

Elvira Annie Cowles

(Sealing June 1, 1843)



Born November 23, 1813, the daughter of Austin and Phoebe Wilbur Cowles, Elvira was baptized on October 19, 1835. The following year she went to Kirtland, probably with her family. By October of 1838, the Cowles were in Far West, Missouri, only to move to Nauvoo, Illinois, in early 1839.

Elvira's obituary indicates that in the spring of 1840 she lived in the Smith household, staying until she married.¹ She and her future husband, Jonathan Holmes, were engaged by September 1842 and married on December 1, 1842.²

Eliza R. Snow penned a poem to the couple:

Conjugal,

To Jonathan & Elvira.

Like two streams, whose gentle forces
Mingling, in one current blend –
Like two waves, whose onward course
To the ocean's bosom tend –

Like two rays that kiss each other
In the presence of the sun –
Like two drops that run together
And forever are but one,

May your mutual vows be plighted –
May your hearts, no longer twain
And your spirits be united
In an everlasting chain.³

Elvira was nominated treasurer of the Nauvoo Relief Society at its organization on March 17, 1842.

Little is known regarding Elvira's sealing to Joseph Smith or whether it was for eternity only or time and eternity. On August 28, 1869, she signed an affidavit stating that she was sealed to the Prophet on June 1, 1843, without specifying the type of sealing.⁴

On February 9, 1938, just months before her death at eighty-eight years of age, Phebe Louisa Holmes, daughter of Elvira Ann Cowles Holmes, recalled, “I heard my mother testify that she was indeed the Prophet Joseph Smith’s plural wife in life and lived with him as such during his lifetime.”⁵

The words “lived with him as such” imply sexual relations in the marriage. Elvira died March 10, 1871, so Phebe’s recollection spanned at least sixty-six years. None of Elvira’s other children were able to validate Phebe’s recollection or to recall similar comments.⁶

A letter written on June 2, 1931, by church member William Wright may help to qualify the relationship between Joseph, Jonathan, and Elvira:

I was well acquainted with two of Joseph’s wives, LaVina [Elvira] and Eliza [Snow or Partridge]. I came to Utah in ’69 and rented LaVina Holmes farm. Before Joseph was shot, he asked Jonathan Holmes if he would marry and take care of LaVina, but if LaVina wanted him to take care of her he would take her. He would fill that mission to please his Father in Heaven.⁷

Although this letter is very late and secondhand, it is reportedly from a man who spoke with Elvira. It seems to corroborate that Jonathan may have been given a “mission” to marry Elvira and “take care of her” in a legal pretend marriage. After the martyrdom, Jonathan would have been free to take Elvira as his own wife.

She did not conceive her first child until seven months after Joseph’s death. The couple went on to have a total of five children together. Polygamy researcher Meg Stout wrote:

Elvira’s lack of children during this time [June 1, 1843 to June 27, 1844] indicates this sealing to Joseph was not physically consummated, despite Phoebe Holmes Welling’s 1939 history (which was remembered hearsay recorded almost 100 years later). Family tradition and the lack of children also indicate that Jonathan didn’t consummate his marriage to Elvira until after Joseph’s death, as late as February 1845. Elvira’s first child, Lucy, was born nine months later. Elvira’s daughter, Marietta, would be born nine months after Jonathan returned from his Mormon Battalion service. Elvira continued to bear a child every two years thereafter until she was 43 years old.⁸

Jonathan apparently respected his wife’s sealing to Joseph Smith, standing proxy in the Nauvoo temple as she was resealed to him vicariously for eternity.⁹

[Evidences of Plural Marriage](#)

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

Endnotes:

1. “Died,” *Deseret Evening News*, 4 (Mar. 23, 1871): 3.

2. Lyndon W. Cook, comp., *Nauvoo Deaths and Marriages, 1839–1845* (Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1994), 103.
3. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2000), 56.
4. Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books 1:78 (MS 3423, CHL. See Elvira Ann Cowles Holmes materials, in Andrew Jenson Collection, MS 17956, bx 49, fd 16, documents 6–7. See also bx 6, fd 62.
5. Phebe Louisa Holmes Welling, n.a., *The Ancestors and Descendants of Job Welling* (Bountiful, Utah: Job Welling Family Organization, 1982), 25.
6. See Elvira Ann Cowles Holmes materials, in Andrew Jenson Collection, MS 17956, bx 49, fd 16, documents 6–7. See also bx 6, fd 62.
7. Undated holograph letter of William Wright, stamped as received in the First Presidency Office on June 2, 1931, in Box 65, CR 1/44, Misc. Corresp. Of 1st Pres., at CHL; copy in D. Michael Quinn Papers, Yale University, Special Collections, Uncat WA MS Uncat. WA MS. 98, 881028, bx3, fd 2.
8. “A Short History of Jonathan Holmes and Elvira Cowles,” accessed September 19, 2011, <http://www.megstout.com/blog/2010/02/19/a-short-history-of-jonathan-holmes-and-elvira-cowles/>.
9. Lisle Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: a Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841–1846* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), 284n305.