

THE SUMMER OF 1842:  
JOSEPH SMITH'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE 12 WIVES HE MARRIED  
AFTER HIS FIRST WIFE, EMMA

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Abstract: Love and marriage through the summer of 1842, as experienced by the prophet Joseph Smith, his first wife, Emma, and several other women who knew Joseph as their celestial mate while he was hiding out at Grainger's farm. During this time he was also quietly and selectively inviting close male adherents in Nauvoo to marry plural wives, leading his restored church, and evading Missouri peace officers who sought to incarcerate him. A romantic look at Mormon polygamy.

Defining the Subject

Last year Todd Compton published a well-documented account of Joseph Smith's plural wives, a book compiled from *their* point of view. *In Sacred Loneliness* devotes a chapter to each of 33 wives, occasionally doubling up for sisters and mother-daughter combinations. This paper looks at these relationships from *Joseph's* point of view, as he struggles to keep his marriage ceremonies private, his conjugal visits discreet, his legal marriage to Emma free from contention, and his church running smoothly. In the summer of 1842 the prophet began to have difficulty with this balancing effort. For example, on June 29, 1842, Eliza R. Snow became the prophet's wife and moved into the Smith household. Shortly afterward, Smith wrote an adoring letter to his first wife Emma, then, days later, he invited his most recent wife, Sarah Ann Whitney, to visit him at his hideout at Grainger's farm to "comfort" him. Simultaneous to these events, Smith issued revelations, evaded Missouri sheriffs, and encouraged select priesthood colleagues to secretly marry plural wives of their own.

This is polygamy from the perspective of the chairman of the board, so to speak, a day-to-day look at Smith's life during the summer of 1842 as he courted a series of women and encouraged other men to take additional wives, all the while trying to run the corporation and keep a step ahead of the law. The prophet seems harried and almost frantic. Polygamy was a dangerous enterprise, one that eventually cost him his life. In cataloging events in Nauvoo during the 1840s I won't differentiate between love and sex, nor try to judge the nature of Smith's relationship to these women--although he expressed a profound love for Emma. Nor do I wish to modify the inherently sensational quality of eyewitness accounts to make the story of polygamy in the summer of '42 appear "balanced." I leave it to you to determine the degree of commitment, risk-taking, recklessness or religiosity in the character of Joseph Smith.

#### Setting the Stage: The Backstory From 1827

What led up to the summer of '42? Smith's position on marriage evolved shortly after he eloped with Emma Hale on January 18, 1827. Over a 15-year period, he took several small steps toward the polygamous theocracy that flowered in 1842.

In 1827, Smith not only married, he completed a five-year ritualized search for gold plates buried in a hill 12 miles from his home. Each year, until the time was right to recover the treasure, he approached the hill at midnight on the autumnal equinox. During the next two years he dictated the Book of Mormon, which is where polygamy is first mentioned, interestingly enough as a prohibition: "There shall not any man among you have save it be one wife," followed by this qualification: "For if I will, saith the Lord of Hosts, raise up seed unto me, I will command my people; otherwise they shall hearken unto these things" (Book

of Mormon, Jacob 2: 27, 30). In other words, polygamy was forbidden until allowed by deity, which only a prophet could determine. It is noteworthy that the audience for this revelation is presumed to be male; the possibility of plural husbands is not addressed.

So the stage was set. In his role as "prophet, seer, and translator," Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830. The next year, as he and Oliver Cowdery studied the Bible, he became convinced that plural marriage as practiced by David and Solomon should be restored to the Latter-day Saints. When Mormon missionaries were sent preaching to Native Americans in 1831, Smith directed several married men to take Indians as wives "that their posterity may become white, delightsome and just."<sup>1</sup> Such an outcome would fulfill the Book of Mormon prophecy that dark-skinned Indians would become "a white [pure] and delightsome people" (Book of Mormon, 2 Ne. 30:6). However, no record exists of any marriages resulting from this expedition.

About five years after he married Emma Hale, Smith became involved with Fanny Alger, his first known intimate relationship outside of legal marriage. Some observers at the time called this an affair; Oliver Cowdery said it was "a dirty, nasty, filthy, affair." Others, like Apostle William McLellin called this relationship Smith's first plural marriage.<sup>2</sup>

Alger's association with the prophet began in 1832-33 and ended by 1836 when she married Solomon Custer and left Ohio for Indiana. Whatever her status, Fanny was apparently the first young homeless female to reside with the Smiths as a domestic housegirl. According to McLellin, in 1832 Emma came upon her husband with Fanny in the barn, down on the hay. McLellin later calls her "Miss Hill" apparently confusing her with the character in a popular romance novel, *Fanny Hill*.<sup>3</sup> In any case, he wrote that an embarrassed Joseph

Smith apologized to Emma in the presence of church colleagues Frederick G. Williams, Oliver Cowdery, and Sidney Rigdon.<sup>4</sup> Even after Fanny left Kirtland by 1836, some church leaders expressed discontent over Smith's relationship with her. In 1838 Cowdery, Smith's primary Book of Mormon scribe and once second in command, was excommunicated, in part, for accusing the prophet of "adultery."<sup>5</sup>

Smith may have had earlier liaisons. Mary Elizabeth Rollins recalled that long before she married Adam Lightner in 1835, in 1831, when she was just 13, she was "sealed" to Joseph Smith. This statement, if taken literally, would designate Mary Elizabeth as perhaps the first plural wife, although her marriage to Smith was not recorded until 1842. She explained that polygamy "was given to him before he gave it to the Church," referring to the 1843 revelation that authorized plural marriage.<sup>6</sup> Beyond the Alger and Lightner accounts, Compton suggests that in about 1838 Smith probably married Lucinda Morgan, widow of abducted Masonic dissenter William Morgan, although there is no marriage record at that time.

The first recorded plural marriage was in 1841 between Joseph Smith and Louisa Beaman. On April 5, disguised in a man's hat and coat, Louisa met Joseph by the Mississippi River where they were wed by her brother-in-law, Joseph Noble. That autumn, Smith married two more women, the daughters of William Huntington. At that time both women, Zina and Prescindia, were already married to other church members, and Zina was six-months pregnant.

In 1841, not only did Smith begin to keep a coded record of marriages ("was" = wed and sealed), he also instructed a few others to take plural wives. In mid-1841 he taught