

Did Plural Marriages Include Sexual Relations?



Joseph Smith was likely sealed to between 30 and 40 women during his lifetime.¹ Of these, it appears the Prophet experienced sexual relations with less than half of the women sealed to him.²

There is no credible evidence that Joseph had sex with three subgroups of his plural wives: (1) fourteen-year-old wives, (2) non-wives (or women to whom he was not married), and (3) legally married women who were experiencing conjugal relations with their civil husbands.

Evidences of Sexual Relations

Some sources that support sexual relations are more explicit and credible than others:

1. **Fanny Alger**: Several accounts record that Emma Smith witnessed Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger together (but not what they were doing together).³ One source asserts that Fanny became pregnant.⁴
2. **Louisa Beaman**: When Joseph Bates Noble, Louisa's brother-in-law, was asked: "Where did they [Joseph Smith and plural wife Louisa Beaman] sleep together?" His responded: "Right straight across the river at my house they slept together."⁵
3. **Emily Partridge**: When under oath in a deposition in the Temple Lot case, Emily Partridge was asked, "Do you make the declaration that you ever slept with him in the same bed?" to which she answered, "Yes sir."⁶
4. **Eliza Partridge**: Concerning Emily's sister Eliza, Benjamin F. Johnson wrote in 1903: "The first plural wife brought to my house with whom the Prophet stayed, was Eliza Partridge."⁷
5. **Lucy Walker**: Lucy Walker's niece, Theodocia Frances Walker Davis, reported to Joseph Smith III in 1876, "Lucy Walker told her that she lived with Joseph Smith as a wife."⁸
6. **Almera Johnson**: Benjamin Johnson affirmed his sister Almera Johnson experienced sexual relations with the Prophet: "He [Joseph Smith] was at my house ... where he occupied my sister Almera's room and bed."⁹
7. **Sylvia Sessions**: In a 1915 statement, Josephine Lyon declared that her mother, Sylvia Sessions told her in 1882 that she (Josephine) was Joseph Smith's daughter.¹⁰ DNA testing has since proven that he was not.
8. **Maria Lawrence**: On May 23, 1844, William Law, who had apostatized months earlier over plural marriage, charged Joseph Smith in a Carthage court with living "in an open state of adultery" with Maria Lawrence.¹¹
9. **Sarah Lawrence**: Several statements document that Sarah Lawrence lived with the Prophet as a plural wife. For example, Lucy Walker attested in 1902: "I know that [Emma] gave her consent to the marriage of at least four women [Emily and Eliza Partridge and Maria and Sarah Lawrence] to her husband as plural wives, and she was well aware that he associated and cohabited with them as wives."¹²

10. [Malissa Lott](#): In an 1893 interview, RLDS Church President Joseph Smith III asked Malissa Lott if she was the Prophet's "wife in very deed," to which she answered, "Yes."¹³
11. [Mary Heron](#): A single document implies sexuality between Joseph Smith and Mary Heron Snyder.

Evidence of sexual involvement between Joseph Smith and three other wives exists but suffers from ambiguities or other credibility problems. Contradictory evidence exists regarding [Eliza R. Snow](#). In addition, single accounts for both [Sarah Ann Whitney](#) and [Hannah Ells](#) imply sexuality but without adequate secondary verification.

Frequency of Sexual Relations

It is impossible to accurately determine how often Joseph Smith spent time with his plural wives, either in conjugal visits or otherwise.

The Nauvoo years were busy for Joseph. He had heavy ecclesiastical and civic responsibilities as church president and city mayor. He entertained visitors and journalists, had parenting responsibilities, and intermittently went into hiding to avoid Missouri lawmen. He also managed a complicated real estate business, preached at weekly services, and in 1844, offered himself as a candidate for US president, which would further have limited his time.

In addition, secrecy was a major concern. Rumors of "spiritual wifery" were rampant after John C. Bennett wrote his mid-1842 letters accusing Joseph Smith of sexual improprieties. Joseph had nothing to do with Bennett's marital system, but the Prophet's teachings of restored Old Testament polygamy were still concealed, even from many devout members.

Another huge obstacle was Emma Smith's vigilant and mostly intolerant eyes.¹⁴

According to Joseph Lee Robinson, who turned thirty-two in 1843 and who supervised a school in Nauvoo, Emma even commissioned spies to prevent Joseph from having private moments with his plural wives.¹⁵ Emma ostensibly sought total control over his plural marriage activities after July 12, 1843.

An important consideration is the phenomenon of diminishing returns. After a certain point, the addition of new plural wives did not necessarily increase Joseph's opportunity for additional sexual encounters with each plural wife. Such a dynamic would, inevitably, have curtailed chances for conception on the part of his plural wives.

Joseph's Plural Wives' Fertility

The Prophet was virile, having fathered nine children with Emma despite long periods of time apart and challenging schedules.¹⁶ A [discussion of Joseph and Emma's family](#) can be found on LDS.org.



Figure 1: General Joseph Smith



Figure 2: Emma Smith and Baby David Smith

It appears that if intimate relations between Joseph and many of his wives occurred frequently, children may have been conceived.

Out of the probable plural spouses, thirty were under age forty and theoretically capable of conception if the timing were right. Most of them married within two years after the martyrdom. Several exhibited impressive fertility after their remarriages.

Three of the women became pregnant within weeks after remarrying. Sarah Ann Whitney, who was sealed to Joseph Smith for twenty-three months, married Heber C. Kimball on March 17, 1845, and based on the birth date of their first child, became pregnant approximately June 15.¹⁷ She bore Heber Kimball seven children between 1846 and 1858.

Lucy Walker, who was sealed to the Prophet for fourteen months, also married Kimball. About three months after their February 8, 1845, marriage, she became pregnant.¹⁸ She gave birth to nine of

Kimball's children between 1846 and 1864.

Malissa Lott was sealed to Joseph Smith in September 1843 and married Ira Jones Willes on May 13, 1849. Their first child was born April 22, 1850, with conception occurring approximately July 30, 1849 (or eleven weeks after the wedding ceremony). Seven Willes children were born between 1850 and 1863.

Emily Partridge bore Brigham Young seven offspring between 1845 and 1862. Her sister Eliza married Amasa Lyman, and she bore five children between 1844 and 1860.

Several other plural wives, like Louisa Beaman, Martha McBride, and Nancy Winchester, also remarried and became pregnant. In light of the obvious fertility of many of Joseph Smith's plural wives, it seems that they either bore him children who are unknown today or that sexual relations in the marriages did not occur often.

No Children from Plural Wives

No children are known to have been born to Joseph and his plural wives.

There are rumors of children, though. It is possible that some were secretly born and then raised by other families and carried other surnames.

However, after the Saints arrived in Utah, there would have been little motive to keep the paternity secret. Any child of the Prophet would have been given special attention and perhaps have been looked upon as a legitimate future leader to counter the claims of Joseph and Emma's sons, who had remained in Nauvoo.



Figure 3: Emily Partridge and Her Children

In the 1860s and 1870s, when RLDS missionaries in Utah emphasized lineal succession in the church presidency, LDS Church leaders would have been motivated to produce Joseph's offspring, not only to establish his role in Nauvoo polygamy but also to dilute the succession claims of the three surviving sons of Joseph and Emma.

LDS Church leaders never took such a step.

[Allegations of Joseph Smith's Paternity are charted here.](#)

To continue this brief narrative of the unfolding of the practice of polygamy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, proceed to the section on [Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger](#).

Endnotes:

1. For a list of names of these women visit the [Biographies](#) page.
2. See Kathryn M. Daynes, *More Wives Than One: Transformation of the Mormon Marriage System, 1840–1910* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 29.
3. William E. McLellin, to President Joseph Smith [III], Independence, Mo., July 1872. Also printed in Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey, eds., *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854–1880*, 488; J. H. Beadle quoting William McClellan, "Jackson County," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 6, 1875, 4; Benjamin F. Johnson in Dean R. Zimmerman, ed., *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs*, 38.
4. Wilhelm Wyl quoting "Mr. W." [Chauncy Webb], *Mormon Portraits*, 57.
5. Joseph B. Noble, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, part 3, page 426, question 683.
6. Emily Partridge, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, part 3, page 384, question 752.
7. Benjamin F. Johnson, Letter to Anthon H. Lund, May 12, 1903; emphasis mine.
8. Joseph Smith III, Journal, November 12, 1876.
9. Benjamin F. Johnson, My Life's Review, 96.
10. Josephine F. Fisher, Certificate, February 24, 1915.
11. People vs. Joseph Smith, May 24, 1844, Circuit Court Record, Hancock County, Book D, 128–29. See also William Clayton, *The Nauvoo Diaries of William Clayton, 1842–1846*, Abridged, May 23, 1844, 49; Thomas Gregg, *History of Hancock County, Illinois*, 301; Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 375.
12. Lucy Walker [Smith] Kimball, "Oath of Lucy Walker Smith: Wife of Joseph Smith, Jr.," October 24, 1902, in Robert B. Neal, "Sword of Laban," no. 10 (1905): 2. Its wording is identical to the December 17, 1902, Joseph F. Smith, Affidavit, October 24, 1902.
13. Malissa Lott Willes, Notarized Statement, August 4, 1893, to Joseph Smith III. Quoted in Raymond T. Bailey, "Emma Hale: Wife of the Prophet Joseph Smith," 99–100; see also 100n9.

14. See Emily Dow Partridge Young, "Incidents in the Early Life of Emily Dow Partridge," 5, written between December 1876 and January 7, 1877; see also Emily D. P. Young, *Autobiographical Sketch: "Written Especially for My Children, January 7, 1877."*
15. Oliver Preston Robinson, ed., *History of Joseph Lee Robinson*, 54.
16. These children were: Alvin Smith (b. and d. June 15, 1828); twins Thaddeus and Louisa (b. and d. April 30, 1831), Joseph Smith III (November 6, 1832-December 10, 1914); Frederick Granger Williams Smith (June 29, 1836-April 13, 1862); Alexander Hale Smith (June 2, 1838-August 12, 1909); Don Carlos Smith (b. 1840, died at fourteen months); Thomas Smith (b. and d. February 6, 1842); and David Hyrum Smith (November 17, 1844-August 29, 1904).
17. Sarah's first child, David Kimball, was born March 8, 1846.
18. Rachel Sylvia Kimball was born January 28, 1846; assuming a full term birth, conception occurred on approximately May 7, 1845.