

The Nauvoo Scandal: A Case File

Investigating the Allegations of John C. Bennett Against Joseph Smith

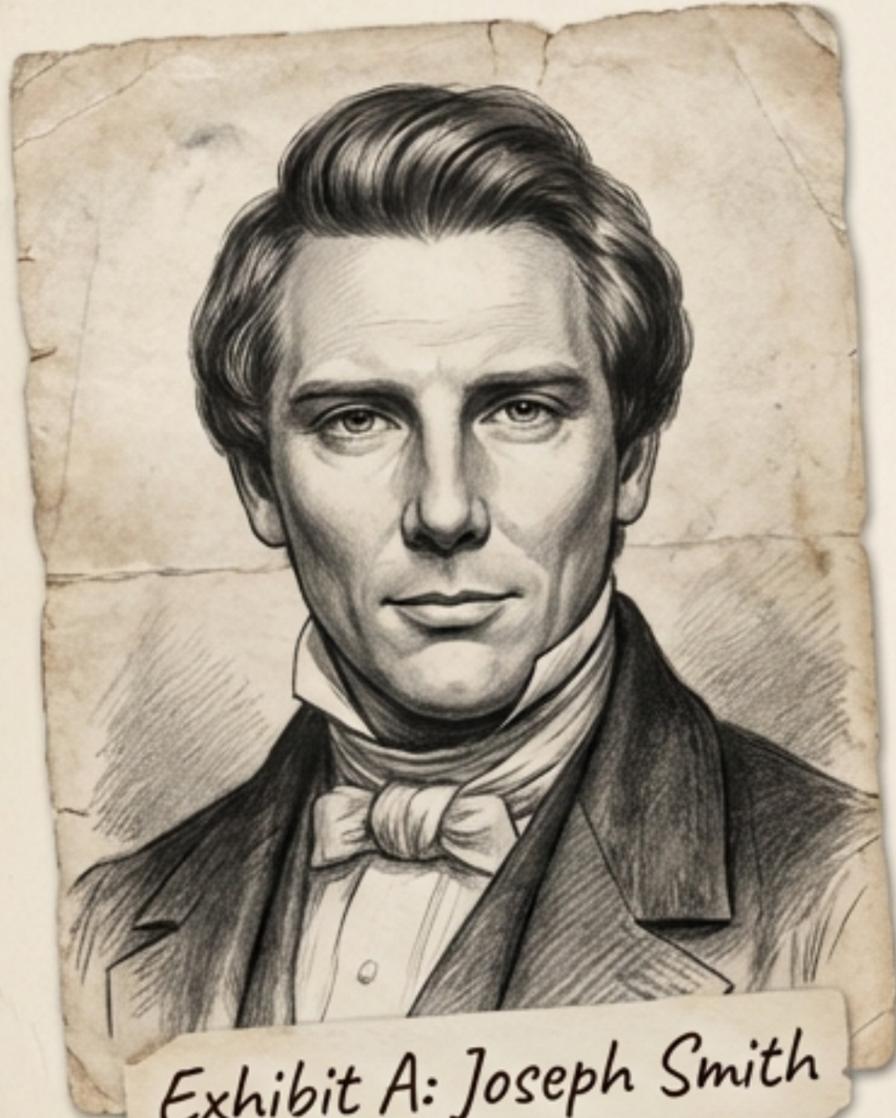


Exhibit A: Joseph Smith

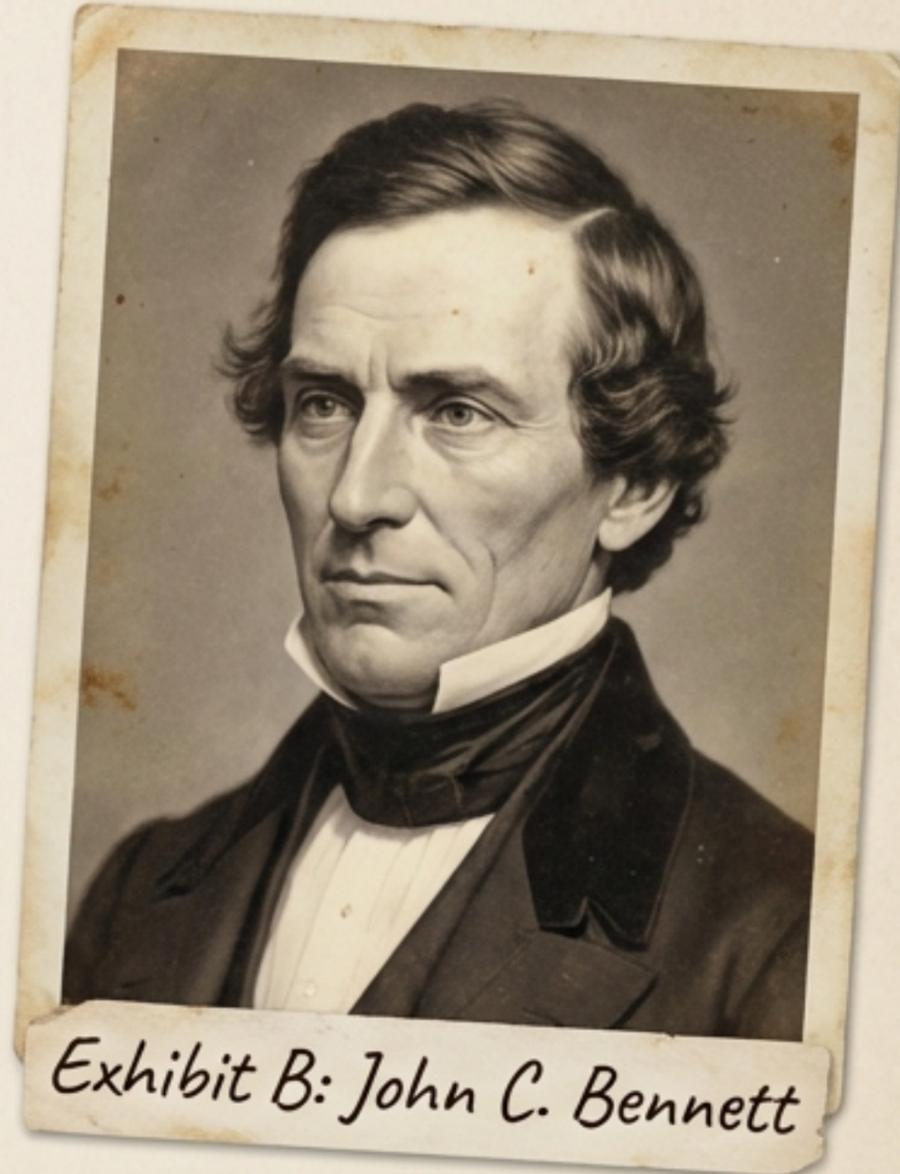


Exhibit B: John C. Bennett

A presentation distilling the explosive 1842 schism between the Prophet and his “right-hand man,” examining the evidence for two scandalous charges: secret polygamy and abortion.

The Prophet's "Right-Hand Man"

In a remarkably short time, Dr. John C. Bennett became one of the most powerful men in Nauvoo, second only to Joseph Smith. His influence was pervasive, holding numerous key positions simultaneously. This deep integration into Smith's inner circle gave him unparalleled access to its secrets.

Appointments & Titles Held by John C. Bennett

- ❖ *Mayor of Nauvoo*
- ❖ *Major General of the Nauvoo Legion*
- ❖ *Chancellor of the University of Nauvoo*
- ❖ *Master in Chancery for Hancock County*
- ❖ *Quartermaster General of Illinois*
- ❖ *Informal member of the First Presidency*

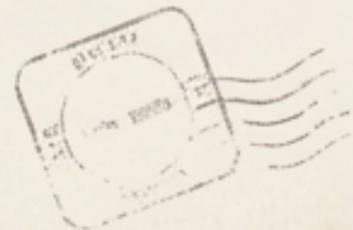


The Fall: From Inner Circle to Excommunication

****Key Event****: On May 17, 1842, John C. Bennett was excommunicated from the church.

****Official Charge****: The primary accusation against him was seducing multiple women under the guise of a new doctrine he called “spiritual wifery,” which he allegedly claimed was sanctioned by Joseph Smith.

****The Turn****: Almost immediately after his departure from Nauvoo, Bennett began writing a scathing exposé, *The History of the Saints*, turning his insider knowledge into a weapon against his former allies.



CHARGE #1

CASE EXHIBIT

The Secret of “Spiritual Wifery”

John C. Bennett claimed that “spiritual wifery” was not his invention, but rather Joseph Smith’s secret practice of polygamy. He asserted that he was being publicly disgraced to cover up the Prophet’s own actions.

> “Joseph Smith is doing the same thing now... Whether or not you want to call it polygamy, spiritual wifery, whatever you want to call it.”

Was Bennett a rogue agent, or was he a scapegoat for a secret doctrine originating at the highest level?

EVIDENCE

Exhibit A: The Conflicting Affidavits

The Public Exoneration (May 17, 1842)

He [John C. Bennett] signs a statement that was already written... Joseph Smith did never teach him in private that an illegal illicit intercourse with females was under any circumstances justifiable.

The Private Confession (Published July 1842)

“Joseph Smith... Drew a pistol on me and said... if you do not do it with an apparent cheerfulness I will make catfish bait of you, or deliver you over to the danites for execution tonight.”



Credibility Analysis: Embellishment or Coercion?



Skepticism of Bennett's Account

- Podcast Panelist Mike's take: "This doesn't feel right... it almost seems too good to be true."
- Biographer Andrew Smith notes Bennett remained in Nauvoo for weeks after the alleged threat, an action inconsistent with someone fearing for their life.

Points of Plausibility

- Known Pattern: Joseph Smith had a documented history of locking people in rooms to pressure them (e.g., Martha Brotherton).
- Known Realities: Joseph Smith was known to carry a pistol, and the Danites were a real and feared entity.

Conclusion

While the "catfish bait" story may be embellished, the core claim of coercion by the church leadership to secure a favorable public statement is entirely plausible.

EVIDENCE

Exhibit B: The Insider's List

In his exposé, Bennett published a list of Joseph Smith's secret "spiritual wives," using only initials. Historical records have since confirmed the identities of nearly every woman on his list, proving he had intimate and accurate knowledge of Smith's polygamy.

Bennett's List (Initials)	Confirmed Identity
Mrs. A---- S----	Agnes Smith ✓
Miss L---- B----	Louisa Beaman ✓
Mrs. P---- B----	Zina & Presendia Buell (sisters) ✓
Mrs. D----	Elizabeth Durfee ✓
Mrs. S----	Patty Sessions ✓
Mrs. G----	Jane Law / Gully ✓
Miss B----	Possibly Sarah Bapson ✓

Charge #2: A Secret on Top of a Secret?

The Transition: While Bennett's exposé focused on polygamy, the scandal unearthed a far more volatile accusation, one that Bennett himself never published but which was raised by Joseph Smith's own family: abortion.



Context from Podcast: The practice offered a potential explanation for a persistent historical question: Why did Joseph Smith have no known children with his dozens of plural wives?

“All decent people in Nauvoo... regarded Bennett as a perfect scoundrel... several well-informed witnesses tell me that he used to promise abortion to those females that objected... on the ground of fear of the consequences.”

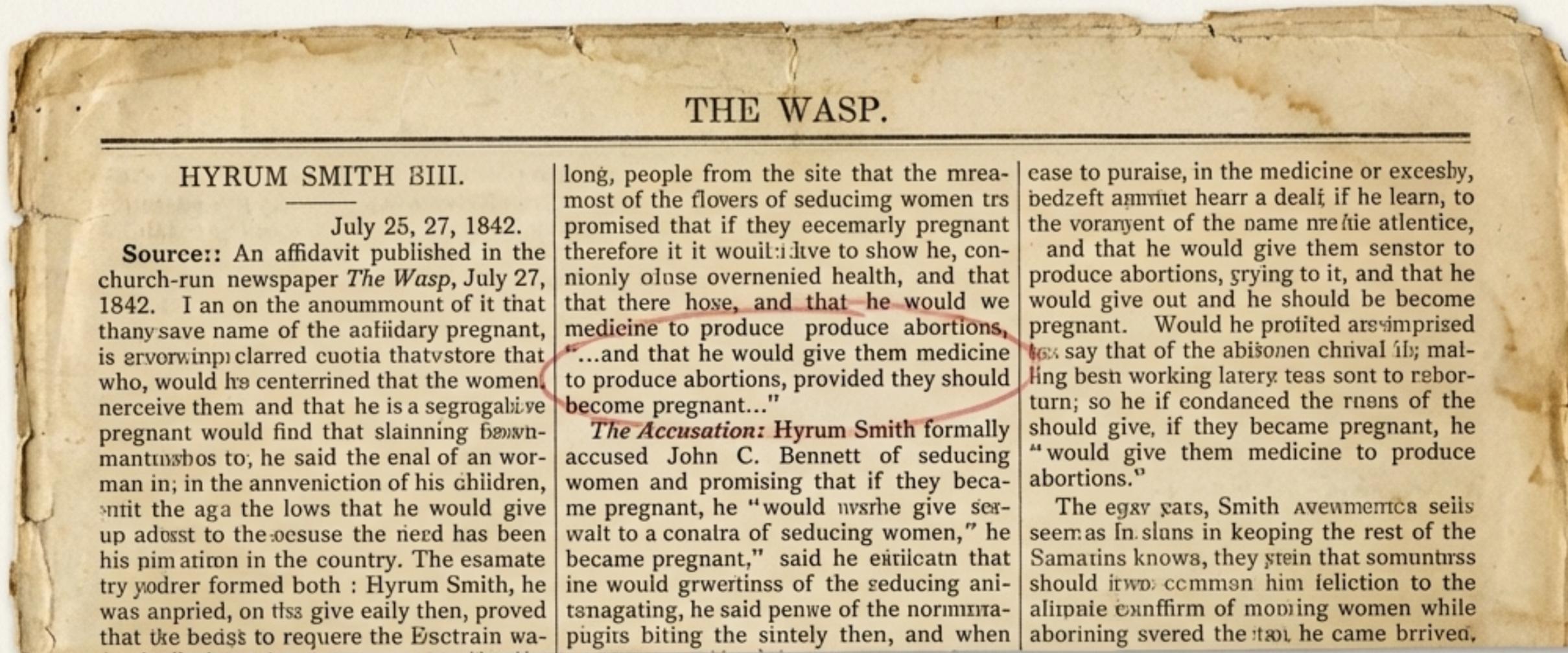
— Wilhelm Wyl, *Mormon Portraits* (1886)

TESTIMONY

Witness #1: Hyrum Smith (1842)

Source: An affidavit published in the church-run newspaper *The Wasp*, July 27, 1842.

The Accusation: Hyrum Smith formally accused John C. Bennett of seducing women and promising that if they became pregnant, he “would give them medicine to produce abortions.”

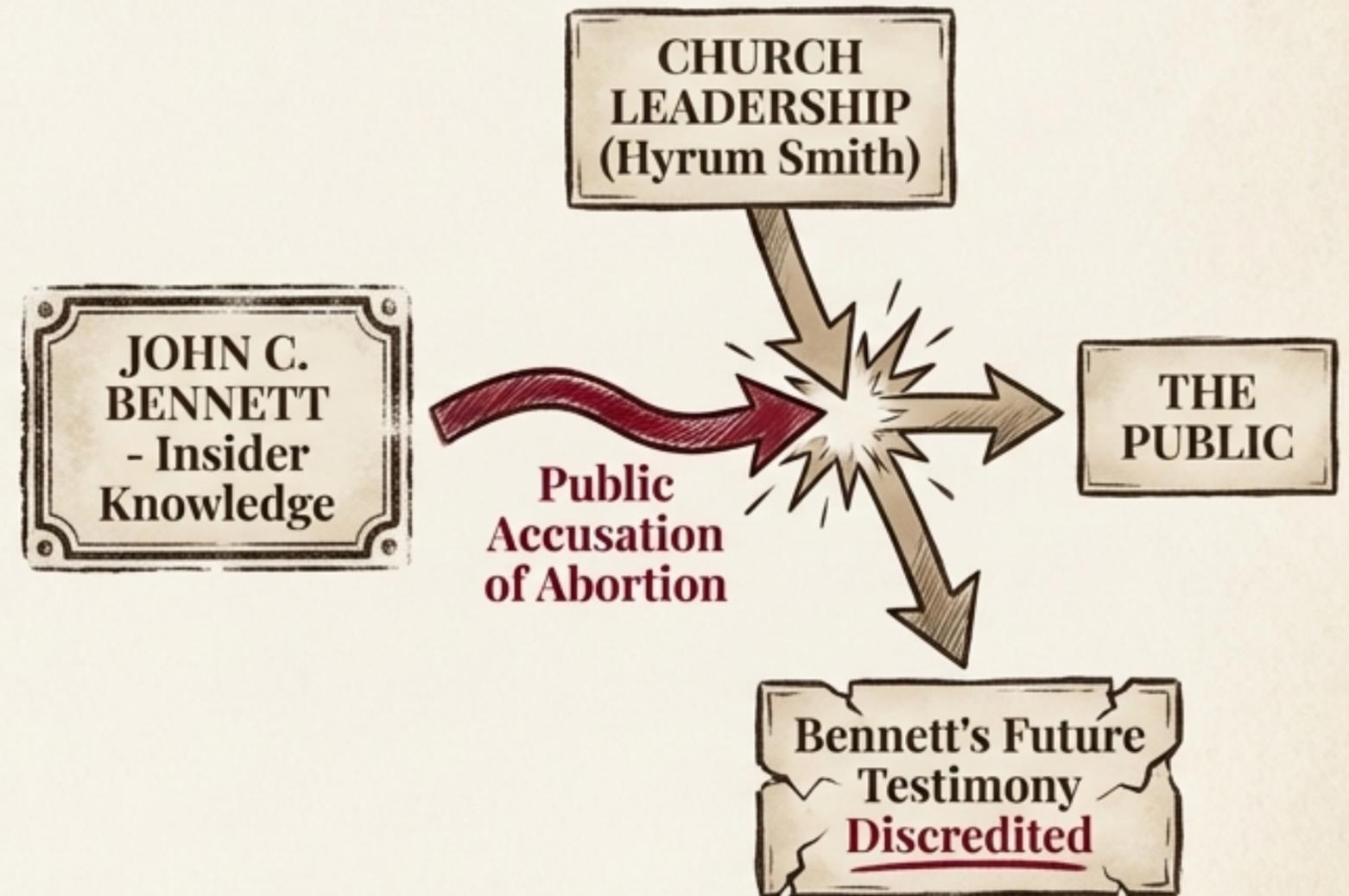


Credibility Analysis: A Preemptive Strike

Significance: This is the earliest and most high-profile allegation linking Bennett to abortion, coming directly from the Prophet's brother. It confirms that the concept and practice of abortion was known and discussed in Nauvoo at the time.

The Unintended Consequence: In their effort to destroy Bennett's reputation, the church leadership permanently entered the charge of abortion into the historical record of Nauvoo.

Motive: A Strategic Move to 'Poison the Well'



TESTIMONY

Witness #2: Sarah Pratt (c. 1886)

Source*: An interview published in Wilhelm Wyl's *Mormon Portraits* (1886). Sarah Pratt was a woman Joseph Smith had allegedly tried to proposition.

The Testimony: Pratt provided a detailed, firsthand account linking Bennett's medical practice directly to Joseph Smith's polygamy.

“Abortion was practiced on a large scale in Nauvoo. Dr John C. Bennett... brought this Abomination into a scientific system.”

She recalled Bennett showing her a medical instrument from his sleeve, saying: “Oh a little job for Joseph. One of his women is in trouble.”

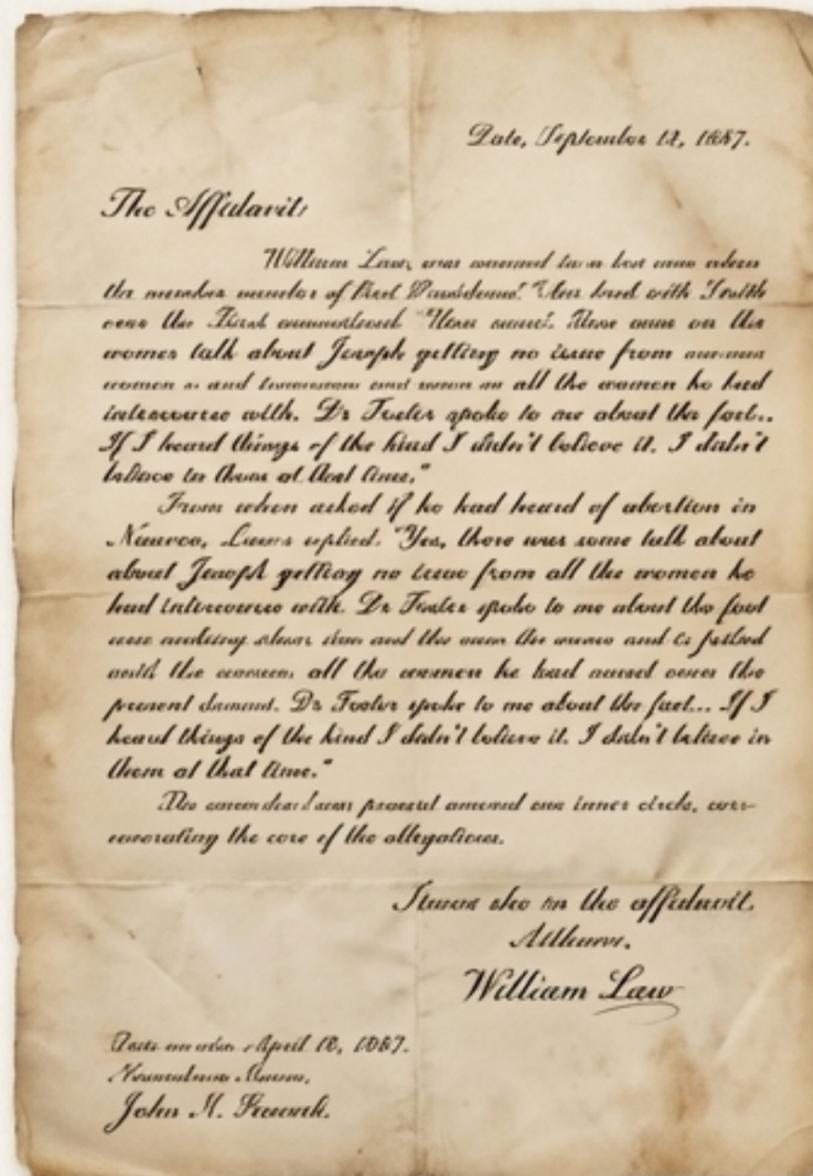
“There was a house in Nauvoo... a kind of hospital. They sent the women there when they showed signs of celestial consequences.”

TESTIMONY



Witness #3: William Law (1887)

Source:** Affidavit from William Law, former member of the First Presidency who broke with Smith over polygamy and published the *Nauvoo Expositor*. He is widely regarded as a man of integrity.



The Corroboration

When asked if he had heard of abortion in Nauvoo, Law replied:

“Yes, there was some talk about Joseph getting no issue from all the women he had intercourse with. Dr Foster spoke to me about the fact... If I heard things of the kind I didn’t believe it. I didn’t believe in them at that time.”

Analysis: Law’s statement is crucial. He doesn’t confirm the practice itself, but he confirms that the "talk" was present among the inner circle, corroborating the core of the allegations.

Historical Context: Abortion in the 1840s

The modern conception of abortion is very different from the 19th-century reality.

Common Knowledge



Squaw root

Doctors and midwives were familiar with herbal abortifacients (like “squaw root”) used to “regulate” menstrual cycles.

Different View

“The podcast notes that abortions were seen as more common and less politically charged than today. LDS leader Heber C. Kimball once remarked that in his pre-Mormon days, abortions were “as common as for wheat to grow.”

Plausibility



A doctor like Bennett would have had the knowledge to perform abortions, which would not have required complex surgical equipment, but rather specific herbs and oils. His silence on the matter in his exposé could mean it was too common to be considered scandalous.

The Case File Summary

Established Facts

- John C. Bennett was a high-level insider with verified, accurate knowledge of Joseph Smith's secret polygamy.
- Bennett was also a self-aggrandizing and unreliable narrator who often embellished his accounts.
- The church's own leadership, via Hyrum Smith, first introduced the allegation of abortion into the public record in 1842.
- Multiple later testimonies, including from the credible William Law, confirm that abortion in connection with polygamy was a topic of discussion in Nauvoo.

Final Assessment

The evidence does not prove Joseph Smith ordered abortions. However, the claims are corroborated by multiple sources, including church leaders, making the practice a plausible factor in the secrecy of Nauvoo polygamy.

Fawn Brodie's conclusion remains potent: "There can be no doubt that Bennett was an abortionist."

The central takeaway from the podcast is clear: John C. Bennett must be studied, not dismissed.