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The *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* fosters respectful, inclusive, and scholarly dialogue on one of Mormon history's most debated topics. By bridging credentialed historians and independent researchers, we elevate discussions beyond polemics while maintaining high academic standards.

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

Michelle Brady Stone

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early Claims and Documentary Silence, 1848–1886

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

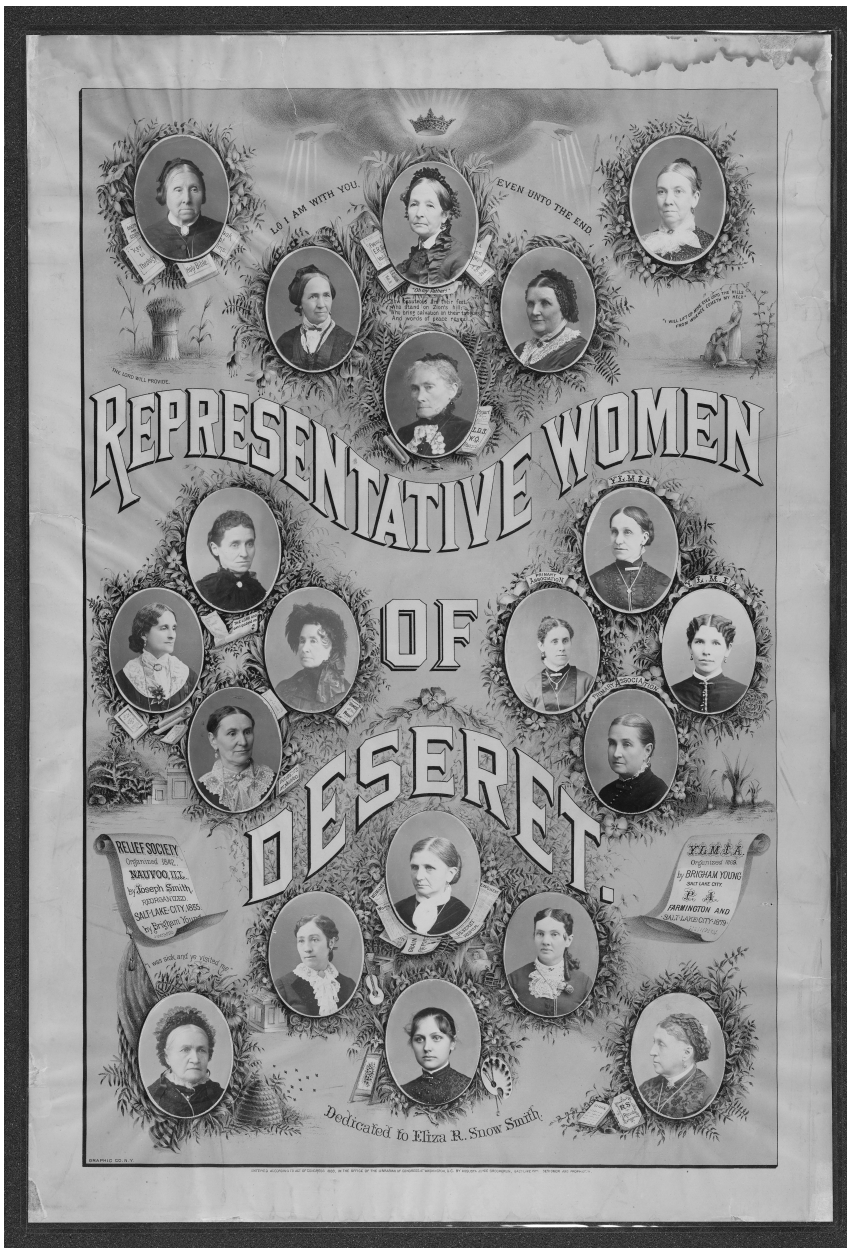
The significance of this silence becomes clearer when considered alongside Crocheron’s treatment of other women in the volume. While Crocheron specified that her selection of women was based on their positions of leadership and other contributions in Salt Lake City rather than their connection to Joseph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

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

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

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

³⁰Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 112.



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



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

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

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

Institutional Codification and Timeline Establishment, 1886–1888

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

³¹Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 2.

³²Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 12.

³³Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 30.

³⁴Crocheron, *Representative Women*, 110.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴¹William Clayton, Affidavit, Feb. 16, 1874, 3, MS 3423, CHL, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

⁴³Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 71–72, 94.

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

⁴⁵Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 71–72, 94.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵⁰Helen M. Whitney, 1876 Reminiscences and Diary, 22-23, MS 9670, CHL, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁵³Helen Whitney, *A Widow's Tale*, 236, 246, LINK.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Obscurity, Resurgence, and Documentary Recovery, 1889–1975

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

⁶³"Endowment House," Temples of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints website, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁷⁰Marriage Certificate for Wilson Law and Elizabeth Sikes, Dec. 25, 1842, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

⁷¹William D. Huntington, Report, circa Apr. 1, 1844, 3, JSP, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸⁵Bachman, *Study*, 152.

⁸⁶Bachman, *Study*, 337.

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

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

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

⁸⁷Bachman, *Study*, 149, 151-152.

⁸⁸Bachman, *Study*, 152.

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

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

The Ascendancy of the 1881 Letter, 1981–1997

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁹⁸Helen Mar Whitney, *Reminiscences and Diary*, MS 9670, CHL, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁰⁰Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy*, 53.

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

¹⁰²Holzapfel and Holzapfel, *A Woman's View*, ix-xlviii, n. 17.

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

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

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

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

¹⁰⁴Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 499.

¹⁰⁵Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 6.

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

¹⁰⁷Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 497.

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

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

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

¹⁰⁹Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 502.

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

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

¹¹²Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 502.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹⁶See pages 71-73 of this paper

¹¹⁷Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 500.

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

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

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

Scholarly Entrenchment and Interpretive Expansion, 2003–2013

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹²⁸Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 748.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³²William Henry Kimball, letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Coalville, Utah, January 20, 1907, MS 15403, CHL, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹³⁷Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 492.

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

¹³⁹Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 715.

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁴⁴Heber C. Kimball, Patriarchal Blessing of Helen Mar Kimball, May 28, 1843, Nauvoo, IL, MS 23826, CHL, *LINK*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵³Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 198.

¹⁵⁴Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 302.

¹⁵⁵Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 362.

¹⁵⁶Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 199.

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵⁷Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 671.

¹⁵⁸Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 201–202.

¹⁵⁹Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy*, 202.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Institutional Validation and Established Consensus, 2013–2025

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

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

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

²⁰¹Runnells, *CES Letter*, 52–53.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁰⁶Runnells, *CES Letter*, 53.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹⁵Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

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

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

²¹⁶Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

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

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

²¹⁹Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

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

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

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

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

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

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

²²³Turner, *Joseph Smith*, 316.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Polygamy's Genesis: Examining Claims of an Early 1830s Polygamy Revelation

Gwendolyn Stevens Wyne

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The nearly two-century struggle to establish a definitive history of Doctrine and Covenants Section 132 is reflected in the evolution of its section headings. When Section 132 was first added to the scriptures of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1876, it was described as “Revelation on the Eternity of the Marriage Covenant, including Plurality of Wives. Given through Joseph, the Seer, in Nauvoo, Hancock County, Illinois, July 12th, 1843.”¹ The 1921 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants added more detail to the summary of the revelation and changed the historical description slightly, implicitly placing polygamy’s beginnings in the Church earlier than 1843 by noting that the revelation was “recorded July 12, 1843” rather than “given,” as it was previously described.² This implication was plainly expressed in the 1981 edition’s section heading, which made a new historical assertion: “Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, it is evident from the historical records that the doctrines and principles involved in this revelation had been known by the Prophet since 1831.”³ Speaking about the 1981 update, Robert J. Matthews noted:

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

¹ *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (Deseret News Office, 1876), 423-432.

² *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1921), 239, [LINK](#). In 1930, the Church published *Latter-day Revelation: Selections from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, which included selections of the Doctrine and Covenants “of general and enduring value.” Because Section 132 was omitted from *Latter-day Revelation*, this edition is not included in the overview of changes in Section 132’s heading.

³ *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981).

Among the historical evidence for the earlier time period is a signed report written by Elder Orson Pratt in 1878 and published in the *Millennial Star*. In it he affirms his personal knowledge that the Prophet received a revelation on the matter in the fall of 1831. A second piece of evidence comes from an address by Elder Joseph F. Smith, delivered in Salt Lake City on 7 July 1878, in which he gives 1832 as the time of the revelation.”⁴

By the time the 1981 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants (hereafter D&C) was published, a historical narrative explaining Joseph Smith’s 1831 knowledge of divinely-sanctioned polygamy was widely acknowledged. B.H. Roberts’ *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* stated that Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible, begun in 1830 and concluded in 1833, was “doubtless” the inspiration for the question that initiated the polygamy revelation in Section 132.⁵

In 2001, the Church began the Joseph Smith Papers Project in an effort to make all documents created by or related to Joseph Smith publicly available. By 2013, findings from this still-underway project prompted the Church to make a number of adjustments and corrections to the section headings of the Doctrine and Covenants, including the introduction to Section 132.⁶ The new heading to Section 132 softened the 1831 claim slightly, stating, “Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, evidence indicates that some of the principles involved in this revelation were known by the Prophet as early as 1831.”⁷ By 2025, further research primarily from the body of evidence available in the Joseph Smith Papers (hereafter JSP)—

⁴Robert J. Matthews, “The New Publications of the Standard Works—1979, 1981,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 22, no. 4 (1982): 415, [LINK](#). Citations for the historical evidence Matthews’ notes are as follows: “Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith,” *Millennial Star* 40 (Dec. 9, 1878): 788, [LINK](#); Discourse by Joseph F. Smith, 7 July 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (London: Latter-day Saints Book Depot, 1880), 20:29, [LINK](#).

⁵B.H. Roberts, *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Period 1. History of Joseph Smith the Prophet, By Himself, Volume V* (Deseret News, 1909), xxix-xxx, [LINK](#).

⁶Summary of Approved Adjustments for the 2013 Edition of the Scriptures, 10, [LINK](#).

⁷Explanations for the Doctrine and Covenants Section Headings (Section 132), *The Joseph Smith Papers*, hereafter JSP, [LINK](#). This paper will address the sources listed in the Historical Introduction to Section 132 which support the 1831 narrative. Historical Introduction, Revelation, 12 July 1843 [D&C 132], JSP, [LINK](#).

which now includes the recently-acquired manuscripts to Smith's translation of the Bible—prompted the Church to adjust Section 132's introduction again, removing the speculative date of 1831. This heading now reads, "Although the revelation was recorded in 1843, evidence indicates that some of the principles involved in this revelation were known by the Prophet earlier."⁸ This change was made "to indicate that some ambiguity exists about when principles in this revelation were revealed to Joseph Smith."⁹

Although the Joseph Smith Papers do not give further details as to why Section 132's heading was changed, removing the speculative date of 1831 was appropriate and necessary. An examination of the historical record, including the statements and scriptures Smith produced in the early 1830s, reveals his marital theology actively condemned polygamy and its practitioners, and consistently upheld monogamy as the sole standard for the Church. This paper proposes that the narrative that Joseph Smith received a polygamy revelation in 1831, or while translating the Bible, is based upon a sparse documentary record, appearing to originate from a retrospective misinterpretation of one of Smith's earliest revelations regarding Native Americans. Over time, recollections were adapted to provide theological and legal precedent for a practice Smith's own early 1830s works—notably his translation of the Bible—explicitly rejected.

History of the 1831 Narrative

To understand what may have prompted the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to remove the 1831 reference in the 2025 revision of Section 132's heading, this paper will examine the historical evidence used to support Joseph Smith knowing about "the principle and doctrine of . . . many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1) as early as 1831, prompted by his translation of the Bible. Consideration will also be given to contextual events that may have led some to later associate polygamy with Smith's earliest revelations.

⁸Doctrine and Covenants 132, Section Heading (2025), *LINK*. Note, unless otherwise stated, all D&C scriptures quoted in this paper come from the 2025 version.

⁹Explanations for the Doctrine and Covenants Section Headings, JSP.

From the organizing days of the Church, Smith's theology was regularly scrutinized for marital innovations, as suspicions of sexual experimentation among new religious groups were often well-founded.¹⁰ As will be discussed later in the paper, Smith's revelations and publications consistently answered questions and accusations about marriage with affirmations of strict monogamy. However, one rumored marital recommendation that was neither denied nor condemned by Church leaders would have likely been unsettling to the sensibilities of early America: a supposed Joseph Smith revelation that elders of the Church form a matrimonial alliance with Native American women.

Ezra Booth Contemporary Account (1831)

Prophecies in the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's revelations ambitiously encouraged preaching to the "Lamanites," considered to be Native Americans who Church members anticipated would help build a temple of God in the "New Jerusalem."¹¹ Toward the end of 1830, Oliver Cowdery and others announced their determination by covenant "to go forth unto the Lamanites, to proclaim glad tidings of great joy unto them, by presenting unto them the fulness of the Gospel, of the only begotten son of God."¹² In 1831, disaffected member Ezra Booth reported that several methods were encouraged to facilitate this objective, including outfitting the Lord's storehouse with goods useful to the Natives, and inter-cultural marriage: "it has been made known by revelation, that it will be pleasing to the Lord, should they form a matrimonial alliance with the natives; and by this means the Elders... gain a residence in the Indian territory."¹³ Monogamy was assumed, as Booth's report included information of a man who found the idea "perfectly suited to his desires," but first needed to divorce his current wife, who was "violently opposed to Mormonism," to carry it out.¹⁴ This and other ideas to make inroads with the Native Americans were not successful; the elders' missionary efforts not

¹⁰Sarah M. Pearsall, *Polygamy and Bigamy* (Oxford University Press, 2013), *LINK*.

¹¹Introduction to Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833, JSP, *LINK*.

¹²Covenant of Oliver Cowdery and Others, Oct. 17, 1830, 1, JSP, *LINK*.

¹³Ezra Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," *Ohio Star* (Ravenna) 2, no. 49 (Dec. 8, 1831): 1, col. 1, *LINK*. Reproduced in E.D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Self-published, 1834), 220.

¹⁴Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," 1.

only sparked a Protestant missionary response to prevent them from proselyting, but also led to charges that members of the Church and Native Americans were in league to destroy other whites on the frontier.¹⁵

Nauvoo and the *Expositor* (1840s)

By the Nauvoo period (early 1840s), suspicions of Latter Day Saint alliances with Native Americans had been thoroughly displaced by allegations that Joseph Smith himself secretly approved and taught polygamy. These claims culminated in the printing of the *Nauvoo Expositor* in June of 1844. The *Expositor* provided affidavits testifying that Smith's 1843 marriage revelation taught a doctrine of polygamy, to which Smith responded, "the truth of God was transformed into a lie concerning this thing," and that "he had never preached the revelation in private, as he had in public—had not taught it to the anointed in the church in private, which statement many present confirmed."¹⁶ These and other purported falsehoods prompted the Nauvoo City Council to declare the *Expositor* a public nuisance and order the destruction of its press, which precipitated Smith's imprisonment and assassination soon after.¹⁷

Joseph Smith's Bible Translation

Joseph Smith had begun his new translation of the Bible in June of 1830, "intending to restore some of the plain and precious parts which had been lost," and he completed the formal effort of his translation in June of 1833.¹⁸ However, despite continued efforts to have his Bible translation published, competing priorities and financial constraints left Smith unable to see it in print before his death in 1844. As Robert J. Matthews explained, although Smith continued to go over his translation and make additional refinements

¹⁵David J. Whittaker, "Mormons and Native Americans: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 18, no. 4 (1985): 35, [LINK](#).

¹⁶Revised Minutes, Jun. 17, 1844, 1, JSP, [LINK](#).

¹⁷Revised Minutes, Jun. 17, 1844, 1.

¹⁸Kent P. Jackson, "New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 6, no. 3 (2005): 156-57, [LINK](#).

and corrections, “the *work* of translation was acceptable as far as the Lord required it of the Prophet at that time, but the *manuscript* was not fully prepared for the press.”¹⁹

After Joseph Smith was killed, Apostle Willard Richards visited Smith’s widow, Emma, requesting to take custody of Smith’s Bible manuscripts. Emma, however, “said she did not feel disposed to give it up at present.”²⁰ The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which thereafter established in Utah under the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, thus relocated without Smith’s Bible manuscript or any scribe of the translation, effectively severing contact between the LDS Church and the Bible translation for more than a century.²¹

In 1866, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS) in Illinois received Joseph Smith’s Bible translation manuscripts from Emma Smith, and the next year published them as *The Holy Scriptures, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation by Joseph Smith, Jr., The Seer*.²² Joseph Smith III, President of the RLDS Church, sent a copy to Orson Pratt, which was later used to produce the 1878 LDS *Pearl of Great Price*.²³ RLDS missionaries also began a widespread distribution of *The Holy Scriptures*, causing concern among some Latter-day Saints.²⁴ After hearing Orson Pratt publicly remark upon the new publication, Brigham Young arose to ward off interest in the scripture by “[bearing] testimony in strong terms that Joseph did not finish the New Translation of the old & New Testament which young Joseph had lately published.”²⁵ Others recollected that Young

¹⁹Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s Efforts to Publish His Bible Translation,” *Ensign* 13, no. 1 (Jan. 1983), 57–64, emphasis in the original, *LINK*.

²⁰Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. VII, xxvii, *LINK*. The scribes for Smith’s Bible translation were Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Emma Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Jesse Gause, and Frederick G. Williams.

²¹Jackson, “New Discoveries,” 149-150.

²²The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints officially changed its name to Community of Christ in 2001.

²³Reid L. Neilson and Mitchell K. Schaefer, “Excavating Early Mormon History: The 1878 History Fact-Finding Mission of Apostles Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt,” in *Joseph F. Smith: Reflections on the Man and His Times*, ed. Craig K. Manscill, Brian D. Reeves, Guy L. Dorius, and J. B. Haws (Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2013), 369, *LINK*.

²⁴Reed C. Durham, “A History of Joseph Smith’s Revision of the Bible,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1965, 210.

²⁵Wilford Woodruff journal, Jun. 20, 1868, 136, MS 1352, LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, UT, hereafter CHL, *LINK*.

stated “that the Prophet, before his death, had spoken to him about going through the translation of the scriptures again and perfecting it upon points of doctrine which the Lord had restrained him from giving in plainness and fullness at the time of which we write.”²⁶

In the 1893 cross-examination of his testimony in the Temple Lot Suit, Joseph Smith III referred to his father’s “Inspired Translation of the Bible” as well as “this volume called the Inspired Translation of the Holy Scriptures,” and in 1936 the RLDS Church adopted this term as the publication’s subtitle, *Inspired Version* (IV).²⁷ In 1944 the RLDS Church published a “Corrected Edition” of the IV, which brought the text into greater harmony with the original manuscripts.²⁸ By that time, however, lack of scholarly access to the manuscripts had taken its toll and LDS suspicions of the IV had developed into accusations, as demonstrated in LDS Apostle Mark E. Petersen’s 1966 book, *As Translated Correctly*:

Not satisfied with [the LDS-published segments of Smith’s Bible translation of Genesis and Matthew], the Reorganized Church decided to publish the “inspired version” including what changes the Prophet had made. But, not happy with all of his changes, THEY ALTERED THE BIBLE TO SUIT THEIR OWN DESIRES, and actually changed some of the corrections made by the Prophet Joseph himself . . . Such changes of course make the work of questionable value.²⁹

In 1968, concerns such as those expressed above began to resolve as LDS scholar Robert Matthews was granted access to inspect whether Smith’s Bible manuscripts were accurately published in the IV.³⁰ Verification of the IV led the LDS Church to adopt portions of what they then designated the Joseph Smith Translation (JST) in the footnotes and appendix of the 1979 edition of the

²⁶George Q. Cannon, *Life of Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Deseret Book Co., 1958), 142 n.*, [LINK](#).

²⁷Abstract of Evidence, Temple Lot Case, U.S.C.C. 491, [LINK](#).

²⁸*The Holy Scriptures: Inspired Version, Translated and Corrected by the Spirit of Revelation by Joseph Smith, Jr., The Seer* (Herald Publishing House, 1944), Foreword.

²⁹Mark E. Petersen, *As Translated Correctly* (Deseret Book, 1966), 29-30, emphasis in the original, [LINK](#).

³⁰Thomas E. Sherry, “Robert J. Matthews and the RLDS Church’s Inspired Version of the Bible,” *BYU Studies* 49, no. 2 (2010): 112-113, [LINK](#).

LDS Church's Bible. While the JST contains only about one-third (1,200 of 3,410) of the verses Smith changed, LDS leaders since this adoption have clearly encouraged the study and use of Smith's entire work, facilitating access to it through its inclusion in the JSP and effectuating the 2024 acquisition of the original Bible manuscripts from the Community of Christ.³¹

1852 Polygamy Revelation Announcement

Within a few years of Joseph Smith's martyrdom, members of the Church who elected to follow the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles began arriving in Utah. By 1852, it was "well known... that [they had] embraced the doctrine of plurality of wives as part of their religious faith," but church members had yet to see evidence that this "essential" doctrine came from Joseph Smith.³² Brigham Young, then president of the Church, called a special conference at which today's Section 132 was presented to the members.³³ In preaching the doctrine before the revelation was read, Orson Pratt asked, "But, says one, how have you obtained this information? By new revelation. When was it given, and to whom? It was given to the Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, Joseph Smith, on the 12th day of July, 1843; only about eleven months before he was martyred for the testimony of Jesus."³⁴

Elder Thomas Bullock read the revelation "given to Joseph Smith, Nauvoo, July 12th, 1843," which asserted that Smith had prayerfully inquired how the Lord justified "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon... as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1).³⁵ The revelation explained that the promises

³¹Historical reasons, space limitations, and instructions from the First Presidency influenced which changes were noted in the LDS scriptures beginning in 1979. See Thomas E. Sherry and W. Jeffrey Marsh, "Precious Truths Restored: Joseph Smith Translation Changes Not Included in Our Bible," *Religious Educator* 5, no. 2 (2004): 57-74, [LINK](#).

³²Orson Pratt, Discourse, Aug. 29, 1852, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2025, 1-2, CR 100 317, CHL, [LINK](#).

³³"Minutes of conference: a special conference of the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 28th, 1852, 10 o'clock, a.m., pursuant to public notice," *Deseret News-Extra* (Sep. 14, 1852): 14-28, [LINK](#).

³⁴Minutes of conference, 1852, 21.

³⁵Minutes of conference, 1852, 26, emphasis in the original.

Abraham received concerning his posterity were fulfilled by Sarah when she gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife, and it commands, "Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham" (D&C 132:32). Between 1852 and 1890, this revelation was used to publicly promote polygamy to the Latter-day Saints as "necessary to a man's highest exaltation in the life to come," and as evidence that polygamy was "commanded by God through Joseph Smith."³⁶

***The Seer* and Anti-Polygamy Sentiment**

Following the announcement of the polygamy revelation, Brigham Young tasked Apostle Orson Pratt to go to Washington, D.C. and publish an apologetic magazine targeted at non-Mormons.³⁷ *The Seer* launched in January 1853, predominantly focused on explaining and defending polygamous doctrine with an ambitious goal:

It is hoped that the President elect, the Hon. Members of Congress, the Heads of the various Departments of the National Government, the high-minded Governors and Legislative Assemblies of the several States and Territories, the Ministers of every Religious denomination, and all inhabitants of this great Republic, will patronize this Periodical, that through the medium of our own writings they may be more correctly and fully informed in regard to the peculiar doctrines, views, practices, and expectations of the Saints.³⁸

The Seer failed to persuade U.S. leaders, however, and in May, 1854, the first legislative attempt to discourage Utah polygamy was debated. A bill to extend the federal land system to the Utah territory was introduced with the stipulation that it not apply to any man with more than one wife.³⁹ While the bill was ultimately

³⁶“Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate: in the matter of the protests against the right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a senator from the state of Utah, to hold his seat” (Government Printing Office, 1904), 1:18, *LINK*.

³⁷Orson Pratt, *The Seer*, M205.1 S453 vols. 1-2 (1853-1854), CHL, *LINK*.

³⁸Pratt, *The Seer* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1853): 1.

³⁹Orma Linford, “The Mormons and the Law: The Polygamy Cases,” *Utah Law Review* 9, no. 3, article 3 (1965): 313, *LINK*.

set aside, Latter-day Saint polygamy was in the government's sights; soon thereafter, the Republican party platform attacked it as one of the "twin relics of barbarism."⁴⁰

First Account of an 1831 Polygamy Revelation (1857)

In response to such external hostility, Utah leaders had a mounting incentive to prove that polygamy was not a recent innovation, but a foundational doctrine of the Church. While compiling Smith's history in 1857, as U.S. Army troops were amassing to depart for Utah and forcibly remove Brigham Young from his position as governor of the territory, Wilford Woodruff recorded a remark by Young that pushed the timeline back further than the 1843 date the polygamy revelation was said to have been revealed: "The revelation upon a plurality of wives was given to Joseph Smith in 1831. He revealed it to Oliver Cowdery alone upon the solem[n] pledge that he would not reveal it or act upon it but He did act upon it in a secret manner & that was the cause of his overthrow."⁴¹ Young retold versions of this story throughout his life, and he appeared to have been drawing from recollections of the same revelation Ezra Booth reported Smith giving in 1831. Because Smith's 1831 revelation was not understood at the time to promote polygamy, these later recollections seem to have been influenced by, and misinterpreted to conform to, the contemporary Latter-day Saint doctrine of polygamy and the institutional needs of the Church.

Ezra Booth's 1831 report stated that Joseph Smith told one man "who has left his wife in the state of N.Y. that he is entirely free from his wife, and he is at liberty to take him a wife from among the Lamanites," provided he first "return to the state of N.Y. and settle his business [legally divorce his wife]."⁴² This man appears to have been Martin Harris, who was separated from his wife at the

⁴⁰"Jeffersonian Roots, Republican Party Platform, June 18, 1856," *The Republican Party: Documents Decoded*, ed. Douglas B. Harris and Lonce H. Bailey (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 4, *LINK*.

⁴¹Wilford Woodruff journal, 1854 January-1859 December, 239, entry for Aug. 26, 1857, MS 1352, CHL, *LINK*.

⁴²Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," *Ohio Star* 11, no. 49 (Dec. 8, 1831): 1, col. 4, *LINK*.

time of the alleged revelation.⁴³ The minutes of an 1845 Council of Fifty meeting indicate this, with W.W. Phelps recounting when “6 or 8 [elders] went over the boundaries of the U.S. to preach— Jos. went to prayer—he then commenced a revelation that Martin [Harris] was to marry among the Laminites [sic]—& that I was to preach that day—&c &c it was a long revelation.”⁴⁴

W.W. Phelps Letter (1861)

In 1861, W.W. Phelps wrote Brigham Young a letter detailing “the substance” of that long revelation, which now included a justification for men having many wives. According to Phelps’ 1861 letter, Smith had said that it was the Lord’s will that:

in time, ye should take unto you wives of the Lamanites and Nephites . . . About three years after this was given, I [Phelps] asked brother Joseph privately, how “we,” that were mentioned in the revelation could take wives from the “natives”—as we were all married men? He replied, instantly “In the same manner that Abraham took Hagar and Katurah [Keturah]; and Jacob took Rachel Bilhah and Zilpah; by revelation.”⁴⁵

As part of the mission to the Lamanites, Smith had arrived in Missouri in July 1831 with a company consisting of most of the named men in Phelps’ letter, and their first Sunday there Phelps “preached to a mixed audience of white pioneers, negroes, and Indians,” two of whom were baptized that same day.⁴⁶ While this would have been a natural bridge to such a topic as inter-cultural marriage, the lack of contemporary documentation for any such polygamous revelation shows Phelps almost certainly misremembered Smith later speaking favorably of polygamy as a way to accomplish the revelation. As LDS researcher Clair Barrus

⁴³Dennis A. Wright, “Caroline Young Harris: The Kirtland Wife of Martin Harris,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: Ohio and Upper Canada*, ed. Guy L. Dorius, Craig K. Manscill, and Craig James Ostler (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2006), 112, *LINK*.

⁴⁴Appendix 2: Council of Fifty, Minutes, Feb. 27, 1845, 5, JSP, *LINK*.

⁴⁵W. W. Phelps, letter to Brigham Young, Aug. 12, 1861, [3-4], Revelations collection, circa 1829-1876, MS 4583, CHL, *LINK*.

⁴⁶*History of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints* (Herald House, 1952), 1:204, *LINK*.

observes, “Anachronisms in the text of the revelation . . . suggest events were not correctly recalled thirty years after the fact,” and that “the most likely scenario explaining the [1831] revelation . . . is that Martin Harris, who was estranged from his wife, was to take an Indigenous wife to obtain legal access to Indian territory. Other accompanying Elders may have also been invited to participate in the alliance.”⁴⁷

Supporting this conclusion is the lack of evidence from Phelps’ named companions Oliver Cowdery,⁴⁸ Martin Harris,⁴⁹ Joseph Coe,⁵⁰ and Ziba Peterson.⁵¹ While all except Martin Harris were deceased when Phelps wrote his 1861 account and could thus not corroborate nor deny whether the revelation implied or instructed polygamy,⁵² all of the men had been excommunicated from the Church in the late 1830s, yet in statements of complaint against Joseph Smith none of them insinuated that polygamy was part of his theological framework. Such a complaint would have been worth voicing for anyone disaffected from Smith, as polygamy was at odds with Smith’s public theology. Additionally, no Latter-day Saint elder ever did “take . . . wives of the Lamanites and Nephites.”⁵³ Martin Harris, who appears to be the one Booth recounted was “entirely free from his wife” provided he first obtain a legal divorce, ultimately remarried Brigham Young’s niece Caroline Young in 1836 after his first wife, Lucy, died.⁵⁴

Martin Harris in fact expressed doctrinal skepticism when he later heard that the Utah Church was teaching polygamy. A year after Section 132 was publicly announced and not long before his second wife Caroline would leave him to join the Latter-day Saints in Utah, Harris reportedly pressed an LDS elder to “reconcile

⁴⁷ Clair Barrus, “Prologues to Plurality: A Study of Joseph Smith’s Revelations on Marriage,” in Cheryl L. Bruno, *Secret Covenants: New Insights on Early Mormon Polygamy*, (Signature Books 2024), 7-8.

⁴⁸ Oliver Cowdery, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁴⁹ Martin Harris, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁵⁰ Joseph Coe, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁵¹ Ziba Peterson, Biography, JSP, [LINK](#).

⁵² Oliver Cowdery died in 1850, Joseph Coe in 1854, Ziba Peterson in 1849, and Joshua Lewis in 1835.

⁵³ Revelation, 1831 July 17, Revelations collection, circa 1829-1876, MS 4583, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁵⁴ Wright, “Caroline Young Harris,” 113.

polygamy with the doctrine taught by one of the old prophets.”⁵⁵ Had polygamy been spoken of favorably by Smith in the early 1830s, Harris would have already had the opportunity to object and ask Smith himself for such an explanation, and would thus not be likely to express confusion at the doctrine.

Most challenging to Phelps' assertion of polygamous teachings following this 1831 revelation are his own 1835 letters on the subject of eternal marriage. “MY ONLY ONE:” Phelps began a letter to his wife, Sally, later referencing Jesus's teachings on marriage in Luke 20 and explaining, “This—is the reason why I have called you at the commencement of this letter, my only one, because I have no right to any other woman in this world nor in the world to come, according to the law of the celestial kingdom.”⁵⁶ As Richard Van Wagoner observed, Phelps' own letters demonstrate he had no knowledge of church-sanctioned polygamy in 1835, making this later claim problematic.⁵⁷

External Pressures and Heber C. Kimball Sermon (1866)

Following the passage of the 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act⁵⁸ and the arrival of the first RLDS missionaries in 1863, Utah leaders were under increasing pressure to defend polygamy legally and theologically, which included establishing its prophetic provenance through Joseph Smith. This heightened scrutiny may have prompted some leaders to begin publicly anchoring the practice as a foundational doctrine revealed in the early 1830s. Heber C. Kimball's 1866 sermon to a Salt Lake City congregation exemplifies this effort; he directly challenged the skepticism surrounding polygamy's

⁵⁵Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, “Rest Assured, Martin Harris Will Be Here in Time,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 1 (2011): 6, [LINK](#).

⁵⁶W. W. Phelps letter, Kirtland, Ohio to Sally Phelps, Liberty, Missouri, Sep. 16, 1835, MS 4587, CHL, [LINK](#): see typescript: Bruce A. Van Orden, “Writing to Zion: The William W. Phelps Kirtland Letters (1835–1836),” *BYU Studies* 33, no. 3 (1993): 563–64, [LINK](#).

⁵⁷Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History* (Signature Books, 1992), 17–18, n. 2, [LINK](#).

⁵⁸The first federal law to criminalized polygamy in all U.S. territories, the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act of 1862 also disincorporated the Church. However, due to the Civil War it was largely unenforced.

origins by insisting Joseph Smith first received a revelation on polygamy in Kirtland:

Now I am going to tell it right out as people do not believe that polygamy started with ~~prophet~~ [sic] the prophet it was thus saith the Lord for my servant Willard and Brigham and Heber to take more wives for this is pleasing in my God's sight and now they [say?] we established polygamy . . . Joseph Smith had the revelation on polygamy and there is no power in earth or in hell that can dispute it that revelation Joseph received in Kirtland and hid it up and it came forth in Nauvoo and Sister Emma burned the original but we was very cautious and took a copy and it is not out of existence and never will be through time nor all eternity.⁵⁹

Kimball's 1866 claim does not include any further details but does align with the timing suggested in Brigham Young's 1857 account. However, it is similarly not supported by any documents or sources from the Kirtland era. Kimball did not join the body of the Church in Kirtland until the fall of 1833 and was not in leadership until 1835. In this same 1866 sermon, Kimball says that "the first time we knew of" the revelation to take more wives was when he and his fellow elders came home from their mission to England in 1841, and yet he does not explain how he knew Smith received the revelation in Kirtland.⁶⁰ Kimball's claim may be unique in that it seems to suggest that the polygamy revelation was a written document received in Kirtland and then hidden until Nauvoo. This claim did not gain traction, and little other than a seemingly erroneous 1883 journal entry of George Richards can be found to defend a Kirtland-era polygamy document.⁶¹

⁵⁹Heber C. Kimball, Discourse, Sep. 2, 1866, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2025, CR 100 912, 5, CHL, *LINK*.

⁶⁰Kimball, Discourse, Sep. 2, 1866, Pitman Transcription.

⁶¹Richards recorded attending a meeting in June 1883 where Latter-day Saint high councilman Thomas Grover signed an affidavit that "Joseph Smith (the prophet) had the revelation on Celestial marriage (as is recorded in Doctrin[e] & Covenants) read in 1836 by his Brother Hyrum before the High council for their acceptance or rejection." As historians note, other evidence available from this time indicates that Grover's 1883 affidavit likely named 1843 as the year Hyrum Smith read a revelation regarding marriage and polygamy to the high council, though the original affidavit is no longer extant to verify. George F. Richards Journals, Jun. 10, 1883, n1, CHL, *LINK*.

Brigham Young, Oliver Cowdery, and Oral Traditions (1867 and 1872)

The influence of W. W. Phelps' recollection is apparent in Brigham Young's recorded sermons, as in the following example from 1867:

Joseph had a manifestation given to him that he didn't write out never was written until 1843 I think in the year 1830 or 1831 this manifestation was given to Joseph it was simply this the Lord said to Joseph the time has come that it is my will that my servants should take to themselves wives but the revelations [sic] was not given but a manifestation to Joseph that the elders of Israel would be required to take more than one wife.⁶²

Just as Phelps and later Young conflated Joseph Smith's 1831 inter-cultural marriage revelation with polygamy, Young's accounts of Oliver Cowdery appear to suffer from similar distortion. In 1867 and 1872, Young added further detail to his 1857 statement that Cowdery "did act upon" a polygamy revelation despite being warned not to by Smith.⁶³ In his 1872 discourse to a congregation in Salt Lake City, Young expounded upon Cowdery's error, narrating the scene between Smith and Cowdery and placing the revelation on polygamy yet earlier, to 1829:

[W]hile Joseph And Oliver were translating the Book of Mormon, they had a revelation that the order of Patriarchal Marriag[e] and the Sealing was right. Oliver said unto Joseph, "Br Joseph, why don't we go into the Order of Polygamy, and practice it as the ancients did? We know it is true, then why delay?" Joseph's reply was, "I know that we know it is true, and from God, but the time has not yet come." This did not seem to suit Oliver, who expressed a determination to go into the order of

⁶²Brigham Young, Discourse, Sep. 8, 1867, Church History Department Pitman Shorthand transcriptions, 2013-2025, CR 100 912, CHL, *LINK*.

⁶³Wilford Woodruff journal, 1854 January-1859 December, entry for Aug. 26, 1857, MS 1352, 239, CHL.

Plural Marriage anyhow, altho he was ignorant of the order and pattern and the results.⁶⁴

However, despite this story's repeated telling, the challenges to its veracity are manifold; and consequently, this narrative is viewed with skepticism by scholars.⁶⁵ As with Heber C. Kimball, Young did not join the church until 1832 and did not join the body of the Latter-day Saints in Ohio until fall of 1833. He was thus not able to have witnessed the conversations he quoted. Additionally, Oliver Cowdery was not married until December 18, 1832, making polygamous marriage any time before that impossible.⁶⁶

In his 1831 letters, Ezra Booth had criticized Oliver Cowdery for entering into a matrimonial contract with a young lady with the consent of her parents, "but as soon as his back is turned upon her, he violates his engagements, and prostitutes his honor by becoming the gallant of another, and resolves in his heart, and expresses resolutions to marry her."⁶⁷ Some have asserted that this demonstrates Cowdery's determination to engage in polygamy before it was permitted,⁶⁸ however, as Lawrence Foster observed, "If Cowdery's character in this regard had been anything but spotless, there can be little doubt that he would have been thoroughly vilified for his indiscretions."⁶⁹ Indeed, Church discipline records seem to dispute the claim that Cowdery became polygamous: Cowdery was the Second Elder of the Church in 1830 and remained one of the top leaders until his excommunication in 1838, and the charges against Cowdery did not include any accusation of attempting polygamy.⁷⁰

Further challenging Brigham Young's description of Oliver Cowdery is an 1846 letter Cowdery wrote to his sister. Cowdery's

⁶⁴A. Karl Larson and Katherine Miles Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker* (Utah State University Press, 1980), 349, [LINK](#).

⁶⁵See, for example, Brian C. Hales, "'Guilty of Such Folly'? Accusations of Adultery or Polygamy against Oliver Cowdery," in *Days Never to be Forgotten: Oliver Cowdery*, ed. Alexander L. Baugh (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2009), 279–93, [LINK](#).

⁶⁶Jackson County, MO, Marriage Record Book, vol. 1, page 44.

⁶⁷Booth, "Mormonism—Nos. VIII–IX," *Ohio Star* 11, no. 49 (Dec. 8, 1831): 1, col. 3.

⁶⁸See, for example, Hales, "'Guilty of Such Folly'?" 279–93.

⁶⁹Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: Three American Communal Experiments of the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1981), 300 n35, [LINK](#).

⁷⁰Minutes, 12 April 1838, 118, JSP, [LINK](#); see also Journal, March–September 1838, 29–31, JSP, [LINK](#).

sister Phoebe had evidently written to him concerning rumors of polygamy among the people as Church members following the Twelve began their westward exodus. Cowdery's response was one of shock and disbelief:

I can hardly think it possible, that you have written us the truth, that though there may be individuals who are guilty of the iniquities spoken of,—yet no such practice can be preached or adhered to, as a public doctrine. Such *may* do for the followers of Mahomet; it may have been done some thousands of years ago; but no people, professing to be governed by the pure and holy principles of the Lord Jesus, can hold up their heads before the world at this distance of time, and be guilty of such folly—such wrong—such abomination.⁷¹

Cowdery's letter demonstrates that he did not believe polygamy could be harmonized with pure Christian principles, and as one personally familiar with the original faith, he did not anticipate Smith's church would ever condone it. Additionally, on his deathbed Cowdery bore testimony "of the truth of the gospel revealed through Joseph Smith, and the power of the holy Priesthood which he had received through his administrations."⁷² It is difficult to reconcile Cowdery's 1846 letter and deathbed witness of the gospel that he understood to require monogamy with Young's later testimony that sometime between 1829 and 1831, Cowdery knew that polygamy was or would be a requirement of God, and that Cowdery became polygamous himself.

Orson Pratt and the Joseph F. Smith Affidavits

By 1869, Orson Pratt's public defense of polygamy had evolved as well. The man who had officially introduced "the principle and doctrine of...many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1) to the Latter-day Saints as having been received in 1843 now sought to establish the revelation as having originated in the early 1830s:

⁷¹Oliver Cowdery, personal letter to Daniel and Phoebe Jackson, July 24, 1846, published in *The Saints' Herald* 55 no. 3 (Jan. 15, 1908): 56–57, emphasis in the original, *LINK*.

⁷²"Oliver Cowdery," in Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia*, 4 vols., (Deseret News, 1901), 1:251, *LINK*.

I will tell you what the Prophet Joseph said in relation to this matter in 1831, also in 1832 . . . In the fore part of the year 1832, Joseph told individuals, then in the Church, that he had inquired of the Lord concerning the principle of plurality of wives, and he received for answer that the principle of taking more wives than one is a true principle, but the time had not yet come for it to be practised [sic]. That was before the Church was two years old.⁷³

Pratt did not then name the “individuals” who Joseph Smith purportedly told about a Kirtland-era polygamy revelation, but his wording seems to echo the earlier statements of Phelps, Kimball, and Young.

In 1869, LDS Apostle Joseph F. Smith, son of Joseph Smith’s brother and fellow martyr Hyrum Smith, began systematically preparing affidavits after realizing “the scarcity of evidence, I might say almost total absence of direct evidence upon the subject [of polygamy], as connected with the Prophet Joseph himself.”⁷⁴ Indeed, outsiders had noted that “no proof has ever yet been adduced to show that Joseph either lived as a polygamist or dictated the revelation in favor of a plurality of wives.”⁷⁵ This evidentiary void was particularly problematic given the testimonies of Joseph F. Smith’s senior leaders, who asserted that the polygamy revelation was known to the Prophet Joseph at or soon after the organization of the Church. Seemingly without any firsthand account of the practice from his own mother, Mary Fielding Smith, who died weeks after the revelation was publicly announced, Joseph F. Smith was also reckoning with the public denial of the practice by his aunt Emma, Joseph Smith’s widow. Emma’s consistent response is exemplified in her interview with historian William Hepworth Dixon, published in 1867: “Emma . . . coolly, firmly, permanently denies that her husband ever had any other wife than herself. She declares the story to be false, the revelation a fraud. She

⁷³Orson Pratt, “Celestial Marriage,” Oct. 7, 1869, *Journal of Discourses* 13:193, [LINK](#).

⁷⁴Joseph F. Smith to Orson Pratt, Jul. 19, 1875, in Joseph F. Smith Letterpress copybook, 3, MS 1325, CHL, [LINK](#).

⁷⁵William Hepworth Dixon, *New America*, (J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1867), 222, [LINK](#).

denounces polygamy as the invention of Young and Pratt.”⁷⁶ To counter Emma’s narrative, and that of her sons, and perhaps to provide a retroactive foundation for the narrative of Smith’s early involvement with polygamy, Joseph F. Smith crafted affidavits to be signed as the primary evidence that Joseph Smith was “married or sealed” to the signatories sometime between 1841 and 1844.⁷⁷

Legal Threats and the Fact-Finding Mission of 1878

During this time of theological opposition, the Church also faced continuous legal threats, as the proposed Wade (1866), Cragin (1868), and Cullom Bills (1869) unsuccessfully made their way through the U.S. legislature.⁷⁸ When the Poland Act was passed in 1874, Latter-day Saint First Presidency secretary and polygamist Geoge Reynolds was designated to be a test case. Reynolds’ indictment for bigamy by a grand jury in December of 1875 may have served as a catalyst for the Church to solidify the legitimacy of the polygamy revelation; soon after, Brigham Young assigned Orson Pratt to revise the Doctrine and Covenants to create an updated edition. The resulting 1876 edition removed the Church’s statement on monogamous marriage,⁷⁹ and added several revelations, including the polygamy revelation as Section 132.

As the Reynolds case worked its way toward the United States Supreme Court, Joseph F. Smith perpetuated the 1831 narrative of polygamy’s genesis by echoing Brigham Young’s accusation against

⁷⁶Dixon, *New America*, 223.

⁷⁷Affidavits about celestial marriage, 1869-1915, CHL, MS 3423, *LINK*. See also Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle B. Stone, “Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits,” *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025), *LINK*.

⁷⁸As various challenges prevented meaningful enforcement of the 1862 Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act, Congress continued working toward an abolishment of polygamy. The Wade Bill proposed giving the governor control over executive, judicial, and militia activities, stripping the Church of its temporal authority. The Cragin Bill proposed to eliminate trial by jury in Utah for cases involving polygamy. The Cullom Bill proposed sending the Army to Utah to enforce anti-polygamy laws. The Poland Act of 1874 incorporated the strictest measures of the proposed bills and mandated that polygamy cases be heard in federal courts, removing the ability of polygamists to have their cases tried by fellow Church members sympathetic to their religious practice. See Richard D. Poll, “The Legislative Antipolygamy Campaign,” *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 107-121, *LINK*. See also Andrew C. Skinner, “Civil War’s Aftermath: Reconstruction, Abolition, and Polygamy,” in *Civil War Saints*, ed. Kenneth L. Alford (Deseret Book, 2012), 295–315, *LINK*.

⁷⁹The article on Marriage was Section 101 (CI) in the 1835 edition and Section 109 (CIX) in the 1844 edition.

Oliver Cowdery, claiming Cowdery had brought “reproach upon himself and thereby upon the church by ‘running before he was sent,’ and ‘taking liberties without license’” by becoming polygamous at that early date.⁸⁰ Confident that Joseph Smith’s theology of polygamy had developed a decade before his practice of it, but lacking evidence for their claim, Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith embarked on a fact-finding mission to the East in 1878, “to obtain, if possible, some dates and facts that pertained to the early history of the Church.”⁸¹ However, in Smith’s report at the 1878 Semi-Annual Conference of the Church, he relayed that “they found no one who could give them any information, or who knew as much as ourselves on these matters.”⁸² Smith’s assertion that the early members knew less than “ourselves” is ironic considering that he was not born until 1838, leaving him with no firsthand knowledge of the events in question.⁸³

Having found “no one” capable of providing any information, Pratt’s recitation of the 1831 narrative upon his return is problematic:

⁸⁰Joseph F. Smith, “Plural Marriage—For the Righteous Only—Obedience Imperative—Blessings Resulting,” Jul. 7, 1878, *Journal of Discourses*, 20:29, *LINK*.

⁸¹Joseph F. Smith, “Semi-Annual Conference,” *Deseret News* 27, no. 36 (Oct. 9, 1878): 572, *LINK*.

⁸²Joseph F. Smith, “Semi-Annual Conference,” 572.

⁸³A few other Joseph F. Smith sources are similarly problematic in that Joseph F. was not alive or old enough to have heard the history from Joseph Smith himself before his death, and Joseph F. does not reveal the original source for this information. At Elizabeth Ann Whitney’s 1882 funeral, he was quoted as follows: “The speaker said, perhaps, for the first time in public, that the women who entered into plural marriage with the Prophet Joseph Smith were shown to him and named to him as early as 1831, and some of them were given in marriage to him as that date, although it was not then prudent, under the circumstances, to make these facts public” (“Funeral Services of Sister Elizabeth A. Whitney,” *Deseret News* 15, no. 75 (Feb. 17, 1882): 3, *LINK*). This quote is occasionally used as supporting evidence of a Fanny Alger marriage to Joseph Smith; however, Joseph F. Smith corrected the record the next day in a Letter to the Editor: “I see, by the reporter’s synopsis of my remarks yesterday . . . that I am made responsible for the following statement: ‘That the women who entered into plural marriage . . . and some of them were given in marriage to him as early as that date.’ This latter statement is wholly incorrect. What I did say was to the effect that when the Prophet Joseph Smith received the revelation in relation to the eternity of the marriage covenant, which includes plural marriage, in 1831, the Lord showed him those women who were to engage with him in the establishment of that principle in the Church, and at that time some of these women were named and given to him, to become his wives when the time should come that this principle should be established” (“Correction,” *Deseret Evening News* 15, no. 76 (Feb. 18, 1882): 2, *LINK*).

[He] refuted the statement and belief of those present that Brigham Young was the author of that revelation; showed that . . . Joseph actually received revelation upon that principle as early as 1831. Said, "Lyman Johnson, who was very familiar with Joseph at this early date, Joseph living at his father's house, and who was also very intimate with me, we having travelled on several missions together, told me himself that Joseph had made known to him as early as 1831, that plural marriage was a correct principle. Joseph declared to Lyman that God had revealed it to him, but that the time had not come to teach or practice it in the Church, but that the time would come." To this statement Elder Pratt bore his testimony.⁸⁴

Lyman Johnson had died in 1859, nearly twenty years before Pratt's attribution, so he was not alive to remind Pratt of this story during the fact-finding mission, and Pratt did not name any other individuals who knew of a polygamy revelation at that early date. Additionally, much like Ezra Booth, Oliver Cowdery, Martin Harris, Joseph Coe, and Ziba Peterson, Johnson had loudly criticized Joseph Smith's faults following his own disaffection, yet he remained notably silent regarding any early polygamy revelation.⁸⁵

Though these testimonies of Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith have hitherto been featured prominently as evidence of the 1831 narrative, they remain second-hand and uncorroborated by contemporary records. Viewed in the context of the severe external pressures facing the Church, these accounts appear to be a result of efforts to reconcile inconsistencies and provide foundational evidence where contemporary documentation and witnesses were absent.

Judicial and Legislative Acts (1879-1887) and Joseph B. Noble Statement (1883)

In 1879, the United States Supreme Court dashed Latter-day Saint hopes for legal victory with its unanimous decision

⁸⁴Orson Pratt, "Report of Elders Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith," *The Latter-day Saints' Millennial Star* 40, no. 50 (Dec. 16, 1878): 788, *LINK*.

⁸⁵See Lyman Johnson's excommunication trial, Minute Book 2, 126, JSP, *LINK*.

against George Reynolds (Reynolds v. United States), rejecting the argument that polygamy was a constitutionally protected practice of the LDS religion.⁸⁶ Soon after, the 1882 Edmunds Act was passed, reinvigorating the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act and strengthening its provisions, making not just bigamy and polygamy with more than one woman illegal but also “unlawful cohabitation.”⁸⁷ The Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 delivered the final blow, disincorporating the Church and introducing a host of legal punishments, including the seizure of its assets.⁸⁸ In this climate of legal siege, Latter-day Saints were incentivized to use history as a form of resistance to government oppression, and an increasing number of members began to publicly testify that Joseph Smith had received a polygamy revelation in the early 1830s.

Joseph B. Noble, an early convert to Mormonism, began providing testimony in 1869 of Joseph Smith’s polygamy as part of the effort to counteract the missionary efforts of the RLDS Church, including proselytizing visits to Utah by Smith’s sons. Noble’s testimony that he had sealed Joseph Smith to Noble’s sister-in-law in “the first ceremony of the plural mar[r]riage performed in this dispensation” led him to become a trustworthy witness for the LDS church.⁸⁹ At an 1883 stake conference, as the community reeled from the newly passed Edmunds Act, Noble shifted his testimony from verifying Nauvoo polygamy to providing a foundational origin for the doctrine. As reported in *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*, the theme of polygamy—also called plural or celestial marriage—as instituted by Joseph Smith and Hyrum Smith was strongly impressed upon the attendees of this conference by the leading elders of the Church. Noble stated that “the prophet Joseph told him that the doctrine of celestial marriage was revealed to him while he was engaged on the work of translation of the Scriptures.”⁹⁰

⁸⁶Reynolds v. United States, 98 U.S. 145 (1878), *LINK*.

⁸⁷Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act, March 22, 1882, Chap. 47, *LINK*.

⁸⁸Text of the Edmunds-Tucker Act of 1887 made available through the Washington County Historical Society, Washington County, Utah, *LINK*.

⁸⁹George F. Richards Journals, Jun. 10, 1883. Joseph B. Noble testified of his first-hand knowledge of Joseph Smith’s polygamy in Nauvoo in the Temple Lot trial (1891-1894).

⁹⁰“Plural Marriage,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 45 no. 29 (Jul. 16, 1883): 454, *LINK*.

Noble's reference to the scriptural translation is ambiguous and could refer to the Book of Mormon, Smith's translation of the Bible, or the book of Abraham.⁹¹ However, Noble's other statements do not suggest a deviation from the previously mentioned 1872 institutional narrative established by Young, who then asserted that the polygamy revelation was given to Smith while he was translating the Book of Mormon, which would have been 1829 or earlier.⁹² While the Book of Mormon condemns David and Solomon's polygamy and does not suggest God justified it as Section 132 does,⁹³ and while no contemporary evidence points to a revelation being received so early, such assertions may have been valuable to the cause of the Utah Church because they placed the origin of the revelation at the very inception of the Restoration.

Hubert Howe Bancroft History (1889) and the Manifesto (1890)

The first to publish the claim that Smith's polygamy revelation came as he was translating the Bible was American historian and ethnologist Hubert Howe Bancroft in his 1889 book, *History of Utah: 1540-1886*. Bancroft recorded the difficulty of sorting through the competing and often oppositional evidences of Latter-day Saint polygamy, acknowledging that it was "impossible at this day" to determine exactly who began to participate in polygamy, or when, as "the evidence comes to us in the form of rumors, general assertions, and bold statements from the mouths of men filled with deadly hate, and cannot be altogether trusted."⁹⁴

As part of his research, Bancroft visited Utah and "gathered from them no inconsiderable stores of original and interesting

⁹¹For example, Thomas Brown Holmes Stenhouse wrote that "Elder W. W. Phelps said in [the] Salt Lake Tabernacle, in 1862, that while Joseph was translating the Book of Abraham, in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1835, from the papyrus found with the Egyptian mummies, the Prophet became impressed with the idea that polygamy would yet become an institution of the Mormon Church." B. H. Stenhouse, *The Rocky Mountain Saints* (D. Appleton and Company, 1873) 182, n., *LINK*.

⁹²Larson and Larson, eds., *Diary of Charles Lowell Walker*, 349.

⁹³The Book of Mormon states, "Behold, David and Solomon truly had many wives and concubines, which thing was abominable before me, saith the Lord" (Jacob 2:24), while Section 132:1 begins by citing an inquiry "to know and understand wherein I, the Lord, justified my servants... David and Solomon, my servants, as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines."

⁹⁴Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft. Vol. XXVI, History of Utah: 1540-1886* (The History Company, 1889): 158-159, *LINK*.

information,” but was frustrated by the clear influence outside pressures had on the collective memory: “In regard to the quality of evidence I here encounter, I will say that never before has it been my lot to meet with such a mass of mendacity. The attempts of almost all who have written upon the subject seem to have been to make out a case rather than to state the facts.”⁹⁵ Bancroft appeared to draw from oral tradition, then, to present the most logical explanation of polygamy’s beginnings in the Church:

It is said that as early as 1831, the will of the Lord in this respect had been revealed to Joseph. In translating the bible he had come upon the passages relating to plural wives and concubines, and had inquired of the Lord what he should do. He was told to wait, and not make the matter public then, the people not yet having faith to receive it.⁹⁶

While the timing of this explanation fits with the contents of the Bible from which Smith was translating, it does not account for the content of the Bible translation that Smith produced, as will be demonstrated in the second half of this paper. But because Smith’s changes were not noted with clear comparison against the original KJV in the RLDS Church’s 1867 publication of the IV, it likely would have been an exercise in diminishing returns for Bancroft to comb through the text to confirm whether Smith’s changes affirmed the Utah Saints’ polygamy narrative.⁹⁷

The institutional effort that Bancroft observed to “make out a case” reached a breaking point soon after the publication of his book. In 1890, the Edmunds-Tucker Act was upheld by the United States Supreme Court (*The Late Corporation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. United States*), and the Church’s resources began to be seized with no hope of legal recourse.⁹⁸ Soon after, Church President Wilford Woodruff issued the Manifesto, officially declaring that “we are not teaching polygamy or plural marriage, nor permitting any person to enter into its practice,”

⁹⁵Bancroft, *History of Utah*, viii, vii.

⁹⁶Bancroft, *History of Utah*, 161.

⁹⁷Joseph Smith, *The Holy scriptures: Translated and corrected by the spirit of revelation* (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 1867), *LINK*.

⁹⁸*Mormon Church v. United States*, 136 U.S. 1 (1890), *LINK*.

as well as his intention to personally and institutionally submit to laws forbidding it.⁹⁹ In 1894, the Temple Lot case resulted in a legal failure to prove polygamy had originated with Joseph Smith at all, let alone in 1831.¹⁰⁰ The actual cessation of polygamy in the LDS Church ultimately required numerous official communications, including the Second Manifesto (1904)¹⁰¹ and a statement from the First Presidency of the Church (1933).¹⁰² Gradually, the intense pressure to prove Section 132's origination in 1831 lessened as the narrative became naturalized within the Church as an established fact—no longer asserted as a defensive claim, but rather as something members had set aside in order to obey the law of the land.

B. H. Roberts History (1910)

More than twenty years after Bancroft published what Utah members said about polygamy's genesis, the narrative was formally codified as institutional history by B.H. Roberts in *The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. In this 1910 publication, Roberts asserted that “there is indisputable evidence that the revelation making known this marriage law was given to the Prophet as early as 1831,” citing the JST as this “indisputable” evidence.¹⁰³ According to Roberts, as Smith began his revision of the Old Testament

he was doubtless struck with the favor in which the Lord held the several Bible Patriarchs of that period, notwithstanding they had a plurality of wives. What more natural than that he should inquire of the Lord at that time, when his mind must have been impressed with the fact—Why, O Lord, didst Thou justify Thy servants, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; as also Moses, David, and Solomon, in the matter of their having many wives and

⁹⁹ *The Woman's Exponent* 19, no. 9 (Oct. 15, 1890): 68, [LINK](#).

¹⁰⁰ “Decision of John F. Philips in Temple Lot Case,” Circuit Court of the United States, March 20, 1894 (Lamoni, IA: The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, n.d.), 43-44, [LINK](#).

¹⁰¹ Joseph F. Smith, Address, Apr. 6, 1904, in *Seventy-Fourth Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (The Deseret News, 1904), 75, [LINK](#).

¹⁰² *Deseret News*, Church Section (June 17, 1933), 42, [LINK](#).

¹⁰³ Roberts, *History of the Church* Vol. V, xxix-xxx, [LINK](#).

concubines (see opening paragraph of the Revelation)?
In answer to that inquiry came the revelation, though
not then committed to writing.¹⁰⁴

Because Roberts (1857-1933) was born well after Smith's death, his summary relied on theological assumptions that were based on oral traditions rather than contemporary records. As will be demonstrated, however, these assumptions are not only inconsistent with the contemporary record of the 1830s, but they also ignore the actual textual revisions Smith made in his Bible translation.

Roberts' supporting evidence is similarly problematic. He cited the condemnation of polygamy found in both the article on marriage in the 1835 edition of the Doctrine and Covenants¹⁰⁵ and in a published series of questions asked and answered by Smith¹⁰⁶ as *corroborating* evidence that Smith had received a polygamy revelation by that time. Assuming that charges against the people meant Joseph Smith had received a polygamy revelation, Roberts reasoned, "Why was [a charge of polygamy made] unless the subject of 'polygamy' had been mooted within the Church?"¹⁰⁷ Roberts suggested that Smith's absence from the general assembly that approved the 1835 D&C demonstrated that Smith was not behind the article on marriage's inclusion in the book. Others, such as Osborne J. P. Widtsoe, made the point more explicitly: "The Prophet Joseph Smith knew nothing of the article [on marriage]. He was absent, in Canada, when it was accepted by the conference."¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. V, xxix-xxx.

¹⁰⁵"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." This statement is Section 101 (CI), "Marriage," in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants, and Section 109 (CIX) in the 1844 Doctrine and Covenants. Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, 251, JSP, 2026, *LINK*.

¹⁰⁶"Question 7th. Do the Mormons believe in having more wives than one. Answer. No, not at the same time. But they believe, that if their companion dies, they have a right to marry again. But we do disapprove of the custom which has gained in the world, and has been practised among us, to our great mortification, of marrying in five or six weeks, or even in two or three months after the death of their companion. We believe that due respect ought to be had, to the memory of the dead, and the feelings of both friends and children." Questions and Answers, 8 May 1838, 43, JSP, *LINK*.

¹⁰⁷Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. V, xxx.

¹⁰⁸Osborne J. P. Widtsoe, *The Restoration of the Gospel* (The Deseret News, 1912), 158, n. c, *LINK*.

While Joseph Smith was, in fact, in Michigan when the general assembly was held to approve the Doctrine and Covenants,¹⁰⁹ this argument regardless relies on a narrow view of the conference itself that ignores Joseph Smith's role as one of four committee members selected in 1834 "to arrange the items of the doctrine of Jesus Christ for the government of the church" into the 1835 D&C.¹¹⁰ In the book's preface, Smith and his fellow committee members explicitly stated their "expectation" that they were "to be called to answer to every principle advanced" in the volume.¹¹¹ In August 1835, the committee finished their work and pronounced the entire book, including the 1835 marriage article, as "a law unto the Church, and a rule of faith and practice unto the same."¹¹²

Considering that the 1835 D&C was printed after being approved by the general assembly, it is evident that Smith—as a member of the D&C committee and as President of the First Presidency (with First Presidency member Frederick G. Williams as printer for the Church)—knew about and supported the inclusion of the statement against polygamy, and considered it the law governing the Church.¹¹³ Subsequent publications of the 1835 marriage article under Smith's direction—including the 1844 publication of the D&C, which included the same and was prepared for publication under Smith's direction—back up the assertion that Smith was aware of, and affirmed, the marriage article.¹¹⁴ Roberts' conclusion that Smith's Bible translation served as a catalyst for a revelation on polygamy at a time when clear instruction on monogamy was being given seems to have stemmed from theological necessity rather than historical documentation.

Additional Sources

In addition to the legal threats by the U.S. government and the competitive claims to authority presented by the RLDS

¹⁰⁹"A Chronology of the Life of Joseph Smith: 1835," *BYU Studies* 46, no. 4 (2007), Aug. 17, 1835, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁰Minutes, 24 September 1834, 76, JSP, [LINK](#).

¹¹¹Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, iv, JSP, [LINK](#).

¹¹²Minute Book 1, 98, JSP, [LINK](#).

¹¹³Doctrine and Covenants, 1835, Source Note and Historical Introduction, JSP, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁴See "On Marriage," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 23 (Oct. 1, 1842), [LINK](#); and Doctrine and Covenants, 1844, 438, JSP, [LINK](#).

Church, Latter-day Saints' collective memory was further influenced by decades of intense rhetoric. The following 1852 teaching by Orson Pratt, frequently emphasized thereafter by the leaders of the Church, illustrates the spiritual pressure placed upon members to embrace polygamy as a requirement for exaltation:

Now let us enquire, what will become of those individuals who have this law [polygamy] 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... This was the word of the Lord to his servant Joseph the prophet himself. With all the knowledge and light he had, he must comply with it, or, says the Lord unto him, you shall be damned; and the same is true in regard to all those who reject these things.¹¹⁵

Decades of such strong teachings, alongside early mandates announced by the President of the Church for women to “bow down... and submit” to polygamy or “leave,” institutionalized a culture of compliance.¹¹⁶ This pressure to embrace the doctrine as a necessity likely contributed to a willingness to reshape memories to agree with a narrative that secured polygamy to the foundation of the Restoration.¹¹⁷

Such sources began to emerge in the 1880s, during the height of institutional pressure to prove a Kirtland-era polygamy revelation.

¹¹⁵“Minutes of conference: a special conference of the elders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints assembled in the Tabernacle, Great Salt Lake City, August 28th, 1852,” *Deseret News-Extra* (Sep. 14, 1852): 21, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁶Brigham Young, “A Privilege Given to All the Married Sisters in Utah,” September 21, 1856, *Journal of Discourses* 4:55-57, [LINK](#).

¹¹⁷Evidence that polygamy was asserted to be necessary for exaltation is found throughout the published materials of the church between 1852 and 1890, but it is most clearly expressed in a December 1891 letter to the President of the United States, from the First Presidency and Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: “We, the first presidency and apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, beg to respectfully represent to Your Excellency the following facts: We formerly taught to our people that polygamy or celestial marriage as commanded by God through Joseph Smith was right; that it was a necessity to man’s highest exaltation in the life to come. That doctrine was publicly promulgated by our president, the late Brigham Young, forty years ago, and was steadily taught and impressed upon the Latter-Day Saints up to September, 1890.” *Proceedings before the Committee on Privileges and Elections of the United States Senate: in the matter of the protests against the right of Hon. Reed Smoot, a senator from the state of Utah, to hold his seat*. Vol. 1 (Government Printing Office, 1904), 18, [LINK](#).

Some of these sources are framed as conclusive statements lacking any detail. A primary example of this type of source is found in Helen Mar Kimball Whitney's 1884 book, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage*: "[W]e will yet be looked up to and regarded as the founders of a superior system of Christianity [one which embraces polygamy]. This fact the Lord revealed to His prophet, Joseph Smith, as early as the year 1831."¹¹⁸ With an evolving story, Marinda Hyde, sister of Lyman Johnson, asserted in a late recollection that "the Lord gave me to Joseph Smith" in 1831, but she reported that she was entirely unaware of this arrangement at the time: "This I did not know until ten years after, when Joseph taught me the doctrine of celestial marriage . . . in the fall of 1841."¹¹⁹

Other accounts with added details began to proliferate at this time. Benjamin F. Johnson, the brother of two of Joseph Smith's alleged wives,¹²⁰ eventually provided one of the most frequently cited accounts of Kirtland-era polygamy because of information it contains about "a verry nice & Com[e]ly young woman," Fanny Alger.¹²¹ Written sometime between 1903 and 1911, Johnson recorded details of 1835 Kirtland, recalling how he allegedly learned from his by-then-deceased brother-in-law "that the ancient order of plural marriage was again to be practiced by the Church."¹²² This account was recorded so late that it could not help but be influenced by the oral traditions surrounding it, as well as the doctrinal necessity of asserting polygamy's foundational importance.

Further illustrating the pattern of retrospective substantiation is the autobiography of Levi Hancock. Although his original journal was silent on the matter, his son Mosiah Hancock added a detailed

¹¹⁸Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, *Why We Practice Plural Marriage* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1884), 53, *LINK*.

¹¹⁹Marinda N. Johnson Hyde statement, circa 1880, CHL, *LINK*. In 1869 Hyde had signed an affidavit that she was she was "married or sealed" to Joseph Smith in May of 1843; her 1880 recollection does not give any explanation for her learning about the doctrine nearly two years before she claims to have acted on it. Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde affidavit, 40 Affidavits on Celestial Marriage, Book number 1, 15, MS 3423, CHL, *LINK*.

¹²⁰These were Delcena Didamia Johnson, whose only record of being a polygamous wife of Joseph Smith was provided by her brother Benjamin F. Johnson in his autobiography, *My Life's Review*, published in 1947, and Almera Woodard Johnson, who provided an affidavit in 1883 of a polygamous marriage with Smith while in Nauvoo.

¹²¹Letter from Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, April-October, 1903, 30, MS 1289, CHL, *LINK*.

¹²²Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, 30.

1896 supplement, fourteen years after Levi's death, which claimed, "As early as the Spring of 1832 Bro Joseph said 'Brother Levi, The Lord has revealed to me that it is his will that righteous men shall take Righteous women even a plurality of Wives that a Righteous race may be sent forth Uppon [sic] the Earth preparatory to the ushering in of the Millennial Reign of our Redeemer."¹²³

The testimony of Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner seems to have been shaped by both institutional pressure she experienced in Utah as well as more personal concerns. As a widow who testified in 1877 that she was polygamously married to Joseph Smith in 1842,¹²⁴ Lightner was a recipient of Church assistance in a time when assistance was scarce.¹²⁵ She also wrote about experiencing feelings of neglect, and a desire to be remembered. In a letter written in response to Relief Society General Secretary Emmeline B. Wells to "[answer] all your questions," Lightner confessed being "very much surprised to receive a letter from you, after 15 years silence . . . I have felt, and do yet, that I am alone, I feel as if I was not recognized by the Smith family [specifically Joseph F. Smith] . . . I feel that I have been spiritually neglected." After commenting on the small attention she received from the leading sisters of the Church at a recent Relief Society conference, Lightner wrote, "How happy you must be up there all together among the noble women who are energetic in the work of God." Lightner then wrote of her important place in Church history, noting that "the Prophet Joseph first told me about his great vision concerning me, he said I was the first woman God commanded him to take as a plural wife \in 1834/."¹²⁶ Lightner's detailed recollections of Smith's early

¹²³Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock (with additions by his son Mosiah Hancock dated "Farmington Davis Co, 1896"), MS 570, 61-64, CHL, *LINK*.

¹²⁴Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner affidavit, Mar. 23, 1877, MS 2673, CHL, *LINK*.

¹²⁵Multiple letters were sent to church presidents requesting financial assistance based on Lightner's status as one of Smith's polygamous wives. See "Letter from Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, Oct. 9, 1887," 1, *The Wilford Woodruff Papers*, *LINK*, as cited in Cheryl L. Bruno and Michelle B. Stone, "Crafting a Sacred Story: Joseph F. Smith and the William Clayton Affidavits," *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* 1, no. 1 (2025), n50, *LINK*. In 1899 Lightner mentioned her distressing financial situation and hopes for continued Church assistance in a letter to her daughter: "Brother . . . says I shall have my orders from the Church as usual, but the Church is so in debt, that he don't think Brother Snow [LDS Church president] will be willing to pay me my money, but he will talk with Brother Snow and see what he can do." Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner to her daughter Mary, Mar. 2, 1899, [11-12], MS 29376, CHL, *LINK*.

¹²⁶Mary E. Lightner letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Mary E. Lightner papers Vault MSS 363, Folder 2, Item 12, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library,

polygamy seem to have emerged around the time of this letter. Most notable is her 1905 address at Brigham Young University, in which she expressed surprise and gratitude at being invited to testify. In that setting, Lightner recounted novel details of an 1834 polygamy revelation more than seventy years after the fact, notably aligning her narrative with stories of Joseph Smith's early visionary experiences with future polygamous wives that Joseph F. Smith had perpetuated.¹²⁷

The many late accounts of an early 1830s polygamy revelation coalesced as Utah Church members were attempting to mount a unified defense of their religious freedom, yet they suffer from incongruencies resulting from an evolving narrative. Some individuals contradicted their own earlier polygamy accounts; others recorded information but lacked firsthand knowledge.

Modern Incorporation

Despite the lack of contemporary support for these accounts, the narrative that God revealed “the principle and doctrine of . . . many wives and concubines” to Joseph Smith as early as 1831 has found its way into multiple institutional resources, including the first volume of *Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days*. The 2018 *Saints* book explains that while creating a new translation of the Bible, Joseph Smith pondered why the Lord had not condemned Abraham and other Old Testament patriarchs for marrying multiple wives, and that upon praying about the matter, “the Lord revealed that He sometimes commanded His people” to engage in polygamy, and that a day would come when He would restore the practice and ask some of the Saints to participate.¹²⁸

While supplementary institutional resources have always been more speculative than the scriptural heading to Doctrine and Covenants Section 132, the heading seems to indicate the direction of the institutional narrative. In Section 132's case, the 2025

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, emphasis in the original, *LINK*. The catalog description describes the letter as “dated in the summer of 1905,” however no date appears on the seven pages of digital images.

¹²⁷Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner remarks, Apr. 14, 1905, signed typescript, MS 833, CHL, *LINK*.

¹²⁸*Saints: The Story of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Latter Days, Vol. 1* (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), 121, *LINK*.

revision to a more cautious heading indicates that there is potential for the early 1830s polygamy revelation narrative itself to be revised. Examining the treatment of polygamy in Smith's translation of the Bible will demonstrate why such a revision may be merited.

Polygamy in Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible

The Inspired Version's treatment of polygamy has received very little analysis and is thus a significant area in need of rigorous historical and textual explication. As we examine Joseph Smith's changes related to polygamy and polygamists, as well as the verses he left untouched in his Bible translation, it is important to note that interpretations may vary. Rather than focusing on exact interpretations, though, textual trends will be examined to determine how they may illustrate Smith's marital theology during the time he translated the Bible. The examination of Smith's Inspired Version, if corroborating an 1831 or early 1830s polygamy revelation, should demonstrate an evolving understanding that there may be times that God commands polygamy, or an effort to understand how the Lord justified Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and also Moses, David, and Solomon "as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1). Conversely, finding a condemnatory stance would indicate that Smith was not seeking such understanding during the time he translated the Bible.

Lamech and the Antediluvian Era

Joseph Smith's first encounter with Biblical polygamy was in Genesis 4, where Cain's descendant, Lamech, was recorded to have "[taken] unto him two wives" (Gen. 4:19). As part of his translation, Smith added detail to Lamech's story well beyond the Genesis account, recorded also in the book of Moses, found in the Latter-day Saint scripture, *The Pearl of Great Price*. Written between October 21 and November 30, 1830,¹²⁹ Smith's translation describes this first polygamist as "having entered into a covenant with Satan, after the

¹²⁹Robert J. Matthews, "A Plainer Translation:" *Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible, A History and Commentary* (Brigham Young University Press, 1975), 64, *LINK*.

manner of Cain, wherein he became Master Mahan" (Gen. 5:35, IV; Moses 5:49). While Section 132 asserts that God's servants "received many wives and concubines...from the beginning of creation until this time" (D&C 132:38), Smith's translation firmly establishes monogamy as the law given at the creation and only associates polygamy with murder, secret combinations, and a rejection of God's commandments.

Once Lamech is introduced, the subsequent narrative suggests polygamy was one of the principal abominations that contributed to the destruction of humanity at the Flood. Continual reference is made to God's commandments, and entreaties to obey the things of God as they were preached "from the beginning" (Gen. 5:44, IV; Moses 5:58). Smith's translation echoes the KJV in recording one of the few commandments given in the beginning, that a man should "leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:30, IV; Moses 3:24). After Adam and Eve began to multiply and replenish the earth, Smith's Moses adds that "from that time forth, the sons and daughters of Adam began to divide two and two in the land" (Gen 4:3, IV; Moses 5:3). By adding the detail that Adam and Eve's posterity divided "two and two," Smith demonstrated that when translating the Bible, he saw monogamy as the divine social order practiced by God's people, leaving no room for him believing in the need to restore polygamy as Section 132 implies (D&C 132: 40, 45).

Smith's translation describes Lamech and his house and all who had covenanted with Satan as cursed because "they kept not the *commandments* of God" (Gen. 5:38, IV; Moses 5:52, emphasis added). Having just described Lamech's marriage to two women and the murder of a young man through a secret combination, the clear implication is that, in addition to murder, Lamech also broke the command to cleave to his wife as one flesh by marrying two women. Enoch's account in Smith's translation validates this, quoting "a voice from heaven" lamenting that the people "have gone astray...and in their own abominations have devised murder, and have not kept the commandments, which I gave unto their father, Adam" (Gen. 6:28, IV; Moses 6:28). The only abomination that Smith's translation describes leading to murder is polygamy, which is also a direct violation of one of the commandments given to Adam. As the chronology reaches Noah's day, Smith's translation

describes the sons of men, who “took them wives, even as they chose,” kindling the anger of the Lord, “for they will not hearken to my voice” (Gen. 8:2-3, IV; Moses 8:14-15). As he called these men to repentance, Noah “taught the things of God, even as it was in the beginning” (Genesis 8:4, IV; Moses 8:16). Smith’s addition that the sons of men would not hearken to the Lord’s voice, accompanied by his description of Noah teaching the things of God “as it was in the beginning,” serve as a direct indictment of the departure from the divine “two and two” order perpetuated by Lamech and his house.

These additions are subtle but significant. If Joseph Smith were truly “struck with the favor” God showed to polygamists, the antediluvian record was his first opportunity to provide a righteous exception.¹³⁰ Instead, he framed men having multiple wives as a corruption that was in direct contradiction to God’s commandments given to humanity at the creation. This condemnatory pattern continues as Smith’s translation moves into the stories of David and Solomon, two of the figures Section 132 claims served as the catalyst for Smith inquiring and receiving a revelation on “the principle and doctrine of [men] having many wives and concubines” (D&C 132:1).

David and Solomon

In his Bible translation, Joseph Smith consistently rewrote the descriptions of Kings David and Solomon, altering the laudatory prose to cautionary descriptions of men who tragically chose unrighteousness. The books with these changes were revised between July 1832 and July 1833 in what is known as Old Testament Revision 2, as Smith had paused his initial revision of the Old Testament at Genesis 24 to first complete his translation of the New Testament. Tables 1-9 provide specific evidence of this pattern.¹³¹

In 2 Samuel, the IV significantly intensifies the consequences of David’s adultery and murder. Whereas David was told in the KJV that the Lord “hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die,” Smith’s translation leaves him further condemned: “The Lord also

¹³⁰Roberts, *History of the Church*, Vol. V, xxix-xxx.

¹³¹In the tables, ~~striketrough~~ is used to reflect text the IV/JST removes, and *italics* to reflect IV/JST additions to the text; none of the italicized words quoted in the IV/JST indicate emphasis unless explicitly stated. The text in the tables does not include scribal notes and alternate capitalizations from the manuscript revisions which do not affect the content of the verses cited.

hath *not* put away thy sin, *that* thou shalt not die.” This change was made after Smith and his scribes simplified their notation process, only making a truncated notation of “Verse 13—not—that” for this verse in Old Testament Revision 2 (OT 2).¹³²

Table 1

2 Samuel 12: 13 King James Bible (KJV)	2 Samuel 12: 13 Inspired Version (IV), Joseph Smith Translation (JST)
And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.	And David said unto Nathan, I have sinned against the Lord. And Nathan said unto David, The Lord also hath <i>not</i> put away thy sin, <i>that</i> thou shalt not die.

In his translation, Smith made several changes to the chapter in 1 Kings which recounts King Solomon’s marriage to Pharaoh’s daughter and the dream in which he received the gift of wisdom from the Lord. Rather than an observation of Solomon’s actions, Smith revised this verse to express the Lord’s displeasure with Solomon’s polygamous union with Pharaoh’s daughter, which because of its Egyptian alliance violated both the law against a king multiplying wives to himself, and the law against causing the people to return to Egypt (Deut. 17:16-17).

¹³²Old Testament Revision 2, 74, JSP, *LINK*. Such brief revisionary notes understandably contributed to the work of Smith’s translation being acceptable and finished, as Robert Matthews observed, even though the manuscript was not fully prepared for the press. Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith’s Efforts to Publish His Bible Translation,” *Ensign* 13, no. 1 (Jan. 1983): 57–64, *LINK*.

Table 2

1 Kings 3: 1 KJV	1 Kings 3: 1 IV
And Solomon made affinity with Pharaoh king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about.	And <i>the Lord was not pleased with Solomon, for he</i> made affinity with Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and took Pharaoh's daughter to wife, and brought her into the house of David until he had made an end of building his own house, and the house of the Lord, and the wall of Jerusalem round about. <i>And the Lord blessed Solomon for the people's sake only.</i>

Contrary to the KJV, Smith's translation does not portray King David as keeping the Lord's statutes and commandments. Solomon is specifically told in the following verse to not follow David's example because he "walk[ed] in unrighteousness." This wording implies David's sin in taking Bathsheba by having Uriah killed was not the single act that God did not justify. Rather, it communicates a lifestyle which was not justified by the Lord's law. This change contributes to a textual trend of re-evaluating David from one who was sought by the Lord for being "a man after his own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14) into a cautionary example of one who fell into unrighteousness.

Table 3

1 Kings 3: 14 KJV	1 Kings 3: 14 IV
And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days.	And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days, <i>and thou shalt not walk in unrighteousness as did thy father David.</i>

The Bible portrays Solomon's polygamy as leading him to have a heart that was not perfect with the Lord, and the following verse in 1 Kings 11 has led to a widespread belief that it was the influence of his foreign wives' idolatry, rather than the polygamy itself, that

caused this sinful state. But the IV change here is noteworthy because Solomon's heart is said to have become like David's, and yet David did not marry foreign wives who turned his heart after other gods. Both kings had many wives in violation of the law in Deuteronomy, and the change in this IV verse implies that this specific violation—the multiplying of wives—rendered both men's hearts imperfect.

Table 4

1 Kings 11: 4 KJV	1 Kings 11: 4 IV, JST
For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.	For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord, his God, <i>and it became as was</i> the heart of David his father.

David's condemnation continues two verses later, where the IV clarifies that he did evil in the sight of the Lord and did not go fully after the Lord, a textual indictment that undermines the description in Section 132 that “in none of these things [having many wives and concubines] did [David] sin against me save in the case of Uriah and his wife” (D&C 132:39).

Table 5

1 Kings 11: 6 KJV	1 Kings 11: 6 IV, JST
And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, and went not fully after the Lord, as did David his father.	And Solomon did evil in the sight of the Lord, <i>as David, his father,</i> and went not fully after the Lord as did David his father.

Another change related to King David interestingly portrays him as having tried to follow the Lord but ultimately having the kingdom rent from his house because he did not keep the Lord's commandments. This reading aligns with and offers a possible explanation for why King Josiah later rent his clothes when the law was discovered in Kings 22: a succession of rulers had not

kept the commandment to not multiply wives because that portion of the law was unknown. This suggests that in Smith’s view, David’s polygamy was not a divinely sanctioned exception, but a transgression born of a lost law. By framing the rending of the kingdom as a consequence of this earlier, perhaps ignorant, disobedience, Smith aligns the IV with the Book of Mormon’s earlier declaration that David having many wives and concubines “was abominable” (Jac. 2:24).

Table 6

1 Kings 14: 8 KJV	1 Kings 14: 8 IV
And rent the kingdom away from the house of David, and gave it thee: and yet thou hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was right in mine eyes;	And rent the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it thee: and yet <i>because he kept not my commandments. But</i> thou hast not been as my servant David, who kept my commandments, and who <i>when he</i> followed me with all his heart, to do that only which was <i>only to do</i> right in mine eyes,

The IV consistently changes descriptions of David’s “perfect” heart to communicate that he was commanded to have a perfect heart, but he fell short. This shift from a statement of fact to a statement of unfulfilled command reinforces the hypothesis that Smith viewed David as living in a state of transgression.

Table 7

1 Kings 15: 3 KJV	1 Kings 15: 3 IV, JST
And he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father.	And he walked in all the sins of his father, which he had done before him; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord, his God, as the heart of <i>Lord commanded</i> David, his father.

While David’s unrighteousness is frankly stated, the IV also portrays him as being willing to repent. The changes in the following verse are minor but demonstrate this nuance by expressing

David's desire to not sin against the Lord, while also upholding God's consistent standard which forbids adultery and murder. Smith's description notes that while David was "cursed" for his murder of Uriah, his entire life was characterized by a need for repentance rather than a state of divine justification, as Section 132 asserts.

Table 8

1 Kings 15: 5 KJV	1 Kings 15: 5 IV, JST
Because David did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from any thing that he commanded him all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.	Because David did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord and turned not aside from any thing <i>all</i> that he commanded him, <i>to sin against the Lord, but repented of the evil</i> all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah, the Hittite, <i>wherein the Lord cursed him.</i>

Following is another small change which implies that although the Lord commanded David to do right, it was Asa alone who pleased the Lord through his actions. Although not directly related to polygamy, the KJV phrases Asa's righteousness as following the example of King David, which may or may not extend to his having many wives and concubines. Smith's IV removes the patriarchal ideal associated with David, ensuring that he is no longer viewed as a righteous example.

Table 9

1 Kings 15:11-12 KJV	1 Kings 15:11 IV, JST
And Asa did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, as did David his father. And he took away the sodomites out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made.	And Asa did right in the eyes of the Lord, as did <i>he commanded</i> David his father; and he took away the Sodomites out of the Land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made, <i>and it pleased the Lord.</i>

The changes to the descriptions of David and Solomon in these verses represent a systematic effort to deconstruct their idealized

status. They do not suggest a translator who is inclined to ask how the Lord justified David and Solomon “as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines” (D&C 132:1).

Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

Equally significant when examining Joseph Smith’s marital theology are the scriptural passages that received no revision in his Bible translation. For example, although Section 132 assumes Moses “received many wives and concubines,” it is noteworthy that none of Smith’s changes in Exodus nor Numbers suggest that he believed Moses was a polygamist (D&C 132:38).¹³³ When Smith worked on text about Abraham and other polygamous marriages, Clair Barrus notes that he “did not take the opportunity to expand or clarify text from Genesis about the practice.”¹³⁴ Interestingly, Smith did not change the widowed Abraham’s instructions to his servant, which explicitly required monogamy to maintain the covenant:

Thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take *a wife* unto my son Isaac . . . The Lord God of heaven, which took me from my father’s house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take *a wife* unto my son from thence (Gen. 24:4,7, emphasis added).

Nor did Smith change Isaac’s charge to his son Jacob. After grieving over Esau’s decision to marry polygamously (Gen. 26:34-35), Isaac commanded Jacob:

¹³³There is not a consensus on whether “the Ethiopian woman” that Moses had married recorded in Numbers 12:1 was Zipporah, a polygamist second wife, or a widowed Moses’ second marriage. Many scholars and traditional commentators such as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, 1040-1105) agree that the woman is Zipporah. In the Book of Mormon’s many references to Moses, polygamy is not referenced, even in passages which would be a natural fit, such as when the gospel as taught by Moses and Abraham is expounded (Hel. 8:11-19). References to Moses in the 1835 Doctrine and Covenants appeal to Moses’ teachings and works but do not imply polygamy (see D&C 84:22-25).

¹³⁴Barrus, “Prologues to Plurality,” 3.

Arise, go to Padan-aram, to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father; and take thee *a wife* from thence of the daughters of Laban thy mother's brother. And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude of people; And give thee the blessing of Abraham, to thee, and to thy seed with thee; that thou mayest inherit the land wherein thou art a stranger, which God gave unto Abraham (Gen. 28:2-4, emphasis added).

Additionally, Smith did not alter the Biblical chronology of Abraham and Israel, whose engagement and possible cessation of polygamy may recast the practice as a transgression for which they later repented. This interpretation is evidenced through the Biblical narrative, which lists no polygamous posterity once Abram and Jacob received their new, covenant names. Although Abram fathered Ishmael, covenant Abraham never again impregnated Hagar, and instead waited more than ten years before he was blessed to father Isaac with Sarah.¹³⁵ Once Sarah died, he remarried Keturah monogamously and had children with her, yet she was not held in the same covenant regard as Sarah and her posterity.¹³⁶ While Jacob had children with Leah and Rachel and their handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah, covenant Israel only had children with Rachel, and after she died giving birth to Benjamin, the Bible records no further posterity, despite Israel's relative youth, wealth, and culturally approved access to fertile women.¹³⁷

Smith's translation of the patriarchs was interrupted in March 1831 by his work on the New Testament. It is worth noting that even though Smith did not resume translating Genesis until July 1832, his translation offers no change or development in polygamous theology over time. If Smith was beginning to consider polygamy as a righteous element of the Abrahamic covenant during the time he translated Genesis, it is surprising that he left the terms of the covenant and the narrative of the covenant fathers so explicitly monogamous.

¹³⁵See Gen. 17-21.

¹³⁶See Gen. 25:6.

¹³⁷See Gen. 29-35.

The Sons of Noah

One change in Joseph Smith’s Bible translation that could relate to polygamy is ambiguous (see Table 10):

Table 10

Genesis 5: 32 KJV	Genesis 7: 85, IV Moses 8: 12, JST
And Noah was five hundred years old: and Noah begat Shem, Ham, and Japheth.	<i>And Noah was four Hundred and fifty years old, and begat Japheth, and forty two years afterward, he begat shem of her who was the Mother of Japheth, and when he was five hundred years old, he begat Ham.</i>

The notation that Japheth and Shem were born of the same mother without a direct comment on Ham’s maternal line has been said to “[clarify] that Ham was born later to a different mother than Japheth and Shem were born to.”¹³⁸ However, this reading injects meaning into the text that the words do not necessarily convey. The verse does not say anything about Noah having multiple wives, as he could have remarried as a widower, or, more likely, the verse may simply be written in such a way as to ward off speculation that forty-two years after the birth of Japheth, Noah’s wife would no longer have been fertile so he must have fathered children with another woman. If Shem was from the same mother as Japheth, the elder brother, as Genesis 10:21 notes, it follows that Ham, born only eight years later, was as well. To read this as an endorsement or example of a righteous man having multiple wives is to impose a later, Utah-era theological lens onto a verse that remains silent on the matter of polygamy.

Paul’s Epistle to the Romans

One candidate in the IV that has been interpreted as indicating an emerging polygamous theology is found in Smith’s changes to Romans 7. In Paul’s complex discourse on the Mosaic

¹³⁸Aaron P. Schade and Matthew L. Bowen, *The Book of Moses: from the Ancient of Days to the Latter Days* (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Deseret Book, 2021), 363–80, *LINK*.

Law, Smith's translation supports the transcendence of that law in phrasing that some scholars believe hints at an effort to justify polygamy.

Table 11

Romans 7: 15 – 22 KJV	Romans 7: 15 - 22 IV, JST
<p>For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.</p>	<p><i>But now I am spiritual; for that which I am commanded to do, I do; and that which I am commanded not to allow, I allow not.</i></p>
<p>If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.</p>	<p><i>For what I know is not right, I would that do I not do; for that which is sin, but what I hate that do I.</i> <i>If then I do not that which I would not allow, I consent unto the law, that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me; and I am not condemned.</i></p>
<p>Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.</p>	<p><i>Now then, it is no more I that do it sin; but I seek to subdue that sin that which dwelleth in me.</i></p>
<p>For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.</p>	<p><i>For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not, <i>only in Christ.</i></i></p>
<p>Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.</p>	<p><i>For the good that I would have done when under the law, I find not to be good; therefore, I do it not. But the evil which I would not do under the law, I find to be good; that, I do.</i> <i>Now if I do that, through the assistance of Christ, I would not do under the law, I am not under the law; and it is no more that I that do it seek to do wrong, but to subdue sin that dwelleth in me.</i></p>

Table 11 (cont.)

<p>I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:</p>	<p>I find then a law, that, <i>under the law</i>, <i>that</i> when I would do good, evil is <i>was</i> present with me; for I delight in the law of God after the inward man.</p>
<p>But I see another law</p>	<p>But <i>And now</i> I see another law <i>even the commandment of Christ</i>, and it is <i>imprinted in my mind</i>.</p>
<p>in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.</p>	<p><i>But</i> my members <i>are</i> warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.</p>
<p>O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?</p>	<p><i>And if I subdue not the sin which is in me</i>, but <i>with the flesh</i> serve the law of sin, O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?</p>
<p>I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.</p>	<p>I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord, then, <i>that so</i> with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.</p>

Ronald V. Huggins observed a possible “theological justification for the reintroduction of polygamy” in Smith’s treatment of verse 19: “For the good that I would *have done when under the law*, I find *not to be good*; therefore, I do it not. But the evil which I would not *do under the law*, I find *to be good*; that, I do.”¹³⁹ However, this appears to be a retrospective interpretation of Smith’s changes taken entirely out of context. First, the original verse in Paul’s epistle, before Joseph Smith’s translation, reads: “For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Rom. 7:19). When Smith’s translated version of this verse is read in context with the surrounding verses, the message is clear: one can only do good through Christ, and when one becomes spiritual in Christ, they are no longer under the old law, but a new law,

¹³⁹Ronald V. Huggins, “Joseph Smith’s ‘Inspired Translation’ of Romans 7,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 26, no. 4 (1993): 179, LINK.

which helps them subdue the sin that is inherently in them as a fallen mortal.

Huggins comments that threads of such justification appear in the later “Happiness Letter,” attributed to Smith as an attempt to woo his First Presidency counselor Sidney Rigdon’s unmarried daughter, Nancy, to become a polygamous wife. However, that attribution was repudiated by Smith as well as by Sidney and Nancy Rigdon. It also appears to contradict the spirit of Smith’s teachings; and it is difficult to establish a clear, direct, unquestionable link between the letter and Joseph Smith.¹⁴⁰

As with the previous verse (Gen. 7:85), interpreting Smith’s additions to Romans 7 as a justification for polygamy injects meaning into the text that the words themselves do not necessarily convey; the New Testament has multiple examples of laws which are not found to be good, and good that goes against the law.¹⁴¹ As previously noted, Smith’s changes to the Old Testament that were made after translating the New do not indicate an emerging theological flexibility with polygamy. These verses in Romans seem to indicate an interest in ascending above the creeds of men to a spiritual life in Christ, a concept Smith consistently taught from the time of his First Vision.¹⁴² Importantly, transcending the law was not how polygamy was framed by leaders who claimed to be teaching Joseph Smith’s theology; polygamy was consistently described as “the law.”¹⁴³

The Book of Isaiah

There are two additional polygamy-related changes to the translation found in the 1867 IV that support this paper’s thesis, although they do not appear to have been made by Joseph Smith.

¹⁴⁰See Appendix: Letter to Nancy Rigdon, circa Mid-April 1842, Historical Introduction, JSP, *LINK* and E. L. Kelley, “Correspondence,” *The Saints’ Herald* 31, no 22 (May 31, 1884): 339, CHL, *LINK*.

¹⁴¹See, for example, Christ’s teaching that prevented the scribes and Pharisees from following the law to stone the woman taken in adultery (John 8), and Peter’s vision where he resists eating unclean animals because it would be against the law, until God tells him, “What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common” (Acts 10:15).

¹⁴²See Joseph Smith-History 1:19.

¹⁴³For example, “God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people” (D&C 132:34). More than thirty references to “the law” of “many wives and concubines” are found in Section 132.

Isaiah chapter 4 in Old Testament Revision 2 shows two faintly penciled-in verse alterations next to verses 3 and 5, indicating these verses should be changed to 2 and 4, respectively.¹⁴⁴ These changes moved the verse in which “seven women shall take hold of one man” to the end of the previous chapter, making it a concluding bookend to the description of wickedness in chapter 3 rather than leaving it in chapter 4, where it is sometimes interpreted as part of the “beautiful and glorious” day that chapter describes. Kent Jackson noted of Smith’s Bible manuscripts that “a very few small corrections, written lightly in pencil, appear to be in the handwriting of Joseph Smith III, the Prophet’s son and president of the RLDS Church (1860-1914),” making it unlikely that this change was made by Smith in his original translation.¹⁴⁵

Esau

The second change was made in the 1944 edition of the IV, where Genesis chapter 26 verse 35 was edited as seen in Table 12:

Table 12

Genesis 26: 34 - 35 KJV	Genesis 26: 34 - 35 IV, JST
<p>And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:</p> <p>Which were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.</p>	<p>And Esau was forty years old when he took to wife Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Bashemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite:</p> <p>Which were <i>was</i> a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah.</p>

After Esau sold his birthright, he married two women. The KJV’s commentary reads as if the women themselves “were a grief of mind unto Isaac and Rebekah.” The IV’s change of the past tense verb “were” to “was” implies Isaac and Rebekah’s grief was *because* Esau married polygamously, rather than the original statement,

¹⁴⁴Old Testament Revision 2, 98, JSP, *LINK*. This observation credited to Jared T. Marcum, “The Seven Women Seeking the Bridegroom: Isaiah 4:1 as Transition Point in a Redemption Allegory,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 61 (2024): 298, n 15, *LINK*.

¹⁴⁵Jackson, “New Discoveries in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible,” 152.

which alternatively could be understood to mean that the two women had personalities which caused Isaac and Rebekah grief. This change is most certainly not from Smith, as Old Testament Revision 2 contains no notations for this verse.¹⁴⁶

Influence of Adam Clarke's Commentary

Also worth considering is the possible influence of Adam Clarke's *Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments: Together with the Apocrypha*, which was the leading commentary among American theologians and scholars during Joseph Smith's day. Smith's view of the first polygamist, Lamech, does not contradict Clarke's, who expressed his disapproval of Lamech and the institution of polygamy clearly: "He was the first who dared to reverse the order of God by introducing polygamy; and from him it has been retained, practiced, and defended to the present day."¹⁴⁷ This similarity, however, appears to be the extent of Clarke's influence on the verses previously cited. While Haley Wilson and Thomas Wayment found parallels between Smith's translation and Adam Clarke's Biblical commentary,¹⁴⁸ aside from a generally negative view of polygamy, these parallels are not apparent in Smith's changes to the above verses.

Summary of Polygamy in the Inspired Version

As we evaluate the treatment of polygamy in the IV, a clear orientation toward monogamy emerges. This should inform any historical narrative related to Joseph Smith's view of polygamy in the early 1830s. Rather than revealing an evolving curiosity and inspired openness toward polygamy, Smith's translation of the Bible demonstrates a theological stance that polygamy was an unrighteous practice.

¹⁴⁶Old Testament Revision 2, 61, JSP, *LINK*.

¹⁴⁷Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible* (1831), Genesis 4:19, *LINK*.

¹⁴⁸Haley Wilson and Thomas Wayment, "A Recently Recovered Source: Rethinking Joseph Smith's Bible Translation," *Journal of Undergraduate Research*: 2017, Iss. 1, Article 310, *LINK*.

Joseph Smith's Concurrent Revelations and Teachings

Robert L. Millet explains that changes in Smith's translation of the Bible "may represent a harmonization of doctrinal concepts that were revealed to Joseph Smith independently of his work with the Bible, but proved to be the means whereby he came to recognize biblical accuracy."¹⁴⁹ Many of these doctrinal concepts were revealed while Joseph Smith translated the Bible, which time was "the most prolific period in the Prophet's lifetime for the writing of revelations."¹⁵⁰ Several of these revelations addressed the nature of marriage, providing further insight into Smith's marital theology. Rather than marking the start of Joseph Smith's interest in polygamy, however, the 1831 translation period produced revelations that were explicitly and consistently monogamous.

In January 1831, Joseph Smith produced a revelation in the name of the Lord, commanding members of the Church to move from their current home in New York to Ohio, "and there I will give unto you my law; and there you shall be endowed with power from on high" (D&C 38:32). With great effort and amidst persecution, the community quickly relocated to receive direct revelation in their own language, unencumbered by the ambiguities typical of ancient translations. Once they arrived in Kirtland, Ohio, a revelation from Smith told them that the purpose of the law was "that ye may know how to govern my church and have all things right before me," and they were commanded: "ye shall see that my law is kept" (D&C 41:3-4). On February 9 and 23, 1831, twelve elders assembled themselves together with Smith, who pronounced the greatly anticipated "law of the church" (D&C 42, section heading).¹⁵¹ Included in the revelation was a command for married

¹⁴⁹Robert L. Millet, "Joseph Smith's Translation of the Bible: A Historical Overview," in *The Joseph Smith Translation: The Restoration of Plain and Precious Truths*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Robert L. Millet (Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1985), 23–47, [LINK](#).

¹⁵⁰Danel W. Bachman, "New Light on an Old Hypothesis: The Ohio Origins of the Revelation on Eternal Marriage," *Journal of Mormon History* 5, no. 1 (1978): 24, [LINK](#).

¹⁵¹The Latter-day Saints attempted to publish the law of the church in the 1833 *Book of Commandments*, but the destruction of the print shop halted printing and destroyed most of the stock before any books were bound. *Book of Commandments*, 1833, 89, JSP, [LINK](#).

men: “Thou shalt love thy *wife* with all thy heart, and shalt *cleave unto her and none else*” (D&C 42:22, emphasis added). Warnings against violations of this marital law were repeated (D&C 42:74-78).

In May 1831, Joseph Smith produced a revelation addressing some of the teachings of the Shakers, including celibacy, proclaiming: “Marriage is ordained of God unto man. Wherefore, *it is lawful that he should have one wife, and they twain shall be one flesh*, and all this that the earth might answer the end of its creation” (D&C 49:15-16, emphasis added). In the ensuing months, Smith pronounced God’s disappointment upon those that would not keep the commandments of marital fidelity they had been given (D&C 63:13-14).

As elders began to return from their missions in the Eastern states in September 1832, Joseph Smith gave “the word of the Lord concerning his church” (D&C 84:1-2). In the ensuing revelation, Smith proclaimed the whole church was under condemnation, and stated that it would not be lifted until the people repented and remembered the Book of Mormon and the former commandments they had been given (D&C 84: 54-57). The idea that Smith began contemplating polygamy at this time, then, is illogical, for the former commandments Smith gave the Latter-day Saints were wholly monogamous, and the Book of Mormon taught that cursings would follow any that hearkened to the things David and Solomon did by having many wives and concubines (Jacob 2:24-33; 3:3-6).¹⁵²

The command for monogamy in Joseph Smith’s revelations extended into special circumstances, such as an excess of women, and having many widows in need of care. The Book of Mormon recounts a time when “there were a great many widows in the land... a great number of women, more than there was of men; *therefore*, king Limhi commanded that every man should impart to the support of the widows and their children, that they might not perish with hunger” (Mosiah 21:10,17, emphasis added). This same theology of communal support without an expectation of marriage

¹⁵²Hyrum Smith taught in 1843 that “a [^]man/ might have one wife,—concubines he should have none...the idea was that this was given to Jacob [in the Book of Mormon] for a perpetual principle.” The Book of Mormon has been said to contain an exception for polygamy in Jacob’s sermon. Hyrum Smith’s teachings in Nauvoo demonstrate that this was not an interpretation the Latter-day Saints accepted until they were established in Utah. See Levi Richards Diary, Vol. 18, entry for May 14, 1843, MS 1284, CHL, *LINK*.

is reinforced by a revelation from Smith in April 1832, which stated, “Women have claim on their husbands for their maintenance, until their husbands are taken . . . And the storehouse shall be kept by the consecrations of the church; and widows and orphans shall be provided for, as also the poor” (D&C 83:1-2, 6). In the Book of Mormon and Smith’s early revelations, then, polygamy is not even an option to be considered when caring for the widows or accommodating a society with many more women than men.

Additional sources by Church leaders during the early 1830s display a similar theological commitment to monogamy and lack of interest in polygamy. In the Church’s monthly periodical, the ancient pattern of marriage as revealed in Joseph Smith’s translation of Genesis was highlighted: “It ought to be known, for it is published, that after Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden of Eden, they had many children, and *the children went forth two and two* and began to multiply and replenish the earth.”¹⁵³

This is contrasted with the theology promulgated in Utah, where Church leaders strenuously taught that polygamy was an essential component of the Abrahamic covenant. This is demonstrated by an 1857 sermon by Heber C. Kimball: “Do you suppose that Joseph and Hyrum and all those good men would associate with those ancient worthies, if they had not been engaged in the same practices? They had to do the works of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in order to be admitted where they are;—they had to be polygamists in order to be received into their society.”¹⁵⁴

Interestingly, the Biblical record contains a lengthy description of Isaac’s courtship and monogamous marriage to Rebekah. Utah leaders such as Kimball, however, taught according to Section 132, referring to the patriarchs as “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, three of the old polygamists.”¹⁵⁵ This stands in stark contrast to Joseph Smith’s teachings in the early to mid-1830s. Just as with Moses, when Smith invoked Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he did not

¹⁵³“Olden Time,” *The Evening and the Morning Star* 1, no. 11 (Apr. 1833), emphasis added, *LINK*.

¹⁵⁴Heber C. Kimball, “The Ax That Is Laid At The Root of The Tree—Regeneration—Products of Polygamy, A Numerous Offspring, Etc.,” Feb. 8, 1857, *Journal of Discourses* 4:224, *LINK*. See also John Taylor Revelation, Sep. 27, 1886, MS 34928, CHL, *LINK*. “All those who would enter into my glory must & shall obey my law & have I not commanded men that if they were Abraham’s seed & would enter into my glory, they must do the works of Abraham.”

¹⁵⁵Kimball, “The Ax That Is Laid At The Root of The Tree,” 224.

highlight polygamy, nor refer to Isaac as a polygamist. Rather, he taught the Latter-day Saints that:

- All could receive the promise of eternal life for themselves by the voice of the Lord.¹⁵⁶
- Abraham's offerings of sacrifice served to open the eyes of the covenant fathers, enabling them to look forward to the time of the coming of the Savior, and to rejoice in his redemption.¹⁵⁷

The 1835 acquisition of multiple scrolls of papyrus, which Joseph Smith translated as the book of Abraham, must also be considered. This scripture, which was not canonized until more than thirty years after Smith's death, details the Abrahamic covenant, but, like the IV, does not include any explanation nor intimation of a divine doctrine of many wives and concubines (see Abr. 3).

Conclusion

Through official Church publications such as *Saints*, LDS members are instructed as follows:

[A]s Joseph read Abraham's story, he pondered much about the patriarch's life. Why had the Lord not condemned Abraham and other Old Testament patriarchs for marrying multiple wives, a practice Bible-reading Americans abhorred? . . . Joseph prayed about the matter, and the Lord revealed that He sometimes commanded His people to practice plural marriage. The time to restore the practice was not yet, but a day would come when He would ask some of the Saints to do so.¹⁵⁸

For some time, official Latter-day Saint publications have suggested that Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible in 1831 prompted him to inquire about the patriarchs' polygamy, leading to a revelation that the practice was justified for the righteous and

¹⁵⁶Letter to Silas Smith, Sep. 26, 1833, 4, JSP, *LINK*; see also, Lucy Mack Smith, *History*, 1845, 231, JSP, *LINK*.

¹⁵⁷Letter to the Church, circa March 1834, 143, JSP, *LINK*.

¹⁵⁸*Saints*, 1:121.

would one day be restored. This narrative was supported by Section 132's heading from 1981 until 2025, and by supplementary resources such as *Saints*. It presented a seamless theological trajectory from Smith's biblical translation to the 1843 revelation.

However, when we compare the 1831 claim to the documentary record, the evidentiary foundation proves thin. The sources used to link polygamy to 1831 are retrospective, ambiguous, or dependent upon later interpretive layering. More significantly, Smith's own scriptural revisions, revelations, and teachings from the early 1830s do not even demonstrate an emerging inclination toward polygamy, much less advocacy for it.

Because Joseph Smith's *Inspired Version* of the Bible has only become widely accessible and institutionally permissible to Latter-day Saints in recent decades, it is unsurprising that Smith's treatment of the biblical polygamists named in Section 132 have gone relatively unexamined. However, it now appears that this trajectory has received institutional encouragement to recalibrate. As current LDS Church President Dallin H. Oaks has said, "There should be no doubt about the current status of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. It is a member of the royal family of scripture. [And] as a member of the royal family of scripture it should be noticed and honored on any occasion when it is present."¹⁵⁹

The history of the Section 132 heading illustrates an important dimension of Latter-day Saint canon formation. Section headings, while not revelations themselves, shape how readers understand the history, and thus the meaning, of sacred texts. By anchoring the principles of polygamy in 1831, the previous section heading authorized and implicitly regulated a particular narration of the doctrine's development.

The 2025 revision not only updates this official framework but also provides a path for revising the narrative. By removing the specific reference to 1831, the heading now aligns more closely with the documentary record. This adjustment signals that official statements which provide context are not set in stone; they evolve in response to ongoing historical analysis. Claims that attach to

¹⁵⁹Dallin H. Oaks, "Scripture Reading, Revelation, and the JST," in *Plain and Precious Truths Restored: The Doctrinal and Historical Significance of the Joseph Smith Translation*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Robert J. Matthews (Bookcraft, 1995), 13.

scripture remain subject to evidentiary scrutiny, and when new research clarifies the strength or weakness of supporting sources, canonical framing can be refined accordingly.

Reconsidering the origins of this narrative challenges the assumption that polygamy was embedded in the Church's theological foundation from its earliest years. Instead, any evidence of an early polygamy revelation points to a more complex process of doctrinal development and institutional memory formation that was primarily based on an 1831 Joseph Smith revelation regarding the mission to the Lamanites, which over time was reconstructed to address the theological and legal needs of the Church in Utah. By disentangling later stories from contemporaneous documentation, this paper shows that Section 132's heading change demonstrates how historical evidence should enable us to refine canonical context, clarify the unfolding of doctrine, and consider alternate narratives. Though the petitioner of Section 132 sought to know and understand how God justified Biblical servants "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as also Moses, David and Solomon . . . as touching the principle and doctrine of their having many wives and concubines" (D&C 132:1), this inquiry cannot be shown to have emerged from Joseph Smith's translation of the Bible.

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

Darla Driggs

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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.

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

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

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 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

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](#).

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.

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

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](#).

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 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

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](#).

children. Four years later, in 1858, Jonathan married twenty-eight-year-old Ann Emmett,⁶⁹ who bore him seven children. After 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

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

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](#).

just nineteen years old. In 1856, Alexander married Clarissa Ann Gilson,⁷⁵ also age nineteen. By this time Alexander was fifty-four. 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

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

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

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 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

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](#).

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, 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

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](#).

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, 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

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](#).

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 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

⁸⁹“United States Census, 1880, *FamilySearch*, *LINK*.

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.

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 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

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](#).

kind and thoughtful.” After a few months of “the sweetest courtship” the two “became engaged and I do not believe there was ever a 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.

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](#).

(this was with his wife's full consent, of course.) The answer was yes. Ann Catherine stayed and worked on 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?

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](#).

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 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."

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](#).

In April 1879 Warriner and his mother, **Lydia**, planned a trip to the St. George Temple, and Warriner,

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

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.

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 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

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](#).

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 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

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

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](#).

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 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,

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](#).

nursing at a local hospital, and sewing to immigrate to America. She described her experience as follows:

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.

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

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 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

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](#).

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 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

¹³⁰Johnson, *My Life's Review*, 266.

his mission, he persuaded Margaret's seventeen-year-old half-sister, Mary Luckham,¹³¹ to marry him, reportedly to care for her sister's 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 family¹³³ **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

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

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](#).

held in this communal home, and numerous families stayed with 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

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)."

invite questions about how mobility and distance affected emotional intimacy, marital relationships, and cooperation between sisters-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?

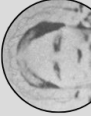






















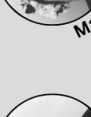












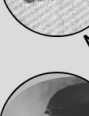













¹⁷⁴Benjamin F. Johnson, Letter to George F. Gibbs, 1903 April–October, 1911, 35, MS 1289, CHL, emphasis in the original, *LINK*.

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 years plg	283 each delivered in same year
Elizabeth Stalcup	8/21/1853 had 5 children under age 12 (7 older)	Jonathan Browning 1822-1895-02/11/1873	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 yrs plg	283 each delivered in same year
Asenath Elizabeth 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 yrs plg; 20 mngy after death of 2nd wife	Yes. All 4 of Miriam's were born after she and Asenath's 4 other 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 plg	Yes. All 4 of Miriam's were born after she and Asenath's 4 other 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 Summer (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 plg	no: died in childbirth along with baby; 15 one year into polygamy; 10 months pregnant through
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 plg	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 plg	no: Charles married Sarah 3 years after MaryAnn stopped having children
Catherine Elinore 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 plg	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! Mary, nearly All 5 wives had children during Harriet's birthing years
Lucina Roberts Cahoon	3/5/1806- 1961 unknown	Peter Johnson 1801- 1840 Reynolds Cahoon 1736-1861	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 Cahoon	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; 16 yrs plg; 10 yrs 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 polygamy	Yes! 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 Spannhower (1857-1928) 8/26/1872 10 children	15	Sarah 10 years younger	9 yrs mngy; 32 yrs plg	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 Louis Ann Ganner (1843-1930) 3/20/1857 0 children	23 13	Sarah was 9 years older Louis 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 poly; 40 yrs in mngy after 1st wife died & 3rd wife left	Yes

 Lucia Roberts	 Thirza Stiles	 Mary Hillgren	 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 S. Green	 Ane Kathrine Jensen	 Mary L. Proham	 Nancy W. Vanner	 Phoebe Simpson
 Elizabeth Stalcup	 Elizabeth Clark	 Ann Emmett	 Mary Ann Kennedy	 Sarah D. Johnson	 Asenath Brimhall	 Miriam H. Johnson	 Catherine L. Lince	 Keziah Peck	 Clarissa Gilson
 Ruth Newell	 Susan Dean	 Charlotta Lundstedt	 Caroline Herrar	 Samantia Lake	 Magdalena Zundel	 Lovina Jones	 Sarah Warner	 Louis G. Butler	 Catherine Carling
 Melissa Johnson	 Sarah L. Dolman	 Elizabeth Keate	 Ella DeSpain	 Esther Johnson	 Sarah S. Galtmower	 Sarah S. Galtmower	 Catherine Carling	 Porter	 Carling

Reviews

Carol Lynn Pearson. *The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy: Haunting the Hearts and Heaven of Mormon Women and Men.*

Pivot Point Books, 2016. 242 pp. \$19.95. ISBN: 978-0997-458206.

Reviewed by Maxine Hanks, Salt Lake City, UT.

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy is a feminist dissection of Mormon polygamy by award-winning author and poet Carol Lynn Pearson. She confronts the living implications of a supposedly dead doctrine, using the perfect metaphor—a ghost. Pearson’s book wants to haunt a slumbering church with a rude awakening to its polygamous poltergeist, reportedly buried in a distant past, yet refusing to die.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of Pearson’s book with an opportunity to reflect on her critique of Mormonism’s most controversial doctrine. Her intent was to present enough evidence and reasons to rid the LDS religion of polygamy’s restless presence, particularly its phantom possession of women’s hearts, minds, marriages, and their hopes of heaven.

Pearson is well known for her sixty years of feminist writings about women’s struggle for self in Mormon culture. She confesses being “personally and deeply hurt by this doctrine” of polygamy when she first learned of it at age sixteen, baffled and wondering, “This is what God has in store for me?” She explains, “My mother had never told me about polygamy in heaven . . . [I’d] known about polygamy of long ago, way back in the days of the pioneers, but I didn’t know about polygamy as our eternal destiny.” She says that from then onward, “the specter of eternal polygamy had taken center place in a gallery of many dark thoughts.” It haunted Pearson’s poetry and writings through “a painful journey” over the course of her life, awaiting a full-fledged lament.

The Ghost of Eternal Polygamy is Pearson’s exposé of that latent female pain from decades of polygamy’s echoes in her lived Mormonism. She’s no longer willing to ignore polygamy as having “faded into the background” of Mormon religion; she has seen polygamy’s ghost, alive and well in Mormon culture today, and

she attests that it's not dead. Pearson's book is a seance for disembodied spirits of polygamy lurking in the Mormon religious psyche—rattling blinds, spooking fears, inflicting lingering dread in the minds of countless LDS women.

Pearson's approach is to show the personal impact of polygamy in women's lives, in their struggles and feelings, rather than to provide an historical or sociological treatment, as in most works on polygamy. This is a compelling approach, focused on personal reception of polygamy in doctrine and theology. The contemporary voices Pearson profiles in her book are not women living in polygamous marriage but in polygamous theology—and this is the point of the book. Pearson wants to document the emotional reality of the belief in polygamy as it inhabits the lived experience of monogamist Mormon women. She wants to reveal the psychological power of a potential polygamy anticipated in heaven, as still shaping, impacting, and invading monogamous marriages in this world. She wants to bring the deferred vision of plural marriage in eternity down to earth in the present reality, to examine its validity.

The book is mainly memoir and commentary, treating the concept and theology of Mormon polygamy. It traces some crucial historical aspects and quotes, blended with personal stories from Pearson's own life and from women whom she surveyed. These are highlighted with her feminist and theological rebuttal of polygamy's viability and doctrines. The book is a rich, detailed, provocative collection of personal and theological reflections, an analysis of polygamy's reception by women. Each chapter contains Pearson's reminiscences of her encounters and studies of polygamy in LDS religion and culture, and ends with several confessions from other LDS women who share their own feelings about the doctrine.

"I knew there were many women, in the valleys of Utah and across all of Mormondom, who experienced a similar haunting," she explains. Pearson selected dozens of quotes from 8,000 responses to an online survey she conducted. Half of the women who answered were active members of the LDS Church at the time—and 85 percent of those women "expressed sadness, confusion, pain."

She cites Joseph Smith as founder of both the LDS Church and of Mormon polygamy, and thus the one responsible for it. However, she redeems Joseph as a "tragic hero" whom she can still admire,

in spite of his fatal flaws—namely his marrying over thirty wives, including a few teens.

“I walked along the paths of his personality,” she explains, “simple stories that make it very easy to love or at least admire Joseph. But his is not a small story, and so the plot has to thicken.” She wrestled with justifications of Joseph’s polygamy, such as, “it may look like a mistake but it really wasn’t” and “God was in charge,” so what “looks bad had to happen for the larger good.”

Pearson faced the hard fact that it “was Joseph’s fault. Unless it was God’s fault,” and concluded that it was Joseph’s fault, as an imperfect human being. He’s “like a very good man who steps on your toes,” she explains, yet “something went terribly wrong, and I believe that God insists, and insists very loudly, that we Latter-day Saints do everything we can to put it right.” She finally attests, “I believe that seeing Joseph’s polygamy as an error is the kindest way to evaluate it. And the surest way to correct it . . . Joseph made errors, and polygamy was the worst error Joseph ever made.”

That is the message of Pearson’s book, beyond its titular thesis that polygamy persists in Mormon theology. What Pearson wants her book to do is to convince readers that polygamy was a fatal mistake of a tragic hero, in need of correcting and healing, by Mormons today.

She forgives Joseph Smith for his revelation, resulting in the only LDS scripture prescribing polygamy: Doctrine and Covenants section 132. However, she devotes the bulk of her book to showing the bad fruits of that revelation as being destructive to Mormon women, past and present. “Joseph’s polygamy had little to do with romantic love. It came by commandment that no one seemed entirely to understand,” she laments.

However, Pearson treats Brigham Young less favorably. As “a man who had fifty-five wives,” she condemns his 1873 sermon “in which he said that if a man refused to take a second wife, in the eternities he would lose the wife he had.” She remembers that she felt “thunderstruck” by his words and flooded with “anger. . . . how could you say that[,] Brigham Young!” Yet eventually a pity replaced her rage: “I mourn for President Young. . . . he thought that he was never wrong.”

Conversely, Pearson views LDS origins in positive terms, as a time when women were “set on a progressive track in a patriarchal

institution . . . as spiritually powerful beings . . . [with] significant authority and responsibilities.” However, “this progressive track was immediately sabotaged by the arrival of polygamy” where “the male is eternally central and the female is eternally auxiliary.”

So, Pearson sets to work, countering the defenses most commonly used by LDS members (especially men) to support polygamy (at least in doctrine or theory). She wants readers to see these reasons as obviously weak or false arguments, or inadequate justifications:

“God commanded it.”

“It was necessary to multiply and replenish the earth.”

“It was needed . . . for the large surplus of female members, especially widows.”

It “produced more faithful members.”

There “had to be a ‘restoration of all things.’”

“God commanded polygamy . . . in the Old Testament.”

“There are more righteous women than men.”

“Monogamy leads to a corrupt society.”

“The one-wife system is a wicked arrangement and results in all manner of ills.” (Brigham Young)

It is “essential for the highest exaltation in the celestial kingdom.”

It “produces healthier children and thus a superior society.”

It carries “a certain publicity value to the whole work of God.”

It “weeded out the less committed members.”

“Without polygamy many of us would not be here.”

“God commanded polygamy . . . to try his people.”

She refutes all of these claims by concluding simply that, “Any possible benefit is a penny’s worth of gain for a dollar’s worth of pain.” It’s hard to refute that logic, coming from a woman.

Pearson notes the ineffectiveness of the “Official Declaration” that ostensibly discontinued polygamy in 1890, by pointing to polygamy’s continued existence beyond its partial policy death by public “Manifesto.” She attests to polygamy’s historical practice as continuing for decades after 1890, in multiple ways, and to its theological persistence to the present time. She testifies that it “continued covertly for years, [and] continues into the present in actual fact in the ‘fundamentalist break-off groups,’” and “continues in belief and in preparation for eternity in the mainstream LDS Church today.”

She convicts the theology of polygamy as the cause of its practice, which she charges as utterly wrong, untrue, and ungodly. She will no longer overlook its practice in history, nor tolerate its presence in heaven. She declares that “plural marriage never was—is not now—and never will be ordained of God.” She sees polygamy as a human affliction rather than a divine revelation—a dark presence inhabiting Mormon theology in need of exorcism, a negative entity possessing women’s hearts and lives. Pearson is calling for a drastic change in LDS theology and doctrine, insisting that any past or partial repudiation of polygamy is not nearly enough.

In convicting the theology, Pearson goes deeper—to convict patriarchy as the source of that theology and its problems. She indicts male privilege as “a sad relic passed from generation to generation throughout most of history, a relic that not only is false but profoundly harmful to all humans of both genders.” She says that when patriarchy and polygamy were pitched as theology, it “all testified to a large and burning question: Why is maleness superior to femaleness?”

Pearson views patriarchy past and present in Mormon theology and culture as the foundation and culprit for all devaluing of women, including via polygamy. She describes Mormonism as swimming in patriarchal authority and governance—where men, not women, are worshipped as gods; men preside over the Church; men perform the saving ordinances; men are depicted in religious images, and men occupy top privilege in all church settings.

Pearson feels a deep personal “calling to help the human family cross the plains of patriarchy into the land of partnership.” She insists that this is the solution, since only partnership of both genders, not polygamy, can bring Zion, or God’s true kingdom on earth.

Pearson’s critique is focused on polygyny, the union of one man to multiple women. Yet she recognizes the complexity or variety of other polygamous relationships in LDS origins. “By the end of 1843, Joseph had taken between thirty and forty wives, some already married to other men, some sealed to him only for eternity, but many sealed for both time and eternity, including a traditional, marital, sexual relationship.” She mentions the practice of “levirate marriage” (sealing widows to living men), and of polyandry (sealing women to multiple husbands), along with polygyny (one husband with multiple wives), and “adoption” (the sealing of non-family members as family). She notes that all of these versions of polygamy or plural marriage emerged during LDS origins in the 1830s-40s. She explains, “Joseph wedded families together in his eternal kingdom by wedding women to him. It created alliances like the royals.”

However, she doesn’t view the non-polygynous forms of plural marriage or sealings (polyandry and adoption) as an improvement over polygyny, nor as desirable. They are exceptions rather than the rule, and “strange” aberrations to family unity. She focuses on the predominant form of plural marriage, as patriarchal polygyny, the theological and practical standard of polygamy in need of remedy. Her concern is that patriarchal polygyny allows one man to have multiple wives, which deeply diminishes and subverts women’s identity, value, equality and partnership, and which envisions a heavenly hierarchy where a male God presides over multiple female deity as his wives.

Pearson doesn’t give polyandry much attention, other than acknowledging its sporadic presence in LDS origins; there’s little mention of it potentially equalizing the unfairness of polygyny via a reversal of sexism, by allowing a woman to have multiple husbands. And she doesn’t give polyamory any attention as an alternative to polygyny, where the complexity of relationships and of loving more than one person may arise. She wants to rid marriage relations of emotional and sexual distractions that invite other partners into that intimate commitment. In other words, she wants Mormon

theology to practice the sanctity of marriage that it preaches in Mormon sermons at church, and at General Conference, and in public discourse.

Pearson is resolute: she will no longer ignore, minimize, endure, nor tolerate the sexism and misogyny inherent in polygyny, where a woman's equality as a marriage partner is diminished, devalued and disempowered by being one of multiple wives.

She refuses to ignore the hidden polygyny inherent in LDS temple sealings today, where an apparently monogamous marriage remains open to polygyny in heaven. Temple marriage allows a man to be sealed to multiple wives—one living legal wife, the others divorced or deceased; however, a woman can be sealed to only one man, in life and in heaven. She also sees sexism when men can annul a sealing at will, while women cannot, unless the man gives his permission. Pearson notes that a “Mormon widow faces a uniquely difficult circumstance, not faced by a widow in any other religious community”—since her sealing to a dead husband often stops any other man from marrying her. He cannot be sealed to her, nor sealed to the children they create together. A woman must be monogamous in her temple sealing, while a man can be polygynous, with temple sealings to multiple women.

Pearson doesn't mention the rare exception to this sexist sealing practice—where a woman retains a sealing to a deceased husband while obtaining a sealing with a living husband, resulting in eternal polyandry. Such gender equality, where women, too, can be sealed to multiple men, is not accessible to women normally, except in rare cases, where special permission is obtained. Yet this loophole seems a vital place to lobby for equality—either in access to multiple sealings with husbands in heaven, or for an end to multiple sealings with wives there. Pearson prefers to end to all multiple marriage sealings, and recommit to monogamy and loyalty in heart, soul, and body, rather than seek an equality of polyandry with polygyny.

Pearson sees in temple sealings a spirit of polygyny hovering over lived monogamy, despite Church claims of monogamous doctrine and practice. She cites a contradiction in sealing multiple wives in religious ritual while banning multiple wives in civil marriage. And she cites a contradiction in excommunicating Mormons who live in polygamy, while approving Mormons who

believe in polygamy, which “has never been excommunicated,” but is protected in theology. She sees these contradictions as an “emotional inauthenticity,” which she firmly “believe[s] to be something we Mormon women continue to deal with today.”

She quotes Phoebe Woodruff, the first of Wilford Woodruff’s seven wives, as an example of the double life and double bind on polygynous wives in history—who publicly promoted polygamy while privately despising it. Phoebe taught, “If I am proud of anything in this world, it is that I accepted the principle of plural marriage, and remained among the people called ‘Mormons’ and am numbered with them to-day.” Yet privately, Phoebe admitted: “I loathe the unclean thing with all the strength of my nature, but...I am old and helpless, and would rather...say anything commanded of me, than to be turned out of my home in my old age.” Pearson notes the irony that Phoebe’s husband was the LDS Church President who issued the “Manifesto” in 1890, ending plural marriage, yet she says this change was “not in response to the feelings of Phoebe and other women, their decades of bitter unhappiness, but in response to the fact that the church faced disenfranchisement.”

Pearson sees polygamy’s ghosts as invading marriage with invisible partners whose theological presence is psychologically disruptive, causing uncertainty of commitment, feelings of infidelity, and mistrust of physical intimacy, security, and loyalty. An additional lover, albeit invisible, causes an emotional loss of safety and faith, even of trust in God. To document this insecurity, Pearson collected thousands of stories from other LDS women who have confronted the personal toll of living with an unseen mistress in their eternal marriage. Many women see polygyny as an extramarital affair intruding on and refusing to leave a monogamist faith. She summons polygamy’s presence in LDS theology in order to exorcise it from the Mormon psyche.

Pearson explicitly calls for the LDS Church to renounce polygamy in all its forms, and admit that it was a mistake. She wants it dispelled from LDS theology, doctrine, ritual, practice, and from its potential presence in heaven. She suggests this can be accomplished by a few crucial “emergency” steps:

Have temple marriage rites place a man and woman on truly equal ground.

Produce an "inspired revision" of D&C 132 by removing the passages on plural marriage.

Use non-sexist language in all official LDS discourse.

Disavow the doctrine of polygamy as the word of God.

Renounce its role in past, present, or future sealings.

Pearson cites examples of other precedent for such doctrinal changes, including the removal of some racist teachings in LDS scripture, doctrine, theology, policy and practice. Pearson's push for revoking polygamy is based on ample examples of other equally complex or momentous changes in doctrine or policy. Her case for renouncing polygamy based on precedent may be the most daring and significant aspect of her book. She challenges LDS Church leaders to do something for women as big as the doctrinal change that enabled the ordination of Black men in 1978. She believes removing the doctrine of polygamy is like removing the ban on Blacks from holding the priesthood. She argues that polygamy, like the racial ban, has shown over time to be a deeply flawed idea, wrongly interpreted as divine commandment rather than recognized as human error.

Pearson doesn't explore polygamy as a purely spiritual concept or a religious metaphor where souls are all members of one spiritual family. Nor does she consider polygamy as a symbolic vision or mystical teaching about the quantum nature of divine being, as described in D&C 93 where all spirits are "light." She focuses on polygyny as literal theology, doctrine, belief and practice with bad results in real lives, mainly for women.

I found her feminist premises and arguments against patriarchal polygyny well presented, solid, convincing, and needed. Some of us feminists have worked with victims of patriarchal polygyny in Utah, for decades, and wish that polygynist aspects of LDS theology, doctrine, practice and culture would be revoked, fully. As a theologian and mystic, I contemplate the spiritual nature of relationships in heaven, where light beings are one family of God, and wonder, how do relationships work there? I sense that Joseph glimpsed eternal relationships as beyond human nature and comprehension. A mystical interpretation may be the most optimistic reading of eternal polygamy.

Pearson does cite the Mormon belief that “all things were created spiritually before they were created physically” to suggest that a higher spiritual reality may be trying to transform our fallen human tendencies. She asserts that God was not the author of patriarchal polygyny, on earth nor in heaven. She also believes that continuing revelation could heal Mormon polygamy—if our spiritual vision aligns with the true nature of God. Setting aside transcendent possibilities for eternal relations, her feminist claims about polygyny in Mormon culture are solid ones we can hold onto.

Finally, Pearson reminds readers that the LDS God is both male and female, not simply male, and that the divine Father and Mother are truly equals in heaven. While she and other LDS feminists see the equality of male and female deity as an obvious truth, Church traditionalists from Brigham Young onward tend to project male hegemony into heaven, where the Mother is subordinate to the Father’s priesthood. Yet Pearson rightly reasons that this makes no sense if both are Gods.

A canonical basis for this truth appears oddly in the midst of the most patriarchal, sexist chapter in all of LDS scripture, D&C 132. While this revelation commands the practice of patriarchal polygyny, it also stipulates the equality of male and female gods. Verse 20 describes the Gods as having the fullness of glory “above all, because all things are subject unto them. Then shall they be gods because they have all power.” This makes no distinction between the status of the Father and the Mother, which would refute any notion of patriarchal superiority over the matriarch. This passage does not envision a male god reigning over a harem of female deities, but depicts the Gods, male and female, as equal in divine power and authority. It theologically refutes most of D&C 132, with the potential to correct all patriarchal claims made in the rest of that text.

Meanwhile, Carol Lynn Pearson is a female prophetic figure herself, with white hair, translucent skin, and a powerful female voice that is still vital in her mid-eighties. Near the end of her book, she testifies that dispelling polygamy’s ghosts truly works because she has done it herself.

“The Ghost, I knew, was a formidable figure, well established and well protected. But I had faced him down in my own life, had evicted him from my personal house of faith. What if... many of

us together—could summon the fortitude and determination of our pioneer ancestors . . . that we could find the power to cast the Ghost from our community once and for all.”

Pearson found the solution to patriarchal polygamy in the simple, obvious gender equality of male and female Gods. She didn’t have to excavate the one or two good lines buried in D&C 132; she simply saw the truth in the Gods themselves, in the Mother as a perfect mirror of the Father. She did what Joseph Smith prescribed in his final sermon: “My first object is to find out the character of the only wise and true God. . . . If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves” (King Follett sermon). She came to know the eternal deity via her own eternal identity.

She explains, “It is my belief that when we, in our small Mormon corner of God’s universe, are able truly to expel the Ghost of Eternal Polygamy, we will ‘shout aloud and sing for joy’ and . . . speak of and to the two who are One, our Mother-Goddess/FatherGod. The hopeful but misty thought that ‘I’ve a Mother there’ will give way to the experience that ‘I’ve a Mother here.’ We will know Him, Her, Them, Us, the Divine Family unbroken . . . singing the wholeness, singing the holiness.”

There is no ghost in this theology, no patriarchy, or hegemony, or polygyny—just a divine unity of self with God. “I am a castle. The Kingdom and Queendom of God is within.”

Millie Tullis. *These Saints are Stones*.

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Reviewed by Genevieve Larsen, Wahiawa, HI.

My mother once taught me that if something truly needs to be done, you should find the busiest woman in your LDS ward. She will do it. I believe this without question. It seems to describe a certain ideal, a woman shaped by Christlike service, one who can be relied upon because she has learned how to carry more than her share. In my experience you will most often find this woman serving in your local Latter-day Saint Primary. But now, when I hear this platitude, another thought programmed by modern “self care” feminist philosophy comes to sit quietly beside it in my mind. Perhaps, these are also the women who have not learned, or have chosen not to exercise, the modern discipline (often heralded as a virtue) of saying no.

That distinction matters more than it appears. It is not that such women do not understand consent, boundaries, or personal cost. It is that many have already made a choice, one that remains largely invisible because it is rarely articulated. The women who continue to labor in the vineyard do so while interrupted by toddlers, by baptism talks using KitKats and teddy bears, by songs about Mother to teach to untrained children’s choirs, by the small, constant demands that leave little room to reflect, let alone record. There is no time to write a journal about the delicate negotiation between consent, choice, and complicity that structures so much of faithful living. And so the record remains thin, not because there is nothing to say, but because the women who might say it are busy.

It is within this silence that Millie Tullis’s book of poetry, *These Saints Are Stones*, situates itself. The collection attempts to reconstruct and reimagine a personal polygamist lineage, centering on a complex familial arrangement in which a mother and daughter become plural wives to the same man. Tullis approaches this history through poetry that blends archival fragments, personal memory, and speculative interiority. Her work forgoes historical certainty to explore the emotional and moral implications of what cannot be fully known.

At the core of the collection is a burden familiar to scholars of Latter-day Saint women's history. Our tradition, which does not canonize saints in the medieval sense, nevertheless elevates pioneer ancestors into figures of moral authority and identity formation. In poems such as "After" and the paired poems entitled "Pinto Cemetery," Tullis examines how names function within this framework. To bear the name of an ancestor is to inherit their story, though the narrative may be sanitized, incomplete, or unresolved. Of particular interest is one branch of her line that she struggles to understand: "No one is named for my grandfather's great grandmother."

The historical configuration Tullis examines is particularly charged. Alice, a widowed mother, marries David. Her daughter, Martha, later becomes his plural wife. The poems move between these figures, attempting to imagine their perspectives while acknowledging the limits of such imagination. Tullis resists offering a singular interpretation. Instead, she presents a series of possibilities, each shaped by the fragments available and the emotional lens she brings to them. She is limited by the historical record, and she explores the lack of primary sources and autobiography: "[Y]ou could not read or write, made sure your Martha could." Yet Martha does not write letters home, even during the prolonged separation of a mission.

One of the most striking aspects of the collection is its engagement with the question of consent. Tullis challenges inherited family explanations that frame plural marriage as purely a matter of obedience or divine mandate. At the same time, she does not fully resolve the question by casting her ancestors as victims. The poems remain suspended between these poles, seeking to account for both agency and compliance in the lives of polygamist women. This tension is further complicated by Tullis's incorporation of her own experiences as a survivor of sexual violence, most notably in "I Dream" and "I Do Not Know." These poems raise questions about the ways personal trauma may be mediated through historical inquiry, and about what remains unsaid even within a work explicitly concerned with giving voice to silence.

The collection culminates in a crisis of faith articulated in the poem, "What I Miss About Believing," where Tullis identifies the loss of communal belonging through the simple phrase "singing

with others.” In the context of Latter-day Saint practice, communal singing is an expression of unity, a ritual that binds individuals into a shared spiritual identity. Its absence signals not only doctrinal doubt but social and emotional dislocation. In the most basic of Latter-day Saint doctrines, newly baptized members promise to join the unity in “bearing one another’s burdens.” But what happens when you are asked to bear a burden that violates the very moral compass that you understood and wanted to follow in a contract with God? Does God cease to be good when your example of Father ceases to look Heavenly? Tullis captures this loss of innocent obedience and allows the reader to feel the weight of what is no longer accessible. In this, I found the most emotional resonance. Belonging is Zion, and without it, we live in Babylon.

For all its attentiveness to rupture, *These Saints Are Stones* also gestures toward endurance. The recurring image of stones, particularly gravestones, functions as a counterpoint to more organic metaphors of growth and cultivation. Stones do not flourish or fade. They remain. In this sense, Tullis shifts the framework through which women’s labor is understood. Rather than emphasizing productivity or visible outcomes, she foregrounds endurance, memory, and the capacity to bear unresolved histories.

This is where her work intersects, and at times diverges, from the lived realities of many contemporary Latter-day Saint women. The metaphor of tilling, which appears in her line, “a woman tills the earth forever... & nothing ever grows,” suggests futility, an endless labor without visible fruit. There is truth in that image. But it is not the whole truth. There are forms of labor whose value is not measured in growth but in what they make possible. Soil is turned not only for planting but sometimes for burial. What is being prepared is not always a garden.

From a scholarly standpoint, Tullis’s collection contributes to fresh feminist approaches to Mormon history that emphasize the limits of archival recovery and the necessity of imaginative reconstruction. Her work aligns with a growing body of literature that seeks to engage with narratives of early polygamy by foregrounding ambiguity and emotional depth. At the same time, it raises important methodological questions. How far can imagination extend before it begins to overwrite the past it seeks to honor?

What responsibilities accompany the act of giving voice to those who cannot speak for themselves?

These questions are not easily resolved, and Tullis does not attempt to resolve them. Instead, she embraces them. The result is a collection that is both evocative and unsettled, one that invites readers to engage with the hidden history it presents and with the interpretive processes it employs.

And yet, I find myself returning to the women who do not write—the ones who are still, even now, too busy. I think of my own younger self, heavy with my first child, trying to finish a degree while navigating a system that had no space for the realities of motherhood. My senior year at BYU, I read *Alas, Babylon* and wondered what a classic work like this would look like from a woman's perspective. But upon reflecting on the plot, I realized there was probably not much of a market for books about day after day of squeezing oranges into orange juice. The mystic meaning of the prosaic was not lost on me, since the previous semester, I had roomed with a girl who, for her senior art project, completed a twelve-work exhibit on the spiritual significance of oranges in her personal life. But that thought never found form in my youthful womanhood, obstructed by the mad dash to figure out who would watch the baby so I could complete my last final, which was scheduled at the same time as my husband's. I did pass the class despite the zero score from the professor who didn't feel that childcare was a legitimate excuse for missing such an important test. I was grateful, as I stood still bleeding from my surgical site in shame and silence with my two-week-old daughter, that I would graduate; I didn't revile my professor as he explained the importance of justice in the academic system. I understood this reality, and my husband received an A. It was enough for me then, and it is now. I would not have recorded it at all, but I was asked to try my hand at writing a book review, this one. I remember standing in a classroom, physically undone, silent in the face of a standard of justice that did not account for my life. No, I did not record it then. I would not have recorded it now, had I not been asked, because if you ask the busiest woman in your ward to do something, she will. I am the Primary President.

That is the tension I carry into Tullis's work. She fills gaps with imagination, and there is value in that. But there is also a kind of

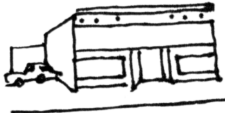
knowledge that does not easily translate into narrative, that resists being shaped into poetry or theory. It is held instead in the body, in repetition, in the quiet endurance of daily obligations that leave little trace. If there are stones, they are not always the ones we choose. Sometimes they are simply what remains.

Perhaps that is where I ultimately depart from Tullis. It is not that I don't appreciate her project exactly as it is. But I wonder what her writing will become with time, with the added weight of a life lived more fully in the interruptions she gestures toward but has not yet fully inhabited. As she strives to find a foundation or touchstone to her own life, she backtracks into others' recollections, her own memories and horrors and imaginations, and finally ends with her newly-found belief in ghosts in the concluding poem "Dream." This poem is the final of ten poems with "Dream" in the title. Tullis feeds her own baby and indicates that she will remain haunted by her imaginings of her family history. What might she see if she stood, years from now, at the graves she describes, after having tilled her own ground long enough to understand its purpose differently? A young mother is still full of possibilities and has the potential of an eternal garden of fruitful descendants in a never-ending Eden.

I do not fault her for writing when she did or how. We can only write when we find the space, the education, and the ability or desire to say "no" to a lifestyle that submits the privilege of complete thoughts to a kind of fully encompassing self-sacrifice that is sometimes called motherhood. But I suspect that the fullest understanding of these women who do define themselves by their silence, our ancestors and the quiet, undocumented Latter-day Saint polygamist wives, will not come from what we manage to record or reimagine. It will come from what we learn, slowly and often silently, to revere. Young Tullis seems still wrought with her search for individual identity that comes with being young. If I must critique her exploration and expose limitations, it is in identifying, as she explicitly does in "Faith," with only the daughter, not the mother.

I wonder if Millie Tullis, with age, will visit Pinto Cemetery. With the maturity that comes from a life interrupted by the sacrifice of motherhood, church service, and one's own flaws and mistakes, will she feel the peace that comes in the silence of visiting stones?

Will an older Tullis, closer to the end of life than the beginning, find peace and belonging in soil prepared for a final resting place in a life that will never fully be resolved? Are the ghosts a comfort or a condemnation? Will she find her own place in her family story? In her poem "Work," she chooses the hair color for an ancestor doll that she wishes for herself and notes that "there is no one alive that remembers the color of her hair, there is no one to correct me." Will she record her own hair color for future generations? She makes no mention of it in her poems.



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As an extension of Paula Harline's 2026 JMP Conference keynote "Did They Like It? What Six Provo Polygamous Wives Wrote about their Motivations, Housing, and Marriage Relationships," the *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* and Preservation Utah are offering a bicycle tour in Provo.

Harline created this tour, in conjunction with the non-profit Preservation Utah, to make the stories of nineteenth-century polygamous wives more visible by looking at their housing. The tour, like Harline's book *The Polygamous Wives Writing Club: From the Diaries of Mormon Pioneer Women*, is based on the personal writings of faithful, obscure polygamous wives.

The tour starts at Mary Jane Tanner's former property, continues to Eunice Stewart's shop on Center Street, with an ice cream break on University Avenue while looking at Catherine Rogers' shop; then there will be a brief interior visit to Diana Smoot's house, finishing with a look at Lorena Larsen's apartment above her daughter's house on 800 North.

This August 15, 2026 tour is offered exclusively to *Journal of Mormon Polygamy* tourgoers. Tickets are \$20, to benefit Preservation Utah. Email liz@preservationutah.org for a registration link.