

Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger



Joseph Smith's marriage to Fanny Alger, his first and only plural wife prior to the Saints settling in Nauvoo, is poorly documented, so it is hard to draw firm conclusions regarding the details of the relationship.

Nineteen different accounts referring to the relationship have been found. Hopefully, more will come to light in the future.

The first reference to the relationship was written on January 21, 1838, several years after the event. Fifteen additional accounts are available, the earliest composed at least thirty-seven years after the incident. Thirteen of the narratives are secondhand.

This paucity of contemporaneous narratives and the presence of contradictory evidences in these accounts allows for a variety of interpretations. Consequently, reading the [Joseph and Fanny accounts](#) is highly recommended.¹

A Plural Marriage Ceremony

Fanny Alger was born on September 20, 1816, as one of ten children to Samuel Alger and Clarissa Hancock Alger. In late 1833 or early 1834, the Smiths hired her as a domestic to assist in the Smith household in Kirtland, Ohio.

According to one account, Joseph approached Fanny regarding a possible plural marriage through her Uncle Levi Hancock. According to the account, Levi later performed the ceremony. In 1896, Mosiah Hancock, Levi's son, described what may have happened:

Father goes to the Father Samuel Alger—his Father's Brother in Law and [said] "Samuel the Prophet Joseph loves your Daughter Fanny and wishes her for a wife what say you"—Uncle Sam Says—"Go and talk to the old woman about it twi'll be as She says" Father goes to his Sister and said "Clarissy, Brother Joseph the Prophet of the most high God loves Fanny and wishes her for a wife what say you" Said She "go and talk to Fanny it will be all right with me"—Father goes to Fanny and said "Fanny Brother Joseph the Prophet loves you and wishes you for a wife will you be his wife"? "I will Levi" Said She. Father takes Fanny to Joseph and said "Brother Joseph I have been successful in my mission"—Father gave her to Joseph repeating the Ceremony as Joseph repeated to him.²

This narrative is not without its problems, including the observations that it is secondhand and late, but other evidences further support that a plural marriage ceremony was performed.



Figure 1: The Kirtland Temple

Dating the Matrimony

The precise timing of the plural marriage ceremony is unknown. Several researchers place the relationship in 1832–1833, but this is clearly too early.³ Mark Staker explains:

Mary Johnson [daughter of John and Alice Johnson born in 1818] lived in the Smith home (Whitney Store) to provide assistance to Emma. She died March 30, 1833. Her death was unexpected and shook up the family. I believe Fanny Alger replaced Mary as household help for Emma. If that's the case it is unlikely Fanny lived with the family while they were living at the store and it is unlikely she assisted them before mid-1833. She most likely assisted between 1834 and 1836, in their home up near the temple.⁴

Mary Elizabeth Rollins recalled that an angel commanding polygamy first appeared in 1834: “Joseph the Seer ... said God gave him a commandment in 1834, to take other wives besides Emma.”⁵ If accurate, then Joseph would probably have married after that angelic visit. Late 1835 or early 1836 seem more likely dates.

Emma Discovers the Relationship

William McLellin, who was excommunicated in 1838, reported a conversation he had with Emma Smith in 1847 describing how the relationship was discovered:

One night she [Emma] missed Joseph and Fanny Alger. she went to the barn and saw him and Fanny in the barn together alone. She looked through a crack and saw the transaction!!! She told me this story too was verily true.⁶

This would have been distressing to any wife, and Emma was no exception.



Figure 2: Ann Eliza Webb Young

Ann Eliza Webb Young described what may have happened next: “Angered at finding the two persons whom most she [Emma] loved playing such a treacherous part towards her, she by no means spared her reproaches, and, finally, the storm became so furious, that Joseph was obliged to send, at midnight, for Oliver Cowdery, his scribe, to come and endeavor to settle matters between them.”⁷

Precisely what role Oliver played, if any, in trying to smooth out the emotional mayhem is unclear. But he sided with Emma in condemning Joseph’s involvement with Fanny. Oliver later referred to the association as a “dirty, nasty, filthy scrape.”⁸

McLellin reported that in his attempts to find resolution, Joseph “confessed humbly, and begged forgiveness,” and added, “Emma and all forgave him.”

Most of the above details came from late and antagonistic sources. Therefore, readers may want to weigh what we “know” in light of those factors. The Gospel Topics Essay, “[Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo](#),” points out that little is known about this marriage, and nothing is known about the conversations between Joseph and Emma regarding Alger.

Upon discovery, Emma sent Fanny out of the house. The young woman immediately boarded with Chauncy and Eliza Jane Webb until she was able to join her family in northern Ohio weeks later.⁹ Eliza Jane described the union: “I do not know that the ‘sealing’ commenced in Kirtland but I

am perfectly satisfied that something similar commenced, and my judgment is principally formed from what Fanny Alger told me herself concerning her reasons for leaving ‘Sister Emma.’”¹⁰

Memories of these difficulties probably contributed to Joseph’s decision to wait at least five years and receive another angelic command before entering into his second plural marriage.

Eliza R. Snow and Fanny Alger

While the plural marriage date is unavailable, the timing of the discovery of the relationship is much easier to pinpoint.

In 1886, historian Andrew Jenson interviewed Eliza R. Snow regarding Nauvoo polygamy. Jenson’s notes describe how Eliza “was well acquainted with her [Fanny Alger] as she [Eliza] lived with the Prophet at the time” that the relationship was discovered.¹¹

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Joseph Smiths wife

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She afterwards married in Indiana where she became the Mother of a large family

A brother Alger lives in St. Georg
Write to Pres. Mc Allister

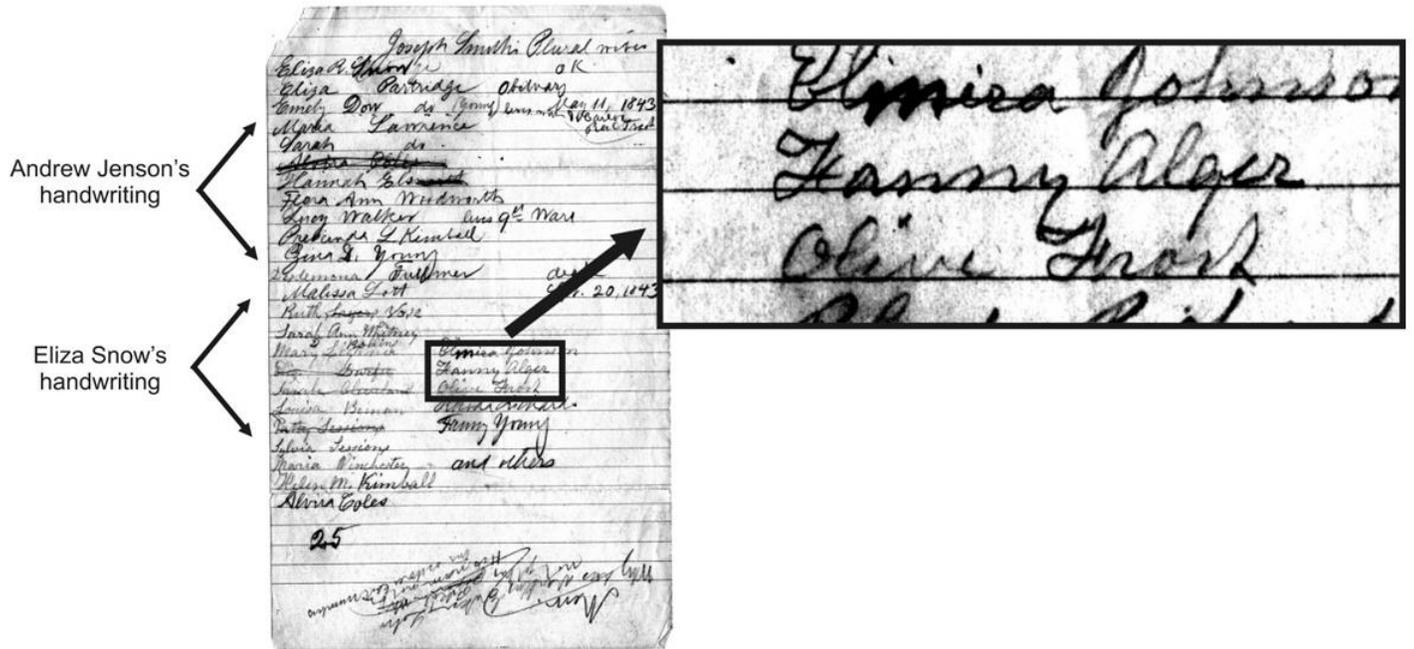
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Eliza R. Snow went to live with the Smith family in the “spring of 1836,” so the relationship would have been discovered sometime in the weeks or months immediately thereafter.¹²

Eliza’s knowledge of the incident is important in another way. During her 1886 interview with Jenson, he apparently handed her his list of Joseph Smith’s wives that he was compiling. Eliza added thirteen names in her own handwriting. One of the thirteen names was “Fanny Alger.”

It seems that if Eliza had thought the relationship to be something other than a plural marriage, she would not have included it.



The Alger Family Remains Faithful

The Algers left for Missouri in September 1836, accompanied by Fanny.

Two months later, in Wayne County, Indiana, Fanny married Solomon Custer on November 16. The clerk recorded: “Dublin November 16th, 1836 This day married by me Levi Eastridge a Justice of the Peace for Wayne County and State of Indiana Mr Solomon Custer and Miss Fanny Alger both of this town.”¹³

Fanny stayed in Indiana while her parents and at least one brother continued on to Missouri, then followed the body of the Saints to Nauvoo in 1839. The family also joined the migration west in 1846 and settled in southern Utah, where Fanny’s parents died in the 1870s.

This course would be less likely if Joseph had violated his own publicly declared standards of sexual morality with their daughter. Nothing in Joseph’s behavior with their daughter seemed to weaken the Algers’ faith in the Restoration.

Authority to Marry

An important question related to the ceremony performed by Levi Hancock is the authority by which he acted. Obviously, civil law would not ratify a polygamous marriage.

While it is possible that the marriage occurred after April 3, 1836, and could have been a sealing in the new and everlasting covenant, it seems more likely that priesthood authority was used to create a marriage that would be for time only.

When Joseph Smith performed the monogamous marriage of Newell Knight to Lydia Goldthwaite Bailey in Kirtland on November 24, 1835, he said:

Our Elders have been wronged and prosecuted for marrying without a license. The Lord God of Israel has given me authority to unite the people in the holy bonds of matrimony. And from this time forth I shall use that privilege and marry whomsoever I see fit. And the enemies of the Church shall never have power to use the law against me.¹⁴

Whether Joseph then contemplated using that authority to perform a plural marriage that God would recognize even if the government did not is unclear. It is possible he had already done so, ordaining Levi Hancock to officiate as he married Fanny.

Fanny's Later Life

Fanny lived in Indiana for decades, raising a large family. She apparently joined the Universalist Church in 1874 and remained a member until her death in 1889. Her obituary stated:

She [Fanny Alger] joined the Universalist church on the evening of the 10th of October, 1874, and until her last, held to that belief. She passed away peacefully and resignedly, with an abiding faith in the justice and love of an All Powerful and Supreme Being, and with joy in the full belief that she would meet with dear ones gone before.

Having fulfilled the duties of life, with a conscientious regard for the welfare and happiness of those who were compelled to lean on her in her middle and early life, she passed away, fully trusting that the welcome applaudit summons, "well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of the Lord," would greet her on the other side. Funeral services were held at the Universalist church in Dublin [Indiana], on Sabbath morning, Dec. 1, 1889, Rev. P.S. Cook and C.T. Swain, officiating.¹⁵

Late in life, she reportedly rebuffed questions about her relationship with Joseph Smith: "That is all a matter of my own, and I have nothing to communicate."¹⁶

Although he does not provide a source for his declaration, according to Benjamin Johnson, Fanny "did not turn from the Church nor from her friendship for the Prophet while she lived."¹⁷

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 [Emma's Path through Plural Marriage](#).

Endnotes:

1. This is Appendix D from volume two of Brian C. Hales, *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Book, 2013.
2. Levi Ward Hancock Autobiography with additions in 1896 by Mosiah Hancock, 63, CHL; cited portion written by Mosiah, Ms 570, microfilm.
3. George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: "... but we called it celestial marriage"* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008), 22, 38, 222; Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 33; D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 45, 587.
4. Email communication to the author September 9, 2008.
5. Mary E. Lightner to A. M. Chase, April 20, 1904, quoted in J. D. Stead, *Doctrines and Dogmas of Brighamism Exposed*, [Lamoni, Iowa]: RLDS Church, 1911, 218–19.
6. William E. McLellin in a July, 1872 letter to the Smith's eldest son, Joseph III, Community of Christ Archives; copy CHL. A typescript of the entire letter is found in Stan Larson and Samuel J.

Passey, eds., *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854-1880*, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007, 488-89.

7. Ann Eliza Webb Young, *Wife Number 19; or, The Story of a Life in Bondage, Being a Complete Exposé of Mormonism, and Revealing the Sorrows, Sacrifices and Sufferings of Women in Polygamy*. Hartford, Conn.: Dustin, Gilman, 1876, 66. This is a secondhand account likely related to her by her parents.
8. Letter to Warren A. Cowdery, 21 January 1838, copied by Warren F. Cowdery into Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. The word “scrape” has been overwritten in an unknown hand to read “affair.”
9. Eliza J. Webb [Eliza Jane Churchill Webb], Lockport, New York, to Mary Bond, April 24, 1876, Biographical Folder Collection, P21, f11, item 7, 8, Community of Christ Archives.
10. Eliza J. Webb [Eliza Jane Churchill Webb], Lockport, New York, to Mary Bond, May 4, 1876, Biographical Folder Collection, P21, f11, item 9, Community of Christ Archives.
11. Document #10, Andrew Jenson Papers, Box 49, fd. 16.
12. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza Roxcy Snow*, Logan, Utah: USU Press, 2000, 10.
13. Wayne County, Indiana, marriage license, for date.
14. *Lydia Knight’s History: The First Book of the Noble Women’s Lives Series*, by “Homespun,” [Susa Young Gates] (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883), 31.
15. Accessed September 6, 2008,
<http://www.algerclan.org/getperson.php?personID=I135&tree=alger>.
16. Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 33, punctuation and spelling standardized. The Lima Branch (Illinois) of the Church organized October 23, 1842, lists Fanny Custer as a member, but whether she was physically present there is not known. Emer Harris’s *Book of Patriarchal Blessings*, no. 210, cited in Van Wagoner, Letter to Newell, n.d., Newell Collection, Marriott Library.
17. *Ibid.* 39.