

FANNY ALGER

(Marriage Date Unknown—Probably Late 1835 or Early 1836)



Born on September 20, 1816, as one of ten children to Samuel Alger and Clarissa Hancock Alger, Fanny provided household help in the Smith household in Kirtland, Ohio. Not much is known about this union as none of the participants elaborated on the topic. What we do have is a collection of late and second-hand reminiscences that may or may not give us clues as to what transpired.

Mary Elizabeth Lightner, a plural wife of the Prophet, recalled in 1905 Joseph's words relating how an angel appeared to him in 1834 commanding him to restore the practice of polygamy: "The angel came to me three times between the years of 1834 and 1842 and said I was to obey that principle."¹ This directive may have prompted Joseph to enter a plural marriage sometime thereafter.

Benjamin F. Johnson, a close friend of Joseph Smith beginning in the Kirtland period, recalled the circumstances in 1903:

And now as to your question, "How early did the Prophet Joseph practice polygamy?"... In 1835, at Kirtland, I learned from my sister's husband, Lyman R. Sherman,² who was close to the Prophet, and received it from him, "that the ancient order of Plural Marriage was again to be practiced by the Church." This, at the time did not impress my mind deeply, although there lived then with his family (the Prophet's) a neighbor's daughter, Fannie Alger, a very nice and comely young woman about my own age, toward whom not only myself, but every one, seemed partial, for the amiability of her character; and it was whispered even then that Joseph loved her.³

According to Mosiah Hancock, writing in 1896, Joseph did not approach Fanny directly. Rather, he enlisted Levi Hancock, the brother-in-law of Fanny's father, to serve as an intermediary.⁴ Levi first approached Samuel Alger, Fanny's father:

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 [Levi's sister and Fanny's mother] about it. T will 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.⁵

While some authors have alleged that this relationship was not an actual marriage,⁶ Mosiah Hancock states that a ceremony was performed making the relationship a plural matrimony from a religious perspective.

In addition, important new evidence supports that Fanny was a plural wife of Joseph Smith. In 2009, Don Bradley discovered a folder at the Church History Library containing Andrew Jenson's research

notes, a folder that no previous polygamy investigator had viewed.⁷ Jenson used those notes to write his 1887 article published in the *Historical Record* entitled: “Plural Marriage.”⁸

In preparation for that article, Jenson interviewed several Nauvoo polygamists still living, including Joseph’s plural wives Malissa Lott and Eliza R. Snow. He recorded that Eliza was “well acquainted with her [Fanny Alger] as she had lived with the Prophet at the time.”⁹ Eliza’s proximity to the events is important because in 1886, she personally wrote Fanny’s name on a list of Joseph Smith’s wives affirming the relationship was a marriage.

Things didn’t go well for Joseph and Fanny. In an 1872 letter from William McLellin to Joseph Smith, III, McLellin recalled details of an 1847 conversation with Emma Smith where Emma acknowledged that in the spring of 1836 “she 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.”¹⁰ What Emma witnessed is not specified. Whether it was the plural marriage ceremony, an exchange of affection, or even sexual relations we are not told.

Regardless, it is obvious Emma did not believe the ceremony was valid and concluded the relationship was adulterous. Ironically, Oliver Cowdery, who Joseph summoned to diffuse the situation, sided with Emma, discounting the validity of the polygamous marriage and later referring to it as a “dirty, nasty, filthy scrape.”¹¹ Oliver’s vitriol may have been intensified due to his frustrations from recent leadership changes that diminished his overall importance.

As a consequence of the discovery, Emma immediately “turned Fanny out of the house.”¹²

Subsequently, both women were severely traumatized and Oliver Cowdery alienated. In addition, rumors of “adultery” quietly spread among the Saints, although they were never loud enough to reach the local media. The first mention of the relationship in any known manuscript occurred in January of 1838.¹³ No contemporaneous documentation of the association has been found.

The evidence is inconclusive regarding the question of whether the Joseph Smith–Fanny Alger plural union included conjugal relations. ([See Appendix B below for evidences.](#))

The Alger family left for Missouri in September 1836 accompanied by Fanny. Two months later in Wayne County, Indiana, she married non-member Solomon Custer. 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.”¹⁴

Benjamin Johnson reported this marriage but miscalculates it by more than a year: “Soon after the Prophet’s flight in [the] winter of 1837 and 1838 [actually January 1838], the Alger family left for the west and stopping in Indiana for a time, Fanny soon married one of the citizens there.”¹⁵

Todd Compton comments: “One can only speculate on Fanny’s motives for marrying a non-Mormon, after a courtship that could have only been a matter of weeks. Perhaps she felt that Smith had abandoned her after Emma ejected her from the household. It is also possible that she simply fell in love with Solomon, who, unlike Smith, was her own age — nineteen.”¹⁶

Fanny stayed in Wayne County and raised 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.”¹⁷

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.”¹⁸

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

[Evidences of Plural Marriage: See Appendix A](#)

[Evidences of Sexuality: See Appendix B](#)

Endnotes:

1. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, “Remarks” at Brigham Young University, April 14, 1905, vault MSS 363, fd 6, Harold B. Lee Library, Special Collections. See also Mary Elizabeth Rollins, February 8, 1902 statement, HBLL MS 1132.
2. Sherman was called by Joseph Smith as an apostle but died before learning of the calling. See Lyndon W. Cook, “Lyman Sherman—Man of God, Would-Be Apostle,” *BYU Studies* 19, no. 1 (1978): 121.
3. Dean Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1976), 38; punctuation and spelling standardized.
4. Currently it is impossible to reconstruct Fanny Alger’s understanding of her relationship with the Joseph Smith. No historical data has been discovered providing her views. Was her willingness to proceed primarily based upon her faith in Joseph’s Prophetic calling? What role did her understanding that Old Testament plural marriage and the possible need to restore it play? Did Fanny receive a spiritual conversion experience, like those described by many women later in Nauvoo? What role did attraction play in forming the union, if any? Did Joseph Smith tell Fanny about the angelic command? Since details of *eternal* marriage was not discussed until five years later in Nauvoo, it seems less likely that she would have understood any of those underlying

doctrines. Perhaps additional manuscript documentation will be discovered in the future to help discern more about this relationship.

5. Levi Ward Hancock, “Autobiography with Additions in 1896 by Mosiah Hancock,” 63, MS 570, LDS Church History Library, punctuation and spelling standardized; cited portion written by Mosiah. See also Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 32. I am indebted to Compton who discovered that both published versions of the journal are incomplete, having had all references to the Fanny Alger marriage removed. These published versions are *The Mosiah Hancock Journal* (Salt Lake City: Pioneer Press, n.d.), 74 pages and *The Levi Hancock Journal* (n.p., n.d.), 58 pages. See also Compton, “Fanny Alger Smith Custer: Mormonism’s First Plural Wife?” *Journal of Mormon History* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 175n3. Mosiah Hancock, “Correspondence: The Prophet Joseph—Some of His Sayings,” *Deseret News*, February 27, 1884, 15, wrote: “Concerning the doctrine of celestial marriage the Prophet told my father [Levi] in the days of Kirtland, that it was the will of the Lord for His servants who were faithful to step forth in that order. But said Brother Joseph, ‘Brother Levi, if I should make known to my brethren what God has made known to me they would seek my life.’”
6. See Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 181–82; Richard S. Van Wagoner, *Mormon Polygamy: A History*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 5–6, 14; See John L. Brooke, *The Refiner’s Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644–1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 217. Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816–1844* (Longwood, Florida: Xulon Press, 2005), 453; O. Kendal White, Jr. and Daryl White, “Polygamy and Mormon Identity,” *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 2 (June 2005), 166. Gregory Prince, *Power from on High* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 165.
7. Documents 1–18, Andrew Jenson Papers, ca. 1871–1942, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16, LDS Church History Library.
8. Andrew Jenson, “Plural Marriage.” *Historical Record* 6 (June 1887): 6:219–40.
9. An unquoted portion of Jenson’s notes (document 10) suggests that Eliza knew of Fanny’s later marriage and children and also knew of “a brother Alger” in St. George.
10. 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. See also Robert D. Hutchins, “Joseph Smith III: Moderate Mormon,” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1977), 79–81.
11. Letter to Warren A. Cowdery, 21 January 1838, copied by Warren F. Cowdery into Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Available in “Letters of Oliver Cowdery,”

on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998).

12. Ann Eliza Webb Young, *Wife Number 19*, 66. On April 12, 1838, David W. Patten testified before the Far West High Council that “He [Oliver] said that Joseph told him, he had confessed to Emma.” *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844*, April 12, 1838, eds. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1983).
13. Letter to Warren A. Cowdery, 21 January 1838, copied by Warren F. Cowdery into Oliver Cowdery Letterbook, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Available in “Letters of Oliver Cowdery,” on *New Mormon Studies: A Comprehensive Resource Library*, CD-ROM (Salt Lake City: Smith Research Associates, 1998).
14. Wayne County, Indiana, marriage license, photocopy of holograph in my possession.
15. Zimmerman, *I Knew the Prophets*, 33).
16. Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness*, 37.
17. Accessed September 6, 2008,
<http://www.algerclan.org/getperson.php?personID=I135&tree=alger>.
18. 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.)

Appendix A — Evidences of Joseph Smith’s plural marriage to Fanny Alger:

- Eliza R. Snow, “First list of wives,” Document #1, Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- Mosiah Hancock, Narrative appended to Levi Hancock Autobiography, 63.
- Oliver Cowdery, Letter to Warren Cowdery, January 21, 1838, Oliver Cowdery Letterbook.
- Far West High Council members, in Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *Far West Record: Minutes of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830-1844*, 167-68, April 12, 1838.
- April 4, 1899 proxy sealing to Joseph Smith under the direction of President Lorenzo Snow, Salt Lake Temple Sealing Records, Book D, 243, GS film, 184,590, LDS Family History Library; Tinney, “The Royal Family of the Prophet Joseph Smith” 41, 63.
- Benjamin F. Johnson, Letter to George F. Gibbs, 1903, 38-39. Dean R. Zimmerman, ed., *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs, Reporting Doctrinal Views of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young*, 38-39.
- William McLellin, Letter to Joseph Smith III, July 1872.

- William McLellin, quoted in J. H. Beadle, “Jackson County,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 6, 1875, 4.
- “Historicus” [pseud.], “Sketches from the History of Polygamy: Joseph Smith=s Especial Revelations,” 1.
- Eliza Jane Churchhill Webb, Letters to Mary Bond, April 24, and May 4, 1876.
- Ann Eliza Webb Young, *Wife No. 19*, 1875, 66–67.
- Chauncey Webb, quoted in Wyl [pseud. of Wilhelm Ritter Von Wymetal], *Mormon Portraits or Joseph Smith the Prophet, His Family and His Friends: A Study Based on Facts and Documents* (1886), 57.
- John Hawley, Autobiography, January 1885.
- Jenson, “Fanny Alger biographical sheet,” Document #10, Andrew Jenson Papers, MS 17956, Box 49, fd. 16.
- Jenson, “Plural Marriage,” 233; Joseph Fielding Smith, *Blood Atonement and the Origin of Plural Marriage*, 75.

Appendix B — Evidences of Sexuality:

Five documents indicate that Joseph Smith may have experienced conjugal relations with his first plural wife, Fanny Alger. The earliest is from Oliver Cowdery in a private letter written January 21, 1838:

I did not fail to affirm that what I had said was strictly true. A dirty, nasty, filthy scrape [“affair” overwritten] of his and Fanny Alger’s was talked over in which I strictly declared that I had never deviated from the truth on the matter.¹

The next reference is thirty-four years later from William McLellin:

[O]ne night she [Emma Smith] 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.²

McLellin reported on the event again three years afterward in 1875 to J. H. Beadle:

He [McLellin] was in the vicinity during all the Mormon troubles in Northern Missouri, and grieved heavily over the suffering of his former brethren. He also informed me of the spot where the first well authenticated case of polygamy took place in which Joseph Smith was “sealed” to the hired girl. The “sealing” took place in a barn on the hay mow, and was witnessed by Mrs. Smith through a crack in the door! The Doctor was so distressed about this case, (it created some scandal at the time among the Saints,) that long afterwards when he visited Mrs. Emma Smith at Nauvoo, he charged her as she hoped for salvation to tell him the truth about it. And she then and there declared on her honor that it was a fact — “saw it with her own eyes.”³

Ten years later, Wilhelm Wyl reportedly quoted Chancy Webb, who said:

Joseph's dissolute life began already in the first times of the church, in Kirtland. He was sealed there secretly to Fanny Alger. Emma was furious, and drove the girl, who was unable to conceal the consequences of her celestial relation with the prophet, out of her house.⁴

The final document was written in 1903 by Benjamin F. Johnson:

I was ... told by Warren Parish That He himself & Oliver Cowdery did know that Joseph had Fanny Alger as a wife for They were Spied upon & found together.⁵

For more details, see Brian C. Hales (with Don Bradley), *Joseph Smith's Polygamy: History and Theology*, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2013.

Endnotes to Appendix B:

1. Oliver Cowdery, Letter to Warren A. Cowdery, January 21, 1838.
2. William E. McLellin, M.D., Letter to President Joseph Smith [III] Independence, Mo., July 1872.
3. William McClellin, quoted in J. H. Beadle, "Jackson County," 4.
4. Wilhelm Wyl quoting "Mr. W." [Chauncy Webb], *Mormon Portraits*, 57.
5. Dean R. Zimmerman, ed., *I Knew the Prophets: An Analysis of the Letter of Benjamin F. Johnson to George F. Gibbs*, 38.