

MARIA LAWRENCE

(Sealed May 1843)



Maria Lawrence was born to Edward and Margaret Lawrence in Pickering, Canada, on December 18, 1823. Her sister Sarah was born two and a half years later on May 13, 1826. The family was converted in 1837 in Canada and moved to Nauvoo in 1840. Joseph Smith was appointed guardian for the family after Edward died in March and the Lawrence sisters went to live with the Smith family.

Three years later in May of 1843, Emma Smith facilitated Joseph's marriages to four plural wives including Sarah and Maria Lawrence and Eliza and Emily Partridge. Lovina Smith Walker, daughter of Hyrum Smith, signed a statement on June 16, 1869: "I was living with Aunt Emma Smith, in Fulton City Fulton Co. Illinois, in the year 1846. That she told me, that She Emma Smith was present and witnessed the marrying or Sealing of Eliza Partridge, Emily Partridge, Mariah Lawrence, and Sarah Lawrence to her husband, Joseph Smith, and that she gave her consent thereto."¹

Emily Partridge testified that Emma took her hand and placed it in Joseph's Smith's hand.² "Emma had consented to give Joseph two wives if Jo he would let her choose them for him, and as she choose E. [Eliza] and myself the ceremony was done ... in her presence, on the 11th of May 1843. ... She afterwards gave Sarah and Maria Lawrence to him, and they lived in the house as his wives. I knew this."³

Since Joseph Smith served as Maria and Sarah's legal guardian, he has been criticized for being sealed to them. The assumption is that he exercised improper influence to coerce them into their plural marriages. Arguing against this assumption is the fact Emma Smith facilitated those marriages even if she afterwards regretted it.⁴ William Law recalled: "Emma complained about Joseph's living with the Lawrence girls, but not very violently."⁵

It seems less likely that Emma would have assisted if she viewed Joseph's aims as improper. Benjamin F. Johnson remembered: "I do know that at his [Joseph Smith's] Mansion home was living Maria and Sarah Lawrence and one of Cornelius P. Lott's daughters as his plural wives with the full knowledge of his wife, Emma, of their married relations to him."⁶

While Maria died before the Saints left Nauvoo, her sister Sarah did not pass away until 1872. Helen Mar Kimball remembered that during Sarah's "last visit to Salt Lake she denied emphatically ever being connected to Joseph."⁷ Nevertheless, neither she nor her sister left any accusations against Joseph. It seems that if Sarah felt that she had been manipulated or deceived by the Prophet, she might have voice an accusation in her later years or disparaged him to the anti-Mormon audiences in Salt Lake City.

The Lawrence Estate

A second criticism regarding Joseph Smith and the Lawrence sisters stems from his purported mismanagement of the estate with accusations that he stole money from it. These allegations arise from an 1887 statement made by William Law when interviewed by exposé author Wilhelm Wyl:

Soon after my arrival in Nauvoo the two Lawrence girls came to the holy city, two very young girls, 15 to 17 years of age. They had been converted in Canada, were orphans and worth about \$8000 in English gold. Joseph got to be appointed their guardian, probably with the help of Dr. Bennett. He naturally put the gold in his pocket and had the girls sealed to him. ... After Joseph's death, A. W. Babbitt became guardian of the two girls. He asked Emma for a settlement about the \$8000. Emma said she had nothing to do with her husband's debts. Now Babbitt asked for the books and she gave them to him. Babbitt found that Joseph had counted an expense of about \$3000 for board and clothing of the girls. Now Babbitt wanted the \$5000 that was to be paid Babbitt, who was a straight, good, honest, sincere man, set about to find out property to pay the \$5000 with. *He could find none.*⁸

Some authors have taken this account at face value.⁹ However, LDS attorney and researcher Gordon Madsen reviewed surrounding documents and concluded that most of Law's claims are "one-hundred eighty degrees off."¹⁰

Further research demonstrates the propriety of the Prophet's financial decisions as guardian. The inheritance was not "\$8000 in English gold," but a farm in Lima, Illinois, possibly worth \$1000, and a promissory note for \$3000, if repaid in full.¹¹

Even at its most generous valuation, it was half of Law's claimed value. Neither did the Prophet enrich himself by taking money from the estate. Gordon Madsen wrote: "Unlike Josiah Butterfield, who billed the [Lawrence] estate for boarding Edward's [Lawrence] three youngest children, Joseph made no claim against the estate for boarding or supporting Sarah and Maria. ... Furthermore, Joseph was entitled by statute to make a claim of 6 percent as compensation for acting as the children's guardian, but he never did."¹²

Madsen concludes: "Contrary to the negative picture painted by the [William] Law-Wyl interview, the record shows that he [Joseph Smith] performed his duty honorably."¹³

Three statements indicate that the plural marriages between Joseph Smith and Sarah and Maria Lawrence may have been consummated. ([See Appendix B below for evidences.](#)) Lucy Walker acknowledged in 1887: "I am also able to testify that Emma Smith, the Prophet's first wife, gave her consent to the marriage of at least four other girls [Emily and Eliza Partridge and Maria and Sarah Lawrence] to her husband, and that she was well aware that he associated with them as wives within the meaning of all the word implies."¹⁴

Benjamin F. Johnson wrote in 1904: "I do know that at his [Joseph Smith's] Mansion home was living Maria and Sarah Lawrence and one of Cornelius P. Lott's daughters as his plural wives with the full knowledge of his wife, Emma, of their married relations to him."¹⁵

The case of Maria Lawrence is strengthened because William Law charged the Prophet with living "in an open state of adultery" with her from October 12, 1843, to May 23, 1844.¹⁶

Concerning Maria Lawrence's 1847 death, Mary B. Smith, daughter of the Prophet's brother Samuel, wrote in 1911:

There was a mystery about Mariah Lawrence. The Lawrences lived just across the street from us. ... Maria Lawrence died of consumption or one might more truthfully put it of a broken

heart. My Aunt Lucy visited her and felt great sympathy for her. She said to Aunt at one time “That if there was any truth in Mormonism she would be saved for” said she “My yoke has not been easy nor my burden light.” As to what was the cause of Maria’s deep sorrow I do not exactly know. I have reason to believe that she was one of Almond Babbitts wives [after Joseph’s death] – And her heartbreak was as likely to be occasioned by him as anyone else.¹⁷

[Evidences of Plural Marriage: See Appendix A](#)

[Evidences of Sexuality: See Appendix B](#)

Endnotes:

1. Lovinia Walker, “Certificate,” Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, 1:30, CHL.
2. Emily Dow Partridge, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony, part 3, page 371, question 488.
3. Emily Dow Partridge Young, “Incidents in the life of a Mormon girl,” undated manuscript, CHL, Ms 5220, pages 186, 186b.
4. Emily Dow Partridge Young, “Incidents in the life of a Mormon girl,” undated manuscript, CHL, Ms 5220, 186. The exact dating of Joseph’s sealings to the Lawrence sisters is unknown, but was undoubtedly chronologically close to the Partridge marriages.
5. “The Law Interview,” *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.
6. Benjamin F. Johnson, “More Testimony,” Letter dated March 9, 1904, *Deseret Evening News*, April 12, 1904.
7. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14, no. 18 (February 15, 1886): 138.
8. “The Law Interview,” *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.
9. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 339; George D. Smith, “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841–1846: A Preliminary Demographic Report,” *Dialogue* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 7; Linda Sillitoe and Allen Roberts, *Salamander: The Story of the Mormon Forgery Murders* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 537; George D. Smith, ed., *An Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 107n36.
10. Phone conversation between Madsen and Hales, September 22, 2007. Notes in possession of the author.
11. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 742–43.
12. Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith as Guardian—The Lawrence Estate,” *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 192–93. See also Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, “The Prophet Joseph Smith and His Plural Wives,” accessed July 10, 2007, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/pdf.php?filename=ODI2MjQ3MzE2LTEwLTIucGRm&type=c mV2aWV3>.
13. Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith as Guardian—The Lawrence Estate,” *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 211.

14. Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” *Historical Record*, 6:230.
15. Benjamin F. Johnson, “More Testimony,” March 9, 1904.
16. *People vs. Joseph Smith*, May 24, 1844, Circuit Court Record, Hancock County, Book D, pp. 128–29. See also William Clayton, *The Nauvoo Diaries of William Clayton, 1842–1846, Abridged* (Salt Lake City: Privately Published [Smith-Pettit Foundation], 2010), 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.
17. Mary B. (Smith) Norman to Ina (Smith) Coolbrith, 3 February, 1911, P13, f1078, Community of Christ Archives, pages 10–11.

Appendix A—Evidences of Joseph Smith’s Sealing to Maria Lawrence

- Malissa Lott, “First list of wives,” Document #1, dictated to Jenson in Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 223, 234.
- Lucy Walker Smith Kimball, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Part 3, p. 461, question 282.
- Helen [Mar] Kimball [Smith] Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14, no. 14 (February 15, 1886,): 138.
- Nauvoo Temple proxy marriage to Joseph Smith, January 24, 1846, in Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings*, 283.
- Joseph Smith III, Letter to Bro. E. C. Brand, n.d. [likely early 1880s].
- Johnson, “More Testimony,” 4.
- Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 96.

Appendix B—Evidences of Sexuality

Three statements indicate that Sarah and Maria Lawrence had sexual relations with Joseph Smith.

Lucy Walker acknowledged in 1887: “I am also able to testify that Emma Smith, the Prophet’s first wife, gave her consent to the marriage of at least four other girls [Emily and Eliza Partridge and Maria and Sarah Lawrence] to her husband, and that she was well aware that he associated with them as wives within the meaning of all the word implies.”¹

Emily Partridge similarly affirmed: “She [Emma Smith] afterwards gave Sarah and Maria Lawrence to him, and they lived in the house as his wives. I knew this.”²

Benjamin F. Johnson wrote in 1904: “I do know that at his [Joseph Smith’s] Mansion home was living Maria and Sarah Lawrence and one of Cornelius P. Lott’s daughters as his plural wives with the full knowledge of his wife, Emma, of their married relations to him.”³

The case of Maria Lawrence is strengthened because William Law charged the Prophet with living “in an open state of adultery” with her from October 12, 1843, to May 23, 1844.⁴

Notwithstanding, Gordon A. Madsen hypothesizes: “Possibly Joseph planned to prove his innocence, not only by his and Maria’s denial of sexual intercourse but also by the testimony of a reputable physician that he had conducted a physical examination and found that Maria was still a virgin.”⁵ This speculation is problematic because, since Maria was sealed to Joseph in a “time and eternity” sealing, then sexual relations would be permitted. In addition, virginity cannot always be proven by physical exam even if the woman has never experienced intercourse.

Endnotes to Appendix B:

1. Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 230.
2. Emily Dow Partridge Young, “Incidents in the Life of a Mormon Girl,” n.d.
3. Johnson, “More Testimony,” March 9, 1904.
4. People vs. Joseph Smith, May 24, 1844, Circuit Court Record, Hancock County, Book D, pp. 128–29. See also William Clayton, *The Nauvoo Diaries of William Clayton, 1842–1846, Abridged* (Salt Lake City: Privately Published [Smith-Pettit Foundation], 2010), 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.
5. Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith as Guardian: The Lawrence Estate,” 202.