

It was only after witnessing her agitation that Joseph gave Walker the twenty-four hour ultimatum. She recalls that, after their conversation, she prayed with renewed fervor through the night; and just before dawn, her “room was lighted up by a heavenly influence . . . like the brilliant sun bursting through the darkest cloud.” Following this, “my soul was filled with a calm.”⁴⁰ She was sealed to Joseph Smith on May 1, 1843.⁴¹

Thus, far from typical marriage proposals, Joseph Smith's pre-marriage interactions with his prospective plural wives lacked common courting behaviors, such as walks, buggy rides, the exchange of physical affection, and flirtatious conversations; instead they usually involved multiple instructions concerning the underlying theological principles either from Joseph or an intermediary. In no cases is there evidence of a quick sealing in reaction to mounting passions or attractions.

Rejections

Lucy Walker recalled the Prophet's emphasis that plural wives should not be coerced or manipulated: “A woman would have her choice, this was a privilege that could not be denied her.”⁴² When arranging a marriage for his brother William Smith, Joseph apparently respected this ideal by inviting the woman, Mary Ann Covington, to participate only if she “felt willing to consent to it.”⁴³ When asked in the Temple Lot deposition to “state to the reporter whether or not you consented” to the plural marriage proposal, Mary Ann Covington Sheffield (West), who married William Smith, replied: “Yes sir.”⁴⁴ Later sealing ceremonies in the Nauvoo Temple required the acknowledgment of the free will and choice of all participants, a requirement that likely began with Joseph.

Joseph Smith's offers of plural marriage were apparently turned down by at least seven women. His preferred response to these rebuffs was to quietly let the matter rest. No evidence of retaliatory excommunications or other

40. Lucy Walker Kimball, “A Brief Biographical Sketch,” 46; see also Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 229–30.

41. George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 100. See also William Clayton, Affidavit, February 16, 1874. Lucy Walker testified that the marriage took place in her family's home. See Lucy Walker, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, Part 3, p. 462, questions 321–25.

42. Lucy Walker Kimball, “A Brief Biographical Sketch,” 46.

43. Mary Ann West, Deposition, Temple Lot Transcript, Respondent's Testimony, Part 3, pp. 495–96, 504, questions 13, 272. According to her testimony, this was the only time she discussed plural marriage with the Prophet. See *ibid.*, page 503, questions 264–65.

44. West, Deposition, p. 496, questions 13–16.

vengeful reactions have been found, although twice he sought to counteract allegations he considered untrue.

Benjamin F. Johnson wrote of one rejection, relating that the Prophet “asked me for my youngest sister, Esther M. I told him she was promised in marriage to my wife’s brother. He said, ‘Well, let them marry, for it will all come right.’”⁴⁵ Johnson further quoted the Prophet: “If your Sister is engaged, it is all right” and then added “in the presence of my family he talked to her on the Subject, but as I had Suspected, She was promised to be married.”⁴⁶ The counsel Joseph Smith gave to Esther Johnson in the setting is not mentioned, but it appears that there the matter ended. She and her future husband were married by Almon Babbit in Nauvoo on April 4, 1844.⁴⁷

In another case, on September 15, 1843, William Clayton recorded an incident regarding Lydia Moon: “He [Joseph Smith] finally asked if I would not give Lydia Moon to him I said I would so far as I had any thing to do in it. He requested me to talk to her.”⁴⁸ Two days later, Clayton wrote: “I had some talk with Lydia. She seems to receive it kindly but says she has promised her mother not to marry while her mother lives and she thinks she won’t.”⁴⁹ She was not sealed to Joseph.

Another unsuccessful proposal occurred with Sarah Granger Kimball, who was legally married to non-Mormon Hiram Kimball:

Early in 1842, Joseph Smith taught me the principle of marriage for eternity, and the doctrine of plural marriage. He said that in teaching this he realized that he jeopardized his life; but God had revealed it to him many years before as a privilege with blessings, now God had revealed it again and instructed him to teach with commandment, as the Church could travel (progress) no further without the introduction of this principle. I asked him to teach it to some one else. He looked at me reprovngly and said, “Will you tell me who to teach it to? God required me to teach it to you, and leave you with the responsibility of believing or disbelieving.” He said, “I will not cease to pray for you, and if you will seek unto God in prayer, you will not be led into temptation.”⁵⁰

As described, Sarah Kimball snubbed Joseph’s proposal and sent him on his way. His response was to encourage her and to pray for her.

Cordelia C. Morley recounted a similar situation: “In the spring of forty-four, plural marriage was introduced to me by my parents from Joseph Smith, asking their consent and a request to me to be his wife. Imagine if you can

45. Johnson, *My Life’s Review*, 96.

46. Benjamin F. Johnson, Affidavit, March 4, 1869.

47. Lyndon W. Cook, comp., *Nauvoo Deaths and Marriages, 1839–1845*, 97.

48. George D. Smith, *An Intimate Chronicle*, 120.

49. Ibid.

50. Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 232.

my feelings, to be a plural wife, something I never thought I ever could. I knew nothing of such religion and could not accept it. Neither did I."⁵¹ Morley, however, had second thoughts and was sealed to the Prophet after his death.⁵²

Another rejection was chronicled by Rachel Ivins's biographer: "When Joseph sought an interview with her [Rachel], she believed he wished to ask for her hand in plural marriage. Her personal turmoil over this prospect must have been excruciating. . . . Her initial response was offended outrage, and she vowed with untypical shrillness that she would 'sooner go to hell as a virtuous woman than to heaven as a whore.' . . . She refused to meet with Joseph Smith, yet years later she insisted that her faith in Mormonism never wavered."⁵³ Despite



Sarah M. Granger Kimball.
Courtesy of Alexander L. Baugh.

Rachel Ivins's initial response, she was also sealed to Joseph Smith by proxy in the Endowment House in Salt Lake City, on November 29, 1855.⁵⁴

All five of these rejections came and went, unbeknownst to most Nauvooans. According to available records, these women suffered no consequences at Joseph Smith's hand, directly or indirectly, for spurning him. Had the woman not personally recounted the episode afterward, knowledge of the proposals may have been lost to later generations. This observation is important because writers sometime assert that Joseph Smith would destroy the reputation of any woman who rejected him—an accusation that is commonly repeated.⁵⁵ These accounts are inconsistent with that view.⁵⁶

51. Cordelia Morley Cox, *Autobiography*, 4.

52. *Ibid.*

53. Ronald W. Walker, "Rachel R. Grant: The Continuing Legacy of the Feminine Ideal," 23–24.

54. Thomas Milton Tinney, *The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith Jr.*, 12; handwritten entry.

55. John C. Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 231 (Sarah Pratt) and 253 (Widow Fuller). See also http://www.i4m.com/think/history/Joseph_Smith_mens_wives.htm; http://www.mormoncurtain.com/topic_josephsmithpolyandrypolygamy_section2.html; <http://www.ldsfreedom.org/node/7>; (accessed October 25, 2011).

56. In 1862, Augusta Cobb Young accused Brigham Young of essentially scaring her into not meeting with Joseph Smith alone upon arriving in Nauvoo in the fall of 1843. Ostensibly, Young wished to marry her himself (they were sealed on November

Joseph Smith's interactions with two women, Sarah Bates Pratt and Nancy Rigdon, demonstrate that he would aggressively defend himself against false or defamatory claims.⁵⁷ It appears that Joseph Smith proposed to Rigdon, who declined.⁵⁸ While she did not publicly accuse the Prophet—as Sarah Pratt would do—she did not keep the episode secret, sharing the details with her parents and at least one of her suitors. One account claims that “she like a fool had to go & blab it.”⁵⁹ Immediately thereafter, Joseph met with Nancy's parents, Nancy herself, and possibly other members of the family—not once but twice. Finally, “matters were satisfactorily adjusted between them and there the matter ended.”⁶⁰

Months later, however, during the summer of 1842, Joseph Smith's estranged counselor, John C. Bennett, published a letter in the *Sangamo Journal*, published in Springfield, Illinois, encouraging Nancy Rigdon “to come out and tell boldly the base attempt on her virtue.”⁶¹ Later that same year, in a book that he wrote based on his newspaper letters, Bennett dramatically portrayed himself as saving Rigdon from being “ensnared by the *Cyprian Saints* . . . taken in the net of the *chambered Sisters of Charity* . . . [and avoiding] the poisoned arrows of the *Consecratees of the Cloister*.”⁶² Joseph publicly denied the Bennett version and his imaginary groups of plural wives.⁶³ Within weeks,

2, 1843) and warned her prior to arriving she should “not see him [Joseph Smith] alone saying he would certainly overcome me,” the reason being that she “had never had to deal with a Prophet of the Lord.” Augusta Cobb Young, Letter to Brigham Young, February 4, 1862.

57. Several authors have published reconstructions of these historical events. However, new evidence and observations indicate that traditional interpretations are incomplete. See Volume, Chapters 15, 17–19.

58. My research suggests that Joseph Smith approached Nancy Rigdon in early 1842 with the hope that she would respond favorably and that, as a result, her father, Sidney (Joseph's counselor in the First Presidency), would also accept and support the practice. I hypothesize that Joseph's dictated letter to Nancy beginning “Happiness is object and design of our existence . . .” may have been written to influence and teach Sidney as much as to convince Nancy.

59. John Wycliffe Rigdon (Brooklyn, N.Y.), Letter to “Arthur Willing, Elder,” February 20, 1904, 7–8.

60. Quoted in Joseph Fielding Smith, *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage*, 83–84.

61. John C. Bennett, “Bennett's Second and Third Letters,” *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842.

62. Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 241.

63. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 125; see also *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters* (Nauvoo, Ill.: n.pub., August 31, 1842).

Nancy Rigdon also denounced Bennett's assertions through a statement issued by her father.⁶⁴

Exactly what transpired between the Prophet and Sarah Pratt is not entirely clear, but it is possible that he sought to dissuade her from her adulterous relationship with John C. Bennett and offered her the opportunity to be sealed to him for eternity. Rather than quietly declining, Pratt made inflammatory accusations that Joseph flatly denied.⁶⁵ Two stories were then being promoted. The first was voiced by John C. Bennett and Sarah Pratt, claiming that Joseph tried to seduce her.⁶⁶ The second was substantiated by Joseph Smith and multiple other witnesses, claiming that Bennett and Pratt were sexually involved and that their allegations against Joseph were an attempt to cover up their own immorality.⁶⁷ Both sides published affidavits making charges and counter-charges. Joseph later assured Orson Pratt, Sarah's husband, that she "lied about me," adding "I never made the offer which she said I did."⁶⁸ Orson later claimed that Joseph had told the truth.⁶⁹

Reviewing Joseph Smith's actions in the cases of Nancy Rigdon and Sarah Pratt and comparing them to his calm response when he was rebuffed by Esther M. Johnson, Lydia Moon, Sarah Granger Kimball, Cordelia C. Morley, and Rachel Ivins suggests that, if Nancy and Sarah had kept silent concerning their interviews with Joseph Smith, the public scandals that followed would have been avoided.

64. Sidney Rigdon, Letter to the editor, August 27, 1842, *The Wasp*, September 3, 1842, 4; rpt., *Sangamo Journal*, September 16, 1842.

65. See Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Minutes, January 20, 1843.

66. John C. Bennett, "Bennett's Second and Third Letters," *Sangamo Journal*, July 15, 1842; italics in original. For an edited version, see Bennett, *The History of the Saints*, 228–31; See W. Wyl, *Mormon Portraits*, 61. See also "Workings of Mormonism Related by Mrs. Orson Pratt," 1–3. Given the number of errors, Sarah Pratt's involvement, if any, is unclear. The writer mistakenly substitutes the surname "Hyde" for "Pratt" in six different places, three times correcting it and three times not, an error Pratt herself would not have made and would have quickly rectified in the document if she had been given the opportunity.

67. See "Affidavit of J. B. Backenstos," Letter of Stephen H. Goddard to Orson Pratt, July 23, 1842, in *Affidavits and Certificates, Disproving the Statements and Affidavits Contained in John C. Bennett's Letters*. See also Ebenezer Robinson, "Items of Personal History," *The Return* 1, no. 11 (November 1890): 362–63; John D. Lee, *Mormonism Unveiled*, 148. Nelson Winch Green, *Fifteen Years among the Mormons: Being the Narrative of Mrs. Mary Ettie V. Smith*, 31.

68. Quorum of the Twelve, Minutes, January 20, 1843; see also Richard S. Van Wagoner, "Sarah M. Pratt: The Shaping of an Apostate," 80.

69. Sidney Rigdon, "Tour East," 401.