

MARY ELIZABETH ROLLINS

(Sealed February 1842)



Mary Elizabeth was born on April 9, 1818, in Lima, New York, about twenty miles southwest of Palmyra, to John Porter Rollins and Keziah Keturah Van Benthuyzen Rollins. The Rollins family moved to Mentor, Ohio, near Kirtland in 1830 where Mary was baptized by Parley P. Pratt on the Isaac Morley farm. Her family moved to Independence, Missouri, in 1831 and four years later she married a non-Mormon, Adam Lightner. The Lightners migrated to Nauvoo in 1840 and boarded with Mary's mother.



In a 1902 signed statement, Mary Elizabeth summarized her experience:

In 1834, [Joseph] was commanded to take me for a wife. I was a thousand miles from him. He got afraid. The angel came to him three times, the last time with a drawn sword and threatened his life. I did not believe. If God told him so, why did he not come and tell me? The angel told him I should have a witness. An angel came to me – it went through me like lightning – I was afraid. Joseph Said he came with more revelation and knowledge than Joseph ever dare reveal. (Brigham Young sealed me to him, for time and all eternity – Feb. 1842.) Joseph said I was his before I came here and he said all the Devils in Hell should never get me from him.¹

Mary also left two long accounts detailing her experiences. In an undated autobiographical sketch, she penned:

In January [1842] ... Brother Joseph and Brother Brigham came to see me and invited me to go the next day to his office in the Brick Store. I was surprised at this. He asked me if I was afraid to go? I replied, "Why should I be afraid of a Prophet of God?" He said Brother Young would come for me.

That night I dreamed I was married to him and occupied an upper room in a new house. In the morning, we were called to breakfast. And I wondered what Emma would say to me for I was afraid of her, but Joseph took me by the hand and led me down stairs, at the foot of which, stood Emma smiling at us and conducted us to the breakfast room.

I awoke then and did not know what to think of my dream. But on going to the office [the] next day, I received the interpretation for what to my astonishment, when Joseph made known to me that God had commanded him in July, 1834, to take me for a wife. But he had not dared to make it known to me, for when he received the revelation, I was in Missouri and when he did see me, I was married. But he was again commanded to fulfill the first revelation or suffer condemnation, for I was created for him before the foundation of the earth was laid.

I said if the Lord told you such a thing, why doesn't He come and tell me? Furthermore, I never would consent to be sealed to him, unless I had a witness for myself. He told me a great many thing concerning the order and the blessings pertaining to it etc. I felt that he and I were both

wrong for I had dreamed for years that I belonged to him; and had besought the Lord to take away such thoughts from my heart. No human being can tell my feeling on this occasion. My faith in him, as a Prophet about failed me. I could not sleep, and scarcely eat.

Next day, Brother Young came to see me, and said after we left the office, Joseph told him that an angel appeared to him, and told him that the Lord was well pleased with him and that I should have a witness that what he told me was true. I marveled at this, but made it a subject of prayer, night and day. One night in February I felt impressed to pray as Moses did in the battle of Israel with the Amalekites, by holding up my hands towards heaven. I also covered my head with a white cloth and I prayed with all my soul, that if the doctrine was true, to give me a witness of the same.

One night I retired to bed, but not to sleep, for my mind was troubled so sleep fled from me. My Aunt Gilbert was sleeping with me at the time when a great light appeared in the room. Thinking the kindling wood was on fire, that was spread on the hearth, I rose up in bed to look. When lo, a personage stood in front of the bed looking at me. Its clothes were whiter than anything I had ever seen. I could look at its person, but when I saw its face so bright and more beautiful than any earthly being could be, and those eyes piercing me through and through, I could not endure it. It seemed as if I must die with fear. I fell back in bed and covered up my head so as not to see it. I pushed Aunt very hard to have her look up and see it too. But I could not wake her and I could not speak. I thought if she were awake, I would not feel so afraid. As it is, I can never forget that face. It seems to be ever before me.

A few days after this Joseph asked me if I had received a witness yet. I said no. He said you soon will have, for the angel expressly told me you should have. Then I told him what I had seen, for I fully realized what I had lost by my cowardice. The family all said they knew something had happened to me, for my countenance was almost transparent. And when I told them of it, there was great rejoicing and they felt that I had been highly favored of the Lord. As yet they knew nothing of what Joseph had said to me.

When Joseph had enquired about the appearance of the person, and I had told him, he seemed much affected and told me that it was an angel from God and that it came for aught with more knowledge and revelation, than he dare reveal at that time. And that if I had prayed in my heart to God, all fear would have left me. As it was, Satan snatched the cup from my lips. He told me of many things to take place soon in my life. As a sign of the truth of what he had revealed to me, his words were verified to the letter.

After receiving other testimonies, I felt I could no longer disbelieve and in the month of March, [1842], Brigham Young sealed us for time and all eternity. Willard Richards and Heber C. Kimball knew of it, but were not present on the 23rd of March.²

In 1905, Mary Elizabeth provided additional details to a group of elders preparing to leave for their missions:

When Joseph sent for me he told me all of these things. “Well,” said I, “don’t you think it was an angel of the devil that told you these things?” Said he, “No, it was an angel of God. God Almighty showed me the difference between an angel of light and Satan’s angels. The angel

came to me three times between the years of 1834 and 1842 and said I was to obey that principle or he would slay me. But,” said he, “they called me a false and fallen prophet but I am more in favor with my God this day than I ever was in all my life before. I know that I shall be saved in the Kingdom of God. I have the oath of God upon it and God cannot lie; all that he gives me I shall take with me for I have that authority and that power conferred upon me.”³

Well, I talked with him for a long time and finally I told him I would never be sealed to him until I had a witness. Said he, “You shall have a witness.” Said I, “If God told you that, why does he not tell me?” He asked me if I was going to be a traitor. “I have never told a mortal and shall never tell a mortal I had such a talk from a married man,” said I. “Well,” said he, “pray earnestly for the angel said to me you should have a witness.” Well, Brigham Young was with me. He said if I had a witness he wanted to know it. “Why should I tell you?” said I. “Well,” said he, “I want to know for myself.” Said he, “Do you know what Joseph said? Since we left the office the angel appeared to him and told him he was well pleased with him and that you should have a witness.”

I made it a subject of prayer and I worried about it because I did not dare to speak to a living being except Brigham Young. I went out and got between three haystacks where no one could see me. As I knelt down I thought, why not pray as Moses did? He prayed with his hands raised. When his hands were raised, Israel was victorious, but when they were not raised, the Philistines were victorious. I lifted my hands and I have heard Joseph say the angels covered their faces. I knelt down and if ever a poor mortal prayed, I did. A few nights after that an angel of the Lord came to me and if ever a thrill went through a mortal, it went through me. I gazed upon the clothes and figure but the eyes were like lightning. They pierced me from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet. I was frightened almost to death for a moment. I tried to waken my aunt, but I could not. The angel leaned over me and the light was very great, although it was night. When my aunt woke up she said she had seen a figure in white robes pass from our bed to my mother’s bed and pass out of the window.

Joseph came up the next Sabbath. He said, “Have you had a witness yet?” “No.” “Well,” said he, “the angel expressly told me you should have.” Said I, “I have not had a witness, but I have seen something I have never seen before. I saw an angel and I was frightened almost to death. I did not speak.” He studied a while and put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. He looked up and said, “How could you have been such a coward?” Said I, “I was weak.” “Did you think to say, ‘Father, help me?’” “No.” “Well, if you had just said that, your mouth would have been opened for that was an angel of the living God. He came to you with more knowledge, intelligence, and light than I have ever dared to reveal.” I said, “If that was an angel of light, why did he not speak to me?” “You covered your face and for this reason the angel was insulted.” Said I, “Will it ever come again?” He thought a moment and then said, “No, not the same one, but if you are faithful you shall see greater things than that.”⁴

Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner lived with her legal husband, Adam Lightner, until his death in 1885. Consistent with an eternity-only sealing, no evidence of sexual relations in Mary Elizabeth’s plural sealing to Joseph Smith has been found.

In 1905, she related, “My husband did not belong to the Church. I begged him and pled with him to join but he would not. He said he did not believe in it, though he thought a great deal of Joseph. He sacrificed his property rather than testify against Joseph, Hyrum and George A. Smith. After he said this, I went forward and was sealed to Joseph *for eternity*” (italics added).⁵

On other occasions, Mary Elizabeth stated she had been sealed to the Prophet for time and eternity.⁶

The reason for the dual reports may be due to the fact that she had experienced two sealing ceremonies. If the first sealing to Joseph Smith during his lifetime was for eternity only and the second a time and eternity proxy sealing performed on January 16, 1846, in the Nauvoo temple, then both answers would have been accurate.

Correspondence in 1892 between Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner and John Henry Smith, indicated that the sealing performed while Joseph was alive was for eternity:

I hope you will not think me intrusive, I am sure I do not wish to be. If I could have an opportunity of conversing with you, and Brother Joseph [F. Smith] I could explain some things in regard to my living with Mr L, after becoming the *Wife of another*, which would throw light, on what *now* seems mysterious – and you would be perfectly satisfied with me. I write this; because I have heard that it had been commented on to my injury. I have done the best I could, and Joseph will sanction my action – I cannot explain things in this Letter – some day you will know *all*. That is, if I ever have an opportunity of conversing with either of you.⁷

Mary Elizabeth doesn’t explain what information would make John Henry Smith “perfectly satisfied” regarding the apparent marital arrangements.

In a letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Mary Elizabeth explained: “I could tell you why I stayed with Mr. Lightner. Things the leaders of the Church does not know anything about. I did just as Joseph told me to do, as he knew what troubles I would have to contend with.”⁸ Apparently her silence regarding the specifics of her relationship with the Prophet were according to his instructions.

Because of Mary Elizabeth’s longevity, she and other of Joseph Smith’s plural wives were able to correspond into the late decades of the nineteenth century. Presendia Huntington Kimball wrote to Mary on March 9, 1880, saying: “won’t it be a happy time for us if we can gain the place where Joseph & our loved ones mingle?”⁹

Zina D. Huntington Young sent a letter to Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner on June 27, 1886, the anniversary of Joseph Smith’s martyrdom:

We remember this day, of all days to us. I went into Sister Eliza’s. We talked over our past a little, then Sister E. spoke in tounques to comfort and cheer us, and how the vale was thinning as we advanced I cannot tell but you will feel the spirit of it.

At 3 PM Sister Emily P Young sent over for Susan, and Sister Presendia was there, to be administered [to.] [...] we left her resting. I wonder what Joseph will want next to go on with the work in the other Land just so we are prepared all right. I hope she will soon be restored.¹⁰

On October 9, 1887, Helen Mar Kimball Whitney penned a letter to church leaders encouraging their financial support of Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner: “I consider her worthy of your attention, and that she, as the Prophet’s wife, should be relieved and provided for the remainder of her days.”¹¹

In 1905, Mary Elizabeth related:

I want to say to you as I said before that Joseph said if I was faithful, I should see greater things than the angel. Since then I have seen other persons, three came together and stood before me just as the sun went down — Joseph, Hyrum and Heber C. Kimball. It was prophesied that I should see Joseph before I died. Still, I was not thinking about that. I was thinking about a sermon I had heard. All at once I looked up and they stood before me. Joseph stood in the middle in a circle like the new moon and he stood with his arms over their shoulders. They bowed to me about a dozen times or more. I pinched myself to be sure I was awake, and I looked around the room to see where I had placed things. I thought I would shake hands with them. They saw my confusion and understood it and they laughed, and I thought Brother Kimball would almost kill himself laughing. I had no fear. As I went to shake hands with them, they bowed, smiled and began to fade. They went like the sun sinks behind a mountain or a cloud. It gave me more courage and hope than I ever had before.¹²

Mary Elizabeth outlived all of the other women who had been sealed to Joseph Smith, dying in 1913 with an apparent firm conviction of the truthfulness of the church.

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

[Autobiography of Mary E. Lightner \(1818–1913\)](#)

Endnotes:

1. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Statement” signed Feb. 8, 1902, Vesta Crawford Papers, MS 125, bx1 fd 11. Original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne, SLC (courtesy Juanita Brooks). See also Juanita Brooks Papers, USHS, MSB103, bx16, fd 13; BYU special collections, Ms 1132. Apostle Joseph F. Smith taught in 1882 that Joseph Smith learned as early as 1831, some of the names of his future plural wives: “When the Prophet Joseph Smith received the revelation in relation to the eternity of the marriage covenant, which includes plural marriage, in 1831, the Lord showed him those women who were to engage with him in the establishment of that principle in the Church, and at that time some of these women were named and given to him, to become his wives when the time should come that this principle should be established.” (“Corrections,” February 18, 1882, *Deseret Evening News*; see his mistranscribed comments in “Funeral Services of Sister Elizabeth A. Whitney.” *Deseret Evening News*, February 17, 1882. Both are available on Richard E. Turley, Jr., *Selected Collections from the Archives of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 2: DVD 9.

2. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Mary Elizabeth Rollins,” copy of holograph in Susa Young Gates Papers, USHS box 14, fd 4. A major portion of this holograph has been published as *The Life and Testimony of Mary Lightner*, n.p, n.d., but the section quoted above was edited out and would have been included on page 24.
3. In a 2011 article, Carrie Miles expanded the last sentence of this paragraph. The words in italics are not in the original: “*It has been revealed to him . . . that he had the power to save anyone who was sealed to him: All that he [God] gives me I shall take with me for I have the authority and that power conferred upon me.*” Carrie A. Miles, “What’s Love Got to Do with it’: Earthly Experience of Celestial Marriage, Past and Present,” in Cardell K. Jacobson with Lara Burton, eds., *Modern Polygamy in the United States: Historical, Cultural, and Legal Issues* (New York: Oxford, 2011, 190. The added sentence is not a quote from Joseph Smith, nor does it accurately reflect his teachings.
4. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Remarks” at Brigham Young University, April 14. 1905, vault MSS 363, fd 6, Harold B. Lee Library, Special Collections, 2.
5. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Remarks” at B.Y.U April 14, 1905, copy of original signed typescript, Vault Mss 363, fd 6, HBLL, BYU, 7.
6. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Affidavit, March 23, 1877, in Scott G. Kenney Collection, MS 587, Box 11, Folder 14, Marriott Library (photocopy of manuscript); Mary E. Lightner to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, Mary E. Lightner to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, quoted in J. D. Stead, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Brighamism Exposed* ([Lamoni, Iowa]:RLDS Church, 1911), 218–19.; Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Mary Elizabeth Rollins,” copy of holograph in Susa Young Gates Papers, USHS box 14, fd 4; Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Statement” signed Feb. 8, 1902 (Vesta Crawford Papers, MS 125, bx1 fd 11. Original owned by Mrs. Nell Osborne, SLC (courtesy Juanita Brooks). See also Juanita Brooks Papers, USHS, MSB103, bx16, fd 13; BYU special collections, Ms 1132.
7. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner to John Henry Smith, January 25, 1892, in George A. Smith Family Papers, MS 36, Box 7, Folder 12 (John Henry Smith, incoming correspondence); Marriott Library; emphasis in original.
8. Excerpts from a letter from Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner dated November 21, either 1870 or 1880, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner Collection; MS 752, Folder 4; LDS CHL. Location of original letter is unknown.
9. “Presendia Huntington Kimball to Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, March 9, 1880,” Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner Collection, MSS 363, BYU HBLL Special Collections, Item 15.
10. Zina D. Young to Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, June 27, 1886, Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Collection, MSS 363, BYU HBLL Special Collections, item 9.

11. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Collection, MSS 363, BYU HBLI Special Collections, item 31.
12. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Remarks" at Brigham Young University, April 14, 1905, vault MSS 363, fd 6, Harold B. Lee Library, Special Collections, 2.

Appendix — Evidences of Joseph Smith's Sealing to Mary Elizabeth Rollins

- Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Affidavit, March 23, 1877.
- Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, "Autobiography," 18–20.
- Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Letter to Emmeline B. Wells, Summer 1905.
- Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Address given at BYU, April 14, 1905, 2.
- Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, Statement, February 8, 1902.
- Emmeline B. Wells, Letters to Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, February 10, March 12, June 22, 1887.
- Mary Lightner, James H. Rollins, and John D. T. McAllister, Letter to John Taylor, May 22, 1882.
- Mary Lightner, Letter to President Woodruff, October 7, 1887; Mary Lightner, Letter to Wilford Woodruff, October 9, 1887.
- Eliza R. Snow, "First list of wives," Document #1, Andrew Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- Nauvoo Temple proxy marriage to Joseph Smith, January 17, 1846. Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings*, 282.
- Andrew Jenson, "Mary Lightner biographical sheet," Document #3, Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- Jenson, "Plural Marriage," 234.
- L. John Nuttall, Diary, April 18, 1884; Jedediah S. Rogers, ed., *In the President's Office: The Diaries of L. John Nuttall, 1879–1892*, 123.