Mary Heron
(Sealing Date Unknown)

According to one isolated source, Mary Heron, the legal wife of John Snider, was sexually involved with Joseph Smith in 1843.¹

While the Prophet was the victim of many slanderous accusations during his lifetime, this reference cannot be easily dismissed because it was made by Joseph Ellis Johnson, a devout Mormon, and recorded in 1850. (See Appendix B below.)

The Joseph Smith–Mary Heron relationship appears to have been a unique plural marriage with several distinct characteristics. The lack of historical documentation will probably always hamper full understanding. However, observing the behavior of the men and women who knew what transpired helps to categorize the relationship.

John Snider and Mary Heron Snider

Born February 11, 1800, at New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, the son of Marlin Snider and Sarah Armstrong Snider, John Snider moved with his family to Toronto, Upper Canada (now Ontario), where he worked as a mason. On February 28, 1822, he married Mary Heron, four years his junior. The daughter of Richard Heron and Harriet Hill Herron, she was born November 10, 1804. Together the Sniders had four children, Harriet Ellen (b. September 4, 1823), Edgerton (b. January 9, 1826), John Jr. (born May 3, 1828), and Julia (born in 1833), who apparently did not live long. John and Mary associated with fellow Canadian John Taylor in studying scriptures in 1833. Three years later they were converted and baptized by Parley P. Pratt.

The Sniders left Upper Canada to join the body of the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland, Ohio, in the spring of 1837. A June 4, 1837, revelation to Joseph Smith, instructed Heber C. Kimball to lead a group of missionaries to England.² John Snider was among that vanguard of Mormon emissaries, the first to ever preach in Great Britain.³ He arrived in Liverpool July 18, 1837, and stayed until October when he boarded a ship back to America. He joined Mary and his children in Far West, Missouri. They were forced to leave within a year, traveling east to Springfield, Illinois. There they were befriended by the Ezekiel Johnson family, including Ezekiel’s son, Joseph Ellis Johnson, who eventually married John and Mary’s oldest daughter, Harriet. Ordained a Seventy on January 19, 1839, John was appointed four months later to serve a second mission to England with the Twelve Apostles but apparently he did not go.⁴

Joseph Smith stayed in the Snider home in Springfield while en route to Washington, D.C., to plead with federal officials for redress regarding Missouri persecutions.⁵ On November 9, 1839, the Prophet wrote to Emma: “We have done all that we could for the safty of Elder Rigdon on a ccount of his week state of hea th and this morning we are under the nesscesity of leaving him at Brother Snyders and pursuing our journey without him.” There was a need to leave Harriet for which he was not prepared.

The Sniders stayed in Springfield a year, after which they...
united with the Saints in Nauvoo. The 1842 census placed the John Snider family, consisting of John and Mary and children Egerton, John Jr., and Sarah, in the third ward.7

Their home was situated below the temple site, just under a mile from Joseph Smith’s Homestead and the Nauvoo Mansion.8

On January 19, 1841, John was appointed as a member of the committee to build the Nauvoo House. John is also mentioned several times in Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo journals, which were begun on December 19, 1841:

December 22, 1841: The word of the Lord came unto Joseph the Seer, verily thus saith the Lord, Let my servant John Snider take a mission to the Eastern continent, unto all the conferences now sitting in that region, and let them carry a package of Epistles that shall be written by my servants the Twelve, making known unto them their duties concerning the building of my houses [Nauvoo House and Nauvoo Temple].9

December 27, 1841.—Joseph. Was with. Brigham, Heber C, Willard & John of the twelve, at his office. Instructing them in the principles of the kingdom. & what the twelve should do in relation to the mission of John Snider. & the European conferences.10

January 28, 1842—At the office ... present Heber C. Kimball. Wilford Woodruff. Brigham Young. & received instruction concerning John Snider.11

Joseph decided that Elder John Snider should go out on a mission, and if necessary some one go with him. And raise up a Church. And get means to go to England. & carry the Epistles required in the Revelation page 36. – and instructed the Twelve, Brigham Young Heber C. Kimball. Wilford Woodruff. &—Willard Richards—being present. To call Elder Snider into their council & instruct him in these things & if he will not do these things he shall be cut off from the Church. & be damned.12

January 31, 1842— in the <evening> was in council with Brigham, Heber. C. – Orson, Willford & Willard concerning Brother Snider.13

March 26, 1842—Elder John Snider Recivied his final instructions from the President, & received his blessing from President B Young. With the Laying on of the hands of President Joseph. John E. Page. & Willard Richards. & Started for England same day.14

Elder Snider hesitated to fulfill the December 22, 1841, revelation, apparently because he felt that the Quorum of the Twelve should furnish him means.15 Regarding his hesitancy, church historians assessed in 1855: “Elder Snider had appeared very backward about fulfilling the revelation concerning him, and felt that he could not do it unless the Twelve would furnish him means, when he was more able to furnish his own means as all the elders were obliged to do when they went out on missions.”16

Under more intense pressure, as these entries show, he accepted his mission and departed on March 26. He journeyed in England until September 29, 1842, when he and 157 converts under his direction boarded the ship Henry and sailed from Liverpool for New Orleans.17 The group arrived in Nauvoo on January 23, 1843. Weeks after arriving home, on February 18 and 19, John Snider was asked to serve as a “pro tem” member of the Nauvoo High Council.18
Two months later, James Allred, John Snider, and Aaron Johnson were appointed to administer baptisms for the dead in the river while the font could not be used. On January 3, 1844, Joseph Smith, acting as mayor, directed the marshal to bring Snider before the Nauvoo City Council to testify on his behalf against William Law, who was accusing the Prophet of sexual improprieties. On June 28, the day after Joseph Smith’s death, John Snider was invited to serve as a member of “Joseph’s bodyguard” escorting the bodies of Joseph and Hyrum back into the city. On July 18, 1844, John served as proxy in being baptized for ten of his deceased ancestors.

Unfortunately, Mary Snider’s activities before and after the death of Joseph Smith are poorly documented. Her reactions to the multiple separations from her husband as he served the church are unknown, but her trials would not have been significantly different from those of many other wives whose husbands had similar leadership responsibilities.

While it appears that Mary was not present at the organization of the Relief Society on March 17, 1842, Emma presented her name along with those of six others for admittance. On May 26, 1842, Mary contributed fifty cents to the Relief Society. There is no record that Mary participated in baptisms for the dead.

According to a 1909 “Life Sketch” penned by Edwin George Snider, “The family [after the Prophet’s death] returned to Toronto, the object being to give the sons Edgerton and John Junior, a chance to learn the masons’ trade.” Their exit from Nauvoo at that time is strange because John was also a mason and there was probably ample work in Nauvoo, especially since the temple was being constructed at that time.

Their absence from Illinois explains why neither John nor Mary was endowed in the Nauvoo Temple or received other ordinances there.

In the fall of 1847, the family moved to Iowa and then six months later, back to Nauvoo, where John assisted in disposing of Mormon properties after the Saints began the exodus west.

In 1850, John journeyed alone to California in search of gold, leaving Mary and the children in the Midwest. Mary crossed the plains in the Almon W. Babbitt Company in the spring of 1851 with their two sons arriving July 17, 1851.

Fellow traveler Mary Augusta Hawkins Snow recorded on May 23, 1851: “We are all rejoicing to day in a glorious sunshine inward as well as outward I trust for all seem happy — particularly the children after being confined in the wagons so long. … Mrs Snider is quite sick and has been made as comfortable as possible, her canaries, the only ones with us, are gaily singing quite unconscious that the hand which has tended them so faithfully thus far is able to do it no longer.”

John joined Mary months later in Salt Lake City. Whether she suffered a lingering illness, or experienced bouts of different sicknesses is unknown; she died January 31, 1852. A search of all available obituaries for Utah and the region for that period fail to identify any details concerning her death. John was never sealed to Mary during their lifetimes, even though a proxy sealing after her death would have been possible.

Curiously, John waited until two weeks after Mary’s passing away to obtain his own temple endowments. Perhaps the timing of John Snider’s first temple visit was coincidental, or possibly a
sealing between Mary and Joseph Smith had created an awkward situation while they were both living.

John Snider remained in Salt Lake City, an active member of the church, and married Sylvia Ameretta Meacham on November 3, 1855. The couple had three children, Marlin, Martin Henry, and John Hyrum and were sealed in the Endowment House on February 16, 1867. John lived the remainder of his life in the Seventeenth Ward. He died on December 17, 1875.

The notice of his death reads: “Deceased was a veteran in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, having been connected with it in the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith and ever since. He was a man much respected, being true to his convictions of right.”

Two weeks later, Apostle John Taylor, who had joined the Church in Toronto, Canada, in 1836 with John, penned a second obituary that was also published, which stated: “He [John Snider] gathered to Utah in 1851, where he has since continued a steadfast, faithful and honorable member in the Church. … Having been well acquainted with him for upwards of forty years, I thought it proper to give the above short statement.” There is no mention of his marriage to Mary Heron in either obituary notice.

**Joseph E. Johnson and Hannah Goddard**

Joseph E. Johnson was born April 28, 1817, to Ezekiel Johnson and Julia Hills Johnson, a family destined to be prominent in early Mormonism. His younger brother by one year, Benjamin F. Johnson, would become a very close friend of the Prophet; and two of his sisters, Delcena and Almera, became Joseph’s plural wives. On October 6, 1840, Joseph Ellis Johnson married Harriet Ellen Snider, oldest daughter of John Snider and Mary Heron Snider, in a ceremony performed by the Prophet.

On January 19, 1845, Brigham Young sealed Lorenzo Snow to Hannah M. Goddard, sister of his legal wife.

After the sealing, but apparently prior to consummating the union, Lorenzo left on a mission. Around April 21, 1849, Joseph E. Johnson became intimately involved with Hannah who became pregnant with his child, Joseph Eugene Johnson, born January 3, 1850 (died March 7, 1852). Upon learning of the incident, Lorenzo Snow relinquished his claim to Hannah Maria as his wife, allowing her to eventually be sealed to Johnson.

Endowment House records indicate the Joseph Ellis Johnson and Hannah Goddard Johnson were sealed on November 17, 1861. Together, they had eight children — six before the sealing and two afterwards.

In April 1849, upon discovery of Hannah Maria’s pregnancy and the circumstances, Joseph Ellis Johnson’s church membership was in jeopardy. He attended a council of priesthood leaders in the Salt Lake Valley on September 2, 1850, that discussed the case.

Brigham Young presided at the meeting, which was also attended by Heber C. Kimball, Willard Richards, Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, Ezra Taft Benson, George A. Smith, Orson Spencer, Daniel Carn, Alexander Neibaur, Joel H. Johnson, Benjamin F. Johnson, and Joseph Kelly (secretary). Notes from that council explain:
O. Hyde [speaking] there is a matter of bro: [Joseph E.] Johnson to be laid before the Council — this matter was brother before Council in Kanesville. His priesthood was required to be laid down until he came here — A Miss Goddard wife of Lorenzo Snow became in a family way by Brother Johnson — she was living in his house — we deemed it improper for her to be there he sent her away to a retired place — she was delivered of a child — she is again living at his house in Kanesville — he wishes to retain his fellowship in the church. He says he has asked Brother Snow & he was satisfied.

Joseph E. Johnson [speaking] — I am come purposely if possible to get the matter settled & atone for the wrong I have done — I have neglected to lay it before you before this — Brother Hyde’s statements are all correct — true— all I can do is beg for mercy — I became acquainted with the girl, & the consequences are as they are — I saw Brothe Snow at Kanesville & he was satisfied — I am come here to atone for the wrong I have done.37

During the proceedings, secretary Kelly recorded Joseph Ellis Johnson’s explanatory comments that make it clear he was not attempting to justify his conduct:

I never heard any conversation to say it was right to go to bed to a woman if not found out — I was aware the thing was wrong — had been with — he said. He was familiar with the first frigging [slang for sexual relations] — that was done in his house with his mother in law — by Joseph.38

The “mother in law” was Mary Heron Snider. While disagreements exist, the house referred to by Johnson appears to have been built in 1843 in Ramus, Illinois.

Observations

If true, contextualizing Joseph E. Johnson’s statement, if it is accurate and was truthfully transcribed, is hindered by a lack of historical documentation regarding the relationship between Joseph Smith, Mary Heron Snider, and her legal husband, John Snider.

Nevertheless, available research supports several observations.

First, John Snider remained devoted to Joseph Smith and the church throughout his life. This behavior could be explained in at least two ways: One is that John was completely unaware of Joseph Smith’s relationship with Mary. In this case, all those aware of the association would have needed to keep it secret. It seems probable that, if Joseph Ellis Johnson knew of the connection, at least one or two others would have also known. Hence, to keep John Snider completely in the dark might have required a conspiracy among those informed. Maintaining the deception would have included certain risks and moral concerns in addition to their possible discomfort with the behavior itself.

Hypothesizing such a dynamic raises the question of what arguments the Prophet could have employed to justify such activities and to successfully win promises of silence from those apprised.

The other possibility is that John Snider knew of the relationship and accepted it. This, too, is difficult to fathom unless his marriage to Mary had experienced significant problems prior to their settlement in Nauvoo, and, even then, it would not have been an easy emotional transition.
How readily men and women were permitted to choose a different spouse to marry in the new and everlasting covenant when it was first introduced is not revealed in the historical record, but if it was ever allowed, it apparently did not happen often.

Second, little can be concluded regarding the relationship between John and Mary in Nauvoo. While conjugality is documented up through 1833 (the birth of their last child), the lack of pregnancy after that point could have been either the result of limited sexual relations or sterility in Mary, who was in her thirties and theoretically, still very capable of conception. That John was able to father three children with his second wife demonstrates that he was not sterile.

The fact that John and Mary were not sealed during Mary’s lifetime may have been due to their absence from Nauvoo and consequent lack of access to the Nauvoo Temple and the lack of opportunity afterwards. However, the sealing was not performed vicariously thereafter even though it could have been done, especially in 1867 when John was sealed to his second wife, supports the possibility that Mary may have been sealed to Joseph Smith.

Third, Mary appears to have been an active Latter-day Saint as corroborated by her 1842 admittance into the Relief Society. Worthiness was an important criterion for all members. That Emma recommended her admission suggests that either there was no relationship between Joseph and Mary at that point or that the relationship existed but was unknown to Emma who did not accept plural marriage until the spring of 1843. Whether Mary would have willingly engaged in an illicit relationship with Joseph Smith is unknown, but it would seem inconsistent with her apparent moral character.

Fourth, little can be said regarding general interactions between Joseph Smith and Mary. He undoubtedly met her for the first time when he, along with Sidney Rigdon and others, boarded at the Sniders’ residence in Springfield, Illinois, in 1839 and she may have been the Sister Synder mentioned by Mary Isabella Hales Horne in Quincy, Illinois, in June of 1841: “The prophet with Sister Snyder called in his buggy upon Sister Cleveland.”\(^{39}\) That their paths would have crossed in Nauvoo seems certain, but nothing beyond Joseph E. Johnson’s statement places them reliably together.

Fifth, the faith of Joseph E. Johnson does not seem to have been negatively affected by what he learned about the Prophet and his mother-in-law in 1843. It is probable that, if he viewed the relationship as immoral, his testimony may not have been compromised. Similarly, when he discussed his case with the council in 1850, the minutes do not record any reaction from the leaders to his comment about Joseph and his mother-in-law.\(^{40}\) That they convened in part to consider Joseph E. Johnson’s membership status due to his adultery (he was disfellowshipped), demonstrates a lack of tolerance of sexual transgressions. That they would have disciplined Johnson but dismissed similar conduct by Joseph Smith without comment seems less likely. If the Prophet was guilty of adultery, Johnson could have claimed hypocrisy, which he was careful to not do.

It appears that the one-sentence record of Joseph E. Johnson’s statement during the council meeting constitutes the primary evidence of a relationship between Joseph Smith and Mary Heron Snider.

Without any additional evidence, it is impossible to conclusively identify the nature of Joseph Smith’s relationship with Mary Heron, if any special relationship ever existed.

**Evidences of Plural Marriage: See Appendix A**
Evidences of Sexuality: See Appendix B

Endnotes:

1. The lack of additional documentation has caused some authors to discount the evidence as insufficient to include her name on a list of official wives. See for example, “Appendix: Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives: Total Number, Reasons for, and Methods of Selection,” in The Persistence of Polygamy: Joseph Smith and the Origins of Mormon Polygamy, eds. Newell G. Bringhamst and Craig L. Foster (Independence, Missouri: John Whitmer Books, 2010), 290–98.
7. Nauvoo Ward Census, 1842, 47, LR 3102 27, CHL.
8. Nauvoo land records show the Sniders on Block 82, lot 2, two blocks below the temple then under construction. Also listed as John Snider’s property is block 156, the location of the Nauvoo House. Both Peter Haws, another Nauvoo House Committee member, as well as Joseph Smith, are listed as owners of block 156. John Snider also owned land near Ramus, Illinois, the home of his daughter Harriet. Nauvoo Land and Records Research Center, P.O. Box 215, Nauvoo, IL 62354.
17. Andrew Jenson, Church Chronology: A Record of Important Events Pertaining to the History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 21–22.
20. Dinger, The Nauvoo City and High Council Minutes, 199.
23. Maurine Carr Ward, “This Institution Is a Good One’: the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo, 17 March 1842 to 16 March 1844,” 184. The other six women were Sarah Higbee, Thirza Cahoon, Kezia A. Morrison, Miranda N. Hyde, Abigail Allred, and Sarah Granger.
27. Joseph E. Johnson’s sister was Almon W. Babbitt’s wife.
32. “Obituary” [John Snider], Deseret News, January 5, 1876, 14.
36. The precise decision of Church leaders regarding the Johnson–Goddard sexual transgression is unknown, but it appears he was soon restored to full fellowship. Concerning the event, Michael
Quinn wrote: “BY [Brigham Young] reproves him and has him rebaptized.” Cited in D. Michael Quinn Papers—Addition—Uncat WA MS. 98, 881028, Box 3, fd. 2, Special Collections, Yale University.

37. Miscellaneous Minutes, September 2, 1850, Brigham Young Collection, d 1234, restricted; excerpts transcribed by D. Michael Quinn, Box 3, fd. 2, Quinn Collection, Yale Library. This document is available on Richard E. Turley Jr., ed., Selected Collections from the Archives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1: DVD 18, but that entry is blacked out, restricted because it deals with Church disciplinary proceedings.


40. It appears that the secretary, “J. Kelly,” was surprised. Quinn’s transcription reads: ““O.H. sd. Kelly told him Johnson knew what he was about—it was done in his house by bro Joseph that the Ch had tried to break down bro. Babbitt & the Ch Therefor—I knew at the time I was doing wrong—I never av taken any body as a excuse—I never plighted my faith on Joseph’s transactions. ... J. Kelly—It as taken me by surprise—in our conversation—Johnson introduced the subject—as to himself—& many scenes that r familiar in the Ch—he sd. It was a matter of his own concern & interested nobody else but those he wod. av to bow to him.” Miscellaneous Minutes, September 2, 1850.

Appendix A — Evidences of Joseph Smith’s Sealing to Mary Heron:

Joseph Ellis Johnson alleged in 1850 that he was aware of sexual relations between Joseph Smith and Mary Heron, his mother-in-law. (Misc Minutes, B.Y. Collection, September 2, 1850, D. Michael Quinn Papers Beinecke Library, Yale University). This document is available on Richard E. Turley Jr., Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2002), Vol. 1, DVD #18, but that entry is blacked out, restricted because it deals with Church disciplinary proceedings.)

Appendix B—Evidences of Sexuality:

Joseph E. Johnson reported that he knew that “the first frigging [slang for sexual relations]—that was done in his house with his mother in law—by Joseph.” (Misc Minutes, B.Y. Collection, September 2, 1850, D. Michael Quinn Papers Beinecke Library, Yale University).
Johnson’s statement represents the only evidence available regarding a sexual relationship between Joseph Smith and Mary Heron Snider. The fact that Mary Heron was not sealed to her legal husband, John Snider during their lifetimes, even though the opportunity was repeatedly available (including by proxy between her 1852 death and John Snider’s 1875 passing), is consistent with a sealing between her and the Prophet. John Snider remained an active Latter-day Saint, suggesting either that he was entirely unaware of the relationship (which is unlikely if his son-in-law, Joseph E. Johnson, knew about it) or that he knew about it and supported it.

For more details, see Brian C. Hales (with Don Bradley), *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013), 1:16.