

Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits

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The story of Joseph Smith and plural marriage remains one of the most contested and carefully constructed chronicles in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Contributing to the controversy is not just the practice itself, but the struggle to document it, shape its meaning, and ensure its survival through turbulent times. For Joseph F. Smith—son of Hyrum, and nephew of Joseph, but removed from the Nauvoo era by a quarter century—this challenge was particularly personal. As a member of the 'royal' lineage, a new Apostle, and a defender and participant in his polygamist community, the pressures on him were immense. Yet, Joseph F. wrote with confidence to his daughter, “Under the influence of the Spirit of inspiration and Revelation from God I have been able to direct the affairs of the Church without one misstep or mistake.”¹ This assurance in his divinely guided course not only reflects his belief in his ability to meet these challenges, but also highlights his conviction that his leadership was part of a greater divine plan.

Despite this confidence, Joseph F. faced a disconcerting realization when seeking to defend the Church’s position: “When the subject [of plural marriage] first came before my mind, I must say I was astonished at the scarcity of evidence; I might say almost total absence of direct evidence upon the subject, as connected with the Prophet Joseph himself. There was nothing written and but few living who were personally knowing to the fact that Joseph taught

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

¹Joseph F. Smith letter to Edith E. Smith, undated, p. 3, MS 33796, CHL, [LINK](#).

the principle.”² Resolving to fill this evidentiary gap, he began collecting affidavits from individuals he believed would testify about their experiences with polygamy in Nauvoo. Through this growing body of documents, gathered from various members of the Church, he sought to establish a narrative that would support the Church’s position on plural marriage. However, these texts have not been subjected to the critical analysis they demand, leaving a gap in our understanding. Studying the purpose, creation, and content of these documents is essential to grasp the broader institutional construct that began to emerge as Mormon polygamy faced scrutiny and opposition from both within and outside the Church.

Central to the body of evidence were the writings of William Clayton, clerk and associate of Joseph Smith, whose accounts have been cited as verification of the prophet’s involvement in plural marriage. While Clayton generated brief journal entries and an 1871 letter to an inquiring Madison M. Scott, these documents lacked the cohesiveness needed to serve as a robust defense of polygamy. Joseph F. Smith recognized the potential within these fragments, seizing upon them to craft a narrative that would fulfill the institutional needs of the Church. Through this process, Joseph F. transformed Clayton’s ideas into a crucial component of the larger body of affidavits.

This paper investigates how Joseph F. Smith, in addition to preserving Clayton’s words, actively shaped them to create a unified account of the Church’s polygamous past. In this context, Joseph F. wielded significant influence over how the Church’s history was framed. The implications extend to how historians interpret the entire body of affidavits compiled by Joseph F. and whether these documents were truly independent testimonies or part of an effort to standardize and solidify the Church’s stance on the issue of Mormon polygamy.

Historiography of the Polygamy Revelation

The historical analysis of Joseph Smith’s teachings on plural marriage reveals a process of documentation and reinterpretation. Initially, records were sparse, but following Joseph’s death, Church

²Joseph F. Smith to Orson Pratt, Jul. 19, 1875, in Joseph F. Smith letterpress copybook, 1875 July 19 - 1879 September 7, p. 3, MS 1325, CHL, [LINK](#).

leaders began to curate accounts of the polygamy revelation. This was driven not only by the need to assert institutional authority but also to address challenges from internal dissent and external opposition. Examining these historiographical shifts provides context for understanding Joseph F. Smith's role in shaping a cohesive legacy of the polygamy revelation.

Joseph Smith's Journal, July 12, 1843

This entry, recorded in Joseph Smith's journal by his scribe Willard Richards, briefly captures the event of July 12, 1843: "Wednesday July 12 Receivd a Revelation in the office in presence of Hyrum [Smith]. & Wm Clayton."³

Though the entry lacks specifics, it has since become foundational for discussions on Joseph's marital doctrines, with interpreters debating the subject of the specified revelation. The entry's terse documentation and lack of elaboration leaves room for several possibilities. Following the death of Joseph and Hyrum, this short yet authoritative statement became part of the documentary record as church leaders constructed a history of the Church and an institutional position on plural marriage.⁴

William Clayton's Journal, July 12–13, 1843

William Clayton's journal contains the earliest and only first-hand account of the dictation of the 1843 polygamy revelation. Under the date of July 12, 1843, Clayton recorded that Joseph Smith dictated a revelation affirming the legitimacy of plural marriage, rooted in the practices of biblical patriarchs such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon. The journal entry represents a critical piece of evidence, offering a window into the development of a controversial doctrine and reflecting Clayton's perspective on the complexities of Nauvoo-era Mormonism.

Clayton's account states that both Joseph and Hyrum Smith presented the revelation to Emma Smith, Joseph's wife, who reacted

³Journal, Book 2, 10 March 1843 – 14 July 1843, p. 307, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁴George A. Smith, Thomas Bullock, and Robert A. Campbell worked together to amalgamate this entry, William Clayton's journal, and the Kingsbury document into the *Manuscript History of the Church* in the mid-1850s. See History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844], p. 1669, JSP, [LINK](#).

with disbelief and defiance to the claim that God commanded her to allow Joseph to take additional wives. Clayton's description of the following day is equally significant, as it describes a private discussion between Joseph and Emma who both tearfully grappled with the implications of the doctrine.⁵ Clayton's writing suggests the emotional and relational challenges that accompanied the introduction of this teaching, as seen through his own observations and understanding.

The significance of Clayton's journal lies in its proximity to the events it describes, providing an early perspective free from more expanded narratives and debates that later emerged surrounding the polygamy revelation. It remains a valuable account for the emergence of the polygamy revelation and its immediate impact.

Brigham Young Builds an Institutional Memory

Nine years and 1,200 miles from Nauvoo, Brigham Young took a significant step in bringing the Church's polygamy doctrine into the open. At a special conference in Salt Lake City in August 1852, Church leaders publicly acknowledged the practice of plural marriage for the first time. This announcement also marked the first public presentation of the revelation on plural marriage, now known as Doctrine and Covenants 132.⁶ Until this moment, the doctrine had been shared only in private settings. Now, with the Church securely established in an isolated community, leaders felt confident enough to openly approve Mormon polygamy and tie it to their efforts to assert religious freedom.⁷

Young asked Orson Pratt to offer a doctrinal explanation of celestial plural marriage, while he himself spoke of its importance

⁵George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Signature Books, 1995), 110. "[July 12, 1843. Wednesday.] This A. M. I wrote a Revelation consisting of 10 pages on the order of the priesthood, showing the designs in Moses, Abraham, David and Solomon having many wives and concubines &c. After it was wrote Presidents Joseph and Hyrum presented it and read it to E[mma] who said she did not believe a word of it and appeared very rebellious. Joseph told me to Deed all the unincumbered lots to E[mma] and the children. He appears much troubled about E[mma]."

⁶The revelation first appeared in the 1876 Doctrine and Covenants.

⁷For background on this announcement, see David J. Whittaker, "The Bone in the Throat: Orson Pratt and the Public Announcement of Plural Marriage," *The Western Historical Quarterly*, 18, no. 3 (1987): 293-314, [LINK](#).

in the Church's teachings.⁸ For Young, who did not claim prophetic gifts, ascribing polygamy to Joseph Smith was essential to justify such a major break from the morality of the day. During his remarks, Young specifically mentioned William Clayton, referring to him as "the man who wrote it from the mouth of the prophet," linking the revelation to Joseph Smith and establishing its authenticity.

Young also shared details about the history of the revelation, describing how Emma Smith had destroyed the original document, the secrecy surrounding its early practice, and the preservation of a copy in his locked desk drawer. Young positioned Clayton's scribal work as a crucial link in the transmission of this revelation. His comments emphasized the eventual triumph of the polygamy doctrine over opposition and its connection with the exaltation of humankind.⁹

Though Young was not formally writing history, his remarks helped create a shared understanding of polygamy's place in the Church and its purpose in their faith. Scholars such as Shmuel Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen note that construction of community identity occurs when "traditions are reconstructed and related to mythical origins, to founders or historical events."¹⁰ In recounting the first public history of the revelation's origin and positioning polygamy as an essential part of Church doctrine, Young ensured its place in Mormon collective memory. The doctrine, controversial as it was, became enshrined as a symbol of faithfulness and divine exaltation, destined to guide the Church for generations to come.

*The Bullock/Kimball Document, 1854-1866*¹¹

About two years after plural marriage became official in the LDS church, Thomas Bullock, possibly along with others in the

⁸"Celestial Marriage: A Discourse by Elder Orson Pratt, Delivered in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 29, 1852," Reported by G. D. Watt, *Journal of Discourses* 1: 53-66, [LINK](#).

⁹Brigham Young speech, Aug. 29, 1852, CR 100 317, CHL, [LINK](#).

¹⁰Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Bernhard Giesen, "The construction of collective identity," *European Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 1, (1995): 81.

¹¹Bullock/Kimball Document: "Names of Relief Society Members circa 1854," MS 3157, CHL, [LINK](#). The document describes itself as follows: "The names in pencil added by Pres. Kimball Sep. 14, 1866 in presence of Geo A. & Joseph F. Smith & R. L. Campbell. The other names in Thomas Bullocks hand writing were got up in the Historians office in early times (1854 till 1860)."

Historical Department, began to “get up” a list of female names. Along its side, the document was labeled “Female Relief Society 1844,” disguising its true character as the earliest institutional attempt to make a complete list of Joseph Smith’s plural wives. Twenty-three names written in Bullock’s handwriting were among the women sealed to Joseph Smith posthumously in Nauvoo. Later, ten more names were added to the list, many by Heber C. Kimball in 1866. Others who were present when Heber made the final additions were Joseph F. Smith, George A. Smith, and Robert L. Campbell. These men were all active in the Church Historian’s office and would have had access to early records of the church. It does not seem to be the case, however, that they used early records to help them compile the list. For example, sealing records from the Nauvoo Temple might have been a good source for someone wishing to make a list of plural wives of Joseph. The Bullock/Kimball document does not appear to correlate well with these temple records.¹² The list would become important to Joseph F. in later years, as he sought to identify women who would testify to having been plural wives of the Church’s first prophet.¹³

Challenges to the Plural Marriage Doctrine

As Church leaders undertook to fortify the institutional foundation of polygamy, they began to face pushback from the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS), who contested the legitimacy of polygamy through journal and newspaper articles, pamphlets, and traveling missionaries. These efforts highlighted the RLDS Church’s firm stance against plural marriage, which they argued was a deviation from Joseph Smith’s original teachings. This intensified the Utah-based Church’s need to solidify its narrative around polygamy as a core doctrine inherited directly from Joseph Smith.¹⁴

¹²See forthcoming paper by Cheryl L. Bruno on the Bullock/Kimball 1854-1866 List of Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives: “Hidden in Plain Sight: A Rediscovered List of Nauvoo Plural Wives.”

¹³There is a high correlation between the 1854-1856 list and the affidavits prepared by Joseph F. Smith.

¹⁴See E. C. Briggs and R. M. Attwood, revised by Joseph Smith and William W. Blair, *Address to the Saints in Utah and California, Polygamy Proven an Abomination by Holy Writ* ([Reorganized] Church of J. C. Of L. D. Saints, 1869), [LINK](#). The pamphlet was first circulated in 1864 and later revised and republished in 1869.

An important moment in this larger effort to establish collective identity occurred during a public meeting in July 1866, when Brigham Young corrected Elder George A. Smith, who had been recounting the history of plural marriage and Hyrum Smith's relationship with the doctrine. As inferred from Young's speech, George claimed that Joseph denied the doctrine during his lifetime¹⁵ and suggested that Hyrum was intended to be Joseph's successor. After George finished speaking, Young intervened, disagreeing with both points. Young presented the Twelve Apostles as the rightful inheritors of Joseph's authority and corrected George by offering his own recollections. According to Young, Hyrum had long suspected that Joseph had received a revelation on plural marriage, but struggled to accept it. Young claimed that after he revealed the full truth of the principle to Hyrum in 1842, Hyrum wept, made a covenant to support Joseph, and thereafter fully embraced the doctrine. This, according to Young, represented a critical turning point in Hyrum's acceptance of polygamy and his loyalty to Joseph.¹⁶

George A. acquiesced to Young's correction, indicating his willingness to align his public statements with the clarification of Joseph and Hyrum's roles in polygamy.¹⁷ This public exchange underscored the importance of maintaining a consistent and unified account, particularly as the Church faced growing opposition to their polygamous practices.

¹⁵While we can't be certain which denials George A. Smith might have been referencing, some possibilities could include Joseph's repeated publications on the canonized Statement on Marriage, in two editions of the Doctrine and Covenants, 1835 and 1844, and twice in the *Times and Seasons*: Sep. 1, 1842, [LINK](#), and Oct. 1, 1842, [LINK](#); Joseph's Q&A in the *Elder's Journal*, Jul. 1838, [LINK](#); Joseph's letter from Liberty Jail on Dec. 16, 1838, [LINK](#); Joseph's letter to the Relief Society in Mar. 1842, [LINK](#); Joseph's statement on Oct. 5, 1843, [LINK](#); Joseph's statement to the Twelve and the High Council on Nov. 25, 1843, [LINK](#); Joseph's discourse on May 26, 1844, pp. 5-8, [LINK](#); and Joseph's remarks to the City Council on Jun. 8 and 10, 1844, [LINK](#).

¹⁶Brigham Young, Oct. 8, 1866 in Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2024, CR 100 912, CHL, [LINK](#). Other sources, including *Saints, Volume 1: The Standard of Truth, 1815-1846* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), have placed the date of Hyrum's acceptance of polygamy as 1843, following his discourse of May 14, 1843, wherein he criticizes polygamy.

¹⁷Historical Department Journal History of the Church, 1866 July-December, [485], CR 100 137, CHL, [LINK](#).

Joseph F. Smith, newly called Apostle on July 1, 1866, was present at the 1866 Conference.¹⁸ As the orphaned son of Hyrum Smith, Joseph F. would have been particularly stricken by Brigham's unflattering portrayal of his father, as excluded from the inner circle of leadership and ineffectual in his preaching. This moment likely galvanized Joseph F.'s desire to redeem his father's reputation, even as he navigated the confines of the Church's established position. Brigham Young's authoritative correction, along with the acquiescence of George A. Smith and the public reading of the plural marriage revelation, set the foundation for the work that Joseph F. would later continue: defending polygamy as central to the doctrine of exaltation and to the legacy of Joseph and Hyrum Smith.

William Clayton Documents

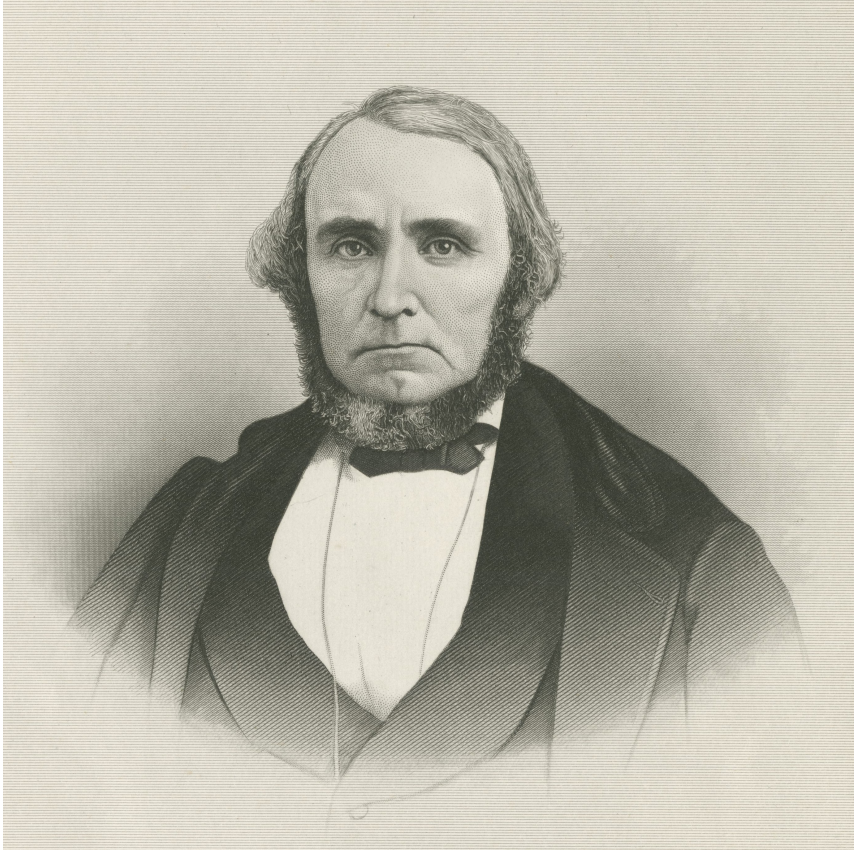
The Church History Library has preserved two nineteenth-century copies of a letter from William Clayton to Madison M. Scott, in which Clayton forcefully defends Joseph Smith's role in initiating plural marriage. This letter became critical in countering the claims of Joseph Smith III and other RLDS leaders, who denied the practice originated with Joseph Smith.

The letter's origins date back to May 1871, when Madison Monroe Scott, a storekeeper and Justice of the Peace in Floyd County, Indiana, first reached out to Brigham Young. Scott described the establishment of a new RLDS congregation of about thirty converts and mentioned specific preachers active in his area. He was deeply concerned about the growing influence of the RLDS ("Josephite") movement in Southern Indiana.¹⁹ Young's secretary replied, naming William Clayton as the scribe to the plural marriage revelation and criticizing Emma for fighting "the principle."²⁰

¹⁸Historical Department Journal History, [485]. Joseph F. was ordained an Apostle on July 1, 1866, but was not sustained a member of the Quorum of the Twelve until the October 1867 conference. At this 1866 conference, he was sustained a member of the High Council.

¹⁹Madison M. Scott Letter, Brigham Young office files, 1832-1878, CR 1234 1, CHL, [LINK](#). Scott was unaffiliated with any of the Mormon restoration factions.

²⁰Reply to Madison M. Scott, Brigham Young Office Files, Letterbook, v. 12, 1870 February 9 - 1872 March 15, CR 1234 1, CHL, [LINK](#).



William Clayton as he would have appeared circa 1871. Engraved portrait collection, circa 1890, PH 327, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT.

William Clayton's Letter to Madison M. Scott (Nov. 11, 1871)²¹

About a month later, on June 23, 1871, Scott turned to William Clayton, seeking clarification on the origins of polygamy. The timing of this letter is significant. On June 25, a local Indiana newspaper reported that the RLDS were building a church in nearby Crawford County, spurred by their success in converting people there and in Clark County.²² Floyd County, where Scott lived, was situated between these two areas, placing him right in the middle of the RLDS religious expansion.

Scott's motivations were as personal as they were theological. A large group of his Campbellite family members were in the process of converting to the RLDS faith, and his paternal uncle was on the cusp of becoming a clergyman and important leader in the Reorganization in Southern Indiana.²³ By writing to Clayton, Scott was likely seeking solid evidence to refute RLDS teachings and influence, hoping to use this information to sway his family and community away from the Josephite faction.²⁴

In his November 11 reply, Clayton reaffirmed that Joseph Smith had indeed introduced plural marriage. He recounted his own role as the scribe who wrote the revelation at Joseph's dictation, underscoring that he was not relying on hearsay but was an eyewitness to the event. The letter expanded upon his earlier, shorter journal entries, providing fuller context and detail. Clayton addressed the destruction of the original copy of the revelation by Emma Smith, but reassured Scott that a copy had been preserved by Bishop Newel K. Whitney, one of Joseph Smith's confidants. This detail was critical, as it supported the claim that the doctrine was preserved despite Emma's opposition. Clayton's letter emphasized the divine nature of the revelation, framing polygamy as essential

²¹William Clayton, Nov. 11, 1871 Letter to Madison M. Scott (copy), JFS affidavit book, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#). See also another copy of the letter written in a different hand, MS 4681, CHL, [LINK](#).

²²"Indiana Items," *St. Joseph Valley Register*, South Bend, IN 26, no. 45 (1871): 2.

²³EMR Book C, 36-37, Mount Eden Branch, Southern Indiana District, org. 5 June 1870, Community of Christ Library and Archives.

²⁴The authors are deeply appreciative of the work of Mary Ann Clements, who was instrumental in locating and profiling Madison M. Scott. Further information on the family's RLDS affiliation was provided by Rachel Killebrew at the Community of Christ Library and Archives.

for eternal salvation. He referenced several women he identified as Joseph Smith's wives, who, as living witnesses, could attest to the truth of the practice.

In the context of RLDS opposition, the letter is particularly significant. By the 1870s, prominent members of the RLDS Church like Joseph Smith III and his brothers Alexander and David Hyrum, had mounted a vigorous proselytizing effort, framing polygamy as a later innovation introduced by Brigham Young. They appealed to theological arguments and offered a version of the faith they claimed was true to Joseph Smith's teachings but without polygamy.²⁵ The RLDS missionaries found receptive audiences among disaffected Mormons in Utah, leading to a wave of conversions that intensified tensions within the Utah church.

Clayton's letter was pivotal not only for individuals like Madison Scott, who sought to protect his family from aligning with what he perceived as a misguided movement, but also for the entire body of Latter-day Saints. Its value extended beyond personal correspondence to serve as a key piece of evidence for affirming the Utah church's doctrinal authority and for countering RLDS incursions.

William Clayton's Affidavit (February 16, 1874)²⁶

William Clayton's 1874 affidavit is a central document in the history of Joseph Smith's plural marriage revelation. Notably, there are two extant copies of the affidavit. Joseph F. Smith wrote the initial draft of the affidavit, with Clayton adding minor corrections in pencil. This process reveals Joseph F.'s significant role in crafting the affidavit and points to his reliance on both Clayton's 1871 letter to Madison M. Scott and his earlier journal. The consistency between the affidavit and the Scott letter, as well as the matching order of events, suggests that Smith used the letter as a framework for the affidavit. Clayton added notary information at the end of Smith's copy, indicating that both men eventually worked together

²⁵See, for example, Briggs and Attwood, *Address to the Saints*. This pamphlet taught that God and the scriptures referred to polygamy as an abomination.

²⁶William Clayton Draft Affidavit, Revelation on Celestial Marriage, Feb. 16, 1874, MS 2673, CHL, [LINK](#) (handwriting of Joseph F. Smith, pencil corrections by William Clayton. See also William Clayton, 1874 Affidavit, Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#) (handwriting of William Clayton, signed and sealed by John T. Caine, notary public).

to formalize Clayton's testimony while ensuring it aligned with the earlier documents.

Clayton made a fair copy of Joseph F.'s draft affidavit, incorporating the pencil corrections he had made and the notary information. This second copy was signed by John T. Caine, Notary Public in the County of Salt Lake, Utah Territory, who affixed his official seal to the document.

The following chart compares William Clayton's letter to Madison M. Scott written November 11, 1871, and Joseph F. Smith's affidavit draft of February 16, 1874. Both emphasize Clayton's authoritative role as a scribe and insider in the polygamy revelation, refuting claims made by Joseph Smith III. While the content of the letter and the affidavit are largely consistent, the affidavit provides additional information.

| Comparison Chart of William Clayton's Letter and Affidavit | | |
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| <p>William Clayton, Nov. 11, 1871 Letter to Madison M. Scott, MS 3423, CHL. LINK</p> | <p>William Clayton Draft Affidavit, Revelation on Celestial Marriage, 1874 February 16, MS 2673, CHL. LINK</p> | <p>Comments</p> |
| <p>Handwriting of William Clayton</p> | <p>Handwriting of Joseph F. Smith; pencil corrections by Clayton; signed by Clayton; notary information and notary signature by Clayton</p> | |
| <p>(Copy) Salt Lake City Nov. 11, 1871 Madison M. Scott, Esqr. Dear Sir:— Your letter of 23rd June last was received by due course of mail , but owing to my being so very closely confined with public duties, which has almost destroyed my health, I have not answered your letter so promptly as is my practice. My health is yet very poor, but I have resigned the office which was bearing so heavy upon me, and am in hopes to regain my usual sound health. Now in regard to the subject matter of your letter, it appears to me the principal topic is what is commonly called polygamy, but which I prefer to call Celestial marriage. As to young Joseph Smith saying that the church here have apostatized; that we have introduced polygamy, denying bitterly that his father ever had a revelation on the subject, that is all mere bosh. I believe he knows better, and I have often felt sorry to learn that the sons of the prophet, should spend their time in contending against a pure and holy principle which their father had his blood shed to establish. They will have a heavy atonement to make when they meet their father in the next world. They are in the hands of God, and my respect for their father will not permit me to say much about the wicked course of his sons.</p> | <p>Revelation on Celestial Marriage In asmuch as it may be interesting to future generations of the members of the Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter Day Saints, to learn something of the first teachings of the principle of plural marriage by President Joseph Smith, the Prophet, Seer, Revelator and Translator of Said church, I will give a short relation of facts which occurred within my personal knowledge, and also matters related to me by President Joseph Smith. I was employed as a clerk in President Joseph Smith's office under Elder Willard Richards, and commenced labor in the office on the 10th day of February 1842. I continued to labor with Elder Richards until he went east to fetch his wife to Nauvoo. After Elder Richards started East I was necessarily thrown constantly into the company of President Smith, having to attend to his public and private business, receiving and recording tithings and donations, attending to land and other matters of business. During this period, I necessarily became well acquainted with Emma Smith the wife of the Prophet Joseph, and also with the children - Julia M. (an adopted daughter) Joseph, Frederick and Alexander, very much of the business being transacted at the residence of the Prophet. On the 7th of October 1842, in presence of Bishop Newel K. Whitney and his wife Elizabeth Ann, President Joseph Smith appointed me Temple Recorder, and also his private clerk,</p> | <p>Background Information In the Scott letter, Clayton is responding to a letter Madison M. Scott wrote him inquiring about polygamy. In the affidavit, Clayton's background as a scribe to Joseph Smith, his intimacy with the family, and his appointment as Temple Recorder and private clerk is established.</p> |

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| | <p>placing all records, books, papers, &c. in my care, and requiring me to take charge of and preserve them, his closing words being, “when I have any Revelations to write you are the one to write them.”</p> | |
| <p><u>Now I say to you, as I am ready to testify to all the world, and on which testimony I am most willing to meet all the Latter-day Saints and all apostates, in time and through all eternity, I did write the Revelation on Celestial marriage given through the Prophet Joseph Smith</u></p> | <p>During this period the Prophet Joseph frequently visited my house in my company, and became well acquainted with my wife Ruth, to whom I had been married five years. One day in the month of February 1843, date not remembered, the Prophet invited me to walk with him during our walk, he said he had learned that there was a sister back in England to whom I was very much attached. I replied there was, but nothing farther than an attachment such as a brother and sister in the church might rightfully entertain for each other. He then said, “why don’t you send for her?” I replied, “in the first place I have no authority to send for her, and if I had, I have not the means to pay expenses.” To this he answered, “I give you authority to send for her, and I will furnish you the means,” which he did. this was the first time the Prophet Joseph talked with me on the subject of plural marriage.</p> <p>He informed me that the doctrine [^]and principle[^] was right in the sight of our heavenly Father, and that it was a doctrine which pertained to celestial order and glory. After giving me lengthy instructions on [^]and information concerning[^] the doctrine of celestial plural marriage, he closed [^]concluded[^] his remarks by the words, “It is your privilege to have all the wives you want.”After this introduction our conversations on the subject of plural marriage were very frequent, and he appeared to take particular pains to inform [^]and instruct[^] me in respect to the principle.</p> | <p>In the Scott letter, Clayton testifies that he wrote the revelation.</p> <p>The affidavit verifies Clayton as a polygamy insider. He had been introduced to it by JS, he was married to a plural wife by JS, he had officiated in marrying JS into plurality, and he knew some of JSs wives. (This last appears—without specifics—later in the Scott letter as well).</p> |

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| | <p>He also informed me that he had other wives <u>living</u> besides his first wife Emma, and in particular gave me to understand that Eliza R. Snow, Louisa Beman, S.P. Sessions and Desdemona C. Fullmer, and others were his lawful wives in the sight of Heaven.</p> <p>On the 27th of April 1843 the Prophet Joseph Smith married to me Margaret Moon for time and Eternity at the residence of Elder Heber C. Kimball. And on the 22nd of July 1843 he married to me according to the order of the church, my first wife Ruth. On the 1st day of May 1843 I officiated in the office of an Elder by marrying Lucy Walker to the Prophet Joseph Smith at his own residence. During this period the Prophet ^Joseph^ took several other wives, amongst the number I well remember, Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Sarah Ann Whitney, Helen Kimball and Flora Woodworth. These all, he acknowledged to me were his lawful, wedded wives, according to the celestial order. His wife Emma was cognizant of the fact of some, if not all, of these being his wives, and she generally treated them very kindly.</p> | |
| <p>on the 12th of July 1843. When the Revelation was written there was no one present except the Prophet Joseph, his brother Hyrum and myself. It was written in the small office upstairs in the rear of the brick store which stood on the banks of the Mississippi river.</p> | <p>In the morning of the 12th of July 1843, Joseph and Hyrum Smith came into the office, in the upper story of the brick store, on the bank of the Mississippi River. They were talking on the subject of plural marriage.</p> | <p>Date of the revelation, given in the small office in the Red Brick Store. Joseph, Hyrum, and Clayton were all present.</p> |
| | <p>Hyrum said to Joseph, "If you will write the Revelation on Celestial marriage I will take, and read it to Emma, and I believe I can convince her of its truth and you will hereafter have peace."</p> <p>Joseph smiled, and remarked, "You do not know Emma as well as I do." Hyrum repeated his opinion and further remarked, "The doctrine is so plain I can convince any reasonable man or woman of its truth,</p> | <p>JFS adds information about Hyrum and how he wanted it to be written so he could convince Emma.</p> |

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| | <p>purity, and heavenly origin.” or words to their effect. Joseph then said, “Well, I will write the Revelation, and we will see.” He then requested me to get paper and prepare to write. Hyrum was ^{was very anxious that} urgently requested Joseph should use ^{to write the revelation by means of} the Urim and Thummim but Joseph ^{in reply} said he did not need to, for he knew the revelation perfectly. ^{from beginning to end}</p> | |
| <p>It took some three hours to write it. Joseph dictated sentence by sentence and I wrote it as he dictated. After the whole was written Joseph requested me to read it slowly and carefully which I did, and he then pronounced it correct.</p> | <p>Joseph and Hyrum then sat down, and Joseph commenced to dictate the Revelation on Celestial marriage, and I wrote it ^{sentence by sentence} as he dictated, after which ^{the whole was written} Joseph asked me to read it ^{through} slowly and carefully, which I did, and he pronounced it correct. He said ^{then remarked} there was much more on the same subject, but what was written was sufficient for the present.</p> | <p>Here the language in the affidavit is taken almost word for word from the Scott letter.</p> |
| <p>The same night a copy was taken by Bishop Whitney, which copy is now here, and which I know and testify is correct. The original was destroyed by Emma Smith.</p> | <p>Hyrum then took the Revelation, to read to Emma. Joseph waited ^{remained with me} in the office until he ^{Hyrum} returned. When Hyrum ^{he} came back, Joseph asked him how he had succeeded. Hyrum replied, that he had never received a more severe talking to in his life, that Emma was very bitter and full of resentment and anger. Joseph quietly remarked, “I told you, you did not know Emma as well as I did.” Joseph then put the Revelation in his pocket and they both left the office.</p> <p>The revelation was read to several of the authorities of the Church during the day. Towards evening Bishop Newel K. Whitney asked Joseph if he had any objections to his taking a copy of the revelation, Joseph replied that he had not, and handed it to him, and ⁱ it was carefully copied the following day by Joseph C. Kingsbury.</p> | <p>JFS adds a longer story about Hyrum returning and telling how Emma gave him a “talking to.”</p> <p>Both accounts mention the copy taken by Bishop Whitney, although JFS’ is longer and adds that Kingsbury was the copyist.</p> <p>Both tell about Emma destroying the original.</p> |

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| | <p>Two or three days after the Revelation was written— Joseph related to me and several others that Emma had teased, and urgently entreated him for the privilege of destroying it, that he became so weary of her teasing, and to get rid of her annoyance, he told her she might destroy it, and she had done so, but he had concented to her wish in this manner, knowing ^to pacify her, realizing^ that he knew the Revelation perfectly, and could rewrite it at any time, if necessary. The copy made by Joseph C. Kingsbury is a true and correct copy of the original in every respect. The copy was carefully preserved by Bishop Whitney, and but few knew of its existence until the temporary location of the Camp of Israel at Winter Quarters. ^on the Missouri river, in 1846^ .</p> | |
| <p>I again testify that the revelation on polygamy was given through the prophet Joseph on the 12th July 1843, and that the prophet Joseph both taught and practised polygamy I do positively know, and bear testimony to the fact. In April 1843 he sealed to me my second wife, my first wife being then living. By my said second wife I had two sons born in Nauvoo. The first one died; the second one is here now and is married. I had the honor to seal one woman to Joseph under his direction. I could name ten or a dozen of his wives who are living now in this Territory, so that for any man to tell me that Joseph did not teach polygamy, he is losing his time, for I know better. It is not hearsay, nor opinion with me, for I positively know of what I speak and I testify to the truth, and shall be willing to meet all opponents on the subject through all eternity. As to the church here having apostatized that is all a mere matter of assertion destitute of truth.</p> | <p>After the Revelation on Celestial marriage was written Joseph continued his instructions privately on the doctrine to myself and others, and during the last year of his life we were scarcely ever together, alone, but he was talking on the subject and explaining that doctrine and principles connected with it. He appeared to enjoy great liberty and freedom in his teachings, and also to find great relief in having a few to whom he could unbosom his feelings on that great and glorious subject. From him I learned that the doctrine of plural and celestial marriage is the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on the earth, and that without obedience to that principle no man can ever attain to the fullness of exaltation in celestial glory.</p> | <p>Both accounts give testimonials on Joseph teaching and practicing plural marriage. The Scott letter mentions “ten or a dozen of his wives,” similar to the affidavit above.</p> |

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| <p>Prest Young and his associates are, and have been, doing every thing they can to carry out the plans and instructions of the prophet Joseph, and so eternity will prove to the condemnation and confusion of all their enemies. Any one that says to the contrary does not know Joseph nor the mission the Lord gave him to fulfil. Polygamy is a Celestial order, the most sacred and holy that was ever revealed from Heaven to man.</p> | | |
| <p>The Revelation of July 12th 1843 says plainly, "to whomsoever this law is revealed they must and shall obey the same, or they shall be damned saith the Lord God." How any man who pretends to believe the bible can fight against polygamy, is a mystery to me. Abraham and Jacob were polygamists. One is called the "father of the faithful." Of the other it is said "<u>In thee and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed;</u>" so that there can be no blessings for the human family only through a polygamist. I do not know where I could get a copy of the revelation or I would send you one. You may rest assured that no man that fights against polygamy will have the privilege of sitting down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of Heaven. I must now close. I could say much on this subject did time allow.</p> | | <p>The letter adds wording from D&C 132. Clayton says he cannot get a copy of the revelation.</p> |
| <p>Truly Yours. Wm Clayton</p> | <p>Salt Lake City. } February 16, 1874 } Wm Clayton</p> | <p>Signature</p> |
| | <p>Territory of Utah } County of Salt Lake } On this sixteenth day of February A.D. 1874, before the undersigned, a Notary Public in and for said County and Territory, personally came Wm Clayton, who being sworn in the form of law, says, that the foregoing statement is true in every particular,</p> | <p>The Notary subscription and signature on the affidavit is in Clayton's hand.</p> |

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| | <p>where the facts are related as coming under his own personal observation, and where the language of others is quoted the exact sentiments, and as near as possible the exact words, are given in every instance. In testimony whereof I have herewith subscribed my name and affixed my Notorial seal, at my office in Salt Lake City, Utah Territory, the day and year aforesaid</p> <p>John T. Caine Notary Public</p> | <p>The fair copy of the affidavit was also written by Clayton, but includes John T. Caine's signature and notary seal.</p> |
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A detailed comparison of both documents demonstrates how the second statement (the February 16, 1874 affidavit) was crafted and expanded from the first (the November 11, 1871 letter).

1. Introducing Polygamy and Establishing Credentials

1871 Letter: William Clayton's letter begins by mentioning his involvement in important public duties but leaves them vague. In addressing claims by Joseph Smith III, Clayton dismisses them as "mere bosh," an expression that indicates his frustration with the challenge to the historical legitimacy of Joseph Smith's teachings and practices regarding polygamy. He states confidently that Joseph Smith both taught and practiced plural marriage.

1874 Affidavit: Joseph F. Smith's affidavit provides a more authoritative and structured narrative than Clayton's letter, emphasizing the preservation of plural marriage's historical truth. Writing in the first person, Joseph F. underscores Clayton's role as Joseph Smith's private clerk, highlighting his proximity to the prophet and intimate knowledge of polygamy's introduction. By presenting Clayton as an authoritative witness, Joseph F. constructs a framework for the doctrine's acceptance and transmission.

While some differences between the two documents stem from their formats—a personal letter versus a sworn affidavit—Joseph F.'s influence is evident in the 1874 affidavit's formal tone, theological grounding, and long-term vision.²⁷ As a church leader, Joseph F. positioned the affidavit to align with doctrinal teachings, contrasting with the urgency and personal frustration in Clayton's letter. The affidavit's structured detail and emphasis on authority reflect Joseph F.'s effort to solidify a compelling historical narrative for future generations, distinguishing it from the less comprehensive and reflective nature of Clayton's earlier correspondence.

2. Clayton's Personal Involvement in Plural Marriage

1871 Letter: Clayton briefly mentions Joseph Smith sealing him to his second wife in April 1843 and that he had two sons with her. He also notes officiating for one of Joseph's plural marriages.

²⁷Joseph F. expressed this concern in his above-cited letter to Orson Pratt. Referring to the affidavits he had collected, he said: "Such testimonies may not appear very important just now: perhaps not while personal witnesses are living. And perhaps I might not live to witness their true value but my children may" (Joseph F. Smith to Orson Pratt, Jul. 19, 1875, CHL).

1874 Affidavit: In Clayton's voice, Joseph F. expands significantly on these events, giving specific particulars. He includes a story about how Clayton was introduced to the principle of plural marriage, with Joseph Smith authorizing and financing his procurement of a potential plural wife from England.²⁸ He records the marriages [sealings] of both his first and second wives under Joseph's hand and describes officiating for the marriage of Lucy Walker to Joseph.

The 1874 affidavit provides much more precise and thorough details than the 1871 letter, not only expanding on Clayton's personal involvement but grounding it in exact dates, locations, and additional marriages. While this could reflect Clayton's desire to offer a fuller account, the expanded affidavit aligns with Joseph F.'s systematic effort at this time to secure reliable, detailed, formal witness testimonies regarding Joseph's involvement in plural marriage. Certainly Joseph F. consulted Clayton's diary, which had long since been turned over to the Church's historical department, as a source of precise dates and details.²⁹ He may also have consulted Clayton directly, though there is no evidence of such a meeting. With a busy schedule and with Clayton's detailed accounts already available, Joseph F. was positioned to draft the affidavit himself, ensuring it aligned with institutional priorities for precision and credibility.

The unusual nature of the story of Joseph authorizing and even financing Clayton to bring a potential wife over to Nauvoo from England points out the complexities Joseph F. faced while crafting the affidavit. Clayton's journal places this conversation on March 9, 1843, yet a later entry on May 31, 1843, records Sarah Crooks arriving in Nauvoo in response to a message received February 12. The timeline discrepancy posed a challenge: if Joseph first instructed Clayton to send for Sarah in March, it would not align with the February correspondence. To resolve this, Joseph F. adjusted the affidavit's wording, having Clayton state that the conversation took place simply "one day in the month of February 1843, date not remembered."³⁰ This subtle revision smoothed over the contradiction, allowing the narrative to fit the established chronology while reinforcing the idea that

²⁸George D. Smith identifies this potential wife as Sarah Crooks (Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 107 n. 38, 556 n. 1). Crooks emigrated to America, but married another man.

²⁹Clayton's journal is used to compile the Manuscript History of the Church as early as October 1845 in Vol. D. See transcript at JSP, notes 224, 230, 234, 239, 242 &c, [LINK](#).

³⁰Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 94, 107.

Joseph introduced Clayton to plural marriage earlier in the year. By prioritizing narrative coherence over strict accuracy, Joseph F. prepared a consistent and persuasive account of Joseph Smith's involvement in Nauvoo polygamy.

3. Expanding the Roles of Hyrum and Emma

1871 Letter: Clayton briefly recounts the writing of Joseph Smith's polygamy revelation on July 12, 1843, noting that only Joseph, Hyrum Smith, and Clayton were present in the upstairs office of the brick store on the Mississippi River. The letter mentions that the revelation was copied by Bishop Newel K. Whitney that night and affirms that the original was destroyed by Emma Smith.

1874 Affidavit: The affidavit narrates how Joseph and Hyrum Smith discussed the doctrine of plural marriage as they came into the office of the red brick store, with Hyrum confidently stating that he could convince Emma of its truth. Hyrum urged Joseph to use the Urim and Thummim to write the revelation, but Joseph declined, saying he knew it well enough. After the revelation was written, Hyrum took it to Emma, while Clayton and Joseph waited in the office. Hyrum returned to report that she reacted with severe anger. Joseph, having anticipated this, commented on Hyrum's lack of understanding of Emma's personality: "I told you, you did not know Emma as well as I did."³¹ The affidavit also recounts how Joseph allowed Emma to destroy the original revelation after persistent pleading, knowing he could rewrite it later. It adds that a copy of the revelation was made by Joseph C. Kingsbury the next day under Bishop Whitney's direction and preserved secretly until 1846 at Winter Quarters.

In comparing William Clayton's 1871 letter and his 1874 affidavit, the differences in Hyrum's role and Emma's portrayal are stark. The letter is concise and does not highlight Hyrum's involvement beyond his presence. The affidavit, however, offers a much more elaborate account, expanding Hyrum's role significantly. Hyrum is portrayed as actively urging Joseph to write the revelation in order to convince Emma of its truth. This expansion of Hyrum's role, depicting him as an advocate for polygamy and a central figure in attempting to bring Emma into the inner polygamy circle, serves multiple purposes. It not only elevates Hyrum's importance in the polygamy narrative but also frames him as a loyal and proactive follower of his brother Joseph. Additionally, the affidavit adds a

³¹William Clayton Draft Affidavit, "Revelation on Celestial Marriage," Feb. 16, 1874.

more dramatic account of Emma's resistance, detailing her anger and the eventual destruction of the original revelation after repeated pleas to Joseph.

A critical factor in understanding these changes is Joseph F.'s influence on the affidavit. As Hyrum's son and a future president of the LDS Church, Joseph F. had a strong personal investment in defending his father's legacy, particularly in response to Brigham Young's 1866 portrayal of Hyrum. In this talk, Young marginalized Hyrum's role in church leadership and the introduction of polygamy, suggesting that Hyrum lacked the same vision and insight as Joseph. This negative portrayal of Hyrum may have motivated Joseph F. to push back against such depictions. Hyrum Smith was a key figure in Nauvoo, serving as Patriarch and as a counselor to Joseph. However, Hyrum's actual role in the introduction and practice of plural marriage has been a matter of some debate. By depicting Hyrum as a devoted defender and promoter of plural marriage, the affidavit aimed to restore Hyrum's image and position him as a crucial figure in the polygamy revelation. This strengthened the position of Joseph F. Smith and LDS leaders in their defense against the claims of RLDS missionaries, protected Hyrum's legacy as a loyal follower of his brother, and reinforced the Smith family's central role in the theological development of the LDS Church, bolstering Joseph F. Smith's own authority.

Stephen C. Taysom, Joseph F. Smith's biographer, notes that "all of the memories that JFS recounts from the Nauvoo period include his father," but that they are "almost certainly more fiction than fact." At best, he suggests, they represent "a memory that he created from some fragmented recollection that reflects his sense of what Nauvoo was all about." Taysom explains, "One senses that JFS's published memories of those years seem far too clear, too crisp and sharp, to be the genuine memories imprinted on a three- or four-year-old mind. The recorded memories themselves are worth considering in detail, however, because they tell us something about what Nauvoo came to mean to JFS as he matured."³² These observations reinforce the notion that Joseph F.'s depiction of Hyrum in the 1874 affidavit was heavily influenced by his desire to promote his father's role in pivotal events.

A notable discrepancy arises when considering Clayton's earlier journal entry from July 12, 1843. In his journal, Clayton recorded that both Joseph and Hyrum took the revelation to Emma. In the 1874 affidavit, Hyrum alone is depicted as delivering the document

³²Stephen C. Taysom, *Like a Fiery Meteor: The Life of Joseph F. Smith* (The University of Utah Press, 2023), 30-32.

to her. This raises questions about the consistency of the later affidavit and whether Clayton was discarding his original version of the story in favor of Joseph F.'s version of events. This evolving account points to the influence of Joseph F., who elevated his father's role by focusing more on Hyrum's actions. Clayton's willingness to participate in this revised version of events could have been motivated by loyalty to the Church and its leadership, or by his hope to be seen as useful or important.³³

In terms of portraying Emma, the shift from the 1871 letter to the 1874 affidavit is significant. The letter is concise and does not emphasize any tension or conflict surrounding Emma's destruction of the polygamy revelation. However, in the 1874 affidavit, her role is much more detailed, with her angry reaction and repeated pleas to destroy the document taking center stage. This not only adds emotional depth to the narrative but casts Emma as an antagonistic force within the household. The dramatic depiction of Emma in the 1874 affidavit, along with Hyrum's expanded role, may reflect an effort to show Joseph and Hyrum as deeply committed to polygamy, despite strong resistance from Emma. By this time, Emma was firmly ensconced in the RLDS tradition, and presenting her as an obstacle helped counter her opposition and influence.

4. Joseph Smith's Plural Wives

1871 Letter: Clayton mentions that he personally sealed one woman to Joseph and insists that he can "name ten or a dozen of his wives who are living now in this Territory," though he does not include any specific names.³⁴

1874 Affidavit: The affidavit gives the exact date Clayton officiated in sealing Lucy Walker to the Prophet. It also mentions the following ten women by name, as plural wives of Joseph: Eliza R. Snow, Louisa Beman, S.P. Sessions, Desdemona C. Fullmer, Lucy Walker, Emily and Eliza Partridge, Sarah Ann Whitney, Helen Kimball, and Flora Woodworth. It adds more specifics about their marriages and Emma's awareness of at least some of them.

There were several sources available to Joseph F. Smith from which he could draw the names of the women. As a prominent Church leader and Church historian, he had access to a variety of historical records, letters, and testimonies. This included William Clayton's journal, portions of which were copied into Joseph F.'s

³³Compare with George A. Smith's similar willingness to concede to Brigham Young's version of events above on p. 5.

³⁴William Clayton, Nov. 11, 1871 Letter to Madison M. Scott.

Affidavit Book such as Clayton's journal entry of May 1, 1843, showing he married Joseph Smith to Lucy Walker "at the temple."³⁵ The journal also strongly suggests a connection between Joseph and Flora Woodworth in August 1843.³⁶ Additionally, Joseph F. had been present when Heber C. Kimball added names to the aforementioned Bullock/Kimball 1854-1866 list of Joseph Smith's plural wives. All the names of Joseph's wives in the Clayton affidavit draft are found in the Bullock/Kimball list.³⁷ That seems to be the primary source Joseph F. used to fill out the "ten or a dozen" names promised in Clayton's 1871 letter and not Clayton's personal experience in Nauvoo. Finally, by 1869, Joseph F. had already collected the affidavits of Eliza and Emily Partridge and Sarah Ann Whitney.³⁸

This foundation would have enabled Joseph F. to compile at least a short list that presented Clayton as a plural marriage "insider" in Nauvoo. Once he completed this draft, he sought William Clayton's input for final validation. Clayton's subsequent pencil corrections do not change any of the details of the marriages. The account thus becomes a record of some of Joseph Smith's marriages that served both Joseph F.'s and Clayton's interests in preserving and defending Joseph Smith's Nauvoo practice of polygamy.

5. Use of Language Found in Other Records

In crafting William Clayton's 1874 affidavit, Joseph F. Smith not only shapes the document's content but does so by integrating specific phrases Hyrum Smith had used in other contexts, thus bringing Hyrum's own voice into the affidavit and reinforcing Hyrum's authority in supporting the polygamy revelation. For instance, Joseph F. draws from Hyrum's known statements about the Urim and Thummim. He writes in the affidavit that Hyrum "was very anxious" and "urgently requested" that Joseph use the Urim and Thummim to write the revelation, but Joseph replied that he didn't need to since he "knew the revelation perfectly...from

³⁵Joseph F. Smith, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book 1, p. 67. The copy was made on August 9, 1869: [LINK](#).

³⁶Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 118-119, under dates of August 23, 26, 28, 29, 1843.

³⁷Bullock/Kimball Document: "Names of Relief Society Members circa 1854."

³⁸See Joseph F. Smith, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book 1, pp. 11-13 (Emily); p. 36 (Sarah Ann), [LINK](#); Book 2, pp. 32-34 (Eliza), [LINK](#).

beginning to end.”³⁹ This detail resonates with earlier records, where Hyrum asked Joseph to “enquire of the Lord through the Urim and Thummim” regarding a revelation.⁴⁰ Joseph F. also adapts Hyrum’s 1844 assurance regarding eternal marriage that he could “make all the world believe it, it is noble and grand,”⁴¹ into a statement about plural marriage: “the doctrine is so plain I can convince any reasonable man or woman of its truth, purity and heavenly origin.”⁴²

6. Clayton’s Testimony

1871 Letter: Clayton concludes his letter by defending polygamy as a sacred, celestial order and dismisses claims that the church had apostatized.

1874 Affidavit: Closing remarks focus on Joseph’s continuing private instruction to Clayton about plural marriage. He reiterates the doctrine’s sacred nature and its necessity for exaltation in the celestial kingdom.

In both documents, Clayton presents polygamy as sacred and tied to the church’s celestial aspirations, but the differences between them display an evolution in how the practice was portrayed. The affidavit expands upon the sacred framing of the revelation and describes Joseph’s ongoing private teachings to Clayton about plural marriage as lasting “until the last year of his life.” This portrayal elevates Joseph’s role as a teacher and prophet, effectively positioning him as a mentor to Clayton on the subject of polygamy. This modification gives the impression of a continuous, direct line of doctrinal authority from Joseph to trusted leaders and witnesses, especially Clayton.

By emphasizing the repeated, private instructions from Joseph to Clayton, the affidavit supports an image of Joseph Smith as fully committed to the doctrine, reinforcing the concept that it was an integral part of his prophetic mission. This framing aligns well with Joseph F. Smith’s own work in the 1870s and 1880s to solidify polygamy’s legitimacy as a divine, foundational doctrine. Under his guidance, documents like Clayton’s affidavit placed polygamy

³⁹William Clayton Draft Affidavit, “Revelation on Celestial Marriage,” Feb. 16, 1874.

⁴⁰Revelation given to Hyrum Smith, *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 19 (1842): 866, [LINK](#).

⁴¹Hyrum Smith Apr. 8, 1844 as recorded by Thomas Bullock, p. 30, CR 100 318, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁴²William Clayton Draft Affidavit, “Revelation on Celestial Marriage,” Feb. 16, 1874.

as a celestial mandate essential to exaltation. This approach not only defended the practice in theological terms but also provided a foundation for institutional memory that could withstand scrutiny and attacks on the doctrine's legitimacy.

7. Notarization

1871 Letter: Clayton's letter to Madison M. Scott, written in his own hand, dated, and signed by him, is a straightforward personal communication reflecting his own account of Joseph Smith's polygamy practices. This letter aligns with other similar documents from Clayton's collection, capturing his individual perspective without any formalized institutional overlay.

1874 Affidavit: The 1874 affidavit, however, is notably more formal and carries the weight of legal authentication, demonstrating that it was crafted for institutional purposes rather than personal correspondence. Two copies of this affidavit exist, both including a notary subscription written by Clayton, indicating its legal authenticity. This subscription, referencing John T. Caine as the notary public, states that Clayton swore under oath that the statements were true to his personal knowledge and accurately represented others' words as closely as possible. In one copy, Caine's name appears in Clayton's hand, but in the second, the affidavit is physically signed and sealed by Caine, lending it a greater sense of official authority and underscoring the legal validity it was intended to communicate.

William Clayton's 1871 letter to Madison M. Scott and his 1874 affidavit differ not only in content but also in the formal presentation and purpose of each document. Known for his efforts to substantiate the Church's polygamy narrative through documentation, Joseph F. Smith may have recognized the value of Clayton's testimony and sought to secure it in a manner that would withstand scrutiny and lend credence to the Church's historical claims. Clayton's part in this attestation cannot be discounted, since both notarial statements are written by him. The care taken to produce two notarized versions suggests a deliberate effort to ensure that this document would serve as a historical artifact in support of the Church's institutional memory and doctrinal legacy on polygamy.

As shown in the above comparison, the evidence that Joseph F. Smith drafted William Clayton's affidavit is compelling. The fact that the original draft is in Joseph F. Smith's handwriting, with Clayton's corrections in pencil, suggests a collaborative process in which Joseph F. Smith shaped the document's core message while Clayton made minor adjustments. This drafting process aligns with

Joseph F. Smith's vested interest in creating a solid institutional narrative around polygamy—a narrative he was actively developing through affidavits and testimonies that reinforced the Church's stance. Further supporting this theory is the notable similarity between Clayton's letter to Madison M. Scott and the affidavit itself; both documents follow a similar structure and even mirror each other in phrasing and themes, which implies that the letter served as a foundation for drafting the affidavit. The affidavit builds on the letter by significantly expanding the details, adding personal anecdotes, contextual conversations, and more precise descriptions of events, especially involving Joseph F.'s father, Hyrum. While the core facts remain consistent, the second version is more elaborate and structured, written with the aim of reinforcing Clayton's credibility and providing a comprehensive record for future generations. Joseph F. Smith's role as the primary author would have allowed him to maintain control over the narrative's language and structure, ensuring it resonated with his doctrinal goals for the Church. Together, the handwriting evidence, contextual pressures, stylistic consistency, and structural parallels between the letter and affidavit strongly demonstrate that Joseph F. Smith was the guiding force behind this affidavit, with Clayton's input serving to add personal credibility rather than altering the foundational message.

Implications

William Clayton's 1874 affidavit, produced near the end of Joseph F. Smith's campaign to gather testimonies on early polygamy, provides valuable insight into the greater collection of affidavits initiated in 1869. These documents, invaluable for understanding the Church's evolving polygamy narrative, demand careful analysis. Clayton's testimony, situated within a deliberate effort to document and defend the practice's origins, illustrates how personal memory was curated to align with institutional priorities. This underscores the need to interpret the entire set of affidavits not only as records of historical events but also as reflections of the creators' narrative goals. The following examples offer a starting point for examining how memory and documentation intersected during this period.

Streamlined Drafting Process

The drafting of William Clayton's 1874 affidavit demonstrates an organizational strategy that prioritized efficiency and consistency in addressing challenges to the Church's narrative on polygamy. By



Joseph F. Smith circa 1873. Joseph F. Smith Family Photograph Collection, PH 7442, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT

employing a pre-drafted version of Clayton's testimony, Joseph F. Smith minimized the time and effort required to produce a legally sound and notarized document. Although Clayton, a skilled scribe, was fully capable of writing the affidavit himself, his role was largely limited to reviewing and approving the text. While this helped produce a polished affidavit quickly, it also reflects an institutional emphasis on procedural efficiency, rather than on fostering deep, personal engagement with the content of the testimony.

This method was not unique to Clayton's affidavit. Joseph F.'s wider efforts to corroborate Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage relied on a similar process of drafting and standardization. Sylvia Sessions (Lyons)'s affidavit, for example, is notable. The document was created using a boilerplate configuration, with key details such as the date and signature left blank, indicating where missing information was to be added.⁴³ The structure seen in Lyons' affidavit and others suggests that a pre-existing framework was used, allowing for quick adaptation to each witness. This approach was valuable in an era of slow communication and travel, allowing the Church to rapidly respond to pressures, including anti-polygamy legislation and opposition from the RLDS Church, with consistent and efficient testimonies. It also ensured alignment with Church goals, even for witnesses who lacked the rhetorical skill to articulate their testimonies independently. However, the use of templates raises questions about how much these affidavits reflect the true voices of the signatories, as editorial control may have influenced the personal nuances of their statements.

Incorporation of Important Nauvoo Voices

Joseph F. Smith's efforts to solidify the Church's polygamy narrative centered on the inclusion of testimonies from prominent Nauvoo-era figures, whose reputations and connections to Joseph Smith lent credibility and weight to their statements. Among these, William Clayton's 1874 affidavit stands out as a cornerstone of this campaign. Clayton's role as Joseph Smith's scribe gave his testimony an air of authenticity, underscoring the claim that polygamy originated with Joseph Smith. Joseph F. capitalized on Clayton's long-standing loyalty to Brigham Young's leadership and his impeccable reputation within the Church, ensuring his testimony would resonate both within and beyond the Mormon community. Testimonies like Clayton's provided a defensive shield against

⁴³Joseph F. Smith, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book 1, p. 62, [LINK](#).

accusations that polygamy was a later innovation introduced by Brigham Young.

This strategy extended beyond Clayton to other trusted voices, such as Eliza R. Snow, whose spiritual and doctrinal authority made her a key contributor to the polygamy narrative. As a prominent leader in the Relief Society and a respected theologian, Snow brought institutional weight to her affidavit, which affirmed her sealing to Joseph Smith. Snow was a key proponent of the principle of celestial marriage, making her testimony particularly persuasive to the broader community. Her testimony reinforced the Church's portrayal of polygamy as a divinely revealed doctrine essential to the restoration of the gospel.

Yet Snow's curated affidavit, which utilizes the boilerplate template, and only briefly states that she was "married or sealed to Joseph Smith" by Brigham Young, raises questions due to its lack of personal details.⁴⁴ This vagueness could reflect several factors: Snow may have been aligning with the institutional narrative that emphasized Joseph Smith as the initiator of polygamy, avoiding personal complexities to fit the official story. Joseph F. may also have eschewed the use of specific experiences in the interest of collecting succinct institutional confirmation of Joseph's polygamy.

Snow's testimony reinforced a patriarchal and hierarchical narrative in which women's voices were often used to justify or support the authority of male leaders like Brigham Young and the Council of the Twelve. The disadvantage of selectively curating historical testimony in this way is that it risks distorting the full complexity of Mormon history and limiting the diversity of voices that contribute to the narrative. By elevating privileged and affluent women like Snow to provide an official defense of plural marriage, Joseph F. risked marginalizing the voices of other women who were less advantaged, had different experiences, or who were not inclined to publicly support the principle. Understanding the dynamics of authority and representation in Mormon history requires analyzing how certain voices are preserved in historical memory while others are excluded.

Correlated Consistency and Standardization

The alignment of William Clayton's 1874 affidavit with earlier documents, such as his 1871 letter to Madison Scott, was part of a strategy to create uniformity in the historical record of polygamy's origins. By carefully coordinating these testimonies, Joseph F.

⁴⁴See Joseph F. Smith, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book 1, p. 25, [LINK](#).

Smith ensured that each account supported the same version of events, presenting a consistent and coherent history of the practice. Clayton's affidavit, for example, smoothed language and details from his earlier letter, reinforcing the authority of the Church's version of events and minimizing the risk of contradictory or diverging accounts.

This strategy of consistency helped shield the Church from external criticism and legal challenges, as it presented a corroborated set of accounts supporting the idea that polygamy was a divinely inspired doctrine. The use of consistent phrasing, such as the term "married or sealed," which appears in the 1869 affidavits of Joseph Smith's plural wives, further minimized discrepancies by creating a broad umbrella under which a range of marital behaviors could be included.⁴⁵ This phrasing allowed for the inclusion of various types of relationships, from traditional marriages to spiritual sealings, under the same terminology, helping to harmonize different testimonies. However, the drive for uniformity also meant that individuals' experiences with polygamy were simplified to fit into a pre-established pattern, erasing the scope of perspectives that could have enriched the historical understanding of early Mormon practices.

Questions of Authorship and Agency

The question of authorship and agency in the creation of affidavits is deeply significant, as it raises ethical issues regarding William Clayton and the women who signed the 1869 affidavits. Although Clayton's 1874 affidavit is presented as his personal testimony, it is clear that his part in producing it was marked by institutional expectations. Clayton was certainly influential in the development of the polygamy doctrine, yet Joseph F.'s hands-on role raises questions about how much of the final account reflects Clayton's own voice. The focus on aligning the affidavit with previously established accounts suggests that while Clayton's

⁴⁵This wording appears on the affidavits of Joseph Bates Noble, Zina D. Huntington Young, Presendia Lathrop Huntington Kimball, Ruth Vose Sayers, Emily Dow Partridge Young, Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde, Rhoda Richards Smith, Dimick B. Huntington, Fanny Maria Huntington, Malissa Lott Willes, Eliza Roxcy Snow Smith, Desdemona Fullmer Smith, Mercy R. Thompson, Sarah Ann Kimball, Thomas Grover, Mary Ann Young, Lucy Ann D. Young, Augusta Adams Young, John Pack, Cylvia (sic) Lyon (unfinished), Elizabeth B. Pratt, Mary Ellen Abel Kimball, Lucy W. Kimball, Elizabeth Ann Whitney, Elvira A. C. Holmes, Sarah Perry Peak Kimball, Benjamin F. Johnson, Clara Decker Young, Eliza Maria Partridge Lyman, Martha McBride Kimball, Mary Ann Pratt, Adeline Brooks Andrus Benson, and Pamela Andrus Benson.

participation was pivotal, the content may have been guided by external forces that prioritized doctrinal needs over individuality.

This dynamic is also apparent in the 1869 affidavits of the women who were sealed to Joseph Smith. For instance, the signatures on both Series 1 and Series 2 versions of Elizabeth Ann Whitney's and Sarah Ann Whitney Kimball's statement dated August 13, 1869, regarding Joseph Smith's letter to the Whitneys are in Joseph F. Smith's handwriting.⁴⁶ They contrast sharply with the signatures on Sarah Ann's affidavit dated June 19, 1869 and Elizabeth Ann's affidavit of August 30, 1869,⁴⁷ raising questions about how active these women were in producing these documents. Moreover, contradictions within these records further complicate their reliability. Elizabeth Ann Whitney's affidavit places her daughter Sarah's marriage to Joseph Smith before the revelation recorded in Section 132 of the Doctrine and Covenants, whereas her memoir, "A Leaf from an Autobiography," produced in 1878-1879, situates the marriage after the revelation was written.⁴⁸ Such discrepancies suggest that the affidavits may not have strictly adhered to personal recollections.

Even when women appeared to participate, their agency was often constrained. For example, Patty Sessions requested her statement remain private, signaling discomfort with the process and the potential for risk or personal embarrassment.⁴⁹ This indicates a tension between the institutional push for a cohesive polygamy narrative and women's desire to control their personal stories. Meanwhile, women like Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner may have embraced their roles as plural wives to secure social or financial advantages, demonstrating a spectrum of responses to institutional demands.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Joseph Smith letter to Newel and Elizabeth Ann Whitney, Book number 2, 1870, 1903, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁴⁷ Sarah Ann Kimball affidavit, Jun. 19, 1869, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 1869, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#); Elizabeth Ann Whitney affidavit, Aug. 30, 1869, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 1869, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁴⁸ [Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney], "A Leaf from an Autobiography," *Woman's Exponent* 7, no. 14 (1878): 1, [LINK](#).

⁴⁹ Patty Sessions statement, Jun. 1867, Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, 1869-1915, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵⁰ Multiple letters were sent to church presidents requesting financial assistance based on Mary's status as one of Joseph's wives. See Mary E. Lightner letter to John Taylor, May 18, 1886, Vault MSS 363, Mary E. Lightner papers, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, [LINK](#); "Letter from Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Oct. 7, 1887," p. 2, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, [LINK](#); "Letter from Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Oct. 9, 1887," p. 1, The Wilford Woodruff Papers, [LINK](#).

Compounding these issues is the patriarchal culture of early Utah, which emphasized obedience to male leaders and husbands. Most women who signed affidavits were married to church leaders in a climate where they were taught “to honor and obey her husband and to look to him as her lord and master,” with the understanding that, “it was his right to command. It was my duty to obey.”⁵¹ These dynamics suggest that the affidavits reveal more about the socio-political climate of their creation than the historical events they purport to document.

Legal and Historical Functions

Joseph F. Smith’s use of notarized legal documents was an innovative attempt to lend formality and credibility to the polygamy narrative. Employed in the historian’s office and having copied a Nauvoo affidavit two years earlier, Joseph F. was clearly familiar with the Nauvoo-era affidavits and seems to have drawn on that tradition, though with key differences.⁵² Previously, straightforward witness statements, like those in the preface to the Book of Mormon or published in the *Times and Seasons* on Oct. 1, 1842, sufficed for non-legal purposes. Formal affidavits, on the other hand, were typically intended for actual legal use.⁵³

Clayton’s affidavit embedded theological and historical claims in the form of a legal document. The primary function of the affidavit was to reinforce the idea that polygamy was divinely mandated and historically rooted, and to counter assertions that it was a later innovation. Strict adherence to legal formalities was a lower priority. Clayton included a notary’s signature and seal to project legal credibility, but he undermined the independence typically expected of such certifications by writing the notary’s subscription himself. Additionally, his initialing of minor corrections in the document suggests a superficial compliance with legal details rather than a deeper commitment to the principles of legal integrity.

In the Nauvoo era, affidavits were crafted to demonstrate that polygamy did not originate with Joseph Smith, while Joseph F.’s affidavits aimed to prove the opposite. While Nauvoo-era affidavits

⁵¹Annie Clark Tanner, *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography of Annie Clark Tanner* (Tanner Trust Fund, University of Utah Library, 1991), 61, 169, [LINK](#).

⁵²Affidavit from William Daniels, Jul. 4, 1844, Joseph F. Smith Copy, p. 1, JSP, [LINK](#). While affidavits were at times collected in Nauvoo, they were generally utilized by church leaders to deny charges of polygamy, and in regard to the frequent court battles that involved Joseph Smith.

⁵³For example, affidavits collected in 1842 regarding John Bennett were published in August: [LINK](#), and intended for a legal case in September: [LINK](#).

generally followed legal protocols to ensure admissibility in court, the later polygamy affidavits often failed to meet legal standards. For instance, David Fullmer's affidavit of June 15, 1869, though signed and notarized, included erased names with one penciled back in afterward.⁵⁴ Similarly, Rhoda Richards' affidavit dated May 1, 1869, had the surname "Smith" added after the fact to three instances of her name, without initials indicating who made the additions.⁵⁵ Sarah Perry Peak Kimball's affidavit of September 7, 1869, omitted the date of her marriage or sealing to Heber C. Kimball.⁵⁶ These and numerous similar oversights suggest that these affidavits were intended more to convey authority than to serve a legal function, which may explain their absence in the Temple Lot case decades later.⁵⁷

Joseph F. Smith may have believed the affidavits would strengthen the church's position against challenges from the RLDS church. Though they did not directly originate as a response to David and Alexander Smith's 1869 mission to Utah, Joseph F. referred to them in a meeting with his cousins on August 8, 1869, describing them as evidence from twelve women who were "spiritual wives" of Joseph Smith.⁵⁸ However, this strategy was ineffective. Alexander dismissed the affidavits as "weapons they expect to use against us," predicting that the effort would backfire.⁵⁹ Joseph F. later published seven of the affidavits, including those of Eliza and

⁵⁴David Fullmer affidavit, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 1869, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵⁵Rhoda Richards affidavit, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 1869, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵⁶Sara Perry Peake Kimball affidavit, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 1869, MS 3423, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵⁷The only mentions of any of the Joseph F. Smith affidavits in the Temple Lot case appear to be Lucy Walker's reference to Leonard Soby's affidavit and William Clayton's affidavit during Emily Partridge's cross examination. Both references came from the compiled church history and not from the body of affidavits.

⁵⁸"The Mormon Fermentation," *The Evening Telegraph*, Philadelphia, PA, 10, no. 50 (1869): 7, [LINK](#). These were: Presindia Huntington Kimball, Ruth Vose Sayers, Emily D. Partridge, Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde, Rhoda Richards, May 1, 1869; Zina D. Huntington Young, May 18, 1869; Malissa Lott Willes May 20, 1869, Eliza R. Snow, Jun. 7, 1869; Desdemona Fullmer, Jun. 17, 1869; Sarah Ann Whitney Kimball, Jun. 19, 1869; Sylvia Session Lyon, and Vienna Jacques, Jul. 20, 1869, unfinished and unsigned. Joseph F. also claimed that he had the evidence of "hundreds" of men, when by this time he had only collected seven men's affidavits.

⁵⁹Alexander Smith letter to Joseph Smith III, Aug. 3, 1869, *The True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 16, no. 5 (1869): 151, [LINK](#).

Emily Partridge, and a statement by Eliza R. Snow, in response to Emma Smith's denial of polygamy shortly before her death.⁶⁰

Ultimately, Joseph F.'s affidavits were a hybrid effort to adapt legal forms to religious purposes. This perspective warrants further reevaluation as more rigorous research on the 1869 affidavits continues.

Collective Memory

Clayton's 1874 affidavit is not only a personal recollection but also a key element in forming a communal vision of Mormon polygamy's origins. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has observed that institutions function by establishing frameworks that privilege certain memories while excluding others.⁶¹ Clayton's affidavit demonstrates this process by integrating his voice into the larger story of the group. Its value as a historical document lies not only in its content but also in what it reveals about the priorities and pressures shaping collective memory at the time of its creation. It also invites deeper inquiry into how such practices influence our understanding of religious authority, doctrinal evolution, and historical truth.

At times, creating institutional memory required crafting narratives that unified and protected the community, even if doing so introduced historical inconsistencies. For example, Thomas Grover's affidavit claimed Hyrum Smith married him to plural wives, Caroline Whiting and Caroline Hubbard, in August 1843. However, records show Whiting passed away in 1840, and Grover married Hubbard in 1841, making both marriages monogamous.⁶² Furthermore, the affidavit's signature does not appear to match other examples of Grover's handwriting, raising questions about its authenticity.⁶³

This tension between personal truth and collective memory reflects a struggle to balance literal accuracy with the perceived moral imperative of protecting the community and advancing its mission. By 1869, the belief that safeguarding the kingdom of

⁶⁰Joseph F. Smith, "Joseph the Seer's Plural Marriages," *Deseret News* 28, no. 38 (1879): 12, [LINK](#). See also "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saint's Herald* 26, no. 19 (1879): 289, [LINK](#).

⁶¹Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse University Press, 1986).

⁶²Thomas Grover affidavit: [LINK](#); Joel P. Grover, *Ancestry and Genealogy of Thomas Grover, Utah Pioneer* (Los Angeles, n.p., 1959), 69, [LINK](#); see also Loren C. Dunn, et. al., *Old Nauvoo Burial Ground* (Nauvoo, IL: Nauvoo Restoration, Inc., 1990), 15, [LINK](#). The authors wish to thank Jeremy Hoop for this observation.

⁶³Example of Thomas Grover's signature: [LINK](#). Compare to signature on the affidavit: [LINK](#).

God was paramount had become deeply ingrained. This context helps modern historians interpret Joseph F. Smith's role in shaping collective memory through his series of polygamy affidavits and testimonies. Decades later, after the Church officially disavowed plural marriages but continued to sanction and perform them, this struggle persisted. In 1904, Joseph F. disingenuously testified before Congress that "there have been no plural marriages" with the knowledge or consent of any Church leader anywhere on earth.⁶⁴

Conclusion and Caution

As shown in the above examples, Joseph F. Smith's development of a polygamy narrative in the Church can be understood as an effort to create a collective identity around plural marriage, continuing the work initiated by Brigham Young. This endeavor reinforced both a shared social reality and the institutional memory of the early Church. Through affidavits like those from William Clayton, Joseph F. crafted a narrative that connected members to polygamy as one of the founding tenets of the faith, strengthening solidarity within the Church. Experts on collective memory suggest that institutional memory is strongly influenced by crafted narratives, which over time become deeply embedded in a group's perception of its history, values, and mission.⁶⁵ Thus, Joseph F. was not only preserving history but actively creating an institutional memory that would perpetuate plural marriage as a sacred legacy within the collective Mormon identity.

The authors of this article urge historians to exercise caution when using the Joseph F. Smith polygamy affidavits as evidence of historical events, as more work needs to be done to analyze their character. These documents were collected under conditions influenced by specific motivations and social pressures. While in the past they have been treated as firsthand testimonies, they can reflect the perspectives or agendas of those who collected or recorded them, potentially skewing the historical record. Moreover, affidavits taken decades after the events they describe are vulnerable to memory distortion and retrospective reinterpretation. Sociologists

⁶⁴Senate Document No. 486, *Proceedings Before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate in the Matter of the Protests Against the Right of Hon. Reed Smoot, A Senator from the State of Utah, to Hold his Seat*, Vol. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906), 177, [LINK](#).

⁶⁵Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, "Social Memory Studies: From 'Collective Memory' to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices," *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (2019): 123–124.

have observed: “Through acts of social remembering individuals become vulnerable to incorporating details about the past that they did not actually experience. That is, conversations can serve as a mechanism enabling the spread of a memory from one person to another. This process is often referred to as social contagion.”⁶⁶ Joseph F.’s involvement in gathering these documents, while likely sincere, was aimed at constructing a collective identity supportive of plural marriage. Thus, the affidavits may have been selectively curated to emphasize certain accounts while omitting or downplaying discrepancies.

This paper began with an observation by Joseph F. Smith in a letter to Orson Pratt remarking on the scarcity of evidence of the Prophet Joseph Smith’s personal practice of polygamy. Joseph F. told Pratt that he had been obtaining affidavits from as many people as he could find “who received personal instructions or commandment from The Prophet respecting the subject of celestial marriage.”

Joseph F. then pleaded, “If you have anything to add by way of leaving or rather placing your testimony on those records in relation to that very important subject as an individual I would be grateful.” Recognizing Pratt’s contribution to the theological support of plural marriage, Smith went on, saying that “much had been written in support of the Doctrine, bearing upon scriptural and rational evidences, but not a word, except the Revelation itself, showing that The Prophet was the author.”

Joseph F. repeated his request:

If you personally know that he was, I would like to have or see your testimony as a witness on the subject. Such testimonies may not appear very important just now: perhaps not while personal witnesses are living. And perhaps I might not live to witness their true value but my children may. I am in favor of having no vacancies in the foundation walls, but want to see them laid solid, at least so far as the record of facts may be truthfully and consistently made.⁶⁷

He could hardly have made his case more eloquently.

⁶⁶Adam D. Brown, Nicole Kouri, and William Hirst, “Memory’s Malleability: Its Role in Shaping Collective Memory and Social Identity,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 3 (2012): 257.

⁶⁷Joseph F. Smith to Orson Pratt, 19 July 1875.

Within weeks, Pratt answered the letter, responding to other questions, but about polygamy he said nothing. Despite being the foremost writer on the theological defense of polygamy, Pratt pointedly held back from giving a personal witness on the subject of Joseph Smith's involvement in plural marriage.⁶⁸

Joseph F. Smith's polygamy narrative was a labor of faith, an attempt to solidify a legacy in the face of doubt and silence. His plea to Orson Pratt reveals a profound yearning—not just for evidence, but for witnesses to stand firm in preserving a cornerstone of the Church's identity. Yet, Pratt's silence and the constructed nature of the affidavits remind us that history is not always built on certainty; it is shaped by choices, omissions, and the stories we choose to tell.

As historians, we must confront these documents with courage and care, honoring the complexity of the past without becoming captive to its constructions. The power of collective memory is undeniable, but its strength lies not in the unity of a single story, but in the rich, conflicting voices it holds. Joseph F. sought to leave no vacancies in the foundation, but history itself demands room for questions, dissent, and truth in all its untidy forms.

⁶⁸Orson Pratt to Joseph F. Smith, 12 August 1875, in Joseph F. Smith papers, 1854-1918, MS 1325, CHL, [LINK](#).