, [LINK](#). See also “Wife of Brigham Dead. Another Relict of President Young Passes Away. Was Also Wife of Joseph Smith,” *Salt Lake Tribune* 40, no. 57 (Dec. 10, 1899): 5, [LINK](#); “Emily Dow Partridge Young,” *Woman’s Exponent* 28, no. 14 (Dec. 15, 1899): 85, [LINK](#).

¹²⁷See, for example, “Helen Mar Whitney. Her Death—A Sketch of her Personal History,” *Deseret News* 29, no. 303 (Nov. 16, 1896): 2, [LINK](#); “Helen Mar Whitney. A Well Known Pioneer Woman Passes Away Yesterday,” *Salt Lake Tribune* 26, no. 358 (Nov. 16, 1896): 8, [LINK](#); “Helen Mar Whitney, one of Utah’s notable women,” *The Journal* 16, no. 49 (Nov. 19, 1896): 8, [LINK](#); Emmeline B. Wells, “A Tender Tribute. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney,” *Woman’s Exponent* 25, no. 11 (Nov. 15, 1896): 76, [LINK](#).

¹²⁸Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 748.

¹²⁹Helen Whitney, *A Widow’s Tale*, 157. Helen wrote, “I called at D. News to get a few, as I learned that my name—among others of Joseph Smith’s wives—were published in Wm Clayton’s testimony—” This entry indicates that the claim in Clayton’s affidavit did not originate from Helen and was published without her prior knowledge.

¹³⁰Whitney, *A Widow’s Tale*, 169, underlined in the original.

together with the timing of the two entries—the first recorded the day Helen was first publicly named as a wife of Joseph Smith, and the second recorded in reference to a conversation about it several weeks later—suggests that her statement reflects engagement with the newspaper’s claim rather than constituting an independent affirmation of a Nauvoo marriage. In this reading, Hyrum was astonished to learn that Helen’s name had been published as a wife, and Helen was astonished that Hyrum had not heard about it sooner.

This reading is reinforced by the fact that Helen’s half-brother Hyrum was not born until 1855,¹³¹ more than a decade after Joseph Smith’s death, and could only have known of an 1843 Nauvoo marriage between Helen and Joseph if it had been communicated to him through the family. However, no evidence of such family transmission has been identified. Despite the later account in which Heber is said to have arranged the sealing in order to be more closely connected to the prophet, Heber made no mention of it in any of his sermons or writings—striking omissions given the abundance of Heber’s writings and the importance such a sealing would have had for him personally and for his entire family. Similarly, neither Vilate nor Helen’s older brother William (even when directly asked to write his reminiscences of Joseph Smith)¹³² ever claimed that Helen had been Joseph’s wife. Given this absence, Hyrum’s reported ignorance of a Nauvoo marriage between Helen and Joseph would not have been unexpected. Helen’s expression of astonishment, therefore, is more naturally understood as a response to his lack of familiarity with the recently published claim than as evidence of a concealed Nauvoo marriage.

This interpretation is further supported by the pattern visible across all seven entries: in each case, Helen was recording statements that originated with others, not making independent claims of her own. When Andrew Jenson visited twice in 1887 requesting her testimony as Joseph’s wife, she instead “gave him a few incidents

¹³¹Some have incorrectly assumed Helen’s entry referred to Hiram Kimball, husband of Sarah Granger Kimball, who, despite being twenty years older than Helen and never being a polygamist, could potentially have known of a Nauvoo sealing between Helen and Joseph. But that Hiram Kimball passed away in 1863, twenty-three years before this entry. Helen wrote about her half-brother, Hyrum Kimball, multiple times throughout her diary, including in this entry.

¹³²William Henry Kimball, letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Coalville, Utah, January 20, 1907, MS 15403, CHL, [LINK](#).

of Flora Gove's life who was a wife of Joseph Smith."¹³³ Other entries likewise record visitors seeking confirmation, which Helen did not supply.¹³⁴ Taken together, these entries document Helen's engagement with circulating assertions about her status following the newspaper report rather than an independent, proactive declaration of a sealing.

While Compton cited these entries as additional support for an 1843 sealing, both their content and context may also be understood as reflecting Helen's effort to navigate the complicated situation she had been thrust into by being publicly identified—without her input—as a wife of Joseph Smith. Given Helen's prominent role as a defender of both the divine origin of plural marriage and Joseph Smith's participation in it, directly contradicting a widely circulated affidavit attributed to William Clayton and published by Joseph F. Smith would likely have carried significant institutional and social consequences. Whether or not Helen agreed with the claims, the situation placed her in a complex and constrained position. Compton's decision to reference the entries only in a footnote may reflect their limited utility as reliable direct evidence; when examined carefully, they do not offer independent contemporaneous affirmations of an 1843 sealing.

In 2005, Richard Bushman published his landmark biography of Joseph Smith, *Rough Stone Rolling*.¹³⁵ Despite its wide reception and impact on both scholarly and LDS communities, the book said relatively little about polygamy. Bushman included only a small number of wives as representative examples of what he saw as Joseph Smith's marital practices. Helen was not specifically named in the volume, but was implicitly included in two groupings of unnamed women used for broader description. Bushman wrote, "In the first six months of 1843, Joseph married twelve women, two of them already married to other men, one single and fifty-eight years old. Five of the women boarded in Joseph's household when he married them."¹³⁶ Notably, Bushman identified the age of the oldest wife but did not specify the youngest. Regarding the other group of wives which implicitly included Helen, Bushman

¹³³Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 236, 246.

¹³⁴Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 205, 605.

¹³⁵Richard Lyman Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

¹³⁶Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 490–491.

wrote, “Their initial anguish . . . must have been real, especially for the younger women. (Ten of Joseph’s wives were under twenty.) They had to give up romance, cut themselves off from friends . . .”¹³⁷ This interpretation was based primarily on Lucy Walker’s undated testimony,¹³⁸ and was likely supported by Helen’s 1881 letter, which appears as the only source associated with Helen in Bushman’s “Sources Cited.”¹³⁹ In a 2015 interview, reflecting on what he would do differently, Bushman said, “How would I do it differently now? I would give more space to plural marriage. . . . I should have included . . . Helen Mar Kimball, the fourteen-year-old bride.”¹⁴⁰

The unanimity of the narrative persisted as a range of writers and historians, from critical to apologetic, increasingly incorporated Helen Mar Kimball—primarily through the lens of the 1881 letter—into their treatments of early Mormon polygamy. George D. Smith’s 2008 volume, *Nauvoo Polygamy*: “*. . . but we called it celestial marriage,*” offered another detailed account of Helen Mar Kimball’s sealing to Joseph Smith.¹⁴¹ Drawing heavily on Jenson and Compton, whom he mentioned or cited ninety-four and seventy-four times respectively, George D. Smith identified Helen as Joseph’s youngest plural wife, and cited the familiar time frame of May 1843 for the sealing. Emphasizing Helen’s age, “fourteen,” more insistently and repeatedly than previous writers,¹⁴² Smith advanced the most explicit case to date for sexuality in the marriage. Referring to Compton, he wrote, “Helen’s biographer concludes that she ‘expected her marriage to Joseph Smith’ to be a ceremony ‘for *eternity* only,’ not an actual marriage involving physical relations. How surprised she was to discover ‘that it included [marriage for] *time* also’: a physical union at age fourteen with a thirty-seven-year-old man.”¹⁴³

As Bachman had done with the 1881 letter, George D. Smith introduced an important document that had received little to no prior scholarly attention: Helen’s May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing.

¹³⁷Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 492.

¹³⁸Lucy W. Kimball Testimony, MS 719, CHL, [LINK](#).

¹³⁹Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 715.

¹⁴⁰Richard Lyman Bushman, “Richard Bushman’s Reflection on RSR,” *Juvenile Instructor* website, Aug. 10, 2015, [LINK](#).

¹⁴¹George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*: “*. . . but we called it celestial marriage*” (Signature Books, 2008).

¹⁴²George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, xii, 2, 32, 176, 198, 201, 302, 362, 563.

¹⁴³George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 201, emphasis in original.

The blessing, given by Helen's father, Heber C. Kimball, at the extreme end of the window generally accepted for her sealing to Joseph, includes language such as, "thou shalt be blessed with a companion," indicating that she was not married at the time it was given.¹⁴⁴ A copy of this blessing was catalogued in the Church History Library in 1975¹⁴⁵—the very same year the 1881 letter was first catalogued. Yet, while the 1881 letter quickly became central to every retelling of Helen's story, the 1843 blessing, a contemporaneous Nauvoo-era document, was entirely overlooked until George D. Smith first utilized it in 2008—thirty-three years after it became available to researchers. The fact that a late, unprovenanced letter that diverges from all of Helen's known writings was elevated to centerpiece status while the earliest document regarding Helen, a contemporaneous 1843 blessing with excellent historical verification,¹⁴⁶ remained virtually ignored for decades, offers a revealing case study of how the allure of a sensational document that supports an existing narrative can overshadow a less dramatic but more reliable contemporaneous source that complicates it.

Following the pattern of reading evidence of a sealing into documents that did not mention it, Smith characterized the blessing as "specifically" referring to Helen's "new husband, the prophet,"¹⁴⁷ although the text itself mentions no specific groom and suggests that no forthcoming marriage was planned when the blessing was given. Smith wrote, "On May 28, Apostle Heber C. Kimball solemnly bestowed upon his daughter the right to partake of the 'blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,' or, in other words, plural marriage."¹⁴⁸ This interpretation is anachronistic. The association of the term "blessings of Abraham" with polygamy does not appear in Nauvoo-

¹⁴⁴Heber C. Kimball, Patriarchal Blessing of Helen Mar Kimball, May 28, 1843, Nauvoo, IL, MS 23826, CHL, [LINK](#).

¹⁴⁵According to CHL staff, the blessing was catalogued along with many other documents when the library moved to the Church Office Building in 1975.

¹⁴⁶In addition to the contemporaneous document itself, several copies were made of Helen's blessing. Additionally, Helen, Heber, and William Clayton each made records of their participation in these blessings and both Helen and Heber copied the blessing in their histories.

¹⁴⁷George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 201.

¹⁴⁸George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 200.

era sources, but was first introduced by Orson Pratt in 1852 in Utah, nearly a decade after the blessing was given.¹⁴⁹

A central purpose of LDS patriarchal blessings is to reveal the specific lineage through which the recipient will receive “the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the biblical patriarchs.¹⁵⁰ Heber C. Kimball gave patriarchal blessing to all of his children the same day. Several of Helen’s brothers were similarly promised that they would be blessed with the blessings of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.¹⁵¹ Helen was told, “Thou art of the ^\same/ seed \with thy brother/ of Joseph,”¹⁵² showing that William was also given his lineage.

George D. Smith’s treatment of Helen’s marriage highlights the chronological tension between the inherited May 1843 marriage date and Helen’s own recollections that she was first introduced to plural marriage in the summer, specifically June. Although her May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing appeared to support her own timeline by indicating she was not yet married and had no immediate marriage plans, Smith retained May 1843 as his section heading date¹⁵³ and later qualified it to “on or about May 28, 1843.”¹⁵⁴ His selective citation of Helen’s recollections, preserving her reference to “summer of 1843” in one context,¹⁵⁵ but omitting that seasonal marker when describing the marriage itself,¹⁵⁶ reduced

¹⁴⁹D&C 132 includes no reference to the “blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Even if it did, Helen’s May 28, 1843 blessing was given six weeks before the revelation is claimed to have been recorded on July 12, 1843. As additional confirmation, in a sermon given August 29, 1852, Orson Pratt explained the concept of polygamy being equated with the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and said, “Why, says one, I never thought of it in this light before.” Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” Aug. 29, 1852, *Journal of Discourses* 1:59-60, [LINK](#).

¹⁵⁰“A patriarchal blessing includes a declaration of lineage, stating that the person is of the house of Israel—a descendant of Abraham, belonging to a specific tribe of Jacob.” “Patriarchal Blessing,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#). Promises of the blessings of Abraham were present in many of the blessings given by Joseph Smith Sr., the original church patriarch beginning in the 1830s, including his blessing to Joseph Smith Jr. See Blessing from Joseph Smith Sr., 9 December 1834, 3, JSP, [LINK](#).

¹⁵¹Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 8 (Sep. 15, 1882): 58, [LINK](#). “Before leaving us to go east my father gave to his children (six in number) their patriarchal blessing, brother William Clayton acting as scribe.”

¹⁵²Heber Kimball, Patriarchal Blessing of Helen Mar Kimball, insertions and strikeout in original.

¹⁵³Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 198.

¹⁵⁴Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 302.

¹⁵⁵Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 362.

¹⁵⁶Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 199.

the visible tension and reflects a pattern in which her language was harmonized when it challenged the prevailing narrative.

Despite George D. Smith's addition of Helen's patriarchal blessing and his selective references to her *Exponent* articles and pamphlets, the 1881 letter remained his dominant interpretive source.¹⁵⁷ Framing the letter as the emotional core of her experience, and amalgamating it with her description of first being told about polygamy (in which she does not mention a marriage to Joseph), Smith cited Helen's "first impulse [of] anger" and her "sense of personal injury and displeasure." He echoed the most emotive lines from the letter and poem, portraying Helen's experience primarily through social isolation and psychological trauma:

She saw her "youthful friends grow shy and cold" as "poisonous darts from sland'rous tongues were hurled." She was "bar'd out from social scenes by this destiny," and faced "sad'nd mem'ries of sweet departed joys." She felt "like a fetter'd bird with wild and longing heart" that "dayly pine[s] for freedom and murm[u]r[s] at [its] lot."¹⁵⁸

Misapplying the Catherine Lewis quote to Helen's later years, Smith asserted that throughout her life she felt she had been "deceived" and that "she could not shake the feeling of having been victimized by the imposition on her youth."¹⁵⁹

This portrayal, while consistent with portions of the 1881 letter, does not align with Helen's self-authored histories, which describe neither memories of slander or social exclusion within her community, nor ongoing resentment. Throughout her last decades, Helen consistently testified of polygamy with no hint of resentment toward Joseph Smith or her father. In her reminiscences she described multiple social activities and connections in Nauvoo, which seem to have increased, not decreased, in 1843 and 1844. She wrote of that time period, "We were not wanting for amusements," and in addition to the balls and parties discussed above, she described happy times singing in the choir, attending the brass band

¹⁵⁷Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 671.

¹⁵⁸Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 201–202.

¹⁵⁹Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 202.

in the Masonic hall, and, despite being “a timid girl of fifteen and frightfully bashful,” even acting in plays.¹⁶⁰ She recalled numerous social outings and evening summer strolls with friends.¹⁶¹ She wrote at length of her friendship with Sarah Ann Whitney, who she described as one of the “guiding stars” of her circle of friends, and said the two of them, “became, as much as is possible, like ‘the two halves of one soul.’” Helen freely asserted that Sarah Ann was a secret plural wife of Joseph Smith, while making no similar claim about herself.¹⁶²

Quoting heavily from the poem, but overlooking Helen’s own accounts of her 1843-1844 social activities, Smith continued, “Not only was Helen saddled by theological imperative to a man two and a half times her age, she longed for the more carefree associations of friends and especially the romantic overtures of her would-be boyfriend.”¹⁶³ Smith provided no citation for his portrayal of Horace and Helen as romantically interested in one another prior to summer 1843, and this interpretation is difficult to reconcile with Helen’s own published recollections. In her *Woman’s Exponent* narrative, Helen emphasized that Horace, who was five years her senior, “had never dreamed of such a thing as matrimony with me, whom he only remembered in the earliest school days in Kirtland as occupying one of the lowest seats.” She teasingly remembered that when she slept over with Sarah Ann, Horace “was impolite enough to . . . request us to stop [talking] and let him go to sleep, which was proof enough that he had never thought of me only as the green school girl that I was.” She then recorded his departure from Nauvoo in May 1843, giving no indication that it had special meaning for either of them.¹⁶⁴

In an interpretation that strayed even from the 1881 letter, George D. Smith attributed the initiation of the marriage to Joseph Smith himself, who he characterized as “pursuing Helen,”¹⁶⁵ despite

¹⁶⁰See Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1882): 91, [LINK](#).

¹⁶¹See, for example, Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 12, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1883): 90, [LINK](#).

¹⁶²Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 19 (Mar. 1, 1883): 146, [LINK](#).

¹⁶³George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 202.

¹⁶⁴Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 19 (Mar. 1, 1883): 146, [LINK](#).

¹⁶⁵George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 198.

the letter explicitly saying it was Heber who, “having a great desire to be connected with the Prophet, Joseph” arranged the match and “offered” Helen to Joseph. George D. Smith also asserted that Helen’s mother was absent from these discussions until she was “finally informed of the transaction,” despite the 1881 letter saying that both parents were present at the meeting with Joseph. In a presentist appeal to his readers’ emotional reaction to his portrayal of Joseph Smith’s actions, George D. Smith wrote, “One might wonder how someone today would react if a church leader asked for their daughter in bargaining an exchange for eternal life.”¹⁶⁶

While Brodie explicitly acknowledged Helen’s silence regarding a marriage to Joseph Smith in her many published writings, and Compton avoided the issue altogether, George D. Smith repeatedly, but inaccurately, implied that Helen discussed her sealing to Joseph throughout her serialized *Woman’s Exponent* articles and polygamy pamphlets.¹⁶⁷ Like Compton, Smith implied that Joseph’s death brought relief—allowing Helen to escape the “theological imperative” of polygamy and reenter the social world from which plural marriage had excluded her.¹⁶⁸

By intensifying claims about sexuality, attributing romantic longing to Helen without clear sourcing, and shifting narrative agency toward Joseph as an active pursuer, Smith advanced a more psychologically detailed and more explicitly presentist portrait than earlier accounts. Drawing on the same documentary foundation that had shaped the emerging consensus, he extended its interpretive reach even in the face of new contemporaneous evidence.

The same pattern of interpretive consolidation appeared in a 2010 paper by J. Spencer Fluhman,¹⁶⁹ which extended the emerging perception that Helen Mar Kimball broadly documented an 1843 sealing to Joseph Smith. Fluhman described Helen as “perhaps the best documented” of Joseph’s plural wives, writing that she “not only penned reminiscences of her Nauvoo experiences for the Relief Society’s *Woman’s Exponent* (1880–86), she also authored a candid autobiographical sketch for her family in 1881, published two

¹⁶⁶George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 200.

¹⁶⁷George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 198–199, 202, 563.

¹⁶⁸George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 201.

¹⁶⁹J. Spencer Fluhman, “‘A Subject That Can Bear Investigation’: Anguish, Faith, and Joseph Smith’s Youngest Plural Wife,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 41–51, [LINK](#).

extended defenses of polygamy, and left a memorable diary of her later years.”¹⁷⁰ Fluhman grouped all of Helen’s writings together in a way that suggested a cohesive body of personal reflections on her marriage to Joseph Smith. In doing so, he contributed to the mistaken impression that Helen openly discussed the marriage across multiple writings, though apart from the 1881 letter, her extensive body of writings never acknowledged it.

Like most previous historians, Fluhman dated the marriage to May 1843, demonstrating the resilience of that deeply rooted historical tradition. Yet, he acknowledged that Helen’s reminiscences “convey[ed] little social interaction with Joseph Smith after the marriage.” He interpreted this specifically to say that “there is no documentary evidence” of “an intimate physical relationship” between Helen and Joseph, and that “the question of sexuality thus remains open.”¹⁷¹ Fluhman’s article illustrates both the growing entrenchment of the 1843 sealing narrative and the subtle mechanisms by which it became accepted as something Helen herself repeatedly affirmed.

The next major reinforcement of the fourteen-year-old wife narrative came in 2013 with Brian Hales’s *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*.¹⁷² Hales’s three-volume work (produced with research assistance from Don Bradley) was widely recognized as the most comprehensive compilation of early Mormon polygamy documents to date, though it also received sustained scholarly criticism for apologetic framing, internal contradictions, and unsatisfactory interpretations and conclusions.¹⁷³ In his treatment of Helen’s story, Hales fully embraced the prevailing narrative, presenting Helen as Joseph Smith’s youngest plural wife and consistently promoting the familiar May 1843 marriage date across his three volumes.¹⁷⁴ He did not include Helen’s May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing. Like his predecessors, Hales treated the 1881 letter as

¹⁷⁰Fluhman, “A Subject That Can Bear Investigation,” 42.

¹⁷¹Fluhman, “A Subject That Can Bear Investigation,” 43.

¹⁷²Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3 vols. (Greg Kofford Books, 2013).

¹⁷³Sunstone Symposium panel “Author Meets Critics: Brian Hales’ Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology,” Sunstone Symposium Program (2013), 29–30, [LINK](#); Brian C. Hales, “Response to Critiques of Joseph Smith’s Polygamy,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 6 (2013): 183–210, [LINK](#); Brian C. Hales, “My First Name Is Not Apologist,” *Rational Faiths* blog, May 2015, [LINK](#).

¹⁷⁴See, for example, Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:248, 428; 2:11, 24, 297, 335; 3:198.

authoritative and positioned it as the key to interpreting Helen's writings, emotions, and experiences. Notably, it was the only source regarding Helen that Hales included in his chronological timeline and his list of evidences,¹⁷⁵ underscoring its centrality to his interpretation.

Hales briefly quoted Stanley Kimball's observation that Helen "never alluded to her marriage to Joseph."¹⁷⁶ However, he offered no analysis or explanation for Helen's silence, and instead continued the established pattern of projecting allusions to the marriage onto writings that made no mention of it. Like Compton and Smith, Hales relied on Helen's account of being kept from dances to conclude, "It is clear that Helen's sealing to Joseph Smith prevented her from socializing like an unmarried woman,"¹⁷⁷ and that her "longings to dance with teenage boys and otherwise socialize may have been subdued as she adopted the lifestyle of a married woman."¹⁷⁸ This interpretation overlooks Helen's characterization of herself as a "child" in that account, as well as the chronological and social evidence discussed in previous sections.

Like Compton, Hales interpreted Helen's July 11, 1886, diary entry as additional support for her sealing. However, whereas Compton relegated the diary to his endnotes, Hales included select phrases from it in his main text, writing:

It is obvious that Helen's sealing was for both time and eternity. In 1886 Helen told a Brother Hyrum Kimball that she "was sealed to the Prophet in Nauvoo." She wrote, "He was astonished and so was I that he was ignorant of this fact."¹⁷⁹

Hales's portrayal overstates the clarity of this entry and presents a level of evidentiary support that the source itself does not sustain. Additionally, it is unclear how this brief journal entry, even in this edited form, establishes that Helen was sealed to Joseph Smith "for both time and eternity." Despite citing the journal entry, Hales

¹⁷⁵Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:335, 442-443, 456; Brian C. Hales, "Helen Mar Kimball Evidences," *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* website, [LINK](#).

¹⁷⁶Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:24.

¹⁷⁷Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:296.

¹⁷⁸Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:296-297.

¹⁷⁹Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:295.

further underscored its ambiguous nature and limited evidentiary value by omitting it from his compiled list of evidence for Helen's sealing.¹⁸⁰

The chronological tension between the commonly cited May 1843 sealing date and Helen's recollection that she first learned of polygamy in June 1843 is obscured in Hales's rendering due to an altered timeline. Hales wrote:

Helen Mar, who married Horace after the Prophet's death, recalled: "It was not till the summer [of 1842] . . . that I [Helen] learned of the existence of the plural order of marriage."¹⁸¹

Hales's bracketed insertion of 1842 does not reflect Helen's actual wording. She wrote, "On the 12th of May, 1843, Horace left for the East. . . . It was not till the summer after he had gone east that I learned of the existence of the plural order of marriage."¹⁸² Whether made in error or as an interpretive adjustment, this alteration shifted Helen's introduction to polygamy by a full year.

Hales situated his historical interpretation of Helen's sealing within a theological framework that emphasized the divine origin of polygamy and the necessity of obedience to divine command, often prioritizing theological arguments over historical consistency. For example, while Hales embraced the 1881 letter as authentic and central to Helen's story, he also perceived theological problems with its description of Joseph's promise of assured exaltation to Helen and her entire family if she would agree to marry him. The letter quoted Joseph as saying, "If you will take this step, it will ensure your eternal salvation and exaltation & that of your father's household & all of your kindred." This is the only direct quotation in the letter, and because it reports words ostensibly uttered by Joseph Smith, it would generally be considered an important source for understanding both his theology and methods. Yet, although Hales treated the 1881 letter as central and reliable, he selectively rejected its key theological claim and explanation for Helen's compliance—Joseph's promise of "eternal salvation and exaltation" for her and

¹⁸⁰Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:335 (Appendix B).

¹⁸¹Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:770 (brackets and ellipses in original).

¹⁸²Helen Mar Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo After the Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch," *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 19 (1 March 1883): 146, [LINK](#).

her father's entire family, a "promise . . . so great that I willingly gave myself to purchase so glorious a reward."¹⁸³

In contrast to Fluhman, who accepted the statement and attempted to explain it within LDS theology, Hales dismissed this portion of the 1881 letter, asserting that Helen "did, in fact, misunderstand the blessings predicated on this sealing." Although he generally treated Helen's recollections as reliable, he argued this purported direct quote from Joseph Smith in what would have been the most consequential personal interaction she ever had with him should be rejected because "it assumes Helen Mar remembered this statement verbatim after almost forty years."¹⁸⁴ Hales expressed no similar concern regarding the rest of the 1881 letter, Helen's many published reminiscences, or the many-decades-later testimonies of others.¹⁸⁵ Employing a statement Helen wrote in a very different context—a mocking barb at Joseph Smith III¹⁸⁶—Hales defended his rejection of this theological explanation for the sealing by asserting Helen said she had been "too young or too foolish to comprehend and appreciate" all of Joseph Smith's teachings. He advised his readers to look instead to "more mature family members who were better positioned to 'comprehend and appreciate' the Prophet's promises to Helen."¹⁸⁷

This interpretation raises important methodological and historiographical questions. It fails to acknowledge that the 1881 letter was presumably written, not when Helen was a young girl, but during the same period in which she wrote her published histories and defenses of polygamy—when she was in her fifties. Throughout his volumes, Hales relied heavily on Helen's retrospective accounts of early Church history, including events from her early childhood. It is therefore methodologically inconsistent to treat Helen as a competent witness in most contexts while dismissing this central theological explanation for her own sealing. Additionally, asserting that a fourteen-year-old girl would have been too young to

¹⁸³Helen Whitney, Autobiographical Letter, March 30, 1881.

¹⁸⁴Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3: 198-99.

¹⁸⁵See, Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 1:237, for just one of Helen's many recollections written "forty years after its occurrence" that Hales accepts without question. See also 2:108, 137. The vast majority of the evidence Hales relies on was recorded decades later—particularly the fifty-years-later Temple Lot testimonies, which he cites heavily.

¹⁸⁶Helen Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph*, 16.

¹⁸⁷Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 3:198-99; 2: 28-29.

comprehend the promised blessings that induced her to submit to a polygamous sealing to a thirty-seven-year-old man, while simultaneously defending her capacity to consent to that sealing, undermines the coherence of the interpretation and raises significant ethical questions.

While Compton acknowledged ambiguity surrounding sexual relations, Hales took a more definitive stance, arguing that there is “no evidence of sexuality”¹⁸⁸ and that the 1881 letter “indicates the marriage did not include sexual relations.”¹⁸⁹ To support this interpretation, Hales quoted Stanley Kimball’s description of Helen’s marriage to Joseph as, “‘for eternity alone,’ that is, unconsummated.”¹⁹⁰ Hales’s use of this quotation to support his assertion that the marriage was not sexual is interesting given his simultaneous claim that, “it is obvious that Helen’s sealing was for both time and eternity.”¹⁹¹ By Hales’s own definition, “A ‘time and eternity’ sealing creates a wife on earth and in Heaven, therefore authorizing conjugal relations in mortality.”¹⁹² Hales asserted that Helen’s sealing to Joseph was both “for time and eternity,” and non-sexual. He grounded this claim in theological reasoning and personal interpretation of sources. For example, Hales acknowledged that “the fact that she was not called to testify in the 1892 Temple Lot trial is significant” because “she lived in Salt Lake City where the depositions were held and had been a vocal defender of plural marriage.”¹⁹³ To explain this, Hales wrote, “I can identify no reason for Helen Mar Kimball to have been bypassed as a witness except that she could not testify of experiencing a full conjugal marriage with Joseph Smith,”¹⁹⁴ and, “I read these factors as strong evidence that her marriage was never consummated.”¹⁹⁵

Hales’s interpretive approach had the effect of insulating Joseph Smith from accusations of impropriety while simultaneously upholding the narrative of a thirty-seven-year-old leader marrying a fourteen-year-old girl. This required careful rhetorical framing—

¹⁸⁸Hales and Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*, 70; see also, Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:300.

¹⁸⁹Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3:202.

¹⁹⁰Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:298; 3:202.

¹⁹¹Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:295.

¹⁹²Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 1:438.

¹⁹³Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:29; see also 2:297–298.

¹⁹⁴Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 2:29.

¹⁹⁵Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy*, 3:202.

acknowledging the discomfort modern readers feel regarding Helen's youth, the age disparity, and the power imbalance, while attempting to mitigate those concerns through cultural, theological, and historical justifications. Hales acknowledged Helen's reported distress but attempted to defend the marriage by arguing that marriages to teenage brides were relatively common in the nineteenth century. In an argument that privileged cultural mores over Helen's documented distress, he asserted that, while "eyebrow-raising," a fourteen-year-old bride would not have been considered scandalous.¹⁹⁶ However, this argument risks minimizing Helen's experience and misrepresenting historical norms. A fourteen-year-old bride, particularly as the twenty-seventh polygamous wife of a thirty-seven-year-old man, would have raised serious concerns within nineteenth-century contexts.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, both Mormon and non-Mormon historical accounts identify public hostility toward polygamy as a significant factor contributing to Joseph Smith's assassination.¹⁹⁸

In his effort to defend the morality of a thirty-seven-year-old prophet's polygamous marriage to a fourteen-year-old girl, Hales presented Helen's eventual acceptance and public defense of the principle of polygamy as retroactive validation of the sealing's divine legitimacy and evidence that Joseph's actions had not been inappropriate.¹⁹⁹ This framing created a logical contradiction. Hales relied on Helen's published writings from 1880 to 1886—which never mention a sealing to Joseph Smith—to argue that the marriage caused no lasting harm. Yet the only document that asserts such a sealing occurred is the 1881 letter, which explicitly describes distress and coercion. Hales thus accepted the 1881 letter

¹⁹⁶See, for example, Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy*, 2:288–289.

¹⁹⁷According to demographic research on nineteenth-century marriage patterns, "very early marriages...—females at the age of fifteen and under and males at seventeen years and under—rarely exceeded 0.5 percent of all first marriages and more often amounted to less." Thomas P. Monahan, *The Pattern of Age at Marriage in the United States* (Philadelphia: Stephenson Brothers, 1951), as quoted in Todd Compton, "Early Marriage in the New England and Northeastern States and in Mormon Polygamy: What Was the Norm?" in *The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy*, ed. Newell G. Bringhurst and Craig L. Foster (John Whitmer Books, 2010), 184–232.

¹⁹⁸See *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, vol. 1, The Standard of Truth, 1815–1846* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), chap. 43, [LINK](#); *Nauvoo Expositor* 1, no. 1 (Jun. 7, 1844): 2, CHL, [LINK](#).

¹⁹⁹Hales and Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: Toward a Better Understanding*, 134; Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy* 2:28, 2:313.

as valid evidence that the sealing took place, while using Helen's silence about the sealing in all her other writings to discount the same letter's testimony of distress.

Despite these methodological shortcomings, Hales advanced the field by compiling and publishing a vast body of primary source material that is widely cited and continues to shape devotional, popular, and scholarly representations of Helen Mar Kimball and the narrative of early Mormon polygamy.

Institutional Validation and Established Consensus, 2013–2025

Alongside the publication of Hales's volumes came the 2013 release of the *CES Letter*, a widely circulated book-length PDF published online by Jeremy Runnells that offered forceful critiques of Joseph Smith on a variety of issues.²⁰⁰ Runnells opened the section on Polygamy/Polyandry with two stories involving the Kimball family. First, he quoted Orson F. Whitney's late and unsupported account that Joseph had required Heber to turn his wife, Vilate, over to him. He then turned to Helen herself, writing, "Joseph took 14-year-old Helen Mar Kimball's hand in marriage after his disturbing Abrahamic test on her father, Heber, while promising Helen and her family eternal salvation and exaltation if she accepted." He followed with a quote from the 1881 letter, then concluded: "Joseph was 37-years-old when he married 14-year-old Helen Mar Kimball, twenty-three years his junior. Even by 19th century standards, this is shocking."²⁰¹

The *CES Letter* had broad impact, but it was far from the only critical platform drawing attention to the unsettling implications of the prevailing narrative. Popular podcaster John Dehlin of *Mormon Stories* had already been widely disseminating critical perspectives on troubling aspects of Mormon polygamy since January 2006.²⁰² In early 2014, Lindsay Hansen Park launched her podcast *Year of Polygamy*, further amplifying public attention to the issue.²⁰³ The

²⁰⁰Jeremy Runnells, *CES Letter: My Search for Answers to My Mormon Doubts*, PDF, last updated 2023, [LINK](#).

²⁰¹Runnells, *CES Letter*, 52–53.

²⁰²John Dehlin, "An Introduction to Mormon Polygamy with Todd Compton—Ep. 12-14," *Mormon Stories* podcast, January 17, 2006, [LINK](#).

²⁰³Lindsay Hansen Park, *Year of Polygamy* podcast, launched 2014, [LINK](#).

impact of this emerging discourse on many Latter-day Saints was profound, as polygamy became one of the most significant challenges to ongoing faith and church activity for many members.²⁰⁴

The year after the release of the *CES Letter*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued an institutional response to the complicated history of polygamy. In October 2014, the Church added the essay “Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo” to their website, which summarized several familiar rationales to contextualize and justify Joseph Smith’s plural marriages. For example, it described Helen Mar Kimball as being “sealed to Joseph several months before her 15th birthday,” and said:

Marriage at such an age, inappropriate by today’s standards, was legal in that era, and some women married in their mid-teens. Helen Mar Kimball spoke of her sealing to Joseph as being “for eternity alone,” suggesting that the relationship did not involve sexual relations. After Joseph’s death, Helen remarried and became an articulate defender of him and of plural marriage.²⁰⁵

Though framed in cautious institutional language, the *Gospel Topics* essay nonetheless expanded awareness of the dominant narrative of Nauvoo polygamy, including the story of Helen Mar Kimball, and provided ecclesiastical validation for that narrative, further consolidating its legitimacy among both members and critics. (For example, following the release of the essay, Jeremy Runnells updated the *CES Letter* to reflect the Church’s acknowledgment that Joseph Smith married Helen “several months before her 15th birthday.”)²⁰⁶

With the narrative of fourteen-year-old Helen Mar Kimball’s 1843 sealing to Joseph Smith now entrenched across scholarly, ecclesiastical, and popular settings, it increasingly came to function as an inherited settled truth no longer requiring fresh evidentiary assessment. In that context, discrepancies such as contradictions in

²⁰⁴See, for example, Jana Riess, *The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 30,47, 219, 224– 225.

²⁰⁵“Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, first published October 2014, [LINK](#).

²⁰⁶Runnells, *CES Letter*, 53.

dating, Helen's silence in all but one late-appearing document, and tensions with contemporaneous sources have often been treated as reconcilable through interpretive adjustments rather than requiring closer examination. Ongoing engagement with Helen's story has, at times, focused more on incorporating it into broader interpretive frameworks than on sustained independent reexamination of the historiography and underlying documentation. In his 2020 *Kingdom of Nauvoo*, Benjamin Park drew on Helen Mar Kimball but did not present her story independently. Instead, he incorporated her reported 1843 sealing into a composite narrative alongside that of Sarah Ann Whitney, portraying both girls in a unified narrative of teenage participants in Joseph Smith's dynastic project. This framing collapsed the distinct timelines, sources, and contexts of each young woman's narrative into one symbolic representation in service of his overarching interpretation.²⁰⁷

In 2022, Todd Compton published *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*, a sequel to his 1997 book.²⁰⁸ While largely reaffirming his original narrative, the volume introduced one notable difference. In 1997 Compton stated that the evidence of sexuality between Joseph and Helen was "entirely ambiguous," but argued there was "no explicit or convincing evidence" for marriages to young women in which "there were no sexual relations."²⁰⁹ In 2022 he offered a somewhat adjusted view: "Though there is no solid evidence either way, I do not believe the marriage was consummated."²¹⁰ Despite the publication and increasing accessibility of Helen's May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing, Compton did not include it in this later treatment. He maintained his previous timeline, again unambiguously asserting that Helen "married Joseph Smith in May 1843." He also continued to center the 1881 letter, introducing Helen by noting that "she wrote a vivid memoir of Smith's proposal to her, the reasons why she accepted it, and the psychic trauma it caused her." He immediately added, "Helen has written more than any other plural wife of Joseph Smith," but again did not acknowledge

²⁰⁷Benjamin E. Park, *Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier* (Liveright, 2020), 134-135.

²⁰⁸Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents* (Signature Books, 2022).

²⁰⁹Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 14-15.

²¹⁰Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*, 556.

that none of her many writings included any indication of a sealing to Joseph Smith.²¹¹

Compton explained that since he could not include all of the documents, “I have favored documents not printed elsewhere.”²¹² Yet despite the 1881 letter having been previously published and the abundance of Helen’s still-unpublished writings, he selected the 1881 letter first for inclusion, again illustrating its central importance to his narrative. Based on the letter, he repeated his earlier interpretations, including that Helen “was devastated when she found out that she was fully married to Smith and could not even go to dances.”²¹³ Though twenty-five years had passed between Compton’s first publication and his sequel, and despite the far greater availability of documents, and the emergence of alternative perspectives on Nauvoo polygamy, his interpretive framework remained essentially unchanged, demonstrating the durability of the narrative once it had become historiographically established.

The most recent scholarly treatment of Joseph Smith, John Turner’s 2025 *Joseph Smith: The Rise and Fall of an American Prophet*, offered another reinforcement of the Helen Mar Kimball narrative.²¹⁴ In his brief overview, Turner, like his predecessors, centered the 1881 letter as the foundational document of Helen’s Nauvoo experiences, synthesizing it with other sources and reading allusions to the sealing into her writings and contemporary family correspondence to construct a narrative of a marriage that “re-shaped Helen’s life more than she expected.”²¹⁵ Turner was only the second historian, after George D. Smith, to cite Helen’s May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing. Yet, like Smith, he incorporated it as supporting evidence without addressing how its contents—most notably its indication that Helen was not yet married—complicate the traditional spring 1843 sealing chronology.

Turner addressed the question of sexuality, writing, “There is no way to know,” but citing the references to “posterity” and “increase” in Helen’s patriarchal blessing to suggest that “sex would have become an expected component of the marriage at some

²¹¹Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*, 556, 553.

²¹²Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*, xi.

²¹³Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Documents*, 554.

²¹⁴John G. Turner, *Joseph Smith: The Rise and Fall of an American Prophet* (Yale University Press, 2025).

²¹⁵Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

point.”²¹⁶ He did not note that Heber C. Kimball blessed all of his children on the same day and gave several of Helen’s brothers similar promises of posterity.²¹⁷ Notably, Turner departed from the traditional “May 1843” timeline for the sealing, writing, “In the spring of 1843, apostle Heber C. Kimball broached the subject of plural marriage to his daughter, fourteen-year-old Helen Mar Kimball.” Turner did not explain his reasoning for adopting this adjusted chronology, but his placement of this conversation in the spring marked a distinct departure from Helen’s consistent accounts that place it in the summer.²¹⁸ While Turner incorporated the significant yet underutilized patriarchal blessing, he employed it primarily as supporting evidence for the sealing rather than engaging its chronological and interpretive implications. His treatment also did not extensively engage Helen’s published histories or attempt to reconcile conflicting evidence. Instead, it largely reaffirmed the inherited narrative with little additional scrutiny of its alignment with Helen’s writings and contemporaneous documents.

For example, relying on the 1881 letter, Turner, like previous writers, emphasized Helen’s supposed marriage-induced social isolation and situated the prohibition against attending dances at the time of the sealing, rather than eight months later. He wrote, “Prior to the sealing, Helen had attended dances and relished opportunities to spend time with friends and prospective romantic interests. Now she was a ‘fetter’d bird with wild and longing heart.’”²¹⁹ Helen’s abundant social involvement in 1843 and 1844 has already been discussed, but Turner’s addition of “prospective romantic interests” introduced an additional layer of interpretation. Turner did not define a specific romantic interest or provide a source for this addition, leaving its evidentiary basis unclear. Whether derived from George D. Smith’s earlier portrayal of Helen as romantically interested in Horace Whitney or developed independently, Turner’s description of Helen being kept from “prospective romantic interests” does not align with her published recollections.

²¹⁶Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

²¹⁷Heber C. Kimball papers, “1837-1866; Autobiography, circa 1842 - 1858,” MS 627, CHL, [LINK](#).

²¹⁸Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 315; Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 5 (Aug. 1, 1882): 39, [LINK](#); Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 100.

²¹⁹Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

In multiple *Woman's Exponent* articles, Helen shared recollections of spending time with “J. Hatch, a young lawyer” she formed an acquaintance with several months after she would have been married to Joseph Smith. Their association began when they acted together in a play in the spring of 1844²²⁰ and lasted throughout the summer. She nostalgically described “strolling upon the hillside with a young gentleman (Mr. Hatch)” accompanied by two unnamed friends on “a lovely evening in the summer of 1844.” Sitting on the temple rocks, they watched “the setting sun with its beautiful reflections on the river.” Her description of “our quiet city that rested in the valley below” makes it clear that this was before the martyrdom. She apparently did not expect this association to be of short duration, writing, “We little dreamed, as we sat there enjoying the delightful scenery . . . how very soon our paths would be in separate directions.”²²¹ The rupture in the relationship occurred on August 8, 1844, six weeks after Joseph Smith’s death, when the couple stood together listening to Sidney Rigdon’s speech during the succession crisis. Helen explained, “We had been on pleasant terms, but lately he had turned Rigdonite.” She described becoming “very indignant” as he spoke “in defence and praise of” Rigdon and attempted “to convince [her] that he was the right man to lead the Church,” particularly while her “father was seated there with Brigham and the rest of the apostles.” She recalled letting him know “how offensive he had made himself,” and that “quite a war of words ensued, neither of us (of course) yielding the point.” With what may suggest lingering emotional investment, she added, “Not long after this he married one of Rigdon’s daughters, which proved to be the only loadstone [sic] that attracted him in that direction.”²²² Helen’s sentimental recollections of her association with Mr. Hatch during the very months she would have been married to Joseph Smith challenge the perception that she was prohibited from “spend[ing] time with friends and prospective romantic interests.”

²²⁰Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1882): 90, [LINK](#).

²²¹Helen Whitney, “The Last Chapter of Scenes in Nauvoo,” *Woman's Exponent* 12, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1883): 90, [LINK](#).

²²²Helen Whitney, “Scenes in Nauvoo After the Martyrdom of the Prophet and Patriarch,” *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 17 (Feb. 1, 1883): 130, [LINK](#). Jeremiah Hatch Jr. married Lacy Ann Rigdon (who was twelve years old at the time of the martyrdom) in 1847, three years after the end of his and Helen’s association.

Turner specifically attributed Helen's presumed social isolation to Joseph Smith, interpreting the prohibition against attending dances as evidence of marital control. He wrote, "Joseph forbade her to attend dances at his residence to protect her from the attentions of other men."²²³ Yet, as demonstrated in earlier sections, the chronology and context of these restrictions do not support this conclusion. Additionally, Helen's own account does not link this episode to a sealing and identifies her father, Heber C. Kimball, not Joseph Smith, as the authority responsible for the restriction. The short-lived resentment she described was directed toward her father, not Joseph Smith. She wrote, "I...thought it a very unkind act in father to allow [William] to go and enjoy the dance unrestrained...and fetter me down." She related that her anger soon passed as she recognized that "my father was very kind and indulgent in other ways...and it was not a very long time before I became satisfied that I was blessed in being under the control of so good and wise a parent, who had taken counsel and thus saved me from evils, which some others in their youth and inexperience, were exposed to."²²⁴ In her retrospective framing, the episode functioned as a moral lesson about obedience and paternal guidance rather than as evidence of marital restriction or emotional estrangement.

The passage most likely to be interpreted as Joseph's direct involvement is Helen's explanation that she "had to stay at home, as my father had been warned by the Prophet to keep his daughter away from there, because of the blacklegs and certain ones of questionable character who attended there."²²⁵ However, when situated within its historical and social context, the statement supports a different reading. Contemporaneous sources indicate that, possibly owing to Nauvoo's lenient extradition environment, a criminal element had entered the city, contributing to periodic concerns among Church leaders about criminal activity.²²⁶ Moreover, while

²²³Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

²²⁴Helen Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo," *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 12 (Nov. 15, 1882): 90, [LINK](#).

²²⁵Helen Whitney, "Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo," 90.

²²⁶Joseph Smith, "Proclamation, 16 June 1844," JSP, [LINK](#); and History, 1838–1856, volume F-1, 1 May–8 August 1844, JSP, [LINK](#). Both documents record Joseph Smith's concern that "our city is infested with a set of blacklegs, counterfeiters and debauchees." See also Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (University of Illinois Press, 1965), 99; "The Nauvoo Municipal Court and the Writ of Habeas Corpus," Introduction to the Legal Records series, JSP, [LINK](#).

Joseph Smith and his family lived in the three rooms they rented in the building, the Nauvoo Mansion functioned as a hotel and community center available for rent.²²⁷ The dances Helen described were not private gatherings hosted by Joseph Smith, but public social events held in a rented venue.²²⁸

In this context, Joseph's warning to Heber is more plausibly understood as a religious leader and trusted associate advising a fellow father regarding the concerning social environment of these gatherings rather than as a husband's attempt to restrict the associations of a young wife. Helen's broader narrative, including her association with Mr. Hatch, demonstrates that she was not subject to general prohibitions against socializing or forming friendships with young men. These details reinforce an interpretation grounded in paternal authority and nineteenth-century protective norms rather than in marital control.

Turner's treatment illustrates the remarkable durability of the dominant interpretive framework. Even the May 28, 1843 patriarchal blessing was assimilated into the inherited narrative rather than permitted to function as an independent chronological and interpretive constraint. As a result, tensions between the 1881 letter and Helen's extensive body of published writing, letters, and journals have remained largely unexamined. Helen's public voice, despite being more extensively preserved than that of any other woman claimed as Joseph Smith's plural wife, has remained subordinated to interpretations derived primarily from a single late-appearing letter, despite the recurring tensions between that letter and her broader body of self-authored work.

Andrew Kimball's 2025 family history, *The Blood in Their Veins: The Kimballs, Polygamy, and the Shaping of Mormonism*,²²⁹ introduced the largest departure to date from the longstanding May 1843 timeline for the sealing. Citing Helen's age as thirteen, not

²²⁷See Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843–29 February 1844, 241, JSP, [LINK](#). “Rented the ^\Nauvoo/ Mansion house to Ebenezer Robinson for \$1,000 per annum—Board for myself and family. & horses—reserving myself 3 rooms in the house.”

²²⁸Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” 90. Helen's account explains that “some of the young gentlemen got up a series of dancing parties.”

²²⁹Andrew Kimball, *The Blood in Their Veins: The Kimballs, Polygamy, and the Shaping of Mormonism* (Signature Books, 2025).

fourteen,²³⁰ Kimball recounted a “celebratory . . . river excursion” which ran into bad weather and resulted in Helen and several others becoming “ill from exposure.” Joseph “could not rest until he went around and informed himself of the condition of each one who had accompanied him to Quincy, and offer advice.” When he got to Helen the second day, he told her to “take for your breakfast only a cup of coffee and a piece of dry bread, and you shall be well.” Helen complied and recovered. After this, according to Andrew Kimball, “To her astonishment, Helen found herself married to Joseph just days later.”²³¹

This new time frame for the sealing warrants closer examination. The ill-fated steamboat outing took place on June 3-4.²³² Joseph visited Helen “the morning of the second day after our return,”²³³ thus June sixth, with Helen recovering on the seventh. Andrew Kimball dated the marriage to “just days later,” marking June ninth as the earliest and thus the only possible day in his scenario since Heber left for his mission on June tenth.

Kimball did not explain his evidence or reasoning for offering this new time frame for the sealing, but since it aligns better with Helen’s repeated reports that she knew nothing about polygamy “till June,” it appears that he may have been attempting to bring his timeline into greater harmony with her testimonies. He also seems to have recognized that Helen’s recollection of the steamboat encounter and subsequent illness suggest that she had not yet been married to Joseph Smith, prompting him to push his proposed date for the marriage to after those events. While the prioritization of Helen’s voice in this approach marks an important improvement over earlier timelines that ignored her seasonal cues and other discrepancies, it still conflicts with her own published statements and chronology.

²³⁰Elsewhere in the book Andrew Kimball correctly cites Helen’s age as fourteen, for example, his Alphabetical Appendix of the Kimballs says on page 472 that Helen “Married Joseph Smith at fourteen.” Andrew Kimball, *The Blood in Their Veins*, 134-135.

²³¹Andrew Kimball, *The Blood in Their Veins*, 134-135.

²³²Both William Clayton’s journal and Willard Richards’s notes of Joseph Smith date this trip to June 3-4: Journal, December 1842-June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843-29 February 1844, 232, JSP, [LINK](#).

²³³Helen Mar Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman’s Exponent* 11, no. 8 (Sep. 15, 1882): 58, [LINK](#).

Kimball's timeline requires the sealing to have occurred June ninth, the day before Heber left on his mission, whereas Helen's published accounts report that the day after Heber first taught her about polygamy—the day the sealing would have occurred—was still “a few days” before he “started for the eastern states.”²³⁴ Helen, aided by journals and records, was generally quite precise in her timelines and recollections. Her frequent use of the word “few” consistently refers to more than two, and usually signifies at least four or five.²³⁵ This conflict in Andrew Kimball's adjusted rendering—his one day versus Helen's “a few days”—highlights the persistent difficulty of reconciling the late-appearing 1881 letter with contemporary documentation and her retrospective public accounts. But, aside from the dating of events, by far the biggest obstacle to aligning the 1881 letter with the rest of Helen's writings is the fact that, despite her extensive public writings about all of these May-June 1843 events, Helen never connected them to a sealing to Joseph Smith. Kimball's reconfiguration thus underscores a fundamental tension at the heart of this historiography: even the most conscientious effort to honor Helen's chronological testimony still requires compressing, minimizing, or reshaping elements of her extensive public accounts, her specific temporal markers, and her sustained silence regarding any marriage to Joseph Smith.

The pattern evident across successive generations of scholarship is that Helen's extensive published and personal record stands in tension with institutional voices and the 1881 letter. Yet, these tensions have not been treated as historiographical problems requiring sustained analysis. Instead, evidence for the sealing has been read into contemporaneous documents that do not explicitly mention it, and ambiguities have been smoothed by prioritizing institutional claims and the 1881 letter over Helen's own published writings.

²³⁴Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 5 (Aug. 1, 1882): 39, [LINK](#).

²³⁵See, for example, Helen Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents in Nauvoo,” *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 4 (Jul. 15, 1882): 26 (referring to a child who “only lived a few months,” in context six months), [LINK](#); *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 8 (Sep. 15, 1882): 58 (stating that Judge Higbee “only lived a few days after his return home,” referring to a period of four days), [LINK](#); and *Woman's Exponent* 11, no. 15 (Jan. 1, 1883): 114 (dating Joseph Smith's June 22, 1844 speech as “a few days previous” to Governor Ford's June 27 address), [LINK](#). These usages suggest that Whitney employed “few” to indicate a span of several days rather than a single day.

This historiographical overview—tracing the origin, development, solidification, and continuation of the Helen Mar Kimball narrative—demonstrates how a story that began as loosely connected nineteenth-century references became firmly entrenched across scholarly, institutional, and popular treatments. In the process, recognition of the extent to which contemporaneous documents and Helen’s writings diverge from the established narrative has faded from view. Even among scholars, it is not widely recognized that among Helen’s many surviving writings, and all other relevant documentation, only a single document—the 1881 letter, which did not surface until 1975 and whose provenance remains unclear—asserts a sealing to Joseph Smith in 1843. Yet this sole divergent account has eclipsed the independent evidentiary weight of more immediate and reliable records that complicate its inherited chronology and interpretive assumptions.

The narrative of Helen’s 1843 marriage to Joseph Smith has served different purposes over time. Early exposé writers publicized scandalous stories about the Church’s founder. Joseph F. Smith sought to establish evidence of Joseph Smith’s polygamy. Andrew Jenson worked to catalog and publish those accounts. Orson F. Whitney emphasized narratives that glorified his family lines. Twentieth and twenty-first-century historians, in turn, worked to synthesize these records into coherent narratives of Nauvoo polygamy. The absences in Helen’s writing and the ambiguities in the documentary record did not serve any of these purposes. Into this climate of challenging ambiguity came the discovery of a document that appeared to beautifully fill the void. The 1881 letter replaced absence with deeply emotive personal testimony and overshadowed documentary ambiguity with what appeared to be a clear and cohesive narrative that aligned with emerging institutional and scholarly interpretations. It offered a framework through which scattered references could be organized into a cohesive story.

In this context, when the letter appeared, it did not simply join the documentary constellation surrounding Helen’s life; it became the gravitational center, drawing every other source into its orbit. Contemporaneous records and Helen’s extensive body of writings have been filtered through its lens rather than evaluated on their own terms. The result is a consensus narrative that is less a composite portrait drawn from multiple perspectives than a

reconstruction shaped almost entirely by the interpretive gravity of one source. This methodological imbalance encouraged silences to be treated as incidental, documents to be read as though they confirm a sealing they never mention, chronological tensions to be harmonized, and historical complexity to be flattened. As a result, Helen herself has too often been reduced to a single role—the “fourteen-year-old wife”—rather than understood as a multifaceted historical figure whose writings and experiences resist such reduction.

Helen Mar Kimball Whitney worked deliberately and persistently to record and publish her history. From 1876 to her death in 1896, she wrote autobiographical sketches, contributed to collaborative biographies, published serialized reminiscences in the *Woman's Exponent*, authored pamphlets, maintained extensive correspondence, kept detailed journals, and gave public speeches. Across this extensive body of work, she vigorously defended polygamy and Joseph Smith's role in its establishment, openly discussed her father's plural marriages, shared her own experiences as Horace Whitney's first wife, and consistently placed her introduction to polygamy in the summer of 1843, just before her father's June 10 departure. She wrote during the period when the LDS Church was mounting its most intensive efforts to prove Joseph Smith had practiced polygamy and when women identified as his wives enjoyed special prestige.

Yet, despite identifying other women as his wives who could testify of his involvement, in none of these writings did she identify herself as Joseph Smith's wife or describe a sealing to him. This silence is not incidental. It represents a sustained pattern across multiple genres of writing, in both public and private contexts, over two decades. It extends beyond Helen herself and manifests in William Clayton's Nauvoo journals, in Helen's absences from Joseph F. Smith's collected affidavits and the 1892 Temple Lot trial, and in her obituary.

This historiographical survey has traced the construction and entrenchment of the current consensus narrative. As a work of historiography, it has not attempted to resolve the underlying historical question of whether a sealing occurred in 1843. What it has demonstrated is that the current consensus rests on a documentary foundation that is more contested and imbalanced

than has generally been recognized. The narrative's apparent clarity and certainty do not reflect the absences and ambiguities present in the sources themselves. Rather, the narrative took shape through a process of historiographical alignment as specific methodological and interpretive choices prioritized certain sources while marginalizing others. Understanding how this consensus formed illuminates not only Helen's story but broader historiographical questions about whose voices shape narratives, which documents gain interpretive authority, and how apparent historical certainty can emerge through the alignment of sources marked by absence and ambiguity.