

Sealings to Legally Married Women



Joseph Smith was sealed to fourteen women with legal spouses. These are some of the most puzzling of all of his plural marriages. From a ceremonial standpoint, it appears that these women had two husbands at the same time. If that were true, it would be called “polyandry,” a nearly unprecedented marital dynamic.

Joseph Smith's Plural Wives	Legal Husband
1. Sylvia Sessions	Windsor Lyon
2. Sarah Ann Whitney	Joseph C. Kingsbury
3. Ruth Vose	Edward Sayers
4. Mary Elizabeth Rollins	Adam Lightner
5. Sarah Kingsley	John Cleveland
6. Presendia Huntington	Norman Buell
7. Esther Dutcher	Albert Smith
8. Zina Diantha Huntington	Henry B. Jacobs
9. Patty Bartlett	David Sessions
10. Marinda Nancy Johnson	Orson Hyde
11. Elvira Annie Cowles	Jonathan Holmes
12. Elizabeth Davis	Jabez Durfee
13. Lucinda Pendleton	George Harris
14. Mary Heron	John Snider

The LDS.org essay “[Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#)” lists three possible explanations for this curious practice:

1. They may have created eternal family bonds or links;
2. The marriages could have been a way for Joseph to comply with the command to take plural wives in a manner that would be less painful for Emma. Plural marriages that didn't include an earthly component (or were for eternity only) would presumably have been less bothersome to her; and
3. Those involved may have believed that the sealing would provide women blessings they might not otherwise receive in the next life.¹

As odd as these arrangements seem to us today, it is important to note that there is no unambiguous evidence indicating that Joseph ever treated these women as wives and sexual partners.

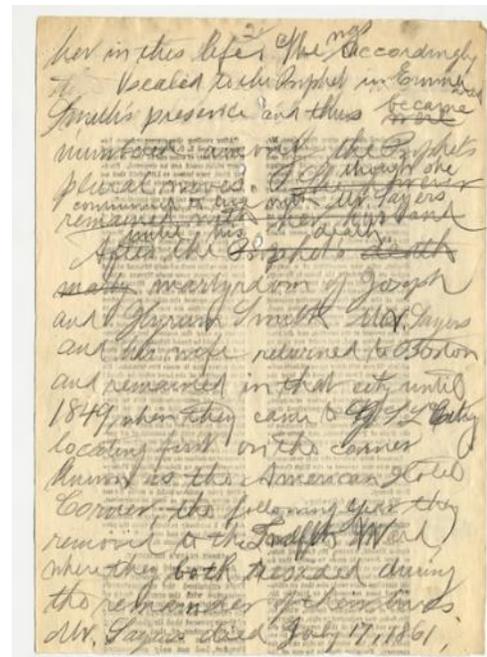
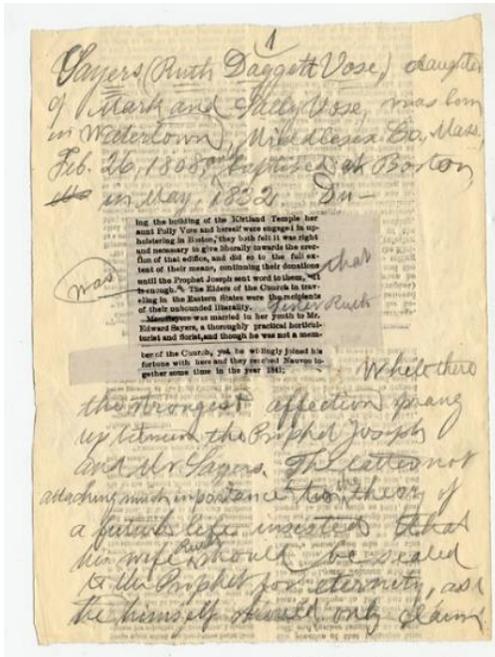
Plural Ceremonies Created Marriages of Different Durations

Plural marriage ceremonies in Nauvoo could be for different durations. That is, a woman could be sealed to a man for this life and the next, called “time-and-eternity,” or a sealing could be just for after death, called “eternity-only.” Andrew Jenson, who became an Assistant Church Historian in the

1890s, described an eternity-only sealing² in his notes as he was interviewing an unidentified Nauvoo polygamist (likely Eliza R. Snow or Malissa Lott) in 1887:

Sayers (Ruth Daggett Vose,) daughter of Mark and Sally vose, was born in Watertown, Middlesex Co., Mass, Feb. 26, 1808, and baptized at Boston Ma in May, 183. ...

While there the strongest affection sprang up between the Prophet Joseph and Mr. Sayers.² The latter not attaching much importance to the/ theory of a future life insisted that his wife Ruth/ should be sealed to the Prophet for eternity, as he himself should only claim her in this life. She was/ accordingly the sealed to the Prophet in Emma Smith's presence and thus were became numbered among the Prophets plural wives. She however though she/ continued to live with Mr. Sayers / remained with her husband until his death.³



Copies of Andrew Jenson's notes describing Ruth Vose Sayers' eternity-only sealing to Joseph Smith.

Joseph's sealings to legally married women seem to have been of this type — eternity-only. That is, they did not constitute marriages during this life, but applied only in eternity (after death). The participants themselves referred to them as marriages, which confuses the issue further even though the relationships were ceremonial in matrimonial nature only.

No Unambiguous Evidence

It is true that little is known regarding Joseph's actual involvement with many of the fourteen women. This lack of evidence is sometimes exploited by critics who wish to fill in the gaps with allegations that sexuality occurred in both relationships, charging that the Prophet entered into one or more genuine polyandrous relationships.

The lack of solid documentation is important because demonstrating the existence of polyandry could be done rather easily by quoting a single credible supportive statement, if such existed. One well-documented account from a participant or other close observer (of which there were dozens)

indicating that any of the fourteen women had two genuine husbands at the same time would constitute such evidence. No documentation of this type has been found.

Similarly, no declarations from other polygamy insiders have been found saying Joseph taught polyandry was acceptable. No credible accounts from any of the fourteen wives exist wherein they complained about it, even though many complaints about polygamy are recorded.

More remarkable is the lack of *defenses* of the practice. Dozens of people were aware of some of these eternity-only sealings. That no explanatory texts or defensive references have surfaced is surprising.

The absence of any unambiguous evidence of polyandry contrasts the abundance of solid evidence establishing the practice of traditional polygamy (plurality of wives) called “polygyny”:

	Polygyny “plurality of wives”	Polyandry “plurality of husbands”
<i>Plain supportive teachings from Joseph Smith regarding?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Written revelation justifying the practice (e.g. D&C 132)?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Women recalling the practice?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Complaints from participants that it was difficult?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Verbal and written defenses from participants?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Officiators recalling the practice?</i>	Yes	No
<i>Unambiguous statements discussing the dynamics of those relationships</i>	Yes	No
<i>Anti-Mormon complaints voiced prior to 1850</i>	Yes	No
<i>Revelation condemning the practice (e.g. D&C 132:41-42, 61-63)?</i>	No	Yes
<i>Statements from Nauvoo polygamists declaring the practice to be sinful?</i>	No	Yes

Polyandry Would Have Been an Explosive Practice

Nothing has been more controversial in the history of the LDS Church than the practice of polygamy. As soon as it became known, printing presses blasted the news across the continent, Christians around the world took offense, Congress labelled it a “relic of barbarism,” and a stigma arose that remains to this day.

If Joseph Smith had practiced polyandry, it seems the push-back would have been at least as great, if not greater.

Polyandry is distinctly different from traditional polygamy because it involves a legal husband. No American law recognized the sealings as creating a genuine polygamous marriage. So if sexuality was involved in any of the sealings, the standard of frontier justice generally allowed the husband, or a father, brother, or son of a sexually involved woman to exact revenge, even mortal justice, upon the perpetrator.

Several of the legal husbands were not active Mormons, so Joseph’s personal safety could easily have been threatened. The possible involvement of the husbands of the wives sealed to him would probably

have increased the potential for public scandal from polyandry beyond that from accusations of multiple wives.



During his lifetime, even Joseph Smith's enemies failed to exploit the charge. After his excommunication, John C. Bennett identified several of Joseph's plural wives in his 1842 publication, *History of the Saints*. Calling them "spiritual wives."⁴ Yet, Bennett never accused Joseph of genuine polyandry. Nor did he invite the husbands of the women he listed to join with him in persecuting Joseph, even though he had appealed to many others to do so.⁵

Similarly, William Law, who was a polygamy insider in Nauvoo, apostatized and went to Carthage on May 23, 1844, to charge Joseph Smith with adultery with one of his previously unmarried plural wives, Maria Lawrence. Law undoubtedly knew of Joseph's sealings to legally married women, but he ignored the chance to accuse him of practicing polyandry.

That Joseph's enemies failed to exploit these particular sealings in their crusades against Joseph Smith is puzzling. Their scandal-mongering missed an excellent opportunity unless they knew the sealings were only for the next life. No one made the accusation that Joseph Smith practiced genuine polyandry until several years after his death, and then the accusations were made by non-members who were not privy to details of the Nauvoo sealings.⁶

Joseph's Teachings Condemned Polyandry

Among Latter-day Saints the practice would have been equally controversial. The revelation on celestial and plural marriage, now section 132 in the Doctrine and Covenants, contains three references to sexually polyandrous relations.⁷ All three label them "adultery," with two cases stating the woman involved "would be destroyed."⁸

Church members who were personally taught by Joseph recalled only condemnations of the practice. For example, when asked in 1852, "What do you think of a woman having more husbands than one?" Brigham Young answered, "This is not known to the law."⁹

The following year Orson Pratt instructed: "God has strictly forbidden, in this Bible, plurality of husbands, and proclaimed against it in his law."¹⁰

On October 8, 1869, Apostle George A. Smith taught that "a plurality of husbands is wrong."¹¹



His wife Bathsheba Smith, who served as Relief Society General President, was asked in 1892 if it would “be a violation of the laws of the church for one woman to have two husbands living at the same time.” She replied: “I think it would.”¹²

Similar denunciations continued as First Presidency Counselor Joseph F. Smith wrote in 1889: “Polyandry is wrong, physiologically, morally, and from a scriptural point of order. It is nowhere sanctioned in the Bible, nor by the law of God or nature and has not affinity with ‘Mormon’ plural marriage.”¹³

In addition, D&C 22:1 states: “Behold, I say unto you that all old covenants have I caused to be done away in this thing; and this is a new and an everlasting covenant, even that which was from the beginning.” This revelation was given shortly after the church was organized in response to a specific question about baptism, which is a new and everlasting covenant between a person and God. The revelation states that the new and everlasting covenant causes all old covenants to be done away.

Eternal marriage is also a part of the “new and an everlasting covenant.”¹⁴ So according to these scriptures, a woman married civilly to one man, but subsequently sealed to another in the new and everlasting covenant, would not thereafter have two husbands in the eyes of the church. The old legal marriage covenant would be “done away.” It is unclear whether this dynamic ever occurred, but the principle prevents the authorized practice of polyandry in the church.

Joseph Smith’s sealings to legally married women may still seem rather odd. Observers may take solace that none of the civil couples tied to this union left any public complaints against Joseph for the arrangements.

This factor alone may give readers consolation regarding these sealings to legally married women.

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 [Sealings to Young Brides](#).

Endnotes:

1. See the section titled “Joseph Smith and Plural Marriage.”
2. Joseph Smith stayed with the Sayerses during August 11–17, 1842, while hiding from Missouri lawmen. Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith: Volume 2, Journal, 183–1842* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 403–18.
3. Ruth Vose Sayers, Draft biographical sketch,” Document 5, Andrew Jenson Papers (ca. 1871–1942), Box 49, fd. 16, 1–2. Jenson apparently used the documents in these folders to compile his 1887 *Historical Record* article, “Plural Marriage.” This sealing is dated “February A.D. 1843” in Ruth Vose Sayers’s Joseph F. Smith, Affidavit Books, May 1, 1869, 1:9. However, the affidavit states that Hyrum Smith performed the sealing, which is unlikely because Hyrum did not accept plural marriage until May 1843.

4. John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842, 256.
5. See John C. Bennett in “Bennett’s Second and Third Letters,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842. (
6. See William Hall, *The Abominations of Mormonism Exposed*, Cincinnati: I. Hart, 1851. 43.
7. D&C: 41–42, 61–63
8. D&C: 41, 63
9. Brigham Young, August 1, 1852, *Journal of Discourses*, 1:361.
10. Orson Pratt, July 11, 1875, *Journal of Discourses*, 18:55–56.
11. George Albert Smith, October 8, 1869, *Journal of Discourses*, 13:41.
12. Bathsheba Smith, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony, part 3, page 347, question 1142.
13. Joseph F. Smith to Zenos H. Gurley, June 19, 1889, CHL. Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2002), 1: DVD 29.
14. See D&C 132:4.