

The Bennett Affair: Sexuality, Secrets & Schism in Joseph Smith's Nauvoo

A historical investigation into the life of Joseph Smith's forgotten right-hand man.

Beyond polygamy, Nauvoo held other secrets.

The historical record points to a story of same-sex intimacy at the highest levels of the early Church, a story that begins with one of Mormonism's most influential and controversial figures.

“The first known instance of homoerotic behavior in Mormon history involved John C. Bennett.”

– D. Michael Quinn, *Same-Sex Dynamics Among Nineteenth-Century Americans: A Mormon Example*

Exhibit A: A Public Accusation of “Buggery”

THE WASP.

“It will be seen by this that General Smith was a great philanthropist as long as Bennett could practice adultery, fornication, and we were going to say buggery without being exposed.”

The Wasp, July 27, 1842 (A Church-run newspaper)

This accusation was published around the time of Bennett’s excommunication, indicating it was part of the public case being made against him by Church leaders.

Buggery:

A 19th-century slang word and legal term for sodomy.

Exhibit B: An Implicit Challenge to the Prophet

The Wasp newspaper

Joseph Smith asks Orson Pratt:

"Have you personally a knowledge of any immoral act in me towards the female sex, or in any other way?"

Orson Pratt replies:

"Personally, towards the female sex, I have not."

Expert Analysis

Historian D. Michael Quinn argued that given the context of Bennett's "buggery" accusation in the same paper, Smith's phrase "or in any other way" was a direct challenge for Pratt to accuse him of the same. Pratt's refusal to exonerate Smith on that point is significant.

Exhibit C: An Incident “Too Indelicate for the Public Eye”

Times and Seasons, May 15, 1844

Joseph Smith testified to discovering John C. Bennett with Francis M. Higby “on the bed on the floor” engaged in an activity censored by the newspaper.

“...here follows testimony which is [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] too indelicate for the public eye or ear... so revolting, corrupt and disgusting has been the conduct of most of this clique...”

Critical Source Context: This testimony was published two years after Bennett left Nauvoo, during a legal dispute where Joseph Smith was actively trying to smear Francis Higby. Its timing makes it a convenient, if not necessarily false, accusation.

To Understand Nauvoo, You Must Understand Its Rules

Source: Sermon by Joseph Smith, November 7, 1841

Joseph Smith fundamentally redefined sin as a matter of mutual loyalty rather than fixed moral law.

"If you do not accuse each other, God will not accuse you... If you will not accuse me, I will not accuse you. If you will throw a cloak of Charity over my sins, I will over yours... What many people call sin is not sin."

Redefining Sodom's Sin

The Traditional View

God destroyed Sodom for same-sex relations.



Joseph Smith's Revisionist Teaching

"The city of Sodom and Gomorrah... were destroyed for rejecting the prophets."

- Sermon recorded in Wilford Woodruff's Journal, January 22, 1843

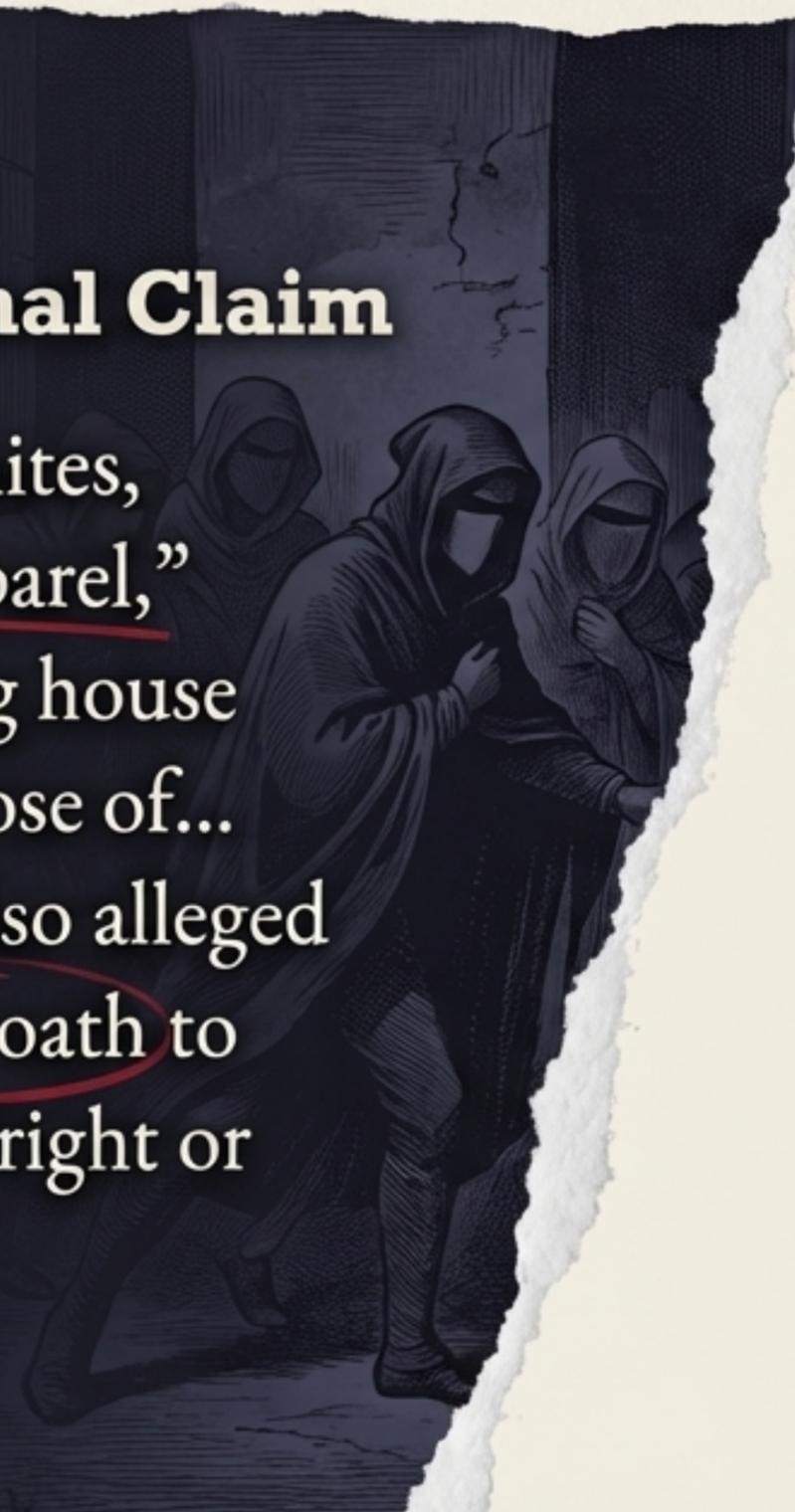


Smith's teaching actively distanced Mormonism from the primary biblical justification for condemning homosexuality, suggesting a more permissive view on the matter within his inner circle.

The Danites: Loyal Bodyguards or a Secret Police?

Bennett's Sensational Claim

Bennett claimed 12 Danites, disguised in “female apparel,” surrounded his boarding house one night “for the purpose of... assassinating me.” He also alleged the existence of a secret oath to uphold the presidency “right or wrong.”



The Church's Official Stance

The Church today states the Danites “existed for only five months” in 1838 and their later activities are a “long-standing and much embellished myth about a secret society of Mormon Vigilantes.”

The Exposé That Shook the Church

Key Fact: In late 1842, Bennett published The History of the Saints, a 300+ page exposé written in less than a month. He then embarked on a two-year lecture tour along the East Coast.

Impact: His story was covered by dozens of newspapers across the country.

The Church Mounts a Counter-Offensive

In response to Bennett's tour, Joseph Smith dispatched more than
300 Elders on "anti-
Bennett missions"
to "disabuse the public mind."

Reported Tactics:

- Attempting to publish rebuttals in local papers.
- Openly debating Bennett at his lectures.
- Interrupting speeches by speaking in tongues.
- Extinguishing the lights to force crowds to leave.



A Pattern of Behavior Emerges

Case Study: The Strangite Church (A Mormon Splinter Group)

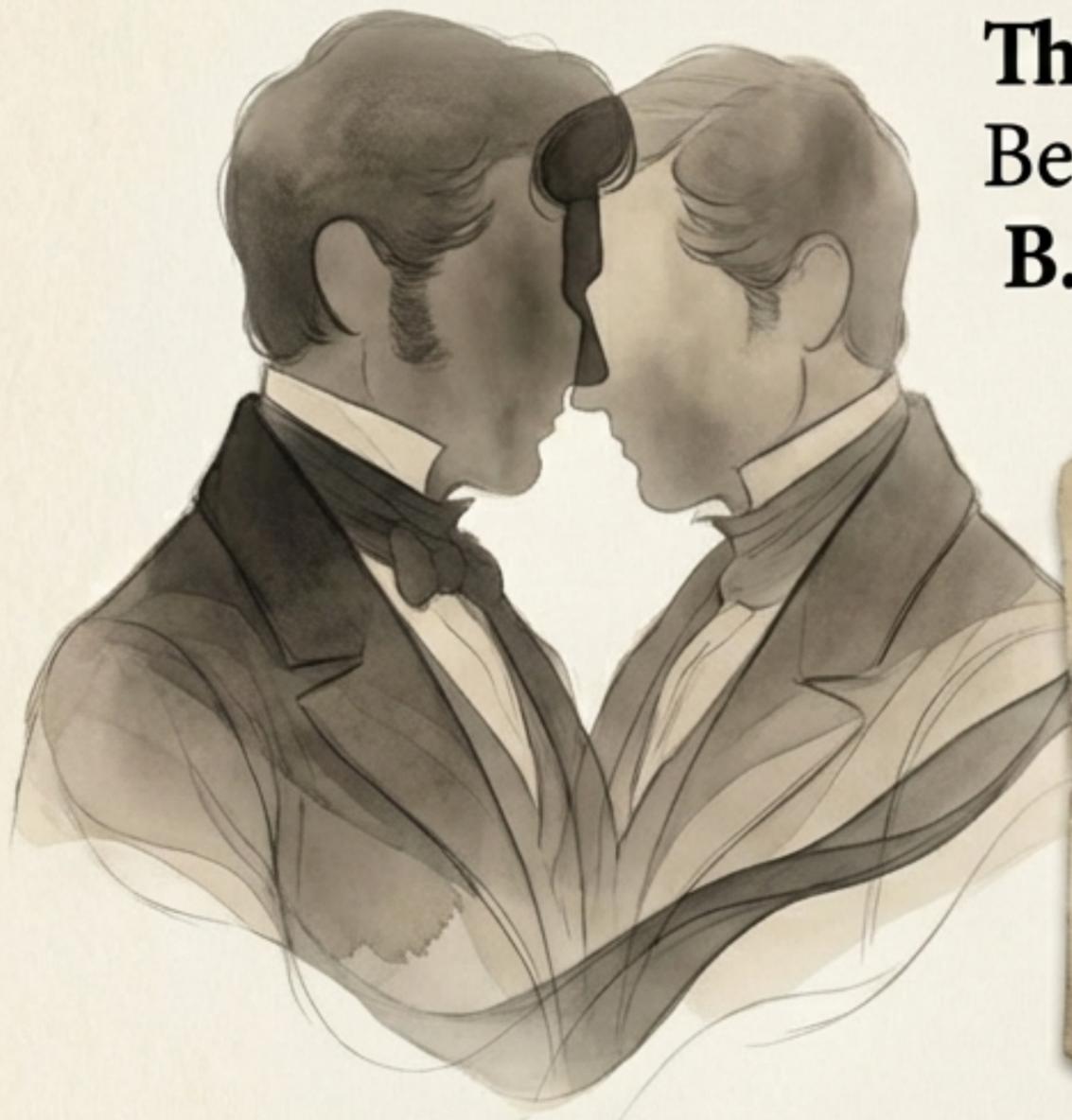
1846

Bennett joins the Strangites and is given a high-ranking position, just as he had in Nauvoo.

The Strangite High Council soon expelled Bennett, charging him with “teaching and striving to put into practice false doctrine regarding polygamy and concubinage.”

Bennett's excommunication from a second Mormon group for similar sexual misconduct lends significant credibility to the original accusations.

Further Evidence: “A Passionate Nature”



The Subject

Bennett's later intense relationship with a Dr. Pierce B. Fagan after his time with the Strangites.

“Bennett was ‘clearly attracted to Fagan and this attraction might well have been of a passionate nature, at least on Bennett’s part.’”

- Andrew F. Smith, *John C. Bennett’s Biographer*

Significance: This analysis from a non-partisan historian suggests Bennett’s attractions were not limited to women.

A Complicated Verdict

Synthesizing the Evidence

- Direct proof of homosexual acts is scarce, and every source from the period is biased by intense political and personal conflicts.
- However, the consistent pattern of accusations from multiple sources, his repeat behavior in the Strangite movement, and his biographer's analysis strongly suggest Bennett was a complex, likely bisexual man.



The Larger Truth

The Bennett Affair shatters the myth of a pious, orderly Nauvoo. It reveals a volatile center of power struggles, radical sexual experimentation, and violent intrigue, all sanctioned by the highest levels of Church leadership.

From Prophet's Confidant to Poultry Pioneer

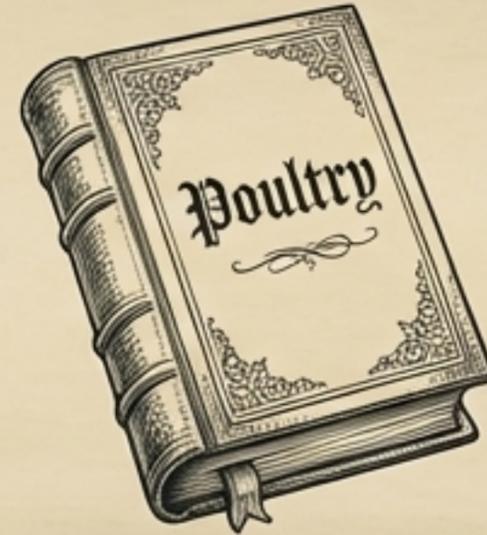
Bennett's Final Chapter: After his Mormon-related ventures failed, Bennett reinvented himself multiple times. His later pursuits included:



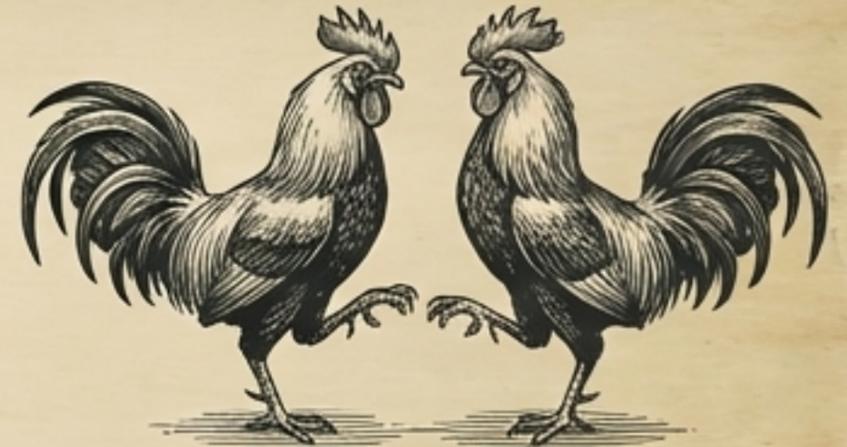
- Marketing ketchup in pill form as a medicine.



- Crossbreeding chickens to create the now-famous Plymouth Rock breed.



- Writing and publishing a book on poultry.



- Breeding game birds for the sport of cockfighting.

Final Note: Bennett died in 1865, fifteen years after Brigham Young had falsely prophesied his gruesome death to a congregation in Utah.



Once central to the rise of Nauvoo, John C. Bennett was deliberately written out of Mormon history. His tombstone remains a final, silent testament to the man the Church chose to forget.