

SARAH LAWRENCE

(Sealed May 1843)



Sarah Lawrence was born to Edward and Margaret Lawrence in Pickering, Canada, on December 13, 1826. Her sister Maria was born two and a half years earlier 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

Later in life Sarah Lawrence openly denied having had a relationship with Joseph Smith. She is the only one of the thirty-five women sealed to Joseph Smith to do so. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney chronicled her history in the pages of the *Woman's Exponent*:

It is a sad thing to record the apostasy of any who were once so highly favored as to receive the great spiritual manifestations which were enjoyed by ... Sarah Lawrence. [She] had been the wife of the Prophet Joseph, his first-wife, Emma, having given her and her sister to him as his wives for time and all eternity. Sarah made choice of my father to stand as proxy for Joseph in this life. But she allows a jealous nature to have full sway. She and I became warm friends after

she entered my father's family, and even after she became disaffected and thought to better her condition by marrying another we were still friends and she met nothing but kindness from father and his family. ...

But the man she married had proven truant to one wife and her little ones, leaving them to struggle for existence in this valley through the hardest times experienced here. And not until they had found friends to succor and help to keep the wolf from their door, did he make his appearance and then he had very little of the Gospel though he, at first, professed to be a "Mormon." He had come from the goldmines of California where he had made what was then considered quite a fortune. It was not long before he proved the truth of my father's predictions as he denied the faith and returned to California, taking Sarah with him. But it seems she failed to find happiness even in monogamy. As it turned out a dissipated character, and it was only a few years before she was divorced from him. She had lost every spark of the Gospel, which had once been her guiding star and was finally left to herself. She became so wicked that when paying her last visit to Salt Lake she denied emphatically ever being connected to Joseph or to my father, and was very insulting to those who dared to dispute her word. She abused her brother Henry's second wife most shamefully, when meeting her in his store, laying to her the most humiliating and abusive accusations, which proved her to be a most vicious and heartless woman. Her brother, Henry Lawrence, was so annoyed by her unprincipled course, that he was among the most thankful when she left here and returned to California, where she soon died.¹⁵

Helen's narrative may have exaggerated Sarah's status and feelings later in her life, but it seems clear that she lost her belief in Joseph Smith as a prophet and her devotion to the church he founded.

[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 (Feb 15, 1886): 138.
8. "The Law Interview," *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.

9. Phone conversation between Madsen and Hales, September 22, 2007. Notes in possession of the author.
10. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 742–43.
11. 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,” <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/pdf.php?filename=ODI2MjQ3MzE2LTEwLTIucGRm&type=c mV2aWV3>, (accessed July 10, 2007).
12. Gordon A. Madsen, “Joseph Smith as Guardian – The Lawrence Estate,” *Journal of Mormon History* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 211.
13. Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” *Historical Record*, 6:230.
14. Benjamin F. Johnson, “More Testimony,” March 9, 1904.
15. Helen Mar Kimball Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14, no. 18 (February 15, 1886): 138.

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

- Malissa Lott, dictated in “First list of wives,” Document #1, 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 Kimball Whitney, “Scenes and Incidents at Winter Quarters,” *Woman’s Exponent* 14 (February 15 1886): 138.
- Nauvoo Temple proxy marriage to Joseph Smith, January 26, 1846, in Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings*, 283.
- Orson F. Whitney, *Life of Heber C. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1945), 419.
- Joseph Smith III, Letter to Bro. E. C. Brand, n.d. [likely early 1880s] Letter Press Book #4, 63–67, P6, Community of Christ Archives.
- 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

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.