

## Fanny Alger

Born in 1816 to Samuel and Clarissa Alger, Fanny Alger joined the Church with her family in the early 1830s and worked in Joseph Smith's household in Kirtland, Ohio.<sup>1</sup> Several Latter-day Saints who lived in Kirtland in the 1830s later reported that Fanny Alger married Joseph Smith, becoming his first plural wife.<sup>2</sup> The marriage was evidently of short duration. Fanny left Ohio with her parents in 1836 for Missouri, apparently staying at a tavern owned by the family of Solomon Custer in Dublin, Indiana.<sup>3</sup> Within a few months, Fanny married Solomon.<sup>4</sup> She remained in Dublin after her parents continued to Far West, Missouri. Fanny's family followed the main body of the Saints from Missouri to Illinois and ultimately to southern Utah. When Fanny's father, a patriarch, passed away in the 1870s, his obituary celebrated his family's faithfulness.<sup>5</sup>

Fanny and Solomon had nine children, only two of whom survived Fanny. The Custers maintained a grocery store in Dublin and invested in a sawmill in nearby Lewisville.<sup>6</sup> The family moved to Lewisville during a time of financial difficulty, and Solomon attempted to sell the sawmill but ultimately declared bankruptcy.<sup>7</sup> Fanny and Solomon moved back to Dublin, where they remained until his death in 1885.<sup>8</sup>

Fanny and Solomon attended the local Universalist Church that Solomon's father had helped establish. During her later years, Fanny also became interested in spiritualism.<sup>9</sup> After Solomon's death, Fanny moved to Indianapolis to live with her son Lafayette. She died in 1889 and was buried in Dublin next to Solomon in a plot of ground he had cleared as a child.<sup>10</sup>

## Relationship to Joseph Smith

Very little is known about the marriage between Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger. The earliest sources emerged in the aftermath of the collapse of the Kirtland Safety Society in 1837. Angry investors in the society and local antagonists circulated many rumors attacking Joseph, including allegations that he committed adultery. Some of the rumors were said to originate with Oliver Cowdery, whose formerly close relationship with Joseph had become strained over a variety of matters. Some claimed Oliver heard Joseph confess to extramarital relations with Fanny Alger.<sup>11</sup> In fall 1837, Joseph Smith confronted Cowdery about the rumor in a meeting attended by at least three others. In that meeting, Cowdery refuted the rumor that Joseph had

confessed to him.<sup>12</sup> The following April, when Cowdery was tried in Missouri for his Church membership over many charges, the high council discussed the rumors Cowdery had circulated. Joseph gave an explanation of his relationship to Fanny that appears to have satisfied the high council.<sup>13</sup> Cowdery was excommunicated during this meeting.

Other than evidence of a visit in the early 1840s to her family who belonged to the Church branch in Lima, Illinois, Fanny's name remains absent from Latter-day Saint records for nearly 30 years.<sup>14</sup> In the late 19th century, a handful of statements by Latter-day Saints and former Church members indicated that Joseph Smith and Fanny Alger's relationship was an early plural marriage.<sup>15</sup> Eliza R. Snow, one of Joseph Smith's plural wives, simply included Fanny in a list of his wives.<sup>16</sup> Mosiah Hancock in 1896 and Benjamin F. Johnson in 1903 likewise described Fanny's relationship to Joseph as a plural marriage that was kept confidential. Hancock told of a private marriage sealing performed by Hancock's father in Kirtland. According to Johnson, Fanny was asked about her relationship to Joseph but refused to elaborate on the matter.<sup>17</sup>

Though we know little about the introduction and early practice of plural marriage, Latter-day Saints honor the faith of early Church members who sacrificed to obey this difficult commandment.

### Church Resources

"Plural Marriage in Kirtland and Nauvoo," Gospel Topics Essays, topics.lds.org.

"Letter from Thomas B. Marsh, 15 February 1838," Historical Introduction, in Mark Ashurst-McGee, David W. Grua, Elizabeth Kuehn, Alexander L. Baugh, and Brenden W. Rensink, eds., *Documents, Volume 6: February 1838–August 1839*. Vol. 6 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, edited by Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2017), 10–17.