

An 1832 Romance with Marinda Johnson?

One often-repeated allegation suggests that the Prophet was intimately involved with Marinda Nancy Johnson in Hiram, Ohio, in 1832, which resulted in the Prophet's being mobbed and beaten. Marinda's brother Luke, who was not personally involved in the proceedings but who was acquainted with the perpetrators and the specific circumstances, wrote:

In the fall of [1832], while Joseph was yet at my father's [John Johnson's home], a mob of forty or fifty came to his house, a few entered his room in the middle of the night, and Carnot Mason dragged Joseph out of bed by the hair of his head; he was then seized by as many as could get hold of him, and taken about forty rods from the house, stretched on a board, and tantalized in the most insulting and brutal manner; they tore off the few night clothes that he had on, for the purpose of emasculating him, and had Dr. Dennison there to perform the operation; but when the Dr. saw the Prophet stripped and stretched on the plank, his heart failed him, and he refused to operate.⁴⁰

Besides Joseph Smith, the mob also attacked Sidney Rigdon at the same time. Sidney and Phoebe Rigdon's son, John, left this account:

Not long after he [Sidney Rigdon] had moved to Hyrum [Hiram, Ohio], Joseph Smith came there to live and sometime during the winter or early spring of the year J. Smith and Sidney Rigdon were one morning before daylight taken out of bed and tarred and feathered by a mob. The mob came and got Rigdon first. He was a man weighing about 225. As they dragged him some distance over the frozen ground by his heels bumping the back of his head so that when they got him to the place where they were to put the tar and feathers on him he was insensible. They covered him with tar and feathers and pounded him till they thought he was dead and then went to get Joseph Smith. He fought them but they got hold of him at last and carried him out and they took him where Rigdon lay and Joseph thought he was dead. The mob covered him with tar and feathers and pounded him till they got tired and left them both on the ground. Joseph Smith soon after the mob left got up and went home not very badly hurt. He was bruised some about the head.

My father must have lain on the ground when the mob left him for some time. At last he got up in a dazed condition did not know where he was nor where to go but at last got his face turned toward his home more by accident than design and went reeling along the road not knowing where he was and would have passed his house but my mother was out the door watching for him and went out as he came along and got him in the house. She got the tar and feathers off from him as best she could and got him to

40. "History of Luke Johnson," *Millennial Star* 26 (December 31, 1864): 834; see also continuation in 27 (January 7, 1865): 5-7.



Drawing by unknown artist, published in Charles Mackay, ed., The Mormons, or Latter-day Saints; with Memoirs of the Life and Death of Joseph Smith, the American Mahomet, 4th ed. (London: Office of the National Illustrated Library, 1851), 55; 1851 edition in my possession.

bed. In the morning Joseph Smith came over to see him but he was crazy. He wanted him to get him his razor. Joseph Smith wanted to know what he wanted it for he said he wanted to kill his wife. Joseph Smith soothed him as best he could and left him. In a few days my father regained his mind.⁴¹

In 1895, LDS Bishop Frederick Kesler recalled additional details reportedly obtained from the Prophet himself: “On one occasion, at a meeting held near the Temple in Nauvoo, Joseph arose to make a few remarks, and he related the incident of the mob knocking one of his front teeth out in their successful effort to pour acquifortis down his throat. His spirit, he said, left

41. John Wickliffe Rigdon, “The Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon,” in Karl Keller, ed., “I Never Knew a Time When I Did Not Know Joseph Smith’: A Son’s Record of the Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon,” 25–26; original holograph in LDS Church History Library. See also “Lecture Written by John M. [sic] Rigdon on the Early History of the Mormon Church” available on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*.



John Johnson Home, July 2007. Brian C. Hales Collection.

his body, and hovered over it in the air, and returned after it was over. They supposed they had killed him, but he had to come back and take his body.”⁴²

Concerning this event, Fawn Brodie wrote: “It is said that Eli Johnson demanded that the prophet be castrated, for he suspected Joseph of being too intimate with his sister, Marinda Nancy.”⁴³ In fact Brodie was quoting Clark Braden, a Church of Christ minister,⁴⁴ who debated future RLDS Presiding Bishop E. L. Kelley in 1884. Braden’s version of this episode is: “In March, 1832, Smith was stopping at Mr. Johnson’s in Hiram, Ohio, and was mobbed.

42. Frederick Kesler, quoted in “Joseph, the Prophet, His Life and Mission as Viewed by Intimate Acquaintances,” *Salt Lake Herald Church and Farm Supplement*, January 12, 1895, 212.

43. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 119. This view is repeated in Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*, 146 and Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, 65.

44. Throughout his life, Braden seemed determined to refute the RLDS Church’s position. See his “Did Joseph Smith Teach and Practice Polygamy?” *Christian Oracle*, April 30, 1891, 4, which stated: “There was published in the *Oracle* in May, 1889, a letter written by William Marks, a member of the First Presidency of the Josephite Mormon Church, in which Marks clearly stated that he *knew* that Smith taught and practiced polygamy. It created quite a stir among the Josephites. They attempt to evade it by saying that it was written long after Smith’s death. We give below an article written by Marks and published in the Mormon paper in St. Louis in 1853 (*Zion’s Harbinger and Baneemy’s Organ* [St. Louis] 3, no. 7 [July 1853]: 52–54), just nine years after Smith’s death.”

The mob was led by Eli Johson, who blamed Smith with being too intimate with his sister Marinda, who afterwards married Orson Hyde.”⁴⁵

It appears that Braden was the very first person to assert a motive for the mob attack that involved inappropriate sexual conduct. Current research supports that the allegation was not included in any publication printed during the fifty-two years prior to the 1884 debate.⁴⁶ In fact, a review of books written between 1832 and 1844 about Mormonism shows that no author mentioned the mobbing until after the *Times and Seasons* published an account in August 1844, two months after the Prophet's death.⁴⁷

Even after that point, sexual impropriety does not appear as a motive for the mobbing. For example, in 1853 Reverend W. Sparrow Simpson, author of *Mormonism: Its History, Doctrines, and Practices*, comments on Joseph Smith's exposure “to the American process of tarring and feathering” and attributes this hostile action “on account of his [Joseph Smith's] strange and pernicious doctrines” without any specific reference to licentious behavior as a motivator.⁴⁸ Similarly, in 1861, Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley's *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City* discusses the 1832 mobbing as an attack provoked simply by the Prophet's doctrines, revelations, and missionary successes in the area.⁴⁹ Antagonistic author John H. Beadle in his 1870 exposé, *Polygamy; or Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism*, listed three reasons: “for attempting to establish communism, for forgery and dishonorable dealing.”⁵⁰

At the funeral of Symonds Ryder in 1870, preacher B. A. Hinsdale observed: “It may seem strange that a man of Father Ryder's strong mind and honest heart, could even temporarily have fallen into the Mormon delusion.

45. E. L. Kelley and Clark Braden, *Public Discussion of the Issues between the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and the Church of Christ (Disciples) Held in Kirtland, Ohio, Beginning February 12, and Closing March 8, 1884 between E. L. Kelley, of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and Clark Braden, of the Church of Christ*, 202. See Wayne A. Ham, “Truth Affirmed, Error Denied: The Great Debates of the Early Reorganization,” 8.

46. For one example, see *History of the Mormons* (1853), 16.

47. “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 5, no. 15 (August 15, 1844): 611.

48. W. Sparrow Simpson, *Mormonism: Its History, Doctrines, and Practices*, 14.

49. Jules Remy and Julius Brenchley, *A Journey to Great Salt Lake City*, 1:282.

50. John H. Beadle, *Polygamy; or Mysteries and Crimes of Mormonism*, 37. Accusations of sexual improprieties also do not appear in James H. Kennedy, *Early Days of Mormonism: Palmyra, Kirtland, and Nauwoo* (1888), 105; William Alexander Linn, *The Story of the Mormons from the Date of Their Origin to the Year 1901* (1923), 135–37. An 1888 account from another antagonist, Reverend Samuel F. Whitney, Newel K. Whitney's brother, also includes a report of the ordeal, noting that castration was intended, but without any allegation of sexual misconduct as a motivating factor. Quoted in Arthur B. Deming, *Naked Truths about Mormonism* 1 (January 1888): 4, column 1.

Let us not fail to remember, however, that Mormonism in northern Ohio, in 1831, was a very different thing from Mormonism in Utah, in 1870. It then gave no sign of the moral abomination which is now its most prominent characteristic."⁵¹ The "moral abomination" referred to was polygamy, which was widely criticized in 1870, but apparently unknown to Ryder in 1832. Five years later in 1875, Amos S. Hayden's *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve* attributes the attack to the mob members' belief that Joseph Smith had concocted "a plot . . . to take their property from them."⁵²

Three years prior to the Braden-Kelley debate, the link between the mobbing and sexual misconduct, specifically polygamy, seemed even more plausible. In April 1881 an unidentified writer using the penname "Historicus" published an article in the *Anti-Polygamy Standard*, a Salt Lake newspaper, in which he stated: "Joseph told Lyman E. Johnson confidentially that polygamy was a true principle. . . . In addition to Lyman, three others, Eli, Edward and John Jr., joined the new church but apostatized in the winter of 1831–32. When the fact is known that these brothers assisted in the tarring and feathering of the prophet, it is not a very far-fetched conclusion to arrive at that they knew of what Smith had told their brother Lyman about polygamy."⁵³ The author "Historicus" freely admitted that the conclusion was based upon speculation, not evidence. He obviously was unaware of any documentation that Clark Braden would quote three years later supporting the claim, if any such evidence actually existed. Braden was in the Midwest but was connected with antagonist factions in the Utah Territory and may have read "Historicus's" report. In fact, this account might have been the basis for Braden's accusations. Interestingly, Braden repeats an error found in the original *Times and Seasons* account, which incorrectly identified Edward Johnson as a participant. John and Elsa Johnson's son, Edwin, had died before the 1830 census.⁵⁴ In addition, Braden asserts that one of Marinda's brothers, "Eli Johnson," was also involved, but she had no such sibling. Historian Mark Staker has verified that John Johnson's brother, Eli, Marinda's uncle, was living at the Johnson home at the time.⁵⁵

51. Amos Sutton Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve*, 252.

52. *Ibid.*, 220–21.

53. Historicus (pseud.), "Sketches from the History of Polygamy: Joseph Smith's Especial Revelations," 1.

54. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken O Ye People: The Historical Setting for Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations*, 367 note 41.

55. *Ibid.*, 336–37, 346–52. Bill Shepard wrote: "There is an Eli Johnson who married in Portage Co. and executed deeds but I've not attached him to a family. John's younger brother Eliphaz may have visited Ohio but I've not found evidence that he ever lived there. But I can't say that for sure so it would probably be best not to speculate." Bill Shepard, email to Michael Marquardt, March 22, 2005.

Except for this hypothesized connection between *Historicus* and Braden, what might Braden's source have been? Braden was born in 1831, and it seems improbable that he would have discovered documentation that had remained unknown for more than fifty-two years. Most likely, he simply read the account of the mobbing, which was available in both LDS and RLDS publications, even repeating an error in that document. Then he assumed that, since emasculation was mentioned, at least some of Joseph Smith's offenses were sexual in nature. If Braden had any evidence beyond his own assumptions, he left no record of what it was, nor have I found any documentation that suggests a historical record.

Mark Staker quotes an account by historian Harriet Taylor Upton, who visited Hiram soon after the Braden-Kelley debate, interviewed local residents, and then published in her 1910 history of the Western Reserve: "Several stories have been told as to why this [mobbing] was done. The truth is that they received this treatment because they were Mormons, because they had interested the people of that vicinity in their belief, and because some of these converts had decided them to be frauds. This was before the days of polygamy. It was largely a quarrel among different religions in the beginning, later because it was believed the new followers were to be deceived."⁵⁶

Importantly, pre-1884 accounts strongly suggest that the mob members were primarily concerned with attempts to live the law of consecration, which they interpreted as attempts by Sidney Rigdon and Joseph Smith to confiscate their property.⁵⁷ The brutal assault was equally directed at Rigdon, whom they left for dead. Richard S. Van Wagoner theorizes in *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess* that Rigdon was, in fact, the primary target.⁵⁸ Some indication of how widespread the concern about property ownership was appears in Orson Hyde's accusations, during his brief 1838 apostasy, that Rigdon had tried to usurp control over the Johnson farm.⁵⁹ Symonds Ryder, one of the mob leaders later wrote:

When they [Joseph Smith and other leaders] went to Missouri to lay the foundation of the splendid city of Zion, and also of the temple, they left their papers behind [in Hiram, Ohio]. This gave their new converts an opportunity

56. Staker, *Hearken O Ye People*, 337; quoting Harriet Taylor Upton, *History of the Western Reserve*, 699.

57. Max H Parkin, "Joseph Smith and the United Firm: The Growth and Decline of the Church's First Master Plan of Business and Finance, Ohio and Missouri, 1832–1834," 4–66.

58. Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Sidney Rigdon: A Portrait of Religious Excess*, 108–18. See also Mario S. De Pillis, "The Development of Mormon Communitarianism, 1826–1846," 19–20.

59. Orson Hyde, quoted by John Wickliffe Rigdon, in Keller, "I Never Knew a Time When I Did not Know Joseph Smith," 25–26.

to become acquainted with the internal arrangement of their church, which revealed to them the horrid fact that a plot was laid to take their property from them and place it under the control of Joseph Smith the prophet [through the law of consecration]. This was too much for the Hiramites. . . . Determined not to let it pass with impunity; . . . accordingly, a company was formed of citizens . . . in March, 1832, and proceeded to headquarters in the darkness of night, and took Smith and Rigdon from their beds, and tarred and feathered them both, and let them go. This had the desired effect, which was to get rid of them. They soon left for Kirtland.⁶⁰

It appears that Brodie's willingness to believe Braden's claims without significant scrutiny is another manifestation of her underlying assumption that Joseph Smith's libido was actively seeking sexual opportunities throughout his life, including as early as 1832. Todd Compton disagrees with Brodie: "There is no good evidence supporting the position (found in Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 119, 462) that Joseph Smith was married to Marinda Johnson . . . or had an affair with her, in 1831, and was mobbed by 'her brother Eli' and others as a result."⁶¹ Nor is there any documentation to suggest that Braden's version of the mob's motives was known to anyone during Joseph Smith's lifetime. Marinda herself recalled in 1877: "I feel like bearing my testimony that during the whole year that Joseph was an inmate of my father's house I never saw aught in his daily life or conversation to make me doubt his divine mission."⁶²

Vienna Jacques: An 1833 Plural Wife?

A late report of impropriety apparently made decades after the alleged incident, involved a woman named Vienna Jacques (apparently pronounced "jack-ways"⁶³). At some point, perhaps during the 1880s, a woman whom some historians call "Mrs. Warner Alexander," allegedly quoted Polly Beswick as quoting Emma Smith regarding an illicit relationship between Joseph Smith and Vienna Jacques. "Mrs. Warner Alexander's" statement reads:

My father, William Smith and mother Became Mormons in Bolton, N.Y, and moved to Kirtland O. in \left/ 1836. After Jo Smith, the Mormon

60. Symonds Ryder, "Letter to A. S. Hayden," February 1, 1868, quoted in Amos Sutton Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio*, 220–21. See also Max H Parkin, "The Nature and Cause of Internal and External Conflict of the Mormons in Ohio between 1830 and 1838," 254.

61. Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, 642.

62. Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom*, 404.

63. This pronunciation is based on Samuel Harrison Smith, Diary, July 18, 1832, who was serving a mission in the Boston area: "Went about five miles to Wm. Angel's, who[se] wife was a sister to Sister Viena *Jacways*" (emphasis mine). Modern pronunciation is sometimes "jakes."