

Polygamy and the Martyrdom



Joseph and Emma Smith lived an outwardly monogamous lifestyle for the final eight months of his life, but the secret plural marriage teachings had started a process that would ultimately take Joseph to Carthage and martyrdom.

From the first plural marriage in Nauvoo in April of 1841 until June of 1844, twenty-nine men, besides Joseph Smith, were sealed to fifty-one plural wives.¹

<i>Plural Marriages Performed Prior to Joseph Smith's Death</i>				
Name	Year	Date	Total Plural Wives	
1. Heber C. Kimball	1842	early	1	
2. Brigham Young		Jun 14	4	
3. Vinson Knight		pre-Jul 31	1	
4. Willard Richards	1843	Jan 18	3	
5. William D. Huntington		Feb 5	1	
6. Orson Hyde		Feb	2	
7. Lorenzo Dow Young		Mar 9	1	
8. Joseph Bates Noble		Apr 5	2	
9. William Clayton		Apr 27	1	
10. Benjamin F. Johnson		May 17	1	
11. James Adams		Jul 11	1	
12. Parley P. Pratt		Jul 24	1	
13. William Felshaw		Jul 28	1	
14. Hyrum Smith		Aug 11	4	
15. John Smith		Aug 13	2	
16. John Taylor		Dec 12	4	
17. Isaac Morley		Dec 19	2	
18. William Henry Sagers		Dec	1	
19. Edwin D. Woolley		?	2	
20. Theodore Turley		1844	Jan	3
21. Erastus Snow	Apr 2		1	
22. William Smith	Apr-May		1	
23. Ezra T. Benson	Apr 27		1	
24. Joseph W. Coolidge	?			1
25. Howard Egan				1
26. Joseph A. Kelting				2
27. John E. Page				1
28. Lyman Wight				3
29. Reynolds Cahoon				1
		Total	50	

LDS historian Danel Bachman observed: “In the security of Nauvoo, and with the imperative of a divine command, Joseph Smith attempted to introduce the new doctrine of plural marriage among his associates and followers. He did so primarily through private and personal interviews.”² On October 23, 1843, Brigham Young wrote in his journal: “With Elder H. C. Kimball and George A. Smith, I visited the Prophet Joseph, who was glad to see us. ... He taught us many principles illustrating the doctrine of celestial marriage, concerning which God had given him a revelation.”³

Samuel W. Richards remembered: “I heard him [Joseph Smith] teach it [plural marriage] privately to quite a number at different times, — that is, in the aggregate, to quite a number, but not to many at a time. And I never did hear him preach it or teach it in what could be called a public manner.”⁴

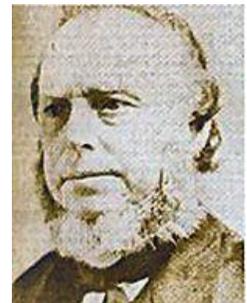
Other witnesses left recollections similar to Joseph Kingsbury who recounted: “Joseph Smith taught me the principle of polygamy. He gave me to understand it with his own mouth that he had married wives more than one. Now in conversation with him, he told me that.”⁵ Both Nathan Tanner and Joseph Kelting recalled the Prophet’s teachings in the “spring of 1844.” Tanner noted: “In the Spring of 1844 at Montrose, Lee County, Iowa, he heard President Joseph Smith while in conversation with himself, Harrison Sagers, [blank] Daniels and others, teach the doctrine of Celestial Marriage or plurality of wives.”⁶

William and Jane Law

In 1842, William Law was one of the first to receive his temple endowment from the Prophet, but polygamy teachings were not shared with the initial endowment recipients.⁷

William and Jane Law learned of the principle of plural marriage the following year as taught by Joseph and Hyrum. The Prophet even allowed William to take home a copy of the revelation on celestial marriage. They were unconvinced and eventually turned against Joseph and the Church.

Unfortunately, the conflict between Joseph Smith and William Law expanded to include more than just a disagreement on the correctness of polygamy. William’s wife Jane became an important participant, but her interactions with Joseph Smith are difficult to reconstruct precisely.



William Law

While the details regarding Joseph, William, and Jane Law are not complete, it is a documented fact that William started the events that resulted in Joseph Smith’s death.

The Nauvoo Expositor and the Martyrdom

William Law’s distaste for polygamy quickly hardened into a desire to destroy Joseph Smith. William wrote in 1871: “I begged of Joseph, and pled with him, as a man might plead for the life of his best friend, to stop all these evils, and save the Church from ruin; but he seemed determined to rush on to utter destruction, and carry all with him that he could; and thus he met his doom.”⁸ In 1887, he recounted: “My heart was burning. I wanted to tread upon the viper.”⁹

not due to charges of bigamy, adultery, or polygamy. Yet, in several ways, plurality was the first in a string of events that ultimately led to his death.

In 1863, Brigham Young recalled Joseph Smith discussing how deeply the principle of plural marriage might affect his future. He quoted Joseph saying:

If ever there was a truth revealed from heaven through him, it was revealed when that revelation [on celestial and plural marriage] was given, and if I have to die for any revelation God has given through me I would as readily die for this one as any other. And I sometimes think that I shall have to die for it. It may be that I shall have to forfeit my life to it and if this has to be so, Amen.¹⁹

Did Joseph Smith Intend to Abandon Plural Marriage?

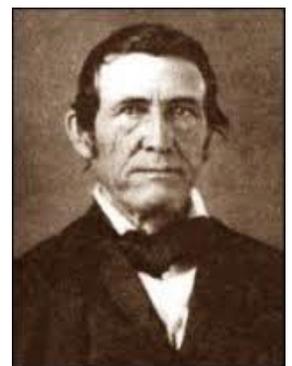
In the years after the Prophet's martyrdom, William Marks, who had served as the President of the Nauvoo Stake in 1843, reported that in the weeks prior to his death, Joseph Smith had issued instructions for the Latter-day Saints to abandon polygamy, Marks wrote in 1853:

When the doctrine of polygamy was introduced into the Church as a principle of exaltation, I took a decided stand against it; which stand rendered me quite unpopular with many of the leading ones of the Church. ... Joseph, however, became convinced before his death that he had done wrong; for about three weeks before his death, I met him one morning in the street, and he said to me, "Brother Marks, ... we are a ruined people." I asked, how so? He said: "This doctrine of polygamy, or Spiritual-wife system, that has been taught and practiced among us, will prove our destruction and overthrow. I have been deceived," said he, "in reference to its practice; it is wrong; it is a curse to mankind, and we shall have to leave the United States soon, unless it can be put down and its practice stopped in the Church. Now," said he, "Brother Marks, you have not received this doctrine, and how glad I am. I want you to go into the high council and I will have charges preferred against all who practice this doctrine, and I want you to try them by the laws of the Church, and cut them off, if they will not repent and cease the practice of this doctrine."²⁰

There are several problems with this recollection. Since the Prophet had secretly authorized all plural marriages, he knew who was involved, eliminating the need to dispatch stake leaders on a witch hunt. He could have identified every practicing polygamist and directly approached them, which would have minimized additional gossip and rumors. In addition, many of the polygamists held higher authority than Marks.²¹ For Joseph to commission him was inconsistent with the leadership structure of the Church.²²

The Prophet continued to authorize new plural marriages through April and into May of 1843. Ezra T. Benson, Theodore Turley, and Erastus Snow were sealed to polygamous brides in April.²³ The last recorded plural union occurred on May 8 between Brigham Young and Clarissa Caroline Decker.²⁴

Also, Joseph Smith continued to privately teach plural marriage through at least May. Amasa Lyman remembered being taught about plural marriage a few days prior to the April 1844 General Conference.²⁵



William Marks

Apostle George A. Smith recalled in 1869: "My last conversation with him [Joseph Smith] on this subject [plural marriage] occurred just previous to my departure from Nauvoo (May 9, 1844). ... In his last conversation, he administered a little chastisement to me for not stepping forward as he had

indicated in patriarchal marriage.”²⁶ George had yet to marry a plural wife. Charles C. Rich signed an affidavit that in May of 1844 “as he was about starting on a mission to the State of Michigan, Hyrum Smith, patriarch, taught him the principle of polygamy or celestial marriage.”²⁷

Joseph’s continued eternal sealing proposals (possibly as late as May 13), his authorization for others to enter polygamous unions (as late as May 8), and his persistent promotion of plural marriage among his followers (May 9 or later) indicate that his feelings regarding the practice of polygamy did not change.

Brigham Young remembered that with respect to plural marriage: “Joseph was worn out with it,” but added, “I never knew that he denied the doctrine of polygamy. Some have said that he did, but I do not believe he ever did.”²⁸

To continue this brief narrative of the unfolding of the practice of polygamy in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, proceed to the section on [Member’s Reactions](#).

Endnotes:

1. Data obtained from George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “... but we called it celestial marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), Appendix B.
2. Danel Bachman, “A Study of the Mormon Practice of Plural Marriage Before the Death of Joseph Smith” (master’s thesis, Purdue University, 1975), 176.
3. Eldon J. Watson, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young* (Salt Lake City: Smith Secretarial Service, 1969), 154. See also *Journal History*, CHL, for date.
4. Samuel W. Richards, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony, part 3, page 572, question 129.
5. Joseph Kingsbury, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony, part 3, page 178, question 18.
6. Joseph Kingsbury, deposition, Temple Lot transcript, respondent’s testimony, part 3, page 178, question 18.
7. See Andrew F. Ehat, “Joseph Smith’s Introduction of Temple Ordinances and the Mormon Succession Question” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1982), 46–47.
8. William Law to T. B. H. Stenhouse, November 24, 1871; quoted in T. B. H. Stenhouse, *Rocky Mountain Saints* (New York: Appleton and Company, 1873), 199.
9. “The Law Interview,” *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.
10. Lyndon W. Cook, *William Law* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book Co., 1994), 29.
11. See the discussion in Orma Linford, “The Mormons and the Law: The Polygamy Cases” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1964), 54–58.
12. “The Law Interview,” *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.
13. “The Law Interview,” *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 31, 1887.
14. See Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy: The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 11–22.
15. Letter written to Dr. W. Wyl, January 7, 1887; cited in “The Mormons in Nauvoo: Three Letters from William Law on Mormonism,” *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 3, 1887.

16. Letter written to Dr. W. Wyl, January 20, 1887; cited in “The Mormons in Nauvoo: Three Letters from William Law on Mormonism, *The Daily Tribune: Salt Lake City*, July 3, 1887.
17. Affidavit, July 17, 1885, quoted in Charles A. Shook, *The True Origin of Mormon Polygamy* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1914), 128; italics in original.
18. See discussion in William Vipond Pooley, “The Settlement of Illinois from 1830 to 1850,” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Wisconsin, 1908), 518–21.
19. Elden J. Watson, *Brigham Young Addresses: A Chronological Compilation of Known Addresses of the Prophet Brigham Young* (unpublished, 1984), 4:268, October 7, 1863, SLC Bowery; see also Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 113.
20. William Marks, “Epistle,” *Zions Harbinger and Baneemy’s Organ* 3 (July 1853): 52–54 (published in St. Louis, by C. B. Thompson).
21. Included were members of the Twelve Apostles or the First Presidency. Joseph and Hyrum Smith and apostles Heber C. Kimball, Brigham Young, Willard Richards, Orson Hyde, Parley P. Pratt, John Taylor, William Smith, John E. Page, and Lyman Wight.
22. D&C 107:33, 78–79.
23. George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “... but we called it celestial marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 577, 625, 629.
24. George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “... but we called it celestial marriage”* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 635.
25. Amasa Lyman, “Amasa Lyman’s History,” *Millennial Star* 27 (September 2, 1865): 553.
26. George A. Smith to Joseph Smith, III, October 9, 1869, “Journal History” for date.
27. Joseph F. Smith Affidavit Books, CHL, 1:54.
28. Brigham Young address, October 8, 1866, Elden J. Watson, *Brigham Young Addresses: A Chronological Compilation of Known Addresses of the Prophet Brigham Young* (unpublished, 1984), 5:52.