

We Do Not Doubt Our Mothers Lived It: An In-depth Look Into The Lives Of My Fifteen Polygamous Foremothers And Their Sister-Wives

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German suffragist Louise Otto wrote: “women will discover that they are being forgotten if they forget to think of themselves.”¹ I am an eighth-generation Latter-day Saint, and I see the truth of these words in the female lines and branches of my own family tree. It is to rectify this feminine forgetting that I attempt to give voice to my foremothers, whose lives of faith have been long ignored. As a woman, a granddaughter who holds their DNA in my body, I feel a responsibility to share their stories. To that end, this study relies on family stories surrounding plural marriage as forms of historical evidence in their own right, drawing on them to raise questions about gender, memory, power, and the lived experience of religion in nineteenth-century Mormon polygamy.

My main sources for information about my foremothers are informal family histories, genealogical records, and inherited family stories. Available biographies were often written generations later by descendants who relied on the same inherited narratives and framed their interpretations through their own individual perspectives. Such accounts frequently contain elements of family folklore and must be approached with methodological caution. At the same time, they offer insight into processes of memory formation and

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

¹Louise Otto, *Frauen-Zeitung* 1, no. 1 (April 21, 1849), trans. Thomas Dunlap, reprinted at *German History in Documents and Images*, [LINK](#).

transmission. For example, in most of the writings centering my foremothers, there is no mention of a polygamist marriage. In contrast, biographies of the polygamous men almost always mention how many wives they had. I question the reason for this variation, and wonder if, for the men, Mormon polygamy was a source of pride, but for the women it was a source of emotional conflict, or perhaps even shame.

Most of the life stories I found were written late in life, when reminiscences could become fuzzy and often faulty. I found few personal journals to help me in my research. To reconstruct aspects of these women's lived experience, I have extrapolated using statistics from the U.S. census, birth and death certificates, and other demographic data. Statistics used can be found in Appendix 1. How these foremothers reacted to the circumstances they were in cannot be fully recovered. The absence of women's voices, particularly first wives and young plural wives, is not incidental. These silences reflect both the secrecy required by the practice and the gendered dynamics of record-keeping, authority, and memory in early Mormonism.

Getting to the truth about polygamy is a challenging task. Conflicting statements, retrospective narratives, and the fragmented state of the documentary record complicate efforts to construct a single, coherent account. This study treats such contradictions as historically significant. They reflect the social, legal, and religious pressures that shaped how polygamy was discussed, recorded, and sometimes obscured. Regardless of how polygamy was introduced or justified, my foremothers lived within its structures, and this paper examines how that was accomplished. From Nauvoo, Illinois, to Council Bluffs, Iowa, and from Utah to Mexico to Canada, polygamy's influence has been woven into the everyday lives my ancestors experienced. My approach to their stories is question-driven, examining gaps, inconsistencies, and silences with curiosity. These flaws in the historical record thus become meaningful evidence of how plural marriage was navigated, remembered, and at times deliberately concealed.

Overview of My Family's Involvement

There are six generations of polygamous couples scattered throughout my genealogy. Polygamy was publicly announced in 1852 and publicly discontinued in 1890, but in my family, the first polygamous mother married sometime around 1844 (Lucina Roberts Johnson), and my last polygamous mother (Catherine Aurelia Carling) ended my family's era of polygamy in 1933 (upon her husband's death). So, while the Church officially sanctioned polygamy for only thirty-eight years, polygamous marriages lasted in our family for eighty-nine years.

Probably half of those living in Utah Territory in 1857 experienced life in a polygamous family as a husband, wife, or child at some time during their lives. By 1870, involvement decreased to about 25 percent of the population, and it appears that the percentage continued to decline over the next twenty years leading up to the 1890 Manifesto.² Of my twenty-one forefathers who lived in Utah and were born between 1790-1860, fifteen of them entered into the practice. That is 70 percent of my male ancestors—a much higher ratio than is typical for the Mormon pioneers in general. My fifteen foremothers who married these men shared their husbands with a total of thirty-two other women. Some had only one sister-wife, while others had four or even six sister-wives. In this paper I will place my fifteen direct foremothers' names in **bold font** to distinguish them from their sister-wives.

Polygamy in Nauvoo 1841-1845

“Addressing Benjamin [F. Johnson], he [Joseph Smith] said . . . that except a man and his wife enter into an everlasting covenant and be married for eternity while in this probation by the power and authority of the Holy priesthood they will cease to increase” (William Clayton).³

In 1843, **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron**⁴ was living as a young mother in the small town of Macedonia, Illinois, approximately twenty miles from the bustling city of Nauvoo.⁵ She and

²“Plural Marriage in Utah,” *Church History Topics*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

³Instruction, 16 May 1843, 14, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁴Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron, profile KWJD-NXR, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁵Benjamin Franklin Johnson, *My Life's Review*, (Grandin Book Co., 1997) 83.

Benjamin F. Johnson had been married in a large gathering on Christmas Day in 1841.⁶ Benjamin said of his bride, “**Melissa** in appearance and education, and ease of manner had no equal in the vicinity.”⁷ Four days after their first anniversary, a baby boy was born to their union. Then, two weeks before their second anniversary, a baby girl joined their family, making three memorable celebrations for the family in December. **Melissa** and her husband were good friends of the Prophet Joseph Smith. When Joseph visited the Saints in Macedonia, he often stayed at the Johnson residence. According to Benjamin’s autobiography, it was while Melissa was newly pregnant with her second child that Benjamin learned about polygamy:

About the 1st of April, 1843, the Prophet with some of the twelve and others came to Macedonia to hold a meeting. . . . Early on Sunday morning . . . he began to tell me that the Lord had revealed to him that plural or patriarchal marriage was according to his law; and that the Lord had not revealed it to him but had commanded him to obey it.”⁸

After explaining plural marriage to his sister Almera, Benjamin brought her to Nauvoo to be married as a polygamous wife to Joseph Smith. In hopes of settling their nerves, Joseph’s brother Hyrum shared his sanction of the marriage by testifying to them: “The Lord revealed this to Brother Joseph long ago, and he put it off until the angel of the Lord came to him with a drawn sword and told him that he would be slain if he did not go forth and fulfill this law.”⁹

This conversation with Hyrum, as recorded in Benjamin’s autobiography, is in contradiction to a speech Hyrum gave one month later. According to Levi Richards, on May 14, 1843, Hyrum stated:

There were many that had a great deal to say about the ancient order of things as Solomon & David having many

⁶Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 76

⁷E. Dale LeBaron “Benjamin F. Johnson Friend to the Prophets” (CFI, Springville, UT, 2008), 43.

⁸Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 83.

⁹Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 85.

wives & concubines—but its an abomination in the sight of God—If an angel from heaven should come & preach such doctrine would be sure to see his cloven foot & cloud of blackness over his head,—though his garments might shine as white as snow—A ^\man/ might have one wife,— concubines he should have none.¹⁰

Did Hyrum testify to Almera and Benjamin in April that Joseph saw an angel with a sword, only to then preach against such angels in May? The contradictory recollection offered decades later shows the instability of retrospective memory and the ways later Church teachings shaped earlier recollections. They serve as evidence of how plural marriage narratives were constructed and passed on over time.

Benjamin also shared details in his autobiography about his own sealing experience. Benjamin wrote that, sometime later, Joseph Smith visited his house and

asked me for my youngest sister, Esther M. I told him she was promised in marriage to my wife’s brother. He said, “Well, let them marry, for it will all come right.” The orphan girl—Mary Ann Hale—that my mother had raised from a child, was now living with us, of nearly the same age as my sister, and I asked him if he would not like her, as well as Almira [sic]. He said “No, but she is for you. You keep her and take her for your wife, and you will be blessed.” This seemed like hurrying up my blessings pretty fast, but the spirit of it came upon me, and from that hour I thought of her as a wife that the Lord had given me.¹¹

Mary Ann Hale¹² had come to stay in the Johnson home sometime before the birth of **Melissa**’s second Christmas baby and would have been sixteen years old at this time. The record preserves no statement from Mary Ann Hale herself. Her voice is absent, and her experience comes only through Benjamin’s later account. This limits what can be said about her perspective.

¹⁰Levi Richards, Journal, May 14, 1843, MS 1284, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, hereafter CHL, [LINK](#).

¹¹Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 85.

¹²Mary Ann Hale, profile KWJP-3D3, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

We do not know the date upon which Benjamin began “from that very hour” to think of Mary Ann as his wife. Did Benjamin simply announce after returning home that evening that they were to be husband and wife? They were, after all, already living in the same home. What were the feelings of first-wife **Melissa** on the subject? It’s possible that Benjamin told **Melissa** about polygamy in April and that **Melissa** then asked Joseph personally about the doctrine in May. Joseph Smith’s journal, written by scribe William Clayton, records that on May 16, 1843, “President Joseph [Smith] and I went to B[enjamin] F. Johnson’s to sleep. Before we retired, the President gave Brother Johnson and his wife some instructions on the priesthood.”¹³

Benjamin continued in his autobiography, “The Prophet had sealed to me my first and had given to me a second to be my wife.”¹⁴ Benjamin’s words are similar in a 1903 letter to Anthon Lund, where he stated that on May 17, 1843, Joseph Smith “sealed to me my first wife and he gave to me to be my [plural] wife, a young orphan girl then living with us.”¹⁵ Initially, I interpreted this to mean that Mary Ann and **Melissa** were both sealed to Benjamin on May 17, 1843. Reading more carefully, why did Benjamin describe the event as being “sealed” to his first wife but only “given” to him his second wife? What is the difference in meaning? It appears to have been carefully chosen by Benjamin, as he uses the same wording in both his autobiography and letter. Was there a ceremony of some kind on May 17 with Mary Ann? Why was Mary Ann not sealed at the same time, since Benjamin had already stated that “from that hour I thought of her as a wife that the Lord had given me.” Benjamin later wrote in his autobiography: “On November 14th [1844] Mary Ann Hale, given to me by the Prophet, was sealed to me as a plural wife by father John Smith, as directed by President Brigham Young.”¹⁶ This sealing occurred four months after Joseph’s martyrdom and eighteen months after whatever words Joseph Smith had formally stated. Additional evidence can be found in a legal statement written by Benjamin in 1887 to the judge in Arizona in

¹³George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Signature Books in association with Smith Research Associates, 1995), 102, [LINK](#).

¹⁴Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 86.

¹⁵Benjamin F. Johnson to President Anthon H. Lund, May 12, 1903, CR 100 394, CHL, [LINK](#).

¹⁶Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 92.

a plea for justice and personal liberty regarding living polygamy. It stated: “As early as 1844, with the full consent of my first wife, was married to my first plural wife.”¹⁷ The terminology Benjamin Johnson employs—contrasting being “sealed” to a first wife with having a second person “given” to him to be his wife—invites closer examination of how agency, consent, and marital legitimacy were conceptualized in early Nauvoo plural marriages. How might ambiguity in terminology affect interpretations of whether a union had prophetic sanction? In what ways were these unions socially and ritually differentiated from formally recognized marriages?

Regardless of when the union occurred, it seems that Mary Ann went along with it reluctantly. A grandchild of Mary Ann’s wrote a memoir that said, “In obedience to our Prophet, Mary Ann gave up her sweetheart to whom she was engaged and married B. F. Johnson.”¹⁸ How can the displacement of prior romantic attachments within early Nauvoo plural marriage be reconciled? Did Mary Ann feel obligated because the Johnsons had taken her in? How much did dependency in relationships shape the conditions of consent for young women, and how might this complicate interpretations of agency in plural marriage? This issue will become even more important as our investigation continues.

Another of my foremothers who is said to have contracted a polygamous marriage during Joseph’s lifetime was **Lucina Roberts Johnson**.¹⁹ **Lucina** lost her first husband and two of her children to cholera while traveling to Kirtland to be with the Saints. How she got along during that time as a widowed mother of small children we do not know. “In 1842,” family records state, “thirty-four-year-old **Lucina** married for the second time—out of desperation—” sixty-three-year-old Reynolds Cahoon, a prominent Latter-day Saint man who already had one wife.²⁰ Of this marriage, a family member wrote: “She was confronted about polygamy

¹⁷Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 303.

¹⁸“Mary Ann Hale,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁹Lucina Roberts Johnson, profile KWJD-J9K, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

²⁰Myron John Dye, Jr., “History and Times of Lucina Roberts Johnston,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

within a year of her marriage to Reynolds at a pub in Nauvoo and flatly denied that she was Reynolds's wife."²¹

Did the marriage actually happen in 1842 as the story claims? If so, how can its timing be reconciled with the following document, signed by Reynold's first wife, Thirza Stiles²² on October first of the same year?

We, the undersigned members of the ladies' relief society, and married females do certify and declare that we know of no system of marriage being practised in the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints save the one contained in the Book of Doctrine and Covenants, and we give this certificate to the public to show that J. C. Bennett's "secret wife system" is a disclosure of his own make.²³

The system of marriage written in the Doctrine and Covenants at that time was monogamy.²⁴

The timing of this marriage is further complicated by historian Gary Bergera's finding that "evidence for Reynolds Cahoon's early plural marriage apparently exists only in Cahoon family history." Bergera also wrote, "**Lucina** evidently bore Cahoon a daughter, named Lucina Johnson Cahoon, about 1843, who died shortly after birth."²⁵ The usage of "evidently" is telling. Family records for this baby note only the year of birth, 1843, and that she "died as a child."²⁶ Did this child only exist in family lore in an effort by descendants to prove that Reynolds was one of the first men polygamously married in the early Church? Were these early marriages seen as a badge of honor?

²¹Doug Cahoon, "could not live happily together..." *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

²²Thirza Stiles, profile KWVQ-NZB, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

²³*Times and Seasons*, 1 October 1842, 940, The Joseph Smith Papers (hereafter JSP), [LINK](#).

²⁴Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, 251, JSP, [LINK](#): "Inasmuch as this church of Christ has been reproached with the crime of fornication, and polygamy: we declare that we believe, that one man should have one wife; and one woman, but one husband, except in case of death, when either is at liberty to marry again."

²⁵Gary James Bergera, "Identifying the Earliest Mormon Polygamists, 1841-44," *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 38, no. 3 (2005): 6, [LINK](#).

²⁶Stella Cahoon Shurtleff and Brent Farrington Cahoon, comps. and eds., *Reynolds Cahoon and His Stalwart Sons* (n.p., 1960), 78, [LINK](#); "Nauvoo Records Lucina Roberts," *Family Search Memories*, [LINK](#).

Lucina and Reynolds certainly were married at some point, but the date may not have been as early as family stories place it. The couple did have a documented child named Rais Call who was born on October 13, 1845 and grew to adulthood.²⁷ Several months later, Nauvoo Temple records show a sealing record for **Lucina** and Reynolds on January 16, 1846.²⁸

Reynolds was also sealed to Mary Hildrath (or Atherton) on this same date.²⁹ Little else is known of her, however, and they had no children together.

Important questions arise as the Nauvoo-era marriages of the Johnsons and the Cahoons are studied. In what ways do inconsistencies within individual accounts complicate claims that specific plural marriages were conducted under Joseph Smith's direction? To what extent do later affidavits and reminiscences reliably reflect Joseph Smith's involvement in early Mormon plural marriage?

The Trek Westward 1847–1849

*Over the winding trail forward we go.
Westward ho, Westward ho!
The dangers are many; the wagons are slow.
Westward ho, Westward ho! (Miriam H. Kirkell)³⁰*

Of the forty-seven women who intertwined their lives together polygamously into my ancestral family units, thirty-six of them crossed the plains to Utah, some in better conditions than others. **Elizabeth Stalcup**³¹ and her family crossed in wagons with little trouble. It took them only sixty-three days to make the trek. They arrived in the Salt Lake Valley with six wagons and nearly \$600 cash that had been carefully hidden beneath a false bottom in a flour barrel. Others, like **Elizabeth's** future sister-wife,

²⁷Rais Bell Casson Reynolds Cahoon, profile KWCT-H97, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

²⁸Lisle G. Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Anointings, and Adoptions* (Smith-Peterson Foundation, 2006), 47, [LINK](#).

²⁹Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings*, 48.

³⁰Miriam H. Kirkell (words) and Marcia Davidson (music), "Westward Ho!" *Children's Songbook* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989), [LINK](#).

³¹Elizabeth Stalcup, profile KWVS-SVM, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

twenty-six-year-old Ann Emmett,³² crossed with handcarts and suffered great deprivations. It took Ann's company 107 days to arrive. In addition to the physical struggles, polygamy added complexity and stress to the emigration journey.

After marrying Mary Ann Hale polygamously sometime around 1844, Benjamin Johnson added another wife, Clarinda Gleason,³³ to his growing family toward the end of 1845. **Melissa**, the first wife, welcomed Clarinda into her home, but Benjamin wrote: "Here my real family troubles commenced. The third wife was much older than the second, and was of broad experience and capability. She was unwilling to be second to the younger, and was not satisfied with her proper place, and there was now discord in the family circle."³⁴ The family left Nauvoo and stopped in Bonaparte, Iowa. It was during this time that Benjamin writes, "My wife, Clarinda, had become dissatisfied and had gone on with an advancing company."³⁵ In a biographical sketch about third wife Clarinda Gleason, written by her daughter, we learn a different side to the story:

Before reaching Winter Quarters, B. F. Johnson lagged behind and let Mother travel on with the company they had started with. . . . Mr. B. F. Johnson had decided that he wanted another wife and continued to stay behind to do the courting. . . . On the 15th of January 1847, her first child was born while she was still living in her wagon. . . . Early in the spring of 1848 Mother traveled on with one of the companies to Salt Lake City and never saw B. F. Johnson from the time he first lagged behind until long after her arrival in Utah. . . . Mother had become alienated from her husband on account of his conduct. She laid her case before President Brigham Young. Johnson at first refused to sign a divorce and

³²Ann Emmett, profile KWHH-PBP, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

³³Flora Clarinda Gleason, profile KWJ4-LD9, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

³⁴Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 95.

³⁵Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 101

sent it back to Salt Lake unsigned, but President Young said, “I will see that he does sign it.” And he did.³⁶

While the sketch states that B. F. Johnson stayed behind to look for another wife, Benjamin himself asserts he stayed behind to “close up my business.”³⁷ He didn’t marry his fourth wife until March of 1850. Was a proposal to some unknown lady extended but declined during this time of separation? The discrepancies between these two accounts demonstrate the hardships of balancing polygamous relationships while crossing the plains. Benjamin also wrote that when he arrived in Winter Quarters January 1848, “I found my wife Clarinda doing well, with a nice daughter over a year old, named Huetta. She was in a degree reconciled and returned to us.”³⁸ A few months later he added, “Among other things to annoy me, my wife Clarinda rebelled at my government of her child and left us upon the road and associated with a family named Washburn, into which she afterwards married.”³⁹

While Brigham Young sanctioned Clarinda’s divorce from Benjamin, he was not so generous to the Cahoon family. It is assumed that **Lucina Roberts Johnson** left Nauvoo with the Reynolds Cahoon family on March 9, 1846. She had two sons: Jarvis, age seventeen; and Lehman, age thirteen, from her first husband, Peter Johnson; and a third son, Rais, who was five months old and the son of Reynolds. However, **Lucina** isn’t mentioned in the Cahoon history as leaving with the family; in fact, she is hardly mentioned in the published history at all.⁴⁰ Apostle Willard Richards’ journal from July 9, 1846, at Mount Pisgah contains an interesting note regarding this marriage:

Bro. Calhon [Cahoon] wished Prst–Young to take
 ^\charge of/ his wife Lucinda [sic] & 8 children & he
 wanted [to] resign all right—& tittle [sic] to them forever
 as he & this wife could not live happily together.⁴¹

³⁶Lorena Eugenia Washburn Larsen, “Sketch of the Life of Flora C.G.W. by her daughter,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

³⁷Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 107.

³⁸Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 108.

³⁹Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 109.

⁴⁰Stella Cahoon Shurtleff, *Reynolds Cahoon and His Stalwart Sons: Utah Pioneers* (Isha Books, 2013), [LINK](#).

⁴¹Willard Richards Journal, Vol. 15, Thursday, Jul 9, 1846, 169, MS 1490, CHL, [LINK](#).

Although this seems to be a strong indication of tension in this plural marriage, the family remained together. A separation must not have been approved by Brigham Young because the Church History Biographical Database lists her traveling to Utah with Reynolds, his first wife, Thirza, and their combined children in the Brigham Young Company in June 1848.⁴² **Lucina** and Reynolds produced another child, Truman, born January 18, 1850, in Salt Lake City. These stories raise the question of how ecclesiastical authority functioned in regulating or resolving marital conflict within plural families. Under what circumstances did Church leaders intervene in marital disputes during the migration period? Was Brigham more likely to grant divorces to women who appealed to him than to men?

There is no record of Reynolds's third wife, Mary Hildrath, traveling with them to Utah. Mary has no death date so we cannot know if it's because of separation or death that they didn't stay united.

Just before leaving with Brigham Young's company, Andrew, Thirza and Reynolds's oldest son, returned from a mission in Scotland, bringing a new bride and her family with him. Andrew and his wife also joined the company and began their journey West. As the story goes, Brigham Young called Andrew to him while on the plains and said, "Brother Andrew, I wish to tell you that I believe the finest thing that you can do is to marry those two other Carruth sisters, Margaret and Janet. That is my advice to you."⁴³ Andrew heeded President Young's advice. The Cahoons' family situation illustrates how ecclesiastical counsel, family context, and the circumstances of migration intersected to shape the formation and expansion of plural marriages across generations. By 1860, census records place Reynolds, Thirza, and **Lucina** in a shared household in Utah, suggesting a degree of residential continuity despite earlier tensions. This case highlights the ways plural families reorganized and persisted, even when earlier episodes reveal strain, negotiation, and uncertainty.

⁴²Lucina Roberts Johnson, *Church History Biographical Database*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

⁴³Shurtleff, *Reynolds Cahoon and his Stalwart Sons*, 60.

Similar to the Johnson and Cahoon families, the Porters also struggled to make a path for polygamy along the plains. Orphaned at age eight and then abandoned by unnamed caretakers at age fourteen, **Lydia Ann Cook**⁴⁴ was taken in by Amy Sumner⁴⁵ and Chauncy Porter after she was found tied to a tree in Nauvoo.⁴⁶ She traveled to Winter Quarters with the Porters and watched with worry as Amy struggled to regain health following the birth of twins who both died in the cold winter of 1846. By the spring, Amy still hadn't regained her strength. One family story states that Amy asked **Lydia**, then age sixteen, if **Lydia** would marry her husband and care for her children. In obedience, **Lydia** married Chauncy on March 28, 1847, and one week later, Amy passed away.⁴⁷ A letter by Amy to President Brigham Young states, "I certify to you and to others to home [whom] it may concern that I desire and request that [L]idy an[n] Cook a young woman that now lives with me should be given to my husband in Mar[ri]age or sealed to him."⁴⁸ In a talk given later in life, **Lydia** said:

Along with many others, Amy took ill that spring when I was sixteen. She asked Chauncy to marry me and if I would care for her children. She told Chauncy "she loves the children and they love her; I know she will raise them right and teach them the gospel." And so on March 28, 1847, I was sealed to Chauncy by Brigham Young.⁴⁹

Another version of the story, as passed down by descendants of Chauncy's third wife, Priscilla Strong,⁵⁰ is that Chauncy took **Lydia** to wife while Amy was sick, and that final betrayal sent Amy to her death.⁵¹ How should historians evaluate competing explanations such as those from Benjamin F. Johnson and Priscilla's

⁴⁴Lydia Ann Cook, profile LRYL-BB9, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁴⁵Amy Sumner, profile KWJY-QR3, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁴⁶Lydia Ann Cook, "Talk by Lydia Ann Cook," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁴⁷Edan Christensen and Marie Grachan, "Lydia Ann Cook Porter," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁴⁸"March 28, 1847 Letter to Brigham Young from Amy Sumner Porter," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁴⁹Lydia Ann Cook, "Talk," *FamilySearch Memories*.

⁵⁰Priscilla Strong, profile KWJR-DY2, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁵¹Author's Interview with Priscilla's great, great, granddaughter, Dawn Fluckiger, Nov. 13, 2025.

descendants, when motives are described differently across sources? How do differing accounts of the same events reflect the perspectives and priorities of their authors?

Lydia was only four years older than Amy's first child. How did the entire family grapple with a girl who had been a child in a family becoming the father's wife? **Lydia** described her marriage at sixteen to the thirty-four-year-old man this way: "It was hard. Chauncy, whom I grew to love, was eighteen years my senior and his oldest son, Alma, was twelve."⁵²

These new arrangements didn't last long, however. The following year, when **Lydia** was six months pregnant with her first child, Chauncy married a third wife—seventeen-year-old Priscilla Strong. Five months after his marriage to Priscilla, **Lydia**, with her newborn baby and a few of Amy's children, began their journey to Utah in the Willard Richards company. Amy's daughter, Nancy, tells of their trek west:

[Father] started **Lydia** with a baby three months old and three of my mother's children. . . . Father put us in the hands of the captain. He wouldn't come at this time because he couldn't sell all his property. Alma, then fifteen years old, was to drive the team. Father kept Sarah to come with him and Priscilla the next year. By the help of the Lord and kind care of Captain Andy Cunningham, we arrived in Salt Lake Valley all alive and well.⁵³

Other records show that **Lydia**'s infant, Warriner Ahaz Porter, was only six weeks old when they began the trek on July 3, 1848.⁵⁴ Chauncy didn't leave for Zion until May of the following year, and his arrival in Utah on September 25, 1849, meant that he and **Lydia** were apart for fourteen months.⁵⁵ If, as Nancy states, Chauncy waited to leave for Zion because he couldn't sell his property, why didn't Chauncy have **Lydia** wait with him? Crossing the

⁵²Lydia Ann Cook, "Talk," *FamilySearch Memories*.

⁵³Nancy Areta Porter Mattice "Lydia Ann Cook (from the Daughters of the Pioneers)" *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁵⁴"Warriner Ahaz Porter," *Church History Biographical Database*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

⁵⁵"Chauncy Warriner Porter," *Church History Biographical Database*, [LINK](#).

plains, especially with a newborn infant, was a treacherous journey. I wonder how frequently women, including pregnant women or mothers with infants, were sent ahead or left to travel without their husbands. Did polygamy inadvertently play a part in Chauncy's decision to let **Lydia** travel on her own? Priscilla was his new bride of only five months. Was he anxious for time alone with Priscilla to strengthen that new marriage relationship? Was there an advantage to sending a member of the family ahead of the rest? Or did **Lydia** make a decision to leave against Chauncy's pleading? Did she want to get away from the new union by insisting on going ahead? If polygamy hadn't been a factor, would **Lydia** have traveled with her husband across the plains?

With the help of the Lord and the care of Captain Cunningham, **Lydia** and the children managed the trip successfully. Chauncy's parents, **Lydia**'s in-laws, had previously arrived on October 2, 1847. They were there in 1848 to receive **Lydia** and the grandchildren "with great rejoicing."⁵⁶ If there had been any hard feelings when Chauncy and **Lydia** parted in Winter Quarters, time and distance may have healed them. Three days shy of nine months after Chauncy arrived in Salt Lake, **Lydia** gave birth to twins. In a talk delivered later in life, she didn't mention the separation with her husband that caused her to travel alone. She simply and poignantly stated, "In obedience to President Young's call, we followed the Saints across the plains, leaving Amy to rest on a hill to be among the many fresh graves." She also misremembered the month and year of her arrival, referring instead to the general date of Pioneer Day. "Finally, on July 24, 1847, our camp reached emigration canyon, overlooking the valley. A shout of 'Hosanna' arose from the Saints mixed with tears of joy."⁵⁷ As with Benjamin F. Johnson's memory of his second wedding date, this is another example of how even significant life-altering dates can be misremembered later in life.

Doctrine Declared Publicly

"You heard Bro. Pratt state, this morning, that a revelation would be read this afternoon, which was given previous to Joseph's death. It contains doctrine, \a small portion of/ which the world is op[p]osed to, but I can

⁵⁶Mattice, "Lydia Ann Cook (from the Daughters of the Pioneers)."

⁵⁷Lydia Ann Cook, "Talk," *FamilySearch Memories*.

*deliver a prophecy upon it. Though that doctrine has not been preached by the Elders, this people have believed in it for years” (Brigham Young, Aug. 29, 1852).*⁵⁸

The first public command to practice polygamy came in a special general assembly of the Church on August 29, 1852. By assignment from Brigham Young, Orson Pratt delivered the announcement and explained what would happen if the Saints rejected the doctrine:

Now, let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law taught unto them in plainness, if they reject it? [A voice in the stand, “they will be damned.”] I will tell you: they will be damned, saith the Lord God Almighty, in the revelation He has given.⁵⁹

The revelation was then read to the congregation. This new doctrine on plural marriage became Doctrine and Covenants 132 but was not added to the D&C until the 1876 publication—the same publication where D&C 109 on monogamous marriage was removed.⁶⁰

Before this public declaration, polygamy had been privately practiced by some, including four of my foremothers: **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron**, **Lucina Roberts Johnson**, **Lydia Ann Cook**, and **Harriet Vernisha Beckstead**.⁶¹ I have previously mentioned each of these women except **Harriet**. In November 1850, one year after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley with her family, **Harriet**, then nineteen years old, married Abraham Hunsaker as his second wife. Of my fifteen foremothers, **Harriet** was the only one who lived in polygamy her entire married life. She never had a single day when she could claim her husband as her own. The other fourteen foremothers either lived monogamy early in their marriages before another wife was included, or they lived monogamy after their sister-wife passed away or left.

⁵⁸Brigham Young speech, Aug. 29, 1852, CR 100 317, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵⁹Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” August 29, 1852, *Journal of Discourses* 1:64, [LINK](#).

⁶⁰“Doctrine and Covenants,” *Church History Topics*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

⁶¹Harriet Vernisha Beckstead, profile KWJ6-SHS, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

Since Abraham married plurally two years before the doctrine was announced publicly, one wonders how Abraham and his first wife Eliza Collins might have learned about the secret doctrine. Was it talked about among the men marching in the Mormon Battalion where Abraham served? Was it taught to them privately by Lorenzo Snow, who resided with them in the Box Elder Stake? Abraham's interactions with Elder Snow are mentioned many times in his biography. Elder Snow already had five wives before the announcement of polygamy in 1852, so it's a possibility.⁶² We don't know when the Hunsaker family learned about plural marriage, but family tradition tells about how they felt upon hearing it. Though he "had been loud in his denunciation of it" when it was first made known to the Church, Abraham and his first wife Eliza made it a matter of prayer, and they "received the testimony that it was from God and that those who accepted it as such, and correctly lived it, would receive countless blessings." Thus, **Harriet** became Abraham's second wife, "with the full and free approval of Eliza."⁶³

Early Saints were taught that plural marriage was a divinely mandated commandment, and rejection of it signified spiritual disobedience and a lack of faith in prophetic authority. Out of a perceived religious obligation, my ancestors, like the Hunsakers, began to initiate the practice into their own families once the doctrine became public.

The Wife of Thy Youth

The LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant (Malachi 2:14).

Four of my foremothers were in their twilight years when their husbands received public counsel to obey the principle, and all four couples heeded the counsel within two years' time. What were their thoughts as they considered this new doctrine and what it might mean for their marriages? Did they discuss all their options together as a couple? Would he marry a younger girl who could aid in

⁶²Eliza R. Snow Smith, *Biography and Family Record of Lorenzo Snow, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Company, 1884): 488-92.

⁶³Q. Maurice Hunsaker and Gwen Hunsaker Haws, eds., *History of Abraham Hunsaker and his Family* (Hunsaker Family Organization, 1957), 69- 70, [LINK](#).

building his kingdom of children on earth? Should he marry an older woman who might need the care and shelter he can provide? Did the first wife make the final decision? Or did the husband move forward on his own? Once another wife was brought home, did the husband remember the wife of his youth all his days or did he find better companionship with his newer wives? The record is often silent on these questions, but it is important to stop and ponder their dilemma, just as they needed to. It seems that couples chose different paths to fulfill the doctrine.

Married for forty-two years with thirteen children, **Nancy Warriner**⁶⁴ still had one son at home and was raising three grandchildren, when in 1854, her husband, Sanford, married forty-nine-year-old Phoebe Simpson.⁶⁵ Phoebe had given birth to twelve children with her previous husband but was divorced. Seven of her children had died in childhood, and three were grown. Only two were still in her care. In following the command to marry polygamously, Sanford chose this middle-aged spouse. Was her age a relief to sixty-four-year-old **Nancy**? Phoebe was still fifteen years younger than **Nancy**, even though she, too, was past childbearing years. **Nancy**'s final ten years of life were spent sharing her husband with Phoebe.

Elizabeth Stalcup⁶⁶ was the wife of Jonathan Browning, a prominent judge in Illinois; they entertained Abraham Lincoln on occasion. After meeting Joseph Smith, **Elizabeth** and Jonathan joined the Church. Their large family arrived in Utah one month after the polygamy conference occurred.⁶⁷ At fifty-one, she had ten children (ages seven and up) when she yielded to the command in 1854. The sister-wife that **Elizabeth** brought into her family was divorced with two children and only thirty-seven years old. Elizabeth Caroline Clark⁶⁸ gave Jonathan Browning three more children. Four years later, in 1858, Jonathan married twenty-eight-year-old Ann Emmett,⁶⁹ who bore him seven children. After

⁶⁴Nancy Warriner, profile KWJT-VMH, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁶⁵Phoebe Simpson, profile LKVB-SX3, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁶⁶Elizabeth Stalcup, profile KWVS-8VM, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁶⁷"Elizabeth Stalcup," *Church History Biographical Database*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

⁶⁸Elizabeth Caroline Clark, profile KWVS-WXQ, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁶⁹Ann Emmett, profile KWJH-PBP, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

twenty-eight years in monogamy, **Elizabeth** lived thirty more years in polygamy. What was her experience of being a grandmother during the same time period that Jonathan was enjoying his additional children from his other wives?

Mary Ann Kennedy⁷⁰ was either pregnant or gave birth in almost every single major Church history location: Kirtland, Ohio; Far West, Missouri; Nauvoo, Illinois; Council Bluffs, Iowa; Winter Quarters, Nebraska; and Salt Lake City, Utah. She recalled having seen her home being burned to the ground by the mobs four times during her lifetime. When fleeing Missouri, pregnant **Mary Ann** and her small family found themselves stuck in the snow. Fleeing on foot, her toes became so seriously frostbitten that she had to have them amputated.⁷¹ Living polygamy was just another of her sacrifices for the gospel. On February 3, 1853, six short months after polygamy became a public doctrine, her husband, Charles Bird, plurally married Sarah Ann Dunsdon.⁷² Charles was fifty, **Mary Ann** was forty-six, and Sarah was just twenty years old. Since **Mary Ann** had four children older than Sarah, did she treat Sarah like another of her fourteen children? If so, how did Sarah react, since she was, in significant ways, **Mary Ann**'s peer? **Mary Ann** lived next door to Sarah for the next fourteen years while Sarah bore eleven children to Charles. With the demands that young children bring, was Charles's attention spent more with Sarah? Did Charles rejoice with the wife of his youth or did **Mary Ann** feel she had been "dealt with treacherously" as Malachi 2:14 mentions?

Catherine Elinore Lince's⁷³ situation was similar to **Mary Ann**'s. She was forty-seven and had given birth to sixteen children with only a few left still at home in 1854, when Alexander Beckstead, aged fifty-two, married Keziah Albine Petty,⁷⁴ who was just nineteen years old. In 1856, Alexander married Clarissa Ann Gilson,⁷⁵ also age nineteen. By this time Alexander was fifty-four.

⁷⁰Mary Ann Kennedy, profile KWJK-C34, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁷¹"Charles Bird and Mary Ann Kennedy," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁷²Sarah Ann Dunsdon, profile KWJN-WY1, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁷³Catherine Elinore Lince, profile L8SR-YD8, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁷⁴Keziah Albine Petty, profile KWVM-WJK, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁷⁵Clarissa Ann Gilson, profile KWJB-CD1, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

Together, Keziah and Clarissa bore him seventeen more children. Clarrisa named her second daughter Catherine Lince, after her senior sister-wife. This raises the question of how common the practice was of naming children after senior wives. What kinship or relational meaning can be inferred from Clarissa's choice? All three wives lived in the same house. Later, after Alexander died, leaving thirteen children under the age of fifteen, **Catherine** and Clarrisa lived together and Keziah lived next door.

We have no information about how these mature foremothers felt when commanded to share their husbands with other wives after a lifetime together. Yet, many questions arise from these situations. How did households function when the first wife's children overlapped in age with a new plural wife? What kinds of domestic labor structures were developed in households where wives occupied both maternal and peer-age categories? How did households change structurally when additional wives were added after a long-term first marriage? How were authority and responsibility distributed in households where generational boundaries were ambiguous?

Read in light of Malachi 2:14, the passage points to a theological and emotional tension. Ideals of lifelong covenantal companionship with “the wife of thy youth” coexisted uneasily with a system that redistributed a husband's time, attention, and reproductive life across multiple wives.

The Fatherless and Widows

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the vices of the world (James 1:27 JST).

Family tradition framed plural marriage as a system intended to provide for widows and orphans. Yet counsel attributed to Brigham Young—instructing high priests and elders not to seek sealings unless a woman desired it and to “let the widows and children alone”⁷⁶—broaches an important question about how this rationale functioned in practice. To what extent were vulnerable widows and orphans solicited for plural unions? Within my own family network, eight widows and/or orphans entered plural

⁷⁶Brigham Young, “Heirship,” Apr. 8, 1853, *Journal of Discourses*, 6:307, [LINK](#).

marriages, providing a focused case through which to examine how ideology, male authority, and women's vulnerability intersected in their lived experience.

Two of the women highlighted earlier in this paper were orphans: Mary Ann Hale was the young orphan girl who lived with Benjamin Franklin Johnson's mother after her own parents died during an epidemic near Springfield, Illinois. After Benjamin married **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron**, Mary Ann came to stay with them, possibly to help with their two small children. Benjamin married her sometime around 1844, which would have made her fifteen years old. A family sketch of her life states, "Mary Ann was gentle, kind, sympathetic and obedient. **Melissa** never complained, though her heart ached. They helped each other bare [sic] their burdens."⁷⁷

Lydia Ann Cook was the orphan left tied to a tree and rescued by Chauncy Porter when she was a young teenager. At the age of sixteen **Lydia** was asked by Amy, who was not recovering after childbirth, to marry Chauncy and take care of her children. As noted above, Amy even made these wishes known in a letter to Brigham Young.

The courtship of first wife **Asenath Elizabeth Browning**⁷⁸ and Isaac Carling sounds lovely. Their families traveled together in the Henry Miller Company with **Asenath's** father as Captain. "During this long journey across the plains **Asenath** and Isaac's friendship ripened into love. She seldom spoke of the trials of that trek, but of the joy they had in singing, dancing, or just talking with other dear friends. It was a courting time to her."⁷⁹ In contrast, Isaac's second wife, Miriam Elizabeth Hobson,⁸⁰ was not yet fifteen years old when she married Isaac in 1857, as his second wife. Miriam's mother had died when she was twelve years old, and her father was called on a mission to England shortly thereafter,

⁷⁷Unattributed sketch of Mary Ann Hale, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁷⁸Asenath Elizabeth Browning, profile KWJ8-5XN, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁷⁹"Unknown Author: Asenath Elizabeth Browning & Isaac Carling History," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁸⁰Miriam Elizabeth Hobson, profile K2QX-WQV, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

leaving Miriam fatherless. Arrangements were made for Miriam and her brother, Henry, to live with friends. A family sketch suggests that perhaps life there was not as accommodating as her father had hoped, and when Miriam visited her newly married sister in Fillmore, Utah, she may have met the Carling family, who were neighbors.⁸¹ **Asenath Carling** had an eighteen-month-old daughter and was two months away from having her second child at this time. Seeing both a need and an opportunity, Isaac married this young girl in 1857.

Sarah Ann Dunsdon's mother passed away in England in 1840 when Sarah was seven; her father died of cholera in Iowa en route to Zion when Sarah was fifteen years old. She was seventeen when she was separated from her siblings while crossing the plains. Descendants tell that the siblings later reunited at a conference where they were wearing matching shawls sewn by their mother before leaving England.⁸² Sarah's circumstances following her 1851 arrival in Salt Lake City remain unclear, but within eighteen months, she married Charles Bird, becoming the sister-wife of **Mary Ann Kennedy**.⁸³ Given that **Mary Ann** was the same age as Sarah's deceased mother and shared her mother's name, how much might plural marriage in this case have reproduced surrogate maternal dynamics? What can be surmised about the emotional, social, and hierarchical relationships between MaryAnn and Sarah during their fourteen years in the same marital network?

Clarissa Ann Gilson⁸⁴ was fifteen when she and her younger siblings traveled as pioneers with their mother in the James C. Snow company in 1852.⁸⁵ Clarissa's mother died at Chimney Rock, leaving Clarissa to take care of the remaining family. Her father did not join the Church and had separated from her mother years earlier, and Clarissa's stepfather was kicked by a horse and died just prior to their migration. Upon arriving in Salt Lake City, Clarissa found employment as a domestic servant. In this capacity,

⁸¹“Miriam Elizabeth Hobson,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁸²“James Dunsdon and Mary Rose History,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

⁸³Mary Ann Kennedy, profile KWJK-C34, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁸⁴Clarissa Ann Gilson, profile KWJB-CD1, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁸⁵James C. Snow Company, *Church History Biographical Database*, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [LINK](#).

and at age nineteen, she married fifty-four-year-old Alexander Beckstead as his third wife.

Ruth Amelia Newell⁸⁶ and Solomon Joseph Despain married in Illinois in 1842 and joined the Church in 1851. By the fall of 1853 they had relocated to Arkansas, where a young orphan, Susan Dean,⁸⁷ began assisting in **Ruth's** household. Introduced to the faith through the Despain family, Susan was reportedly disowned by her aunt and uncle after choosing baptism. When the Despain family migrated first to Tennessee and later to Utah in 1861, Susan accompanied them and, in 1862, married Solomon.

The situations of Mary Ann, **Lydia**, Miriam, Sarah Ann, Clarissa, and Susan troublingly suggest that an array of social and economic mechanisms facilitated the introduction of domestic servants into plural households as prospective wives. In almost all of these cases, domestic proximity shaped pathways into plural marriage for dependent young women within Latter-day Saint households. How common, one must ask, was the pattern of men selecting additional wives from within their own domestic networks rather than from outside the household? This question extends from young orphan girls to widows.

My foremother **Lucina Roberts Johnson** was a widow of more than five years when she married Reynolds Cahoon in Nauvoo. Polygamy was only a whisper at that time, so it is a curious union. We don't know any of the circumstances surrounding the courtship or when the actual marriage took place, but they were sealed in the Nauvoo Temple in 1846.

Another widow, Caroline Patience Harrar,⁸⁸ married Solomon Despain in 1875 after the sudden death of her first husband, who had been Solomon's work partner. The 1880 census lists Caroline living with two of her Wooley sons, so it is unclear whether Solomon provided for her needs and spent time with her there.⁸⁹ However, these two cases raise additional questions about plural marriage as a form of economic or moral obligation. Under what conditions did

⁸⁶Ruth Amelia Newell, profile KWJ5-QVD, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁸⁷Susan Dean, profile LRK8-NSG, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁸⁸Caroline Patience Harrar, profile KWJ8-6H1, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁸⁹"United States Census, 1880, *FamilySearch*, [LINK](#).

plural marriage function as social protection for vulnerable women, and when did it primarily reinforce existing household hierarchies and dependencies? Did vulnerable women need to marry in order to have care and protection, and did plural marriage actually provide it?

Age, Courtship, and Consent

“Elders, never love your wives one hair’s breadth further than they adorn the Gospel, never love them so but that you can leave them at a moment’s warning without shedding a tear” (Brigham Young).⁹⁰

The majority of polygamous marriages occurred in my family between 1850 and 1880. Data shows us that in 1850, native-born white American women were married at the median age of 21.3. This age at marriage remained stable for white women from 1850 through 1870.⁹¹ The average age at first marriage for Western European women generally varied from 24 to 27.⁹² For the women married into my family lineage from 1850–1880, the average age was 17.7 years old. Sixteen of the wives were married when they were younger than age eighteen. Why were girls in this plural marriage community marrying several years earlier than women in the broader American and European populations? Instead of assuming that frontier life simply made girls grow up faster, it is useful to look at how plural marriage changed the marriage market itself. Because older men were able to marry multiple wives, this affected the number of available partners for young women and single men of similar ages.

As I combed through the records of these women, I began to note with curiosity the ages at which my forefathers married each of their polygamous wives. When these men brought another wife into the family, how did deliberation, consultation, courtship, timing, and religious framing factor into the decision to introduce a new wife? The principle of consent is a more modern construct, but it still comes into play where there are age or power dynamics

⁹⁰Brigham Young, “Remarks on a Revelation Given in August 1831—General Instructions,” Jun. 15, 1856, *Journal of Discourses* 3:354, [LINK](#).

⁹¹Catherine A. Fitch and Steven Ruggles, “Historical Trends in Marriage Formation, United States, 1850–1890” (paper prepared for the History Department, University of Minnesota, n.d.), 7, [LINK](#).

⁹²Fitch and Ruggles, “Historical Trends,” 5.

at work in a marriage. In addition to the orphans and widows in the preceding section, there are additional examples from my ancestry where this is seen.

Elizabeth Ann Keate's⁹³ future husband, John Boyce, traveled between the United States and Salt Lake City as a Church freighter. This is how he met the Despain family on one trip and the Keate family on another trip. It is noteworthy that John may have been instrumental in bringing both his future wives across the plains: Ella Eugenia Despain,⁹⁴ in 1861, as a three-year-old, and **Elizabeth**, in 1862, as a twenty-year-old. **Elizabeth** married John two years after he helped her cross the plains and Ella married John, as a second wife, eighteen years later.

According to a biography of **Elizabeth**, “romance budded on the wagon train or at least enough communication was started that John and **Elizabeth** found each other, fell in love and were married” two years later.⁹⁵

For Ella, marriage seems to have been more transactional. She writes, “After mother, myself, and the youngest boys moved to the farm on Granite Bench, John Boyce bought forty acres joining ours, from father.” These were forty acres of land that her father had previously gifted to Ella. “I always said I married John to get my forty acres back. . . . There was not much romance to our courtship—just matter of fact everyday happenings.”⁹⁶

Her matter-of-fact telling of their courtship is in deep contrast to her earlier telling of being engaged to Brigham Young’s nephew, Joda Young. He was “gentlemanly, polite and courteous, coming from one of the best families in the country.” Ella had “never met a more cultured young man. . . . Joda kept coming to see me and I admired him very much and he proved to be all I thought him, so kind and thoughtful.” After a few months of “the sweetest courtship” the two “became engaged and I do not believe there was ever a

⁹³Elizabeth Ann Keate, profile KWJY-9MG, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁹⁴Ella Eugenia Despain, profile KV57-FF4, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁹⁵Loy K. Despain, “Elizabeth Ann Keate” in *Loy Despain Family History Collection* (Self-published, 2014), 21, [LINK](#).

⁹⁶“History of Ella Eugenia Despain Boyce from The Boyce Family History,” 15, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

happier girl alive in all the wide world. But alas, that happiness did not last long.”⁹⁷

She explained that after some miscommunication, they called off the engagement.

As a second wife, **Harriet Vernisha Beckstead**⁹⁸ may have felt like quite an intruder. Her husband, Abraham Hunsaker, and his first wife, Eliza Collins,⁹⁹ had been married for seventeen years before entering polygamy. Abraham fell into a routine of marrying a new wife approximately every four years for the next thirteen years. Even as Abraham got older, he married women who were each younger than the last. In 1850, **Harriet** was nineteen; in 1854, Margaret Sweeten¹⁰⁰ was sixteen; in 1858, Ane Kathrine Jensen¹⁰¹ was fifteen; in 1863, Mary Luckham¹⁰² was eighteen (a year younger than Ane Kathrine). When the last wife, Mary, joined the family, first wife Eliza had six children who were older than she was. This pattern suggests a widening generational gap within the household, as well as the emergence of a pronounced age hierarchy that likely shaped relationships among wives and between wives and children.

The Hunsaker family history observes: “Romance seemed to have very little part in the early days of Pioneer life, and one day, when **Harriet** was hanging the family wash on the line, Abraham asked her to become his second wife. Without any courtship or preparation for a wedding she married him.”¹⁰³

Interestingly, the same circumstances were said about his proposal to his fourth wife, Ane Kathrine, who went to work for Eliza:

One day when Catherine [Katherine] was hanging out clothes, Abraham asked her if she would marry him. (this was with his wife’s full consent, of course.) The answer was yes. Ann Catherine stayed and worked on

⁹⁷“History of Ella Eugenia Despain Boyce,” 14.

⁹⁸Harriet Vernisha Beckstead, profile KWJ6-SHS, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

⁹⁹Eliza Collins, profile KWJY-QX4, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰⁰Margaret Sweeten, profile KWV3-9GW, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰¹Ane Katherine Jensen, profile KWCY-T4Q, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰²Mary Luckham, profile KWJZ-NG6, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰³*History of Abraham Hunsaker and his family* (Hunsaker Family Organization, 1957) 175, [LINK](#).

until she had earned enough money for her wedding dress. . . . They were very happy.¹⁰⁴

The repeated story of a marriage proposal happening during domestic labor deserves closer scrutiny. It is not clear whether this was a common way proposals actually happened, a literary convention that casts plural marriage as practical and harmonious, or even one story that was later remembered and told about more than one wife. The Hunsaker family history seems to shape how plural marriage is understood by downplaying courtship and emphasizing ideas of agreement and happiness.

Abraham acknowledged in his journal the significance of Ane Katherine's age when he wrote, "I was sealed to a girl by the name of Katharine Jenson. President Brigham Young sealed us in one of his rooms in his fine house. She is tollerable young, being most sixteen years old, will be sixteen in next February."¹⁰⁵ His comment shows an awareness of her youth that stands in some tension with the implication of consent and happiness.

Lovina Jones¹⁰⁶ lost her mother when she was a young girl. At the age of nine, she sailed from Wales with her grandmother, father, and brother. During the passage, her father remarried, and **Lovina's** stepmother did not treat her well. Her father and his new wife expressed their disapproval of polygamy and moved to Idaho, leaving **Lovina** and her grandmother in Utah. Soon after this, on March 20, 1857, at age twelve, **Lovina** married William Bailey Lake Sr. as his third wife on the very same day that he married his second wife, thirteen-year-old Louisa Ann Garner.¹⁰⁷ We don't know whether they knew each other, but we do know that by modern standards they were not capable of consent. What level of desperation may have constrained their choices?

Did they help each other through the adjustment and trauma that surely they must have felt marrying this thirty-one-year-old man? William died one year later when these two wives were still

¹⁰⁴"Ane Catherine Jensen Story, 04-12-2024," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰⁵*History of Abraham Hunsaker*, 96-97.

¹⁰⁶Lovina Jones, profile KWN4-2C3, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰⁷Ruth O. Stapley, "Biography of Lovina Jones Lake Brimhall (1844-1933)," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#); Louisa Ann Garner, profile KWNR-6TS, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

just girls. **Lovina**'s granddaughter wrote that "**Lovina** told her own daughters many years later that she was happy and loved while living in this home. She had never lived with William as his wife."¹⁰⁸

A thirteen-year-old widow, **Lovina** went to live with her sister-in-law's family, the Brimhalls. **Lovina** married her sister-in-law's husband, again as a third wife, when she was fourteen-and-a-half and he was thirty-three. It may have been true that she was not treated as a wife in William's home, but that was not the case in Noah's home. **Lovina** bore a child just under one year later. She often remarked that she was a bride, wife, widow, and again bride, wife, and mother by the time she was fifteen years of age. Because of **Lovina**'s father's bitterness over polygamy, he disowned her, but **Lovina** was faithful to her adopted religion and declared to her granddaughter that her polygamous days were the happiest of her life.¹⁰⁹ How do we reconcile potentially troubling marital patterns with faith-affirming family memories?

With two wives and eight children, **Lydia Ann Cook**'s son, Warriner Ahaz Porter wrote that he noticed a girl in the dining hall who had beautiful hair:

When I went in to dinner, naturally I tried to discover the girl with the red hair, but . . . I had concluded that perhaps she was at work in the kitchen so settled down to my meal. . . . All of a sudden . . . there stood the very girl I had been looking for, and as our eyes met, there was something in the expression of her eye that drew me to her, and I could not get her off my mind.¹¹⁰

After making his interest known to her parents, they agreed to the arrangement. "She acquiesced and from this beginning our courtship was carried on very pleasantly for about eighteen months." In April 1879 Warriner and his mother, **Lydia**, planned a trip to the St. George Temple, and Warriner,

¹⁰⁸Stapley, "Biography of Lovina Jones Brimhall," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁰⁹Florence Brimhall Brinkerhoff, "Lovina Jones Brimhall," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁰"Warriner Ahaz Porter Autobiography, circa 1915-1929: Chapter I," 14, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

thinking it would be an opportune time to do a little in behalf of the living, I took this girl along. . . . I was at this time nearing my thirty-first birthday, and the girl had just passed her sixteenth anniversary. After this event, we enjoyed what might be termed heavenly bliss.¹¹¹

In polygamy, older men see young girls very differently than they do in monogamist communities. A monogamist man may notice that a young girl is striking, but it would not go further than that. In polygamy, older, married men are trained to see even very young teenage girls as potential wives. During this time of courtship, Warriner's second wife had a baby, and at the time of the wedding, his first wife was pregnant with baby number seven.

A year and a half after arriving in Utah, Benjamin Franklin Johnson moved his two wives into their newly built home. It was in this same season that on November 11, 1849, **Melissa** had a daughter, and two months later, on January 12, 1850, Mary Ann had a son. Benjamin tells us "about this time I courted and had sealed to me on the 17th of March 1850 Harriet Naomi Holman,¹¹² a niece to my first wife, her mother being my first wife's half-sister. She was sixteen years of age." He makes no mention in his biography of thinking in retrospect that maybe the timing of this marriage was inconsiderate to his two postpartum wives.

Benjamin had three wives, eight small children, and two on the way when he was called on a mission in 1852. Prior to receiving the mission call, Benjamin had asked Harriet's sister, Sarah Melissa Holman,¹¹³ to marry him. Sarah declined the proposal because Benjamin was leaving for a mission, and she didn't want to wait. He wrote that she was "beautiful and witty and I had perhaps loved her too much—and must see my idol broken."¹¹⁴ She was fourteen years old at the time. Upon returning home from his three-year mission, Benjamin found that Sarah Melissa, now eighteen years of age, was still unattached. Nine months after returning home, he escorted Sarah to the Legislative Ball and renewed his proposal to her. They were married on February 3, 1856, ten months after

¹¹¹"Warriner Ahaz Porter Autobiography, circa 1915-1929: Chapter I," 14.

¹¹²Harriet Naomi Holman, profile KWJD-1F4, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹¹³Sarah Melissa Holman, profile KWNT-489, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁴Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 127.

his homecoming. His other three wives were each pregnant at this wedding. Benjamin was not the only man to wed while his other wives were with child. According to the statistics, sixty-nine percent of the polygamous weddings in this study occurred while previous wives were pregnant or postpartum.

Four wives notwithstanding, Benjamin records in his autobiography: “At this time the Elders were strongly reminded of their duty in the increase of their families according to the revelation on marriage, and I was again counseled to take another wife.”¹¹⁵ True to this counsel, Benjamin sought another wife, Susan Adeline Holman,¹¹⁶ who had been living with her two sisters as part of the family. He had a dream that he should wed Susan—“that it would bring sorrows, but also far greater joys and reward; all of which has been fully verified.” He soon won her over and married her in February 1857.

“Having not yet fulfilled all the counsel given me, I wondered if any other young woman would willingly take the risk of poverty and hard work with me.”¹¹⁷ Benjamin tried to influence Sarah Jane Spooner¹¹⁸ to marry his counselor but then wished to win her himself. He considered the thought to be a suggestion from the Lord, and so she was wooed and won in April 1857, just two short months after Benjamin had married Susan—three more wives within fifteen months. How did these new wives feel about the quick succession of their marriages? What of the other three wives he married before his mission? Had they learned to simply get along without him even after his return home?

Learning about the situations of young plural wives can be distressing to a modern reader. Remarkably, however, in this study, the women who married polygamously between the ages of twelve and nineteen overwhelmingly remained married. Knowing one’s place in the hierarchy of sister-wives was vital to the harmony of polygamous homes. Out of forty-seven women, there were only two plural wives (Magdalena Zundel¹¹⁹ and Clarinda Gleason) who were older in age than their senior sister-wives. It is noteworthy that both of these women divorced their first husbands soon after

¹¹⁵Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 191.

¹¹⁶Susan Adeline Holman, profile KWJ8-NFX, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁷Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 192.

¹¹⁸Sarah Jane Spooner, profile KWJ6-9P3, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁹Magdalena Zundel, profile KWJY-V76, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

marrying plurally.¹²⁰ This pattern suggests that having a wife's age correlate with their place in the family was vital to success. This may have been why men almost always married plural wives who were younger than the others already in his home.

European Immigrant Sister-Wives

And it shall come to pass that the righteous shall be gathered out from among all nations, and shall come to Zion, singing with songs of everlasting joy (D&C 45:71).

Four of my foremothers' sister-wives immigrated from Europe after the American Saints had settled in Utah. The first to cross the Atlantic was Sarah Ann Dundson.¹²¹ In 1849 at the age of fifteen, she sailed on the ship *Ashland* with her father and siblings. As I've mentioned, her mother died in England and her father died soon after arriving in America. As an unmarried orphan, Sarah Ann was fated for polygamy, though she may not have known it. Polygamy was still underground in 1849. Until 1852, missionaries sent to England were denying the practice even though some had multiple wives waiting for them at home.

One such example of preaching against polygamy abroad while practicing it back home was apostle and future president of the Church, John Taylor. In an 1850 public debate with Protestant ministers in France, Taylor said:

We are accused here of polygamy, and actions the most indelicate, obscene, and disgusting, such that none but a corrupt and depraved heart could have contrived. These things are too outrageous to admit of belief; therefore . . . I shall content myself by reading our views of chastity and marriage, from a work published by us, containing some of the articles of our Faith. "Doctrine and Covenants," page 330. . . "we declare

¹²⁰"Biography of Magdalena Zundel Brimhall Miller," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#). Magdalena was sealed to Noah Brimhall in Salt Lake City on Jun. 22, 1857, at age 23, and divorced him on Nov. 14, 1859. Flora Clarinda Gleason, profile KWJ4-LD9, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#). Clarinda was sealed to Benjamin F. Johnson in the Nauvoo Temple on Feb. 3, 1846, at age 27, and divorced him in 1849.

¹²¹"Dunasan, Sarah," *Saints By Sea: Latter-day Saint Immigration to America*, [LINK](#).

that we believe that one man should have one wife, and one woman but one husband.”¹²²

At the time of this discussion, John Taylor was married to six wives.¹²³

Such contradictions raise questions about the experiences of immigrant converts gathering to Zion. What role did misinformation regarding the practice of polygamy play in shaping converts’ expectations about life in Utah? At what point were immigrant women such as Sarah Ann Dundson informed about plural marriage, particularly after the deaths of parents or guardians left them dependent upon established LDS families for support and belonging?

Ane Kathrine Jensen¹²⁴ was born in Denmark. Her father sent ten-year-old Kathrine and her brother with their aunt to immigrate to Zion in 1853, where she worked for and lived with the Hammonds, an English family, until her father arrived the next year. Polygamy had been acknowledged by this time, so becoming involved with it may have been less surprising. After arriving in Salt Lake City, Kathrine’s father married five wives within five years. Most of these wives were also from Denmark. They lived in Salt Lake City for two years, then moved to Brigham City. When Kathrine was thirteen years old, she went to work for **Eliza Collins Hunsaker**, then married **Eliza**’s husband, Abraham, two years later.

Charlotta Lundstedt¹²⁵ was a twenty-year-old housemaid in Stockholm, Sweden, when she was baptized by a Mormon missionary in 1877. By 1880 she had saved enough from dressmaking, nursing at a local hospital, and sewing to immigrate to America. She described her experience as follows:

¹²²John Taylor, *Three Nights’ Public Discussion* (Liverpool: John Taylor, 1850), 8, [LINK](#).

¹²³Lyndon W. Cook, *Nauvoo Marriages Proxy Sealings, 1843-1846* (Grandin Book, 2004), 119, n. 5.

¹²⁴Ane Kathrine Jensen, profile KWCY-T4Q, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹²⁵Charlotta Albertine Lundstedt, profile KWNV-RCC, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

The first part of the voyage on the black seas was the roughest. When I arrived in Utah I couldn't speak a word of English, no learning in schools, I just had to pick it up. I got house work in Salt Lake City. I then met a family by the name of Chlerson. It was through them I met Solomon Joseph Despain. Chlerson's [sic] being Swedish, would interpret English for me. After a courtship of four weeks, only seeing my lover, Joseph [as she referred to Solomon], once a week, he proposed through the Chlersons as interpreters and we were married March 28, 1881.¹²⁶

At age fifty-nine, Solomon was thirty-four years older than Charlotta—a Bishop, a Justice of the Peace, and a sawmill owner. Her account highlights the profound dislocation experienced by many immigrant converts arriving in Utah. Unable to speak English and dependent upon Swedish-speaking Church members for employment, translation, and social connection, she entered a courtship that lasted only four weeks and was conducted largely through interpreters. Such circumstances invite closer examination of how language barriers, economic dependence, and immigrant isolation shaped the marital choices available to newly-arrived women in Mormon society.

After Solomon decided to move to Arizona, Charlotta went with him, but his first two wives chose to stay with their adult children in the Granite, Utah, area. Time and again, polygamy separated families from each other.

Sarah Jane Spooner, Benjamin Franklin Johnson's seventh and last wife, emigrated from Wales with her mother and sisters in 1854. We know little about her except that she married Benjamin only two months after he had married his sixth wife. Sarah Jane seemed to be the wife that he spent the most time with in his later years. When all the other wives became disenchanted, she stayed the most loyal.

The stories of Sarah Ann, Ane, Charlotta, and Sarah Jane reveal that gathering to Zion frequently required more than geographic migration. For single immigrant women, it also involved

¹²⁶“Life History of Charlotta Albertina Lundstedt, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).”

entering intricate marital and familial systems that reshaped domestic life across generations. These narratives also demonstrate the extent to which plural marriage operated through kinship and social networks. Young immigrant women often entered homes as servants, boarders, or dependents before marrying into those same families. Language barriers, rapid courtships, age disparities, and unequal economic and social power further complicate modern assumptions about agency and consent. At the same time, many of these women demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and religious commitment while navigating profoundly unfamiliar social worlds.

Biological Sisters as Wives

While your wife is living, do not marry her sister and have sexual relations with her, for they would be rivals (Lev. 18:18, NLT).

In the pioneer days of the Church, when first wives were faced with the command of living polygamy, it may have given them comfort to bring a biological sister instead of a stranger into their home. Perhaps it was the husband who chose sisters to simplify the intricacies of dealing with extended families. In studying the lives of my foremothers, it seems that sisters fared better in their polygamous circumstances than other women.

At the age of sixteen, **Catherine Aurelia Carling**¹²⁷ married twenty-one-year-old Edson Porter. **Catherine** fasted three days and three nights and received an answer that “the man who had asked me to be his wife for time and eternity would be a proper companion for me.”¹²⁸

Six years after their wedding, Edson married **Catherine**’s sister, Phoebe Malinda Carling,¹²⁹ who was four and half years younger than **Catherine**. At the wedding, **Catherine** was pregnant with her fourth child. Of the twenty-six children born between them, **Catherine** had four babies and Phoebe had seven babies who didn’t survive past the age of three. Their experience invites closer examination of the ways plural marriage functioned within extended kinship networks, The repeated loss of children in

¹²⁷Catherine Aurelia Carling, profile KWZW-YVV, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹²⁸Catherine Carling, “Memory written by Ann’s younger sister Catherine found in Isaac V Carling History v2,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹²⁹Phoebe Malinda Carling, profile KWZL-19C, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

both women's families further suggests the need to examine how plural marriage shaped collective experiences of grief, caregiving, and maternal identity.

For **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron** and her husband, Benjamin F. Johnson, the choice of who to bring into the family may have been a strategic one. Benjamin's first plural wife was the orphan who lived with them for years. It seemed a natural fit. The second plural wife was an older outsider who divorced Benjamin within a few years. Maybe after that experience, they decided to keep the marriages closer to home. Benjamin's next three wives were all sisters. What's more, they were the daughters of **Melissa's** stepsister. Put more directly, **Melissa's** father was their grandfather. The first of the biological sisters, Harriet, was married to Benjamin for six years before the next sister, Sarah, joined the family; the third sister married Benjamin a year after that. In Benjamin's journal, he wrote that "the same spirit of unkindness towards me still continued [into 1883] with my three sister-wives, who living apart from me clamored for a division of property; to which I consented."¹³⁰ It sounds as if the three Holman sisters rallied around each other when life seemed unfair to them. Benjamin was left to honor their matriarchal wishes. In this case, the sister-sister marriage structure appears to have fostered a strong internal alliance among them, providing emotional solidarity and collective bargaining power within the plural household.

Harriet Vernisha Beckstead's experience as a sister-wife to two half-sisters followed a somewhat different pattern, since the two sisters weren't married to Abraham at the same time. Abraham's third wife, Margaret, died in childbirth with her fifth child while Abraham was away serving a mission. She left behind four surviving children. Second wife, **Harriet**, at once took the little motherless infant and loved and cared for them along with her own three-month-old baby. At the time of Margaret's death, Abraham was away doing missionary work. Soon after Abraham returned from his mission, he persuaded Margaret's seventeen-year-old half-sister, Mary Luckham,¹³¹ to marry him, reportedly to care for her sister's

¹³⁰Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 266.

¹³¹Mary Luckham, profile KWJZ-NG6, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

orphaned children. In early 1863, fifty-year-old Abraham married Mary, described as a beautiful young lady with dark brown hair and blue eyes. She became Abraham's fifth and final wife.

These cases suggest that the Levitical concern about rivalry between sisters (Lev. 18:18) was reconfigured within the lived realities of Mormon plural marriage. In my family, kinship bonds brought cooperation and facilitated negotiations over status, property, and maternal authority.

Living Arrangements

In my Father's house are many mansions (John 14:2).

Among my polygamous ancestors, there was no single model for how plural families arranged their homes and daily lives. Lack of wealth didn't deter families from entering into the practice, but it did determine what their living arrangements looked like. My polygamous ancestors were typically very poor. Privacy was a luxury few had in the early Utah days. Between the command to desert their homes when the United States military was upon them, or the counsel to colonize new areas, or the need to go into hiding, few of my ancestors had permanent residences.

Some families crowded together under one roof. Keziah Albine Petty shared both log and adobe homes with **Catherine Elinore Lince** and another sister-wife, even while enduring years of blindness and raising ten children.¹³² **Harriet Vernisha Beckstead** and her sister-wives first camped in their wagons on property owned by Samuel Smith. They then lived together in a tiny adobe dwelling in Brigham City with three wives and fourteen children. Another wife was added to the family before the Hunsakers moved into a larger "Big House" with separate sections for each wife's family.¹³³ **Mary Ann Kennedy** and Sarah Dunsdon endured frontier conditions in wagons, forts, dugouts, and later a log cabin with a lean-to and a balcony. Church meetings were held in this communal home, and numerous families stayed with

¹³²"Keziah Albine Petty Beckstead, 1835–1907" *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#); "Catherine Lense Beckstead, pg. 2," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹³³"Abr[a]ham & Harriet Hunsaker, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#)."

them while building their own homes.¹³⁴ Much later, Charles Bird finally established separate residences for each wife. How did women negotiate domestic authority, privacy, and caregiving responsibilities in such crowded spaces? What emotional strains or solidarities emerged when multiple wives raised children side by side under one roof?

Other plural households appear to have sought a balance between togetherness and independence. **Catherine Aurelia Carling** and her sister-wife had individual homes next door to one another. **Asenath Elizabeth Browning** lived across the street from her sister-wife Miriam Elizabeth Hobson, with their children of the same ages playing together.¹³⁵ **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron** and her sister-wives occupied separate apartments connected within the same large, L-shaped residence. The family was called together by a bell for prayer, home evenings, and socials.¹³⁶ Later, the LeBaron wives maintained separate homes in different cities, and for a time each woman manned different post offices.¹³⁷ Did such arrangements reduce tensions by allowing wives greater autonomy, or did proximity still require constant negotiation over status and access to the husband? In homes where children moved freely between households, how were ideas of motherhood, sisterhood, and family identity reshaped?

Still other families experienced continual movement and separation. **Ruth Amelia Newell** moved repeatedly with Solomon Despain through quarry buildings, homesteads, and settlements while Susan Dean and Charlotta Lundstedt joined the family. The women eventually maintained homes in different states, as did the family of **Esther Melita Johnson**,¹³⁸ Harriet Naomi Holman separated from her husband Benjamin and lived out her older years residing with adult children.¹³⁹ These shifting residential patterns invite questions about how mobility and distance affected emotional

¹³⁴Donna Fae Johnson Francisco, "History of Charles Bird and His Wife Mary Ann Kennedy, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹³⁵"Miriam Elizabeth Hobson," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹³⁶"Harriet Naomi Holman Johnson (12 January 1834–1 August 1914)," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹³⁷A tribute written by Norma G. Nix (granddaughter) and read by her at the B.F. Johnson Reunion held March 19, 1955 at the Mesa 7th and 9th Ward building.

¹³⁸Esther Melita Johnson [Openshaw], profile KWNF-22H, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹³⁹"Harriet Naomi Holman Johnson (12 January 1834–1 August 1914)."

intimacy, marital relationships, and cooperation between sister-wives. To what extent did separate households provide protection from conflict, and to what extent did they produce isolation and instability for women already navigating the uncertainties of plural marriage?

Emotional Struggle in Polygamy

For behold, I, the Lord, have seen the sorrow, and heard the mourning of the daughters of my people (Jacob 2:31).

In an effort to motivate and reiterate the importance of living the law of polygamy, leaders of the Church preached about it often. Three years into the public practice, Brigham Young declared, “Now if any of you will deny the plurality of wives, and continue to do so, I promise that you will be damned. . . . Do not reject anything because it is new or strange, and do not sneer nor jeer at what comes from the Lord, for if we do, we endanger our salvation.”¹⁴⁰

A year later, Brigham acknowledged the struggle the female Saints were having in living this law. He said that he was often approached by men saying that their wives have “not seen a happy day since I took my second wife” and “that many of them are wading through a perfect flood of tears, because of the conduct of some men.” He put forth a solution to help alleviate the negative attitudes. “I am going to give you from this time to the 6th day of October next, for reflection, that you may determine whether you wish to stay with your husbands or not, and then I am going to set every woman at liberty and say to them, Now go your way, my women with the rest, go your way.” Then he gave them a warning: “And if the women will turn from the commandments of God and continue to despise the order of heaven, I will pray that the curse of the Almighty may be close to their heels, and that it may be following them all the day long. And those that enter into it and are faithful, I will promise them that they shall be queens in heaven, and rulers to all eternity.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰Brigham Young, “Plurality of Wives.—The Free Agency of Man,” Jul. 14, 1855, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:266-267, [LINK](#).

¹⁴¹Brigham Young, “The People of God Disciplined by Trials—Atonement by the Shedding of Blood—Our Heavenly Father—A Privilege Given to all the Married Sisters in Utah,” Sep. 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 4:55-57, [LINK](#).

If the women wanted to leave the difficulties of polygamy, where would they go? Utah was separated from the United States by over one thousand miles of rough terrain, and winter was about to begin. Additionally, they were taught that they would be damned eternally if they left¹⁴² and that the emotional turmoil they were experiencing was a curse from Eve.¹⁴³

In what ways did theological teachings about a “curse” on women legitimize the social costs of polygamy for women? In later life, Zina Young (third Relief Society general president) commented that women in polygamous relationships “expect too much attention from the husband” and explained that a “successful polygamous wife must regard her husband with indifference, and with no other feeling than that of reverence, for love we regard as a false sentiment; a feeling which should have no existence in polygamy.”¹⁴⁴ Zina found support and camaraderie in her relationships with family and women friends. Notwithstanding Zina Young’s call for wifely indifference towards husbands, several of my polygamous foremothers succumbed to resentment and envy.

Lydia Ann Cook’s granddaughter later recalled that jealousy emerged after Chauncy married his plural wife, Priscilla, whose poor health required much of his attention and care. During the winter of 1860, a young English convert named Tom Spackman boarded with **Lydia**’s family while trying to settle in Porterville. That same winter, both **Lydia** and Priscilla gave birth to sons. According to the family account, Priscilla became convinced that **Lydia**’s child, Omni, resembled Spackman and accused **Lydia** of infidelity. Chauncy reportedly believed the accusation, and, while administering to **Lydia** during a severe illness following childbirth, prayed that she would die if the child were not his. Instead, **Lydia** recovered while Chauncy himself became suddenly ill, only recovering after seeking forgiveness from **Lydia**.¹⁴⁵ The story, as

¹⁴²Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” Aug. 29, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:64, [LINK](#).

¹⁴³See Young, “The People of God Disciplined By Trials, Etc.” 4:57; George Q. Cannon, “Celestial Marriage,” Oct. 9, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:207, [LINK](#).

¹⁴⁴*New York World*, (Nov. 19, 1869), Quoted in Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Signature Books, 2001), 108.

¹⁴⁵Cynthia Estella Jones Tuttle, “Sketch of Lydia Ann Cook Porter,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

preserved by descendants, framed the episode as a moral lesson against unrighteous judgment.

Omni was born in January 1861, but Melvin had already been born eighteen months earlier in June 1858. So, while this story may be true, the details are incorrect. Despite its factual inconsistencies, this family memory illuminates the emotional tensions, suspicions, and fragile negotiations of trust that plural marriage demanded from both wives and husbands.

Living in polygamy may have broken **Elizabeth Ann Keate** beyond her strength. She died at thirty-seven years of age, in childbirth. Her great-grandson Loy Despain wrote in a biography that “There is a feeling by some in the family that **Elizabeth** may have died with a heavy heart. . . . She had 14 years of stable life with John but she was living in the era of polygamy and found herself sharing her husband with another woman, Ella Eugenia Despain, during the final year of her life.”¹⁴⁶

Ruth Amelia Newell’s granddaughter Verna Maud Boyce Judd wrote that **Ruth** moved with her husband to the mouth of Little Cottonwood Canyon where her last three children were born—at the same time that her sister-wife Susan was giving birth to her first three children. “Father got tired of an ailing wife and became faultfinding which made Mother very miserable and unhappy, and they were never as happy again.”¹⁴⁷ It is important to note that **Ruth** did not go with Solomon when he moved to Arizona with his third wife.

Melissa Caroline Johnson¹⁴⁸ married Alexander Hunsaker in 1869. **Melissa**’s polygamy experience was short-lived. Alexander married Sarah Elvira Tollman¹⁴⁹ in 1884 and was called to settle Arizona the same year. Sarah did not accompany Alexander but divorced him instead. We are left to wonder whether Sarah divorced because she was unwilling to go to Arizona or if there were other

¹⁴⁶Despain, “Elizabeth Ann Keate,” 27-28, [LINK](#).

¹⁴⁷Ella Eugenia Despain Boyce and Vernal Maud Boyce Judd, “Ruth Amelia Newell,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁴⁸Melissa Caroline Johnson, profile KWNP-TLW, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁴⁹Sarah Elvira Tolman, profile KWVC-318, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

reasons. Alexander did not marry polygamously again, even though he was only thirty-four when Sarah left. Since **Melissa**'s only experience in polygamy ended with a divorce, we may speculate as to whether Sarah and **Melissa** did not get along, or whether there was tension between Sarah and Alexander. In polygamist homes, what was more important: sister-wife relationships, or spousal relationships?

The most heartbreaking example I have read of the emotional toll caused by polygamy is that of **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron**. At the age of thirty-nine, first wife, **Melissa**, died not long after her husband's return from a mission and marriage to three additional wives within eighteen months. Third wife Clarinda Gleason's daughter wrote, "Mother often said that Melissa was as fine a woman as ever lived. She also said that Melissa's death was partly due to the conduct of her husband."¹⁵⁰ Of Melissa's death, Benjamin writes,

Melissa Bloomfield, the beloved wife of my youth came to parturition with her ninth child, Leah, a daughter, when all for a time appeared well. For many years she had been subjected to sinking-spells from a nervous affection in her head, and overcome by such an attack she sank until very low. . . . She passed as one falling asleep while in my arms, her head upon my breast. The dear loving wife of my youth had left us; our home and our hearts were desolate and in mourning.¹⁵¹

Nineteenth-century descriptions of "sinking-spells" often encompassed symptoms now associated with depression, including despair, emotional exhaustion, feelings of inadequacy and the loss of pleasure or hope in daily life."¹⁵² **Melissa**'s depression occurred in the same years that Benjamin was continually courting and marrying other women. When four children were born to four different wives within four consecutive months prior to **Melissa**'s death, how might such intense reproductive and domestic pressures have reshaped the emotional climate of the household? Could

¹⁵⁰"Sketch of Flora Clarinda Gleason Washburn," 2, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁵¹Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 208.

¹⁵²"From Nerves To Neuroses," *Science Museum*, Jun. 12, 2019, [LINK](#).

Benjamin not see the correlation? Under what conditions did plural marriage produce emotional resilience, and when did it correlate with isolation, depletion, or despair among wives?

Polygamy in Hiding

“You will see trouble, trouble, TROUBLE enough in these United States. And as I have said before I say today: I tell you in the name of God, woe! to them that fight against Zion, for God will fight against them” (John Taylor).¹⁵³

Beginning in 1874, the US Congress took definite legal steps to suppress the Church’s practice of polygamy.¹⁵⁴ By December 6, 1884, Presidents John Taylor and George Q. Cannon sent a letter to Church leaders in Arizona, warning, “A general attack is being made upon our liberties throughout all the Territories where our people reside. . . . There can be no question that there is apparently a concert of action on their [the federal officers’] part to push our people to the wall and to destroy our religious liberty and with it our religion itself.”¹⁵⁵ Polygamous husbands were counseled to go into hiding or relocate with their families. This edict affected six of my polygamous foremothers and their sister-wives.

As persecution of polygamists intensified, **Ruth Amelia Newell**’s husband’s health began to decline. It was thought that if he moved to a warmer climate, his strength might improve. He thus distributed his land to his children; then, he and his youngest wife, Charlotte, left for Arizona. At that time, **Ruth**’s family received the property west of Little Cottonwood Creek, and Susan Dean’s family, the property east of it. In 1885 he went to Thatcher, Arizona, where he lived the rest of his life. Because of the practice of polygamy, **Ruth** and Solomon separated after forty-three years of marriage. **Ruth** lived with her children for eighteen more years before she passed away. I don’t believe they ever saw each other after the move. How often did Solomon think of his estranged

¹⁵³Samuel W. Taylor, *The Last Pioneer: John Taylor, a Mormon Prophet* (Signature Books, 1999), 335.

¹⁵⁴“Official Statement on Plural Marriage,” *Church News* (June 17, 1933), 4, [LINK](#).

¹⁵⁵First Presidency to Stake Presidents, December 6, 1884, in John Taylor Family Papers, MS 0050, box 20, folder 3, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library, quoted in Eric Perkins and Mary Jane Woodger, “Administration from the Underground,” in *Champion of Liberty: John Taylor*, ed. Mary Jane Woodger (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 351, [LINK](#).

wives? How did long separations caused by anti-polygamy pressures reshape emotional bonds within plural families? In later life, how did wives and husbands redefine companionship and belonging after decades of marriage gave way to distance?

Elizabeth Ann Keate's sister-wife, Ella, recounted that she married John Keate during the height of federal prosecution against polygamists, when men were being imprisoned for practicing plural marriage. One night, shortly after their marriage, Ella's father received word from Salt Lake City that officers planned to arrest her. He "came down and roused us out of bed" so John could take her into hiding at the home of friends in Draper. Ella later remembered being told that, had the authorities found them, they likely would have been "turned . . . over to the tender mercies of the Grand Jury" while polygamist men were receiving prison sentences of up to three years.¹⁵⁶ Ella and **Elizabeth** were sister-wives for only one year before **Elizabeth** died in childbirth in 1879 at the age of thirty-seven, leaving Ella to raise **Elizabeth**'s children alongside her own. Reflecting later on the experience of caring for two families, Ella wrote that the "little things" of daily life "try one almost to the very quick." After **Elizabeth**'s death, John never married polygamously again, so his hiding from the law must have occurred during the year when he was married to both women. Their story invites questions about how the combined pressures of evading federal prosecution, secrecy, pregnancy, and domestic upheaval may have affected the physical and emotional well-being of plural wives during the anti-polygamy raids.

About the time the United States government intensified its raids against polygamists, **Catherine Aurelia Carling**'s husband, Edson, and a few of his associates went underground for six months. While he was away both of his wives gave birth. When he finally returned home, the family remained together for the next two years, but the threat of persecution continued to loom over them. President Wilford Woodruff sent word through the stake presidents that plural families who wished to relocate to Old Mexico would have his blessing. Since Edson's brother Warriner was already there with his families, the Porters decided

¹⁵⁶"History of Ella Eugenia Despain Boyce," 15.

to leave Utah behind. On September 4, 1890, after selling their home, **Catherine** and her family began the journey South. They arrived in Colonia Diaz in November, only to discover that water was scarce and irrigation canals had not yet been built. Accepting an invitation to relocate again, they moved to Juárez, where Edson found work as a shoemaker in a local store.¹⁵⁷ **Catherine** had seven more children in Mexico, including Evan Cook Porter, my paternal grandfather, born on December 29, 1902. Sister-wife Phoebe had nine more children during that time. Their refuge in Mexico proved temporary. In 1912, revolutionaries in Mexico began threatening Mormon colonists, forcing the families to flee once more. They returned first to Utah before eventually settling in Arizona.¹⁵⁸

After moving to Tempe, Arizona, in 1883, with his two families, Samuel Openshaw found little peace. It is said that he outsmarted the authorities by wearing his wife's calico dress and bonnet to pass through the town unrecognized. Finally, the difficulty of being a polygamist became too great, and Samuel resorted to moving his second family back to Utah. **Esther Melita Johnson** lived in Arizona, and Sarah Elizabeth Spainhower¹⁵⁹ lived in Utah. With the demands that Samuel faced of being a bishop in Tempe, Arizona, it was likely difficult for him to make regular trips to Utah to visit his second family.

Sarah had six children, ages one to ten, when she returned to Utah alone. Samuel did not abandon the family completely, but his prolonged absence appears to have reshaped the rhythms of family life. Earlier in the marriage, Sarah had given birth approximately every eighteen months, but after the separation there were now gaps of four and five years between births. Meanwhile, **Esther** continued bearing children regularly in Arizona until the age of forty-one, when she gave birth to her thirteenth and last child. In the 1900 U.S. census, Sarah is identified as "widowed," even though she had her final child with Samuel the following year, and Samuel didn't die until 1904.¹⁶⁰ Such circumstances invite questions about

¹⁵⁷"History of Edson Darius Porter, 533, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁵⁸"Biography of Catherine Aurelia Carling Porter," *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁵⁹Sarah Elizabeth Spainhower, profile KWJ4-ZQ2, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁶⁰"United States, Census, 1900", Entry for [Sarah] Elizabeth Openshaw, 1900, [LINK](#).

how intermittent fatherhood and geographic separation affected the emotional lives of children in plural families. How did young children understand a father who appeared only occasionally? And how did prolonged absence reshape Sarah's experience of marriage, motherhood, and family identity within a still technically intact plural union?

Though **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron** died in 1860, well before the polygamy raids occurred, I should make mention of her sister-wives' experiences. In 1879, Benjamin was called to open a place of refuge in Mexico for those who wished to flee from the coming storm. Benjamin gathered his family together and asked for volunteers to go with him to Mexico. Several of his sons were willing, "but of my 5 wives not one could afford the sacrifice. . . . I must go without the companionship of a wife."¹⁶¹

A plural wife learns to be independent. The bond that would motivate a monogamous wife to travel with her husband wherever he was called to go was not as strong in polygamous marriages. Wives were used to being without their husbands. When a difficult relocation was discussed, it is no wonder that the wives didn't choose to go. Putting his feelings above her own, and once again being the one to endure the hardship of relocating with her husband, Sarah Jane decided to accompany Benjamin. They left in May of 1882. It is difficult to understand the circumstances and feelings that existed during this perilous time. The husbands were torn between devotion to each of their wives and fear of incarceration, if not obedience to the law. The wives were divided between feelings of neglect and desire for companionship.

A few years later, Benjamin moved to St. George to be in hiding. None of his wives went with him. Sarah Jane and Harriet Naomi were the only wives to even pay him a short visit during that time. Benjamin wrote, "I am alone, and whatever care or solace I receive in my hermit life is by the hand or voice of those who are not my own children, or that of their mothers. Yet, unlike many others I am not in prison and why should I complain?"¹⁶² Upon returning to Arizona, Benjamin summed up the purpose of his practice of polygamy. He wrote:

¹⁶¹Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 251.

¹⁶²Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 289.

I spent a portion of the day at my son-in-law Wm J LeBaron's where were assembled a number of my children and my wife, Susan A., who has not spoken to me since my return from over two years exile, hiding from the penalty of the law for the privilege, to her, of being the mother of her own dear children, and of attaining the highest and almost sacred blessings even on earth bestowed upon woman.¹⁶³

Benjamin felt that he had sacrificed to do his duty as a polygamist, so that his wives could obtain their exaltation, yet he felt that they didn't appreciate him for it. Did he recognize the sacrifice they had made?

Lovina Jones and Samantha Lake¹⁶⁴ lived as sister-wives in Idaho for nineteen years until persecutions became great. In 1877, Noah volunteered to move to Arizona as a missionary and pioneer. Samantha chose not to go with Noah. Instead, she and her children still at home went to New Mexico to spend time with her married daughter. While there, the family contracted smallpox. After twenty-four years of marriage and sixteen children, Samantha died without her husband by her side. Noah drove there to retrieve his children, and upon their return, **Lovina** took the children under her wing. Norman, one of the oldest of the four children, declared he would always be grateful to Aunt **Lovina** "for her kindly care" in those bereaved days.¹⁶⁵

Hiding, exile, relocation, divided households, and prolonged absences became woven into the ordinary fabric of family life. Women often bore the practical burdens of maintaining homes, raising children, managing pregnancies, and preserving emotional stability, while husbands moved between households, concealed themselves from authorities, or fled to distant colonies. Children grew up with interrupted paternal presence, shifting domestic arrangements, and mothers who were simultaneously married and effectively alone. Plural marriage, as experienced by my foremothers, seemed to produce both adaptation and emotional distance.

¹⁶³Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 299.

¹⁶⁴Samantha Lake, profile LLQF-RKK, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

¹⁶⁵Stapley, "Biography of Lovina Jones Lake Brimhall."

Polygamy Testimonials

And she shall be brought down and shall speak out of the ground, and her speech shall be low out of the dust; and her voice shall be as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground, and her speech shall whisper out of the dust (Isaiah 29:4, adapted).

The pioneers' defense of polygamy in response to outside criticism may have done more to shape their self-identity than even living the lifestyle. Even though relatively few Mormons practiced polygamy, defense of plural marriage was required. Polygamy helped the Mormons develop a group loyalty.¹⁶⁶

Ruth Stapley recalled the words of her grandmother, **Lovina**, saying, "Living in polygamy were the happiest days of my life... And if you can't say something good about it, then keep your mouth shut."¹⁶⁷ **Lovina** lived nineteen years in polygamy and then forty years in monogamy after her sister-wife died of smallpox.

Even as **Lovina** kept the good memories of polygamy forefront in her mind, her patriarchal blessing, given after she had lived many years as a plural wife, reflected her deepest feelings: "the Lord thy God has witnessed your loneliness and your deep sorrow and has guided you by inspiration, and you have been counted worthy to be associated with the Saints of the Most High who has given you power to control your feelings."¹⁶⁸ **Lovina** was living with an aching concern that many LDS women feel today. When she was twelve years old, she had been sealed to a man she was married to for only one year. Her second marriage to Noah Brimhall lasted fifty-nine years and brought forth fifteen children. According to Mormon doctrine of the time, she could not be sealed to this life-long partner. Her blessing may have given her hope. It went on to say, "This is the voice of the Holy Spirit, and you shall stand in your lot and place with him thou hast chosen." After almost one hundred years, **Lovina** was sealed by proxy to her second husband, Noah Brimhall, on January 13, 1976, in the Salt Lake Temple.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶Paula Kelly Harline, *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club* (Oxford Press, 2024), 48.

¹⁶⁷Stapley, "Biography of Lovina Jones Lake Brimhall."

¹⁶⁸Lovina Jones Patriarchal Blessing, March 15, 1886.

¹⁶⁹Lovina Jones, profile KWN4-2C3, *FamilySearch Family Tree*, [LINK](#).

On one occasion, when asked to bear her testimony, Eliza Hunsaker, **Harriet Vernisha Beckstead**'s sister-wife and first wife of the family, said: "[When] my husband accepted the Gospel and was baptized, I too was ready and when the principle of plural marriage was made known to us, I believed it to be sent of God and consented to my husband taking 4 other wives. I have never regretted it."¹⁷⁰

In 1881, **Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron**'s fifth sister-wife, Sarah Melissa Holman, wrote a letter that she deposited into the Relief Society Jubilee Box in Payson, Utah, to be opened by her posterity in 1930. It stated:

The principles of our religion are the saving principles of all the world. All who do not yield obedience to the same must surely perish for there is no true happiness outside this Kingdom. I want to express my sentiments in relation to Celestial Marriage [plural marriage]. To the great clamor of the gentiles I can bear my testimony—faithfully and truthfully—that in it I find happiness, joy, peace, love and beauty. God sends the choice, noble spirits to take the tabernacles begotten by polygamous parents, and power with them that will cause the enemies of his Saints to fear and tremble and crumble to the ground, sooner, or later. This is not guesswork with me.¹⁷¹

Sarah went on to identify herself as the fifth wife of her husband, mother of eleven children. She explained:

Four wives of us have raised our families under the same roof, having separate rooms. Children of four families raised in the same dooryard; most of them grown into young men and women and are devotedly fond of each other as brothers and sisters. All of them are intelligent and full of the spirit of the Gospel. We can have a dance, sing in a choir, or theater; meeting, or any sociable

¹⁷⁰“Sketch of the Life of Eliza Collins Hunsaker,” 6, *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

¹⁷¹“A copy of a letter written by Sarah Melissa Holman Johnson, and placed in Jubilee Box in 1881,” *FamilySearch Memories*, [LINK](#).

enjoyment independently. Our sons and their wives, mothers and daughters, one in all, join in religious, or sociable amusements and enjoy ourselves very much. The Spirit of the Lord rules us and crowds evil influences out of our midst. May God grant this ever be the happy lot of the faithful.¹⁷²

Sarah's account is rich in detail about children, shared space, and communal religious life, yet it offers little direct insight into her relationship with their shared husband. The emphasis falls instead on harmony, productivity, and spiritual unity within a multi-family household. Notably, this testimony was written the same year that Sarah's husband, Benjamin, was making preparations to escape to Mexico, a plan that initially none of his wives agreed to join. The contrast between this context and the tone of Sarah's testimony raises questions about how such accounts functioned—whether as personal reflection, religious witness, or participation in a broader public defense of plural marriage. In contrast to Sarah's testimony, Benjamin wrote nine years later:

[I]f we fail to govern those given to be with us then the influence of those we should govern will be against us, and the more near and dear they are to us the greater will be their power against us. And thus, when the confidence, loyalty and love of the wife, which gives strength to man is reversed, it becomes equally his weakness and dishonor . . . in view of this cruel condition sustained by those to whom I have given my life's best offering,—to whom I was never disloyal or untrue as a husband, I feel a sadness . . .¹⁷³

Even though his personal journal shows sentiments of heartache and loneliness, Benjamin defended the practice ardently in a letter to Elder Gibbs:

And while I can believe that to some plural marriage was a great cross, Yet I cannot say so from my own experience, for although in times that tried \men's/ hearts,

¹⁷²“A copy of a letter written by Sarah Melissa Holman Johnson.”

¹⁷³Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 308

I married Seven wives, I was blessed with the Gift to love them all; and altho[ugh] providing for so many was attended with great labor care & anxiety, yet there was sympathy & love as my Reward. And there is not one of my children or there [sic] mothers that are not dearer to me still than life.¹⁷⁴

These sources reveal discrepancies between public affirmation and private expression, showing clear differences in emphasis between male and female accounts. Sarah's testimony centers on children, shared domestic life, and spiritual unity. Benjamin's writings, particularly in private, focus on questions of loyalty, authority, and emotional strain. These contrasts raise important questions about genre, audience, purpose, and authenticity in plural marriage narratives.

Conclusion

From women who took care of their sister-wives' children after death or tragedy, to those who left their husbands with younger wives, and lived instead with their adult children, my foremothers adapted to the emotional, physical, financial, and spiritual demands of plural marriage in varied circumstances. Some endured isolation and loneliness, while others were strong and resilient in the face of extreme hardship rooted in a practice they believed was commanded by God. The silence around many of these women still weighs on me. Their voices are often filtered through male accounts or stories written generations later, leaving much of their emotional experience just out of reach. What remains are fragments, moments of labor, loss, movement, and care.

This paper has therefore employed a question-centered approach to family history, one that resists flattening women's experiences into a single narrative and instead asks how each woman negotiated plural marriage within her own changing circumstances. This interrogative approach follows questions raised by the surviving evidence: How did women adapt? Where did they find support, resistance, sorrow, or fulfillment? What choices were available to them within the religious and social world they inherited?

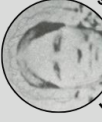


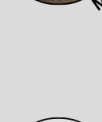





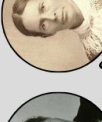








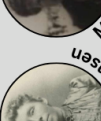
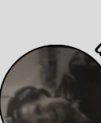



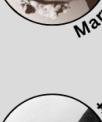

















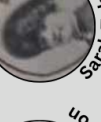
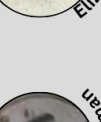


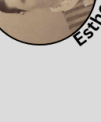
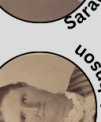



¹⁷⁴Benjamin F. Johnson, Letter to George F. Gibbs, 1903 April–October, 1911, 35, MS 1289, CHL, emphasis in the original, [LINK](#).

I may never fully know what my foremothers felt, but the evidence is clear to me: they were not all living the same story. Each woman navigated plural marriage in distinct and situational ways within the religious world they inherited. My hope is that they found joy and fulfillment in some measure through their sacrifices.

Darla Driggs is an independent researcher and educator whose work explores women's lived experiences within the historical practice of plural marriage in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. An eighth-generation member of the Church, she grew up immersed in family narratives that preserved the legacy of polygamy across generations. Motivated by a desire to better understand her feminine heritage, Driggs has conducted extensive genealogical and historical research on fifteen LDS foremothers, each of whom lived as a polygamous wife during the more than forty-five years the practice was sanctioned by the Church. She holds a degree in education from Brigham Young University and is the mother of six children.

Appendix

Vitals	Pioneer	Husband	Marriage	Age at wife polygamy #	# of kids	Sister Wives (vitals, marriage, & children)	Age at polygamy	Sister Wives Age Gap	Experience with Polygamy	Had children simultaneously
Nancy Arnets Warner 3/21/1864	7/29/1790- 6/21/1847	Sanford Porter 1873 Poreville	11/7/1826 Vermont	64	1	Phoebe Jane Simpson (1805-1883) 9/5/1854 0 kids	49	Phoebe 14 years younger	42 years mngy; 10 child bearing years in polyg	283 each delivered in same year
Elizabeth Stalcup	8/21/1853 had 5 children under age 12 (7 older)	Jonathan Browning 1822-1895-02/1/1873	11/7/1826 Tennessee	51	1	Elizabeth Caroline Clark (1817-1890) 3/17/1854 3 kids Ann Emma (1830-1919) 3/28/1838 7 kids	57 20 Ann 27 years younger	Elizabeth 14 years younger	28 years mngy; 30 polyg	Yes. All 4 of Miriam's were born after she was 48. Asenah's 4,8th children. She raised them together.
Asenath Browning	11/7/1835 -1/3/1859	Isaac Van Wagoner 1834-5/25/1911	11/7/1854 Oregon	22	1	Miriam Elizabeth Hobson (1843-1869) 06/27/1857 4 kids	13	Miriam 8 years younger	3 years mngy; 12 polyg; 20 yrs after death of 2nd wife	Yes. All 4 of Miriam's were born after she was 48. Asenah's 4,8th children. She raised them together.
Catherine Aurelia Carling	3/1/1865- 11/1/1957	Edson Darius Porter 4/12/1855-12/10/1933	6/2/1860 St George	21	1	Phoebe Malinda Garing (1869-1945) 2/19/1866 13 kids	16	Phoebe 4 years younger	6 yrs mngy; 47 yrs polyg	Yes. All 4 of Miriam's were born after she was 48. Asenah's 4,8th children. She raised them together.
Lydila Ann Cook	8/6/1830- 12/20/1882	Chauncy Warner Porter 10/20/1812-3/3/1888	3/28/1847 Nebraska	16	2	#1 Amy Sumner (1815-1847) 12/6/1833 8 children #3 Priscilla Strong (1830-1895) 2/10/1848 12 kids	32 18	Amy 15 years older Priscilla exact same age.	10 months in mngy	yes; 14 kids & 12 kids interspersed
Elizabeth Ann Keate	8/6/1841- 11/26/1879	John Boyce 2/22/1842-12/19/1923	12/18/1864 SLC	38	1	Ella Eugenia Despain (1855-1936) 1/30/1879 11 children	21	Ella 17 years younger	15 years mngy; 11 months polyg	no; died in childbirth along with baby; 15 one year into polygamy; 10 months pregnant though
Ruth Amelia Newell	9/22/1822- 8/21/1901	Solomon Joseph Despain 12/3/1823-2/17/1895	6/30/1842 Illinois	40	1	Susan Dean (1845-1922) 5/17/1862 10 children Charota Alberta Lunsford (1857-1940) 3/24/1881 15 kids Caroline Palencia Herrar (1832-1901) 11/24/1875 0 kids	18 23 25	Susan 21 years younger Charotta 35 years younger	20 years mngy; 33 years polyg	Yes; Ruth's last 3 babies were born the same time as Susan's first 3.
MaryAnn Kennedy Bird	12/7/1807- 10/11/1867	Charles Bird 9/19/1805-9/29/1884	3/22/1826 Pennsylvania	46	1	Sarah Ann Dunsdon (1833-1889) 2/31/1853 11 children	20	Sarah 26 years younger	32 years mngy; 14 years polyg	no; Charles married Sarah 3 years after MaryAnn stopped having children
Catherine Elmore Lince	7/6/1807- 11/12/1889	Alexander Beckstead 3/16/1802-2/25/1870	1/25/1823 Ontario Canada	47	1	Keziah Abine Peety (1835-1907) 11/18/1854 10 children Clarrisa Ann Gilson (1837-1911) 2/3/1856 7 children	19 18	Keziah 28 years younger Clarrisa 30 years younger	31 yrs mngy; 16 yrs polyg	no; Alexander married Keziah 4 years after Catherine's last baby was born
Harriet Vernisha Beckstead	6/17/1831- 1/6/1905	Abraham Hussaker Sr. 11/29/1812-13/1889	11/51/1850 SLC	19	2	#1 Eliza Collins (1817-1888) 13/1/1833 12 children #3 Margaret Sweeten (1837-1862) 6/11/1854 5 children #4 Ane Kathrine Jensen (1843-1927) 11/13/1858 10 kids #5 Mary Luckham (1845-1882) 3/14/1863 8 children	33 17 15 17	Eliza 14 years older Margaret 6 yrs younger Ane 12 years younger Mary 14 yrs younger	Polygamy her whole life	Yes!l Many many All 5 wives had children during Harriet's birthing years
Lucina Roberts Cathoon	3/5/1806- 1961 unknown	Peter Johnson 1801- 1840 Reynolds Cathoon 1738-1861	11/24/1824 Vermont about 1942	36	3	#1 Thirza Silles (1789-1866) 12/11/1810 7 children #3 Mary Hildrath (1806-?) 1/16/1846 no children	53 40	Thirza 17 years older Mary same age	Married to Peter Johnson 14 years after polygamy to Cathoon	no
Melissa Louisa Johnson	2/19/1853- 11/7/1921	Alexander Howard Huskard 1852-1910	11/29/1869 SLC	31	1	Sarah Elvira Tolman (1868-1888) 6/31/1864 no children	16	Sarah 15 years younger	Yes; 15 years mngy; 10 years polygamy; then back to monogamy	Sarah divorced him within a year of her death. Melissa and her father were having children simultaneously
Melissa Bloomfield LeBaron	1/28/1821- 9/4/1860	Benjamin Franklin Johnson 1818-1905	12/25/1841 Kritland	23	1	Mary Ann Hale (1826-1910) 11/14/1844 5 children Flora Clarrisa Holman (1819-1900) 2/3/1846 1 Child Harriet Naomi Holman (1834-1914) 3/17/1850 8 kids Sarah Melissa Holman (1838-1901) 2/3/1856 15 kids Susan Adeline Holman (1841-1919) 2/8/1857 8 kids Sarah Jane Spooner (1839-1911) 4/5/1857 3 kids	18 27 17 19 17	Mary 5 years younger Flora 2 years older Harriet 12 yrs younger Sarah 16 yrs younger Susan 20 yrs younger Sarah Jane 10 yrs younger	Yes; almost 3 years in mngy; 16 yrs in polyg	Yes!l Many! All 7 wives were having children at the same time. In 1860 there were babies born 4 months in a row!
Esther Melilla Johnson	9/26/1847- 4/26/1926	Samuel Openshaw 1833-1904	12/25/1863 Spring Lake Utah	25	1	Sarah Elizabeth Spainhower (1857-1928) 8/26/1872 10 children	15	Sarah 10 years younger	9 yrs mngy; 32 yrs polyg	Yes; almost all of them
Lovina Jones	3/31/1844- 11/6/1933	William Bailey Lake 1826-1858	3/20/1857 Utah	12	3	#1 Sarah Ann Marler (1834-1927) 12/26/1850 4 kids Louisia Ganner (1843-1930) 3/20/1857 0 children	23 13	Sarah was 9 years older Louisia was 7 months older	Married for one year then husband died	Yes
Noah Birchhall 1826-1918			1/25/1859 SLC	14	3	#1 Samantha Lake (1835-1878) 6/22/1853 11 children #2 Magdalena Zundel (1833-1919) 6/22/1857 1 child	22 24	Samantha 5 years older Magdalena 11 years older	19 yrs in polyg; 40 yrs in mngy after 1st wife died & 3rd wife left	Yes

 Lucina Roberts	 Thirza Stiles	 Mary Hillgrath	 Melissa L. Barton	 Mary Ann Hale	 Flora Clarinda Gleason	 Harriet H. Johnson	 Sarah H. Johnson	 Susan H. Johnson	 Sarah Jane Spooner
 Amy Sumner	 Lydia Cook	 Priscilla Stone	 Eliza Collins	 Harriet Beckstead	 Margaret Sweten	 Ane Kathrine Jensen	 Mary L. Prokman	 Nancy W. Vinner	 Phoebe Simpson
 Elizabeth Stalcup	 Elizabeth Clark	 Ann Emmett	 Mary Ann Kennedy	 Sarah D. Johnson	 Asenath Brimhall	 Miriam H. Johnson	 Catherin L. Lince	 Keziah Betty	 Clarrisa Gilson
 Ruth Newell	 Susan Dean	 Charlotta Lundstedt	 Caroline Herrar	 Samantia Lake	 Magdalena Zundel	 Lovina Jones	 Sarah Warner	 Louis G. Butler	 Catherin e Carling
 Melissa Johnson	 Sarah L. Dolman	 Elizabeth Keate	 Ella DeSpain	 Esther Johnson	 Sarah S. Galtmower	 Sarah S. Galtmower	 Catherin e Carling	 Catherin e Carling	 Catherin e Carling