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WOMEN, FAMILY, AND UTOPIA

Communal Experiments of the Shakers,
the Oneida Community, and the Mormons

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Oneida women engaged in a bag-making bee. A man is reading aloud to the group. Note the distinctive bloomer-style dresses and short hair worn by the community women. *Courtesy Oneida Community Mansion House.*

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Plural Marriage and the Experiences of Mormon Women
in Illinois During the Early 1840s

EFFORTS TO INTRODUCE a form of polygamy among the Mormons at their primary church settlement in Nauvoo, Illinois, during the early 1840s created intense controversy, both at the time and subsequently. Records of the main body of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints indicate that the first plural marriage sanctioned by a ceremony occurred there on April 5, 1841, between the church's thirty-five-year-old prophet-founder, Joseph Smith, Jr., and the twenty-six-year-old Louisa Beaman. On July 12, 1843, formal written sanction was given to the practice when Smith privately dictated a revelation calling for a restoration among the Latter-day Saints of polygamous marriage practices similar to those of the Old Testament patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. These new practices were set within the context of a conception of marriage, growth, and development—a "new and everlasting covenant"—which was to continue throughout all eternity. Presentation of this revelation within the following month to many in the church's leadership cadre led to a crisis in the young church. Little more than a year later, on June 27, 1844, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were murdered in a jail in Carthage, Illinois, while awaiting trial on charges arising in part from the dissatisfaction of some of their followers with the new polygamous beliefs and practices.¹

This brief and turbulent effort by Joseph Smith and some of his associates in Nauvoo to introduce plural marriage among the Latter-