

Eliza R. Snow

(Sealed June 29, 1842)



Eliza Roxcy Snow, the most widely known of Joseph Smith's plural wives, was born on January 21, 1804, to Oliver and Rosetta Pettibone Snow. Though she first met the Prophet in the winter of 1831–1832, she did not join the church until April 5, 1835. In December, she moved to Kirtland, Ohio, where she boarded with the Smith family and taught their children. In April of 1838, Oliver led his family to Missouri where they stayed until the following March. They then moved to Illinois with some of the family living in Warren County (north of Nauvoo) and others moving to Lima, thirty miles south.



By July, Eliza was living in Nauvoo where the years of 1840 and 1841 passed apparently uneventfully. When the Nauvoo Relief Society was organized on March 17, 1842, Eliza was chosen as secretary, a probable acknowledgement of her scholastic abilities and her closeness to Emma Smith, the society's first president.

The details of her introduction to plural marriage by Joseph Smith are unavailable. However, Eliza left two accounts of what transpired:

When first plural marriage was suggested to me, ... I would not listen to the matter. The idea was repugnant, abhorrent. I was like any other young woman who had beaux and suitors for her hand. I wanted to share a husband with no woman. But I was told it was God's command, and I went to God and asked God to enlighten me, and he did. I saw and felt that plural marriage was not only right, but that it was the only true manner of living up to the gospels, and I quenched my womanly emotions and entered the order.¹

On another occasion, she mentioned:

In Nauvoo I first understood that the practice of plurality of wives was to be introduced into the church. The subject was very repugnant to my feelings — so directly was it in opposition to my educated prepossessions, that it seemed as though all the prejudices of my ancestors for generations past congregated around me. But when I reflected that I was living in the dispensation of the fulness of times, embracing all other dispensations, surely plural marriage must necessarily be included, and I consoled myself with the idea that it was far in the distance, and beyond the period of my mortal existence. It was not long, however, after I received the first intimation, before the announcement reached me that the “set time” had come — that God had commanded his servants to establish the order by taking additional wives — I knew that God ... was speaking. ... As I

increased in knowledge concerning the principle and design of plural marriage, I grew in love with it. ...

I was sealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith for time and eternity, in accordance with the celestial law of marriage which God has revealed — the ceremony being performed by a servant of the Most High — authorized to officiate in sacred ordinances. This, one of the most important circumstances of my life, I have never had cause to regret.²

Eliza boarded at the Homestead in Nauvoo with the Smith family for almost six months (August 14, 1842 to February 11, 1843) afterwards she went to live with the Jonathan Holmes family.³ In 1887 Eliza spoke with a newspaper reporter concerning the secrecy surrounding her sealing: “[I] lived in the same cottage with another lady [Elvira Cowles Holmes] for two years after she had been sealed, but said not a word to her friend and neighbor. At last Joseph told her one day that she might talk with her neighbor on the subject, and then for the first time she revealed her connection with plural-marriage. ‘We women kept secrets in those days,’ she added.”⁴ Eliza’s ability to keep her marriage to Joseph Smith concealed from her cottage-mate indicates that his visits to see her were probably sporadic and did not include any public display of affection.

Eliza began her diary on the date of her plural sealing to Joseph Smith. In a reflective entry, one sees hints of her recent plural marriage:

This is a day of much interest to my feelings. Reflecting on past occurrences, a variety of thoughts have presented themselves to my mind with regard to events which have chased each other in rapid succession in the scenery of human life.

As an individual, I have not passed altogether unnoticed by change, in reference to present circumstances and future prospects ... though I rejoice in the blessing of the society of the saints, and the approbation of God. A lonely feeling will steal over me before I am aware, while I am contemplating the present state of society — the powers of darkness, and the prejudices of the human mind which stand arrayed like an impregnable barrier against the work of God. While these thoughts were revolving in my mind, the heavens became shadowed with clouds and a heavy shower of rain and hail ensued, and I exclaimed “O God, is it not enough that we have the prepossessions of mankind — their prejudices and their hatred to contend with; but must we also stand amid the rage of elements?” I concluded within myself that the period might not be far distant, that will require faith to do so; but the grace of God is sufficient, therefore I will not fear. I will put my trust in Him who is mighty to save; rejoicing in his goodness and determined to live by every word that proceedeth out of his mouth.⁵

Contradictory evidence makes it impossible to determine if this marriage was consummated. ([Click here to view evidences.](#)) The most quoted statement dealing with Eliza R. Snow’s relationship with Joseph Smith is found in a late, third-hand account made by Angus Cannon when remembering his conversation with Joseph Smith III:

[Joseph Smith III] said, “I am informed that Eliza Snow was a virgin at the time of her death.” I in turn said, “Brother Heber C. Kimball, I am informed, asked her the question if she was not a virgin although married to Joseph Smith and afterwards to Brigham Young, when she replied in a private gathering, ‘I thought you knew Joseph Smith better than that.’”⁶

Less commonly referenced is a firsthand statement from Eliza in an 1877 letter from her to Daniel Munns, an RLDS member:

You ask (referring to Pres. Smith), “Did he authorize or practice spiritual wifery? Were you a spiritual wife? I certainly shall not acknowledge myself of having been a carnal one.” ... I am personally and intimately acquainted with several ladies now living in Utah who accepted the pure and sacred doctrine of plural marriage, and were the bona fide wives of Pres. Joseph Smith.”⁷

While it seems unlikely that Eliza would have ever considered herself a “carnal” wife in any setting, overall this statement seems to indicate that either she was not sexually involved with the Prophet or she was carefully trying to avoid admitting to it, even though she freely implied its occurrence with some of Joseph’s other plural wives.

RLDS Church President Joseph Smith, III commented in 1876: “If my father had many polygamous wives, why was it that none of these women bore him children? Eliza R. Snow, whom it is said gave birth to a child of his, denies it.”⁸

Conflicting stories exist regarding the relationship between Emma Smith and Eliza. Accounts suggest that at some point in time, [Emma and Eliza had a violent conflict with hair pulling, a broom stick, or a topple down a staircase, perhaps one that caused Eliza to miscarry](#) and left her unable to bear children.⁹

There are multiple problems with each of the accounts. The narratives all appear to have undergone at least one retelling, if not several over the span of many years. The proposed chronology is also problematic because it is probable that Emma knew of Eliza’s sealing to Joseph prior to the Smith family’s move into the Mansion on August 31, 1843, but Eliza never lived with the Smiths while they resided in the two-level Mansion.¹⁰

Also, the narratives include highly improbable descriptions of Joseph kissing or embracing Eliza in Emma’s plain view. In addition, significant inconsistencies are noted respecting the portrayal of the architecture of the staircase, as well as issues of pregnancy, miscarriage, and possible post-traumatic sterility.

Concerning the tantalizing stories of conflict between the two women, it may be that folklore predominates where credible historical evidence is lacking.¹¹

In 1872, Eliza shared her convictions concerning plural marriage to a Relief Society in Payson, Utah: “Plurality of wives is a great trial if you want to sit in the courts of heaven, honor polygamy, don’t suffer your lips to say ought even if you do not believe in it. When I entered it,

I had no anticipation of ever being acknowledged as a lawful wife. I believed in it because I felt the work was true and I longed to see a prophet. I feel proud that I ever embraced it.”¹²

[Evidences of Plural Marriage](#)

For additional insights see [“Joseph Smith’s Plural Wives after the Martyrdom.”](#)

Endnotes:

1. “Two Prophets’ Widows A Visit to the Relicts of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young,” J. J. J., in *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO) 85 (Thursday, August 18, 1887): 6 col E.
2. Eliza R. Snow, “Sketch of My Life,” in “Utah and Mormons” collection, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, microfilm copy in CHL, under call number MS 8305, Reel 1, Item 11, page 13. See also Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, Logan: Utah State Univesity Press, 2000, 16–17.
3. Adiah Winchell Clements claimed: “That once when she was at her work that Emma went up stairs and pulled Eliza R. Snow down stairs by the hair of her head as she was staying there although she had contesended [consented] to give him one or more women in the beginning.” Quoted in John Boice and Mary Ann (Barzee), Boice “Record,” MS 8883, Microfilm of manuscript, 1884–1885, pages 178–79. This account is problematic because Emma gave consent for Joseph to marry plural wives in May of 1843 and Eliza R. Snow moved out of the Smith residence three months earlier.
4. “Two Prophets’ Widows A Visit to the Relicts of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young,” J. J. J., in *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (St. Louis, MO) 84 (Thursday, August 18, 1887):6 col E. The dating is problematic in that Eliza lived with Sarah Cleveland at the time of the sealing until August 14, 1842 when she was invited by Emma to join the Prophet’s family in the Homestead where she stayed until February 11, 1843. That day Lucy Mack Smith moved in with Joseph and Emma and Eliza moved to the Morley settlement.
5. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, “Eliza R. Snow’s Nauvoo Journal,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 15 (Summer 1975): 394.
6. Angus Cannon, Statement, in 1905 interview with Joseph Smith III, LDS Church History Library.
7. Eliza R. Snow, Letter to Daniel Munns, May 30, 1877, Community of Christ Archives.
8. “Joseph Smith, Jr.,” *Salt Lake Tribune* (November 24, 1876): 4.
9. All of these accounts are analyzed in Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith’s Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013, 89–103.
10. Eliza R. Snow, “Sketch of My Life,” in “Utah and Mormons” collection, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, microfilm copy in CHL, under call number MS 8305, Reel 1, Item 11, page 15.
11. See Brian C. Hales, “Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and the Reported Incident on the Stairs,” *Mormon Historical Studies* vol. 10, no. 2 (Fall 2009), 63–75.
12. Payson Ward, Utah Stake, Relief Society Minutes (1868–1877) 1 (26 September 1872): 162–63, CHL. I’m grateful to Jill Derr for this quotation.