

Counting Polygamists:
A Review of George D. Smith's Identification
of the Earliest Mormon Polygamists

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In the spring of 1994, George D. Smith published his ground-breaking investigation into the origins of Mormon plural marriage entitled "Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-1846: A Preliminary Demographic Report" (Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought 37, no. 1). His analysis covered thirty-six pages and featured seven tables. Perhaps his most impressive accomplishment was the thirty-six-page appendix "Nauvoo Polygamous Families" which listed every known plural husband and wife sealed with Joseph Smith's (and later Brigham Young's) approval, together with dates of birth, marriage, sealing, age at sealing, and total family size prior to mid-1844, from mid-1844 to 1846, and from 1846 on. The essay, and the research underlying it, was of monumental significance. Never before had such careful, painstaking scrutiny been brought to bear on the men and women surrounding Joseph Smith who not only shared his views on the controversial doctrines of eternal marriage and plurality of wives, but fully embraced their practice.

What I hope to undertake in this presentation is to reexamine George's identification of the thirty husbands who married plurally with Joseph Smith's approval prior to the latter's death on 27 June 1844. Representing more of an inquiry than a critique, I would like to review George's documentation, point out some additional sources, and offer where appropriate some tentative recommendations for consideration. I am certain that George would be the first to acknowledge that his essay was an initial attempt at a very thorny subject. Not only are the documentary sources few, but often they are confusing and occasionally contradictory. In fact, I know that he has continued to refine both his identifications and analysis and that, with luck, we should be able to read his work following its publication in book-form in the not-too-distant future.

In his published essay, George identified thirty men as having contracted plural marriages with Joseph Smith's approval during his lifetime. Of these thirty men, based on my own review of the sources (discussed below), I agree with the identification in twenty instances, question the identification in ten, and recommend nine additions, for a revised tentative total of twenty-nine.

Recommended Deletions

The men whose status as early Mormon polygamists I question, and my reasons for doing so, are as follows:

John T. Bair

John T. Bair, baptized LDS in 1834, married Lydia Regester on 29 August 1829; they divorced (according to John's "Individual Record" at www.familysearch.org) or separated, probably by the early 1840s, since their last child was born in Ohio on 8 December 1839. John then married Lucinda Owen Tyler civilly on 19 October 1843 (according to Lyndon Cook's Nauvoo Deaths and Marriages, 107). According to the brief manuscript narrative entitled "John Bair" (no author, LDS church archives): "He [John] must have loved the [LDS] Church very much as he left his first wife [Lydia] and seven of his children back East because as she would have nothing to do with his religion and would not come with him." Because John and Lydia were not living together, for whatever reason, as husband and wife at the time of his civil marriage to Lucinda, I don't believe John should be counted as an early Mormon polygamist.

James Bird

James Bird married Jane Mott Carpenter about 1831. (George Smith specifies 25 February 1831.) According to his "Individual Record" (www.familysearch.org), James then supposedly married Sophia Alcester Fuller on 5 May 1843. James was endowed in the Nauvoo temple on 3 February 1846, Jane three days later, at which time both were presumably sealed to each other. The Nauvoo temple record contains no reference to Sophia Alcester Fuller.

However, according to Susan Easton Black (Membership, s.v. "Fuller, Sophina Alcesta"), Sophina Alcesta Fuller was born on 5 May 1843, married James Bird on 15 March 1857 (she was not quite fourteen), but soon thereafter divorced him because she married George Washington Gee on 4 May 1862. She died on 26 December 1930. (Interestingly, in her entry for James Bird, Susan Easton Black does not identify Sophina as one of James's wives.) Because a Bird family descendant evidently confused Sophina's birth date for a marriage date, I believe James Bird should be dropped as an early Mormon polygamist.

Thomas Bullock

Thomas Bullock married Henrietta Rushton on 25 June 1838 in England. They were sealed in the Nauvoo temple on 23 January 1846, the same date Thomas was sealed to Lucy Caroline Clayton (sister of William Clayton). Thomas's journal entry for this date reads, in part: "At dusk I, Henrietta and Lucy went to the Temple, dressed, sat in the Cel. Room, and shook hands with B[righam]. Young. H[eber]. C. Kimball. O[rson]. Hyde, P[arley]. P. Pratt, A[masa]. Lyman. Went into the President's room when I and [the?] two others were sealed up to eternal life, thro' time to come forth in the morn of the resurrection, and thro' all eternity. Were sealed up against all sin except the sin against the Holy Ghost and the shedding of innocent blood by A. Lyman. I praise the Lord for this