

Dating the Joseph Smith - Fanny Alger Relationship

Identifying the exact year of the marriage or relationship between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger is challenging. Eight of the nineteen accounts in the chart above provide dates that range between 1832 and 1836.¹

Historical Accounts that Provide a Date for the Beginning of the Relationship (Marriage) and/or Aftermath of the Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger Marriage			
Author	Date	Marriage or Aftermath?	Quotation
Levi Hancock via Mosiah Hancock	1832-1833	"Early in the spring of 1832..."	[Circumstantial evidence] Levi Hancock married Clarrisa Reed in 1832.
Historicus [pseudo.]		"When Joseph Smith was an infant" [1832-1833]	"She [Emma Smith] discovered that Joseph had been celesitalizing with this maiden, Fanny, who acknowledged the truth, but Joseph denied it in toto and stigmatized the statement of the girl as a base fabrication. Emma, of course, believed the girl, as she was very well aware that no confidence could be placed in her husband, and she became terrible worked up about it. She was like a mad woman, and acted so violently that Oliver Cowdery and some of the elders were called in to minister to her and 'cast the devil out of sister Emma."
William McLellin		"Joseph [III]... at your birth [November 1832]"	"Your father [written to Joseph Smith III] committed an act with a Miss Hill—a hired girl. Emma saw him, and spoke to him. He desisted, but Mrs. Smith refused to be satisfied. He called in Dr. Williams, O. Cowdery, and S. Rigdon to reconcile Emma. But she told them just as the circumstances took place. He found he was caught. He confessed humbly, and begged forgiveness. Emma and all forgave him."
Martin Harris		"In or about the year 1833"	"The servant girl of Joe Smith stated that the prophet had made improper proposals to her, which created quite a talk amongst the people."
Benjamin F. Johnson	1835-1836	"In 1835"	"And there was some trouble with Oliver Cowdery, and whisper said it was relating to a girl then living in his (the Prophet's) family; and I was afterwards told by Warren Parish, that he himself and Oliver Cowdery did know that Joseph and Fannie Alger as wife, for they were spied upon and found together."
Eliza Jane Churchill Webb		"in 1835-or 6"	"Fanny Alger's mother says Fanny was sealed to Joseph by Oliver Cowdery in Kirtland in 1835-or 6... Fanny Alger had lived in Joseph's family several years, and when she left there she came and lived with me a few weeks. I suppose your mother will remember what a talk the whole affair made..."
Eliza R. Snow		[spring of 1836]	"Alger, Fanny, Joseph Smith's wife. One of the first wives Joseph married. Emma made such a fuss about. Sister E. R. Snow was well acquainted with her as she lived with the Prophet at the time."
Fanny Brewer		"In the spring of 1837"	"There was much excitement against the Prophet, on another account, likewise,-- an unlawful intercourse between himself and a young orphan girl residing in his family, and under his protection!!!"

Three different scenarios are generally presented. One places the marriage/relationship beginning in 1832-1833, with the disclosure and backlash occurring shortly thereafter. A second version promotes that the marriage/relationship began in 1832-1833 but was not revealed until 1835-1836. The third interpretation has both the commencement and the aftermath occurring in the 1835-1836 period.

Several scholars, including D. Michael Quinn and George D. Smith, have suggested 1832-1833 for both the beginning and exposure.² Smith wrote in *Nauvoo Polygamy*: "Joseph's own retrospective writings begun in 1832, the same year he became head of the church in Kirtland. Yet, that same year, he had famously become involved with a sixteen-year-old carpenter's daughter named Fanny Alger."³

Four documents support an 1832-1833 time period.⁴ Martin Harris appears to be referring to the Alger marriage in a second-hand account from an 1875 interview, placing it "in or about the year 1833."⁵ Two writers, William McLellin and an author using the pseudonym "Historicus" dated the incident to the birth of Joseph Smith, III, which occurred on November 6, 1832.⁶ It is possible that "Historicus's" informant was William McLellin, which would make this a single source. Probably the strongest evidence for an 1832-1833 marriage is circumstantial. Mosiah Hancock's journal reports that sometime in the early 1830s, Joseph told Mosiah's father Levi: "I want to make a bargain with you. If you will get Fanny Alger for me

for a wife you may have Clarissa Reed.” Noting that the Levi Hancock – Clarissa Reed marriage occurred March 29, 1833, Todd Compton concludes the two marriages occurred close to each other chronologically: “Joseph probably married Fanny in February or March 1833.”⁷

A closer look at the four manuscripts, however, demonstrates that one is comprised of non-specific circumstantial evidence and the other three refer strictly to the aftermath rather than the commencement. They discuss the events surrounding its discovery and the subsequent backlash, saying nothing about its inception.

Believing that Joseph Smith contracted his first plural marriage (or had an immoral association) in 1832-1833 *and* that it was soon exposed is problematic. Current evidence supports that the relationship was first divulged in 1836. Eliza R. Snow declared that she was living with the Smith family at that time⁸ and she didn’t move into their home until the spring of 1836.⁹ Mosiah Hancock left an account that his father was asked to whisk Fanny away from gathering apostates in the summer of 1836.¹⁰ Contemporary records show that months later in September, the Alger family, including Fanny, left Kirtland for Missouri. One Kirtlander recalled that the relationship created “excitement” in 1837.¹¹ Complaints regarding Joseph Smith’s relationship with Fanny Alger were first mentioned in contemporary documents in 1838.

The names of several individuals who were involved with the detection and fallout are provided in the three narratives. Included are Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Sidney Rigdon, Martin Harris, and Frederick G. Williams. If they learned of the union in 1832 or 1833, available evidence supports that none of them reacted to that knowledge for several years. The period between 1832 and summer 1836 was filled with activities such as the Missouri troubles, Zion’s Camp, and the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. It is difficult to believe that Emma Smith and other influential Church members would have kept completely mum through those events concerning a relationship they would have seen as adulterous. Even more implausible is the idea that suddenly, after years had passed, they would make a “fuss” or accuse him concerning it. An examination of all of the contemporary accounts and later recollections describing those memorable proceedings reveals no concerns during that period specifically arising from the Prophet’s morality.

In an October 19, 1995 letter to Gary J. Bergera, Michael Marquardt observed: “Concerning Fanny Alger, I have compiled some material relating to what has been said concerning her and Joseph Smith... It appears that whatever occurred with Fanny Alger probably happened in the year 1836 with Fanny leaving Kirtland, Ohio. This year is closer to the events relating to Oliver Cowdery as Cowdery had discussed the matter with Joseph Smith and others in the summer and fall of 1837.”¹² In summary, no contemporary evidence has been found to support even a limited disclosure of the Fanny Alger - Joseph Smith union prior to 1836.

The second scenario posits an 1832-1833 plural marriage or relationship that was not divulged until 1835-1836.¹³ This reconstruction asserts that Joseph Smith married Fanny in conjunction with the marriage of Levi Hancock to Clarissa Reed. Indeed, it might be argued that one cannot accept Mosiah’s account that describes how a marriage ceremony was performed, without also accepting the 1833 date associated with the Levi-Clarissa wedding. However, Mosiah explained:

When my Father had started on his first mission to preach this Gospel He felt that perhaps he had done wrong in not telling the Prophet that he had made arrangements to marry Temperance Jane Miller of New Lyme—When Father returned from his mission he spoke to the Prophet concerning the matter The Prophet said – “Never mind Brother Levi about that for the Lord has one prepared for you that will be a Blessing to you forever!”

At that time Clarissa Reed was working at the Prophet’s
She told the Prophet She loved brother Levi Hancock...

Therefore Brother Joseph said “Brother Levi I want to make a bargain with you—If you will get Fanny Alger for me for a wife you may have Clarissa Reed. I love Fanny”¹⁴

At the time of the discussion, Clarissa was already attracted to Levi, so the marriage may have proceeded rapidly, much more rapidly than a novel plural marriage between the Prophet and Fanny Alger. This interpretation also assumes that Fanny and Joseph Smith were able to maintain their marriage secret from Emma Smith for several years and the Fanny was the Prophet’s plural wife longer than any other, including those he married in Nauvoo.¹⁵

The third timeline specifies that the marriage/relationship commenced in 1835-1836 and the detection and repercussions occurred thereafter, probably mid-1836. Michael Marquardt writes that it occurred “prior to the fall of 1836.”¹⁶ Many other writers have embraced this interpretation.¹⁷ Several documents also support this scenario. In a 1903 letter, Benjamin F. Johnson asserted the events transpired in 1835.¹⁸ Eliza Jane Churchill Webb quoted Fanny’s mother saying it was in 1835 or 1836.¹⁹ As reviewed above, Mary Elizabeth Rollins recalled Joseph stating an angel came three times commanding him to practice polygamy. The first of these visits, according to Mary Elizabeth, occurred in 1834. If an angelic directive was involved, the first plural marriage would have been after 1834.

Richard Van Wagoner asserts that it wasn’t until sometime during 1835 that Fanny was employed as a maidservant to Emma Smith, living there in the Smith home.²⁰ Mark Staker gave additional details:

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. After that Eliza R. Snow moved into the house on the hill and taught school for Joseph’s children in the rear portion of the home.²¹

Current manuscript documentation does not specify when the Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger marriage/relationship first began. However, evidence supports it was not discovered by Emma and others until mid-1836.

¹ See Richard Van Wagoner, “Joseph and Marriage,” *Sunstone*, 10:9 (January 1986) 32-33, See also the summary in Todd Compton, “Truth, Honesty and Moderation in Mormon History: A Response to Anderson, Faulring and Bachman’s Reviews of *In Sacred Loneliness*,” section “The Date of Fanny Alger’s Marriage,” (accessed February 11, 2007) <http://www.geocities.com/athens/oracle/7207/rev.html>.

² Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Origins of Power*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994, 45, 587.

³ George D. Smith, *Nauvoo Polygamy: “... but we called it celestial marriage”*, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2008, advanced uncorrected copy, 22. Later in the text Smith clarifies: “Before Long, talk about Joseph echoed Fanny’s name, maybe as early as 1832 but certainly from 1833 to 1835.” (*Ibid.* 38.) It appears the George’s views on this topic have evolved, perhaps in conjunction with his continued research. In “Nauvoo Roots of Mormon Polygamy, 1841-46: A Preliminary Demographic Report.” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 27, no. 1 [Spring 1994]:5 he used an 1835 date. [1-72]. However in his 2002 Sunstone Symposium presentation, “How Joseph Smith Found Thirty Women to Marry Him and How This Changed His Life,” (SL02311), George D. Smith dated the Alger relationship to 1833.

⁴ Richard L. Bushman suggested Joseph involvement with Fanny Alger might have been “as early as 1831” but does not supply any documentation to explain such an early date. (*Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, 323.)

⁵ Metcalf, Anthony. *Ten Years Before the Mast*. Malad, ID: By the Author, 1888, 72.

⁶ Letter to Joseph Smith, III, July 1872, Community of Christ Archives, reprint in Stan Larson and Samuel J. Passey, eds., *The William E. McLellin Papers, 1854-1880*, Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2007, 488-89. An anonymous writer, perhaps McLellin himself, wrote similarly, dating the event to “the time the present Joseph Smith [III] was an infant.” (“Sketches from the History of Polygamy: Joseph Smith’s [indcipherable] Revelations,” *Anti-Polygamy Standard*, April, 1881, Salt Lake City, vol. 2 no. 1, p. 1.)

⁷ Todd Compton, *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*. Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1997, 33; see also Todd Compton, “Fanny Alger Smith Custer Mormonism’s First Plural Wife?” *Journal of Mormon History*, 22 (Spring 1996) 1:178, 195. [174-207] Compton does not assume the aftermath began in 1833, only that a secret marriage then occurred.

⁸ Andrew Jenson Papers [ca. 1871-1942], MS 17956; LDS Church Archives, Box 49, Folder 16, document #10.

⁹ Eliza R. Snow, "Sketch of My Life," in "Utah and Mormons" collection, Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley, microfilm copy in LDS Church Archives, under call number MS 8305, Reel 1, Item 11, page 7.

¹⁰ “As time progressed the Apostates thought they had a good hold on Joseph because of Fanny and some of the smart ones confined her in an upper room of the [Kirtland] Temple determined that the Prophet should be settled according to their notions Brother Joseph came to Father and said “Brother Levi what can be done”?—There being a wagon and a dry goods Box close by and Joseph being strong and Father active Father soon gained the window Sill and Fanny was soon on the ground Father mounts his horse with Fanny behind him and although dark they were in New Lyme forty five miles distant.” (Mosiah Hancock additions in, “Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock, CHO, Ms 570, microfilm, page 64.) This account is confusing in several ways. The windows of the Kirtland temple seem too high to allow a safe stealthy exist for Fanny as described. In addition, Oliver Cowdery, who seemed to be a primary source of complaint, would not have been classified with any “apostate” group in mid 1836.

¹¹ Bennett, John C. *The History of the Saints: Or an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland & Whiting, 1842a, 85-86.

¹² Michael Marquardt to Gary J. Bergera, October 19, 1995; copy of letter in possession of the author. Used by permission.

¹³ Email from Todd Compton to the author September 9, 2008.

¹⁴ Mosiah Hancock, “Autobiography of Levi Ward Hancock (with additions by his son Mosiah Hancock),” CA, Ms 570, microfilm, 62-63.

¹⁵ Joseph was sealed to his first plural wife in Nauvoo, Louisa Beaman, in April, 1841 and was killed in June 1844, or a duration of thirty-nine months. A later 1832 or early 1833 plural marriage extending to mid-1836 would have surpassed that duration. I believe that evidence for a marriage or relationship between Joseph Smith and any other woman besides Fanny Alger, between 1830 and 1841, including Lucinda Pendleton (Morgan Harris) in 1838, is not persuasive. See text below.

¹⁶ Michael Marquardt, *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844*, Longwood, Florida: Xulon Press, 2005, 451.

¹⁷ See Donna Hill, *Joseph Smith: The First Mormon*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1977, 188-89; Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality: The Shakers, The Mormons, and The Oneida Community*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984, 137-38; Newell Linda King, and Valeen Tippetts Avery. *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1984, 66; Kimball Young, *Isn't One Wife Enough?* New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1954, 91.

¹⁸ 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*, Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1976, 38-39.

¹⁹ Letter to Mary Bond, Apr. 24, 1876. Myron H Bond collection, P21 f11, Community of Christ Archives.

²⁰ Van Wagoner, Richard S. *Mormon Polygamy: A History*. 2nd ed., Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989, 14, states that Fanny “Alger did not live in Smith’s home until 1835.” No reference is provided, but if true, would support a later marriage date. See also Newell Linda King, and Valeen Tippetts Avery. *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1984, 66; Richard Lloyd Anderson and Scott H. Faulring, “Review of *In Sacred Loneliness: The Plural Wives of Joseph Smith*, by Todd M. Compton,” *FARMS*, Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 10/2 (1998), 78-79. [67-104]

²¹ Email communication to the author September 9, 2008.