

## Appendix: Letter to Nancy Rigdon, circa Mid-April 1842



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Source Note



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Historical Introduction



On 3 August 1842 John C. Bennett, formerly a close associate of JS,<sup>1</sup> forwarded to the editor of the Springfield, Illinois, *Sangamo Journal* the text of a letter he claimed JS wrote to Nancy Rigdon, daughter of Sidney and Phebe Brooks Rigdon. Because JS's authorship of this letter is uncertain, the letter is presented as an appendix to this volume rather than a featured document. The *Sangamo Journal* published the letter, embedded in a letter from Bennett himself, in its 19 August 1842 issue. Bennett's letter, written on the Erie Canal aboard the steamboat *Nassau*, was the sixth epistle he sent to that newspaper attacking JS and the Latter-day Saints. In May 1842 Bennett was excommunicated, and he resigned his position as mayor of Nauvoo, Illinois, amid charges of sexual promiscuity and other scandalous offenses.<sup>2</sup> After his expulsion from the church was publicized the following month,<sup>3</sup> Bennett launched a vitriolic campaign to disparage JS, which included sending the series of letters to the *Journal*. In the second of these communications, dated 2 July, Bennett claimed to have intimate knowledge of JS's attempts to court Nancy Rigdon as a plural wife—a marital system Bennett referred to as “spiritual wifery”—and described a letter that JS purportedly wrote to Rigdon to explain the doctrine and justify the proposal. Bennett further reported that the letter was in the hands of Rigdon's friends and that both he and Rigdon's father, Sidney, had read it.<sup>4</sup>

Because contemporaneous evidence discredits other allegations in Bennett's *Sangamo Journal* letters—and in his subsequent book, *History of the Saints; or, An Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*, which appeared in early November 1842—some debate exists among historians about the authenticity of this purported JS letter.<sup>5</sup> As in the cases of most of his verifiable plural marriages, JS was silent about this issue—neither confirming nor denying either his authorship of the letter or the allegation that he approached Nancy Rigdon to be a plural wife.<sup>6</sup> JS's brother William Smith, editor of the Nauvoo newspaper *Wasp*, denied that JS was the letter's author.<sup>7</sup> In September the *Wasp* also printed a statement above Sidney Rigdon's signature claiming that “Mr. Smith denied to me the authorship of that letter.” However, Rigdon's statement implied that such a letter did exist. Rigdon cryptically reported that his daughter Nancy declared that “she never said to Gen. Bennett or any other person, that said letter was written by said Mr. Smith, nor in his hand writing, but by another person, and in another person's hand writing.”<sup>8</sup> Although this particular

letter's authenticity is contested, JS both wrote and offered to write similar letters of explanation about the principle of plural marriage to other prospective spouses.<sup>9</sup>

If the text was derived from an authentic letter or a copy thereof in Bennett's possession, neither the original letter nor an early manuscript copy has been located. The earliest extant version is the one printed in the *Sangamo Journal*, reproduced here. Bennett published the letter again in his *History of the Saints*, and it was also reprinted in other newspapers that were circulating his *Sangamo Journal* letters at the time, including the *New York Herald*.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the version in the *New York Herald*, which included JS as the signer and Rigdon as the recipient, none of the 1842 printed versions or later handwritten copies based on them include a signature, address, or date. However, in introducing the text in both the *Sangamo Journal* and his book, Bennett identified JS as the author and Nancy Rigdon as the recipient.<sup>11</sup> In addition to being unaddressed, the letter contains no language explicitly tying its content to plural marriage, though it can certainly be read as a discreet introduction or invitation to the practice. If JS proposed that Rigdon become his plural wife, she refused his invitation.<sup>12</sup>

If JS composed the letter and sent it to Rigdon, he would likely have done so in spring 1842. If Bennett's general chronology of JS's proposal to Rigdon is reliable, then the letter had to have been written after 16 March 1842, as Bennett claimed he tried to dissuade JS from approaching her on the grounds that both JS and Rigdon's father were Master Masons (both JS and Sidney Rigdon were raised Master Masons on 16 March).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, if Bennett is to be believed, the letter had to have been written at the latest by 2 July, on which date Bennett wrote to the *Sangamo Journal* that he saw the letter. The timing can likely be further narrowed to sometime in mid-April if Bennett was indeed present in Nauvoo and involved in JS's proposal plans. According to Bennett, Marinda Nancy Johnson Hyde approached Nancy Rigdon at JS's behest on 9 April at the funeral of Ephraim Marks and told her that JS wanted to see her. When Rigdon arrived at the appointed meeting place, Willard Richards met her and rescheduled the meeting with JS for Thursday (14 April). Bennett continued his narrative by saying that JS proposed to Rigdon on that day and promised to write her, which he said JS did "in a few days thro' Dr. Richards."<sup>14</sup> This timing—and the possibility of JS's authorship in general—may be partially corroborated by cryptic entries scribe Willard Richards made in JS's journal for 12 and 13 May 1842, which refer to "certain difficulties or surmises which existed" between JS and Sidney Rigdon and private discussions between the two men.<sup>15</sup>

Though his letter to the *Sangamo Journal* did not include any provenance information or explicit physical description, when Bennett included the letter in *History of the Saints* he stated that the original was in Willard Richards's handwriting and that he obtained it from church member Francis M. Higbee.<sup>16</sup>

## Footnotes

[1] Bennett was mayor of Nauvoo at the time JS was vice mayor, was major general of the Nauvoo Legion at the time JS was lieutenant general, and was a member of the First Presidency.

[2] “New Election of Mayor, and Vice Mayor, of the City of Nauvoo,” *Wasp*, 21 May 1842, [3].

*The Wasp*. Nauvoo, IL. Apr. 1842–Apr. 1843.

[3] “Notice,” *Times and Seasons*, 15 June 1842, 3:830.

[4] “Further Mormon Developments!! 2d Letter from Gen. Bennett,” *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield, IL), 15 July 1842, [2]; see also “To the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and to All the Honorable Part of Community,” *Wasp*, 25 June 1842, [2]–[3].

*Sangamo Journal*. Springfield, IL. 1831–1847.

*The Wasp*. Nauvoo, IL. Apr. 1842–Apr. 1843.

[5] See, for example, Dirkmaat, “Searching for ‘Happiness,’” 94–119.

Dirkmaat, Gerrit. “Searching for ‘Happiness’: Joseph Smith’s Alleged Authorship of the 1842 Letter to Nancy Rigdon.” *Journal of Mormon History* 42, no. 3 (July 2016): 94–119.

[6] Some sources corroborate the story that JS proposed marriage to Nancy Rigdon while others refute it. For instance, John W. Rigdon—Nancy’s younger brother—signed an affidavit decades later confirming that JS approached his sister, while apostle Orson Hyde asserted in 1845 that Nancy Rigdon fabricated the story of a proposal after JS reproved her for immoral behavior. (John W. Rigdon, Affidavit, Salt Lake Co., UT, 28 July 1905, pp. 6–8, in Joseph F. Smith, Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, CHL; *Speech of Orson Hyde*, 27–28.)

Smith, Joseph F. Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, 1869–1915. CHL. MS 3423.

*Speech of Elder Orson Hyde, Delivered before the High Priest’s Quorum in Nauvoo, April 27th, 1845, upon the Course and Conduct of Mr. Sidney Rigdon, and upon the Merits of His Claims to the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. Nauvoo, IL: John Taylor, 1845. Copy at CHL.

[7] “Bennett’s Letters,” *Wasp*, 27 Aug. 1842, [2].

*The Wasp*. Nauvoo, IL. Apr. 1842–Apr. 1843.

[8] Sidney Rigdon, Nauvoo, IL, 27 Aug. 1842, Letter to the Editor, *Wasp*, 3 Sept. 1842, [3].

*The Wasp*. Nauvoo, IL. Apr. 1842–Apr. 1843.

[9] See JS, Nauvoo, IL, to Newel K. Whitney and Elizabeth Ann Smith Whitney, 18 Aug. 1842, CHL; and Emily Partridge Young, Deposition, 19 Mar. 1892, part 2, p. 350, question 22, *Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints v. Church of Christ of Independence, Missouri, et al.* (C.C.W.D. Mo. 1894), typescript, United States Testimony, CHL.

*Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints v. Church of Christ of Independence, Missouri, et al.* (C.C.W.D. Mo. 1894). Typescript. Testimonies and Depositions, 1892. Typescript. CHL.

[10] Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 243–245; “Discussion by General Bennett about Joe Smith and the Mormons,” *New York Herald* (New York City), 31 Aug. 1842, [2].

Bennett, John C. *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842.

*New York Herald*. New York City. 1835–1924.

[11] Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 243–245.

Bennett, John C. *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842.

[12] No documentary evidence exists for a marriage between JS and Nancy Rigdon, and both Bennett and John W. Rigdon asserted that Nancy refused JS's proposal.

(Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 243; John W. Rigdon, Affidavit, Salt Lake Co., UT, 28 July 1905, pp. 3–4, in Joseph F. Smith, Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, CHL.)

Bennett, John C. *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842.

Smith, Joseph F. Affidavits about Celestial Marriage, 1869–1915. CHL. MS 3423.

[13] “Further Mormon Developments!! 2d Letter from Gen. Bennett,” *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield, IL), 15 July 1842, [2]; Minutes, 15–16 Mar. 1842.

*Sangamo Journal*. Springfield, IL. 1831–1847.

[14] “Further Mormon Developments!! 2d Letter from Gen. Bennett,” *Sangamo Journal* (Springfield, IL), 15 July 1842, [2].

*Sangamo Journal*. Springfield, IL. 1831–1847.

[15] See JS, Journal, 12 and 13 May 1842.

[16] Bennett, *History of the Saints*, 245.

Bennett, John C. *The History of the Saints; or, an Exposé of Joe Smith and Mormonism*. Boston: Leland and Whiting, 1842.

## Additional Versions

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Happiness is the object and design of our existence, and will be the end thereof if we pursue the path that leads to it; and this path is virtue, uprightness, faithfulness, holiness, and keeping ALL the commandments of God. But we cannot keep *all* the commandments without first *knowing* them, and we cannot expect to know *all*, or more than we *now* know, unless we *comply* with or keep those we have *already received*. That which is *wrong* under one circumstance, may be, and often is, *right* under another. God said

*thou shalt not kill*,—<sup>1</sup> at another time he said *thou shalt utterly destroy*.<sup>2</sup> This is the principle on which the government of heaven is conducted—by *revelation* adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. *Whatever God requires is right*, NO MATTER WHAT IT IS, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire. If we seek first the kingdom of God, all *good things* will be added.<sup>3</sup> So with Solomon—first he asked wisdom, and God gave it him, and with it every DESIRE of his heart,<sup>4</sup> even things which might be considered *abominable* to all who do not *understand* the order of heaven only in part, but which, in reality, were right, because God gave and sanctioned by *special revelation*.<sup>5</sup> A parent may whip a child, and justly too, because he stole an apple; whereas, if the child had asked for the apple, and the parent had given it, the child would have eaten it with a better appetite, there would have been no stripes—all the pleasures of the apple would have been received, all the misery of stealing lost. This principle will justly apply to all of God's dealings with his children. Every thing that God gives us is *lawful and right*, and 'tis proper that we should *enjoy* his gifts and blessings *whenever and wherever* he is disposed to bestow; but if we should seize upon these same blessings and enjoyments without law, without *revelation*, without commandment, those blessings and enjoyments would prove cursings and vexations in the end, and we should have to lie down in sorrow and wailings of everlasting regret. But in obedience there is joy and

peace unspotted, unalloyed, and as God has designed our happiness, the happiness of all his creatures, he never has, he never will, institute an ordinance, or give a commandment to his people that is not calculated in its nature to promote that happiness which he has designed, and which will not end in the greatest amount of good and glory to those who become the recipients of his laws and ordinances. Blessings offered, but rejected, are no longer blessings, but become like the talent hid in the earth by the wicked and slothful servant<sup>6</sup> — the proffered good returns to

the giver, the blessing is bestowed on those who will *receive*, and *occupy*; for unto him that hath shall be given, and he shall have *a bundantly*; but unto him that hath not, or will not receive, shall be taken away that which he hath,<sup>7</sup> or might have had.

“*Be wise TO-DAY, 'tis MADNESS to defer.*

Next day the fatal precedent may plead:

Thus on till wisdom is pushed out of time”<sup>8</sup>

Into eternity.

Our heavenly father is more liberal in his views, and boundless in his mercies and blessings, than we are ready to believe or receive, and at the same time is more terrible to the workers of iniquity, more awful in the executions of his punishments, and more ready to detect every false *way* than we are apt to suppose him to be. He will be enquired of by his children — he says *ask* and YE SHALL RECEIVE, *seek* and ye SHALL find,<sup>9</sup> but if ye will take that which is not your own, or which I *have not given you*, you shall be rewarded according to your deeds, but no

good thing will I withhold from them who walk uprightly before me, and do my will in *all things*, who will listen to *my voice*, and to TO THE VOICE OF MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE SENT, for I delight in those who seek diligently to know my precepts, and abide by the laws of my kingdom, for all things shall be made known unto them in mine own due time, and in the end they shall have joy. [p. [2]]

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Document Information



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Footnotes



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