

Elizabeth Davis

(Sealing Date Unknown)



Elizabeth Davis was born to Gilbert Davis and Abigail Reeves Davis on March 11, 1791. She joined the church on April 10, 1831. Two years later the twice widowed Elizabeth married Jabez Durfee on March 3, 1834. Casting their lot with the Saints, she and Jabez moved to Missouri and later Nauvoo.

The date of Joseph Smith's sealing to Elizabeth Davis Durfee has not been verified. Likely it was an eternity-only sealing creating a marriage only for the next life. Elizabeth's legal husband, Jabez Durfee, was an active Latter-day Saint, so why she chose the Prophet rather than Jabez as her eternal husband is unclear. It appears that the couple experienced some marital turmoil before the sealing or perhaps as a consequence of it.

Jabez was endowed on a different day than Elizabeth when the Nauvoo Temple opened in the winter of 1845.¹ Elizabeth was resealed by proxy to Joseph Smith on January 22, 1846, but Jabez did not participate either as a proxy husband or a witness. Cornelius Lott represented the Prophet in the vicarious ordinance.² Jabez and Elizabeth formally separated later that year.

Elizabeth may have been a member of the polygamy inner circle in Nauvoo. However, after Emily Partridge married the Prophet, she related a conversation demonstrating Durfee's ignorance of restored plural marriage: "Mrs. Durfee invited my sister Eliza and I to her house to spend the afternoon. She introduced the subject of spiritual wives as they called them in that day. She wondered if there was any truth in this report she heard. I thought I could tell her something that would make her open her eyes if I chose, but I did not choose to. I kept my own counsel and said nothing."³

If Elizabeth Davis was, in fact, a plural marriage insider, it is strange she would have voiced her ignorance on the occasion described. Perhaps she was just testing Emily's knowledge or using the comment to open a discussion on the topic with which she was well informed.

Similarly, that she was actually sealed to Joseph has been questioned.⁴ Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring believe the evidence for Davis's inclusion on Joseph Smith's list of wives is not compelling,⁵ but her name was personally added to Andrew Jenson's list by Eliza R. Snow.

Elizabeth Davis followed the westward movement as far as Winter Quarters, but then she departed from the migrating Saints, turning back to Illinois. During the 1850s, she visited Salt Lake City. Ex-Mormon Sarah Pratt wrote:

There was an old woman called [Elizabeth Davis] Durfee. ... I don't think that she was ever sealed to [Joseph Smith], though it may have been the case after Joseph's death,

when the temple was finished. At all events, she boasted here in Salt Lake of having been one of Joseph's wives.⁶

Elizabeth lived out the remainder of her life with her son. Ironically, in the late 1860s they were baptized into the RLDS Church, despite its official position that Joseph Smith did not practice plural marriage.

Todd Compton summarized: "She died as a member of the RLDS faith, whose president Joseph Smith, III, vehemently denied that his father had ever practiced polygamy. Perhaps Elizabeth came to believe that polygamy was wrong by the time she became a "Reorganite," or perhaps she simply felt drawn to her old friend Emma Smith and Emma's children. She remains one of the most interesting of Joseph's wives, a puzzle only partially solved."⁷

[Evidences of Plural Marriage](#)

For additional insights see ["Joseph Smith's Plural Wives after the Martyrdom."](#)

Endnotes:

1. Lisle Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: a Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841–1846* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), 88.
2. Lisle Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings: a Comprehensive Register of Persons Receiving LDS Temple Ordinances, 1841–1846* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2006), 282 fn264.
3. Emily D. P. Young, autobiographical sketch, "Written Especially for My Children, January 7, 1877," Marriott Library, manuscript owned by Emily Young Knopp, copy of typescript in possession of the author.
4. Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, "Review of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, by Todd M. Compton," *FARMS Review of Books*, (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute 10, no. 2 (1998), 74–76, [67–104].
5. See Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, "Review of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, by Todd M. Compton," *FARMS Review of Books*, (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute 10, no. 2 (1998), 75–77.
6. W. Wyl, pseud. [Wilhelm Ritter von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits, or the Truth About Mormon Leaders From 1830 to 1886* (Salt Lake City: Tribune Printing and Publishing Co., 1886), 54.
7. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997), 269.

Appendix — Evidences Joseph Smith was sealed to Elizabeth Davis

- Eliza R. Snow, "First list of wives," Document #1,, Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 256, lists a "Mrs. D*****." Elizabeth married Jabez Durfee.

- Sarah Pratt, quoted in Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 54–55.
- Jackson, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Experiences of Joseph H. Jackson*, 13.
- Nauvoo Temple proxy marriage to Joseph Smith, January 22, 1846. Brown, *Nauvoo Sealings, Adoptions, and Anointings*, 282.
- Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 234.
- Accompanied Eliza R. Snow, Sarah Ann Whitney, and Elvira A. Cowles to visit Malissa Lot on June 29, 1843. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, 78.