

The Fanny Alger Affair: Adultery Disguised as Marriage

The first documented polygamous relationship of Joseph Smith was not noble or divinely orchestrated; it was secretive and remains ethically indefensible. Around 1833, in Kirtland, Ohio, Smith began a sexual relationship with Fanny Alger, a 16-year-old housekeeper living in his household. 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!!!¹

Ann Eliza Webb Young reported second hand that Emma: “Angered at finding the two persons whom most she 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.”

He sided with Emma in condemning Joseph’s involvement with Fanny. Oliver called it “a dirty, nasty, filthy affair”, words he used in a private letter to his brother Warren (January 21, 1838, cited in the Joseph Smith Papers, Documents, Vol. 5). Cowdery’s moral condemnation is telling: he did not describe the event as a “marriage” or even a misunderstanding, but as unambiguous adultery. Emma’s shock and devastation were equally profound; she had not been informed of any ceremony and would later grapple with repeated betrayals under Joseph’s secret polygamy.

Ethical Violations:

1. Exploitation of a Power Imbalance

Fanny Alger was not Joseph’s social equal. She was a teenager, dependent on the Smith household for work and shelter, and subject to Joseph’s dual authority as employer and prophet. Such a power imbalance, especially in a religious context, renders true consent deeply questionable. This was not a relationship of equals; it was an exploitation of trust and position.

2. Deception of Emma Smith

Emma knew nothing of any purported marriage. The secrecy of the encounter, and Emma’s discovery through observation rather than disclosure, speaks volumes. Had Joseph believed his relationship with Fanny to be divinely sanctioned, why was it hidden? Why was Emma excluded? His concealment is “consciousness of guilt.”

3. Absence of Doctrinal or Legal Framework

At the time of the Alger incident, no revelation on plural marriage existed. The doctrine later canonized as Doctrine and Covenants 132, introducing “celestial marriage” and threatening Emma with destruction if she refused, was not recorded until 1843, a decade later. To retroactively label Fanny as Joseph’s first “plural wife” imposes an anachronistic justification that did not exist in Kirtland.

4. Emma’s Own Sealing Status

Even Emma herself was not sealed to Joseph until 1843, after at least sixteen other plural “marriages.” If Fanny Alger was truly a “celestial wife,” this would imply Joseph placed his teenage housekeeper ahead



¹ 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.

of his lawful spouse in eternal priority, an absurdity that exposes the self-serving nature of later justifications.

Modern LDS Church's Whitewashing

Today, LDS apologetic literature, including the Church's Gospel Topics Essays,² softens or rebrands the Alger incident as an early "plural marriage" rather than adultery. This revisionism is profoundly dishonest. No evidence of a sealing ceremony exists; no contemporary testimony supports the claim. The only direct record from a close associate (Oliver Cowdery) labels it adulterous.

By calling this a "marriage," the modern LDS Church engages in historical sanitization, an effort to protect Joseph Smith's prophetic image at the expense of transparency. Such retroactive framing erases the harm to Emma and Fanny, dismisses credible contemporary witnesses, and conditions members to accept implausible narratives rather than confront difficult truths.

Why This Matters

The Alger affair is not a minor footnote; it is the blueprint for Smith's subsequent polygamy: secrecy, exploitation of authority, betrayal of Emma, and post-hoc rationalizations. It highlights how the modern Church, rather than reckon honestly with this history, continues to perpetuate distortions that shield Joseph at the expense of victims.

To describe this as "marriage" is not merely inaccurate, it is unethical. It perpetuates harm by denying Fanny Alger's exploitation, silencing Emma's betrayal, and presenting Smith's sexual predation as divinely mandated. Such framing discredits the Church's claim to moral or prophetic integrity.

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² LDS Gospel Topics Essays*: "Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo" ([lds.org/topics](https://www.lds.org/topics)).
[LDS Essay on Polygamy/Polyandry in Kirtland and Nauvoo \(Annotated\)](https://www.lds.org/topics) 