

David M. Whitchurch

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Personal Glimpses of Joseph F. Smith: Adolescent to Prophet

Carole Call King, the great-granddaughter of Martha Ann Smith Harris, did not realize the treasure she inherited when her father passed away. Busy with the funeral and other family demands, she had overlooked the contents of one box. Left unnoticed on a closet shelf for a time, it finally caught her attention one day as she put away the vacuum. She discovered in the box, beneath her mother's chiffon wedding dress, three small, narrow boxes neatly wrapped in tissue paper. On them, her grandmother, Sarah Lovina Harris Call (1883–1961), had written with her own hand the words “Letters to mother.” Inside she found nearly one hundred original letters written by Joseph F. Smith to his sister Martha Ann Smith Harris. Joseph F. and Martha Ann, the only children of Mary Fielding and Hyrum Smith, had written each other for nearly sixty years.

In the months that followed, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, a professor from Brigham Young University, invited me to join the project of transcribing the letters of Joseph F. and Martha Ann. Additional letters written by Joseph F. to his sister were located in the Church History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (CHL). During the search to find Joseph F.

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Envelope of a letter written from Martha Ann Harris to Joseph F. Smith on February 1, 1856. Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.

Smith letters, a number of Martha Ann Smith Harris letters were discovered. The collection now comprises 180 letters written by Joseph F. Smith with 48 corresponding letters from Martha Ann Smith Harris.¹ This collection provides a rare glimpse into the personal life of adolescent Joseph F. whose circumstances prematurely thrust him into the responsibilities of adulthood in preparation to become prophet and President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Transcription Process

All letters between Joseph F. and Martha Ann were carefully transcribed to follow a systematized process to ensure reliability and accuracy of the transcription. The letters retain the original spelling, punctuation, superscripts, underlines, and strike-throughs. The transcribers have edited as little as possible, although some punctuation was altered for clarity. The following table provides a summary of the symbols used throughout the Joseph F. and Martha Ann Letter Collection.

Symbol	Description
[<i>italics</i>] Square brackets	Italics within a square bracket used to describe missing words, partially missing words, or missing letters due to holes, tears, or cuts in the paper. Also used to describe illegible erasures from strike-through or illegible erasures
< > Angle brackets	Readable strike-through, insertion, or correction
[...]	Used to indicate an omission in content from the original letter

Death of Mary Fielding Smith

After arriving in the Salt Lake Valley in 1848, Mary Fielding Smith purchased a forty-acre lot in the Mill Creek area, six miles southeast of the central Salt Lake settlement, where she and her family constructed a two-room adobe house.² Four years after she arrived in the Valley, while on a visit to Salt Lake, she came down with a debilitating illness, probably pneumonia, and died in the home of Heber C. Kimball on September 21–22, 1852.³ She was just fifty-one years old. She left behind the children from the previous marriage of her deceased husband, Hyrum Smith, and her own son and daughter, Joseph F. and Martha Ann.⁴

Joseph F. and Martha Ann were devastated at the loss of their mother. Martha Ann wrote, “To lose my dear mother at the tender age of eleven was a severe trial in my life. I felt I did not care to live longer. My heart seemed crushed. I was not old enough at my father’s death to fully realize it as I did the loss of my mother. I felt that the world was a blank. It was a sore bereavement which I felt I could never wear out with time.”⁵ Thirteen-year-old Joseph F. took his mother’s death equally hard, turning deathly pale and fainting. It took considerable effort from those around to revive him.⁶

After their mother’s death, Joseph F. and Martha Ann were cared for by Hannah Grinnels, a close family friend who had boarded with the Hyrum Smith family before Mary Fielding became Hyrum’s second wife. Hannah remained with the family until she died at age fifty-eight, a little more than a year after Mary’s passing.⁷ Recalling this time, Joseph F. wrote, “After my mother’s death there followed eighteen months . . . of perilous times for me. I was almost like a comet or fiery meteor, without attraction or gravitation to keep me balanced or guide me within reasonable bounds.”⁸ Evidence of this can be found in the account of a run-in he had with a schoolmaster. According to his own recollection, he and Martha Ann were in class when D. M. Merrick pulled out a leather strap to punish Martha Ann. When he told the girl to hold out her hand, Joseph F. shouted, “Don’t whip her with that!” The schoolmaster turned on the young man, but the apparently stronger frontier boy “licked him good and plenty.”⁹ His actions resulted in his being expelled from school.¹⁰

The incident with his schoolmaster may also have influenced Brigham Young to send Joseph F. on a proselytizing mission.¹¹ During the April 1854 general conference, President Brigham Young read the names over the pulpit of those called to

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serve missions. A total of ten missionaries were called to the Pacific Isles, Joseph F. being the youngest one called. As reported in the *Deseret News*, these included Orson Whitney (age twenty-four), John Young (son of Lorenzo, age seventeen), Washington B. Rodgers (age twenty-eight), Simpson M. Molen (age twenty-two), George Spiers (age eighteen), Joseph Smith (son of Hyrum, age fifteen), Silas S. Smith (son of Silas, age twenty-three), Silas Smith (son of Asahel, age thirty-two), Sextus [Sixtus] Johnson (age twenty-four), and John T. Cain (age twenty-five).¹² Within a few months, Joseph F. had been ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood, received his endowment, been set apart as a missionary and making his way with other missionaries to the Pacific Isles.¹³ Traveling first to San Francisco by way of San Bernardino, the missionaries worked to pay for their travel expenses. Joseph F. and eight other missionaries finally left for the Sandwich Islands, arriving in Honolulu on September 27, 1854.¹⁴

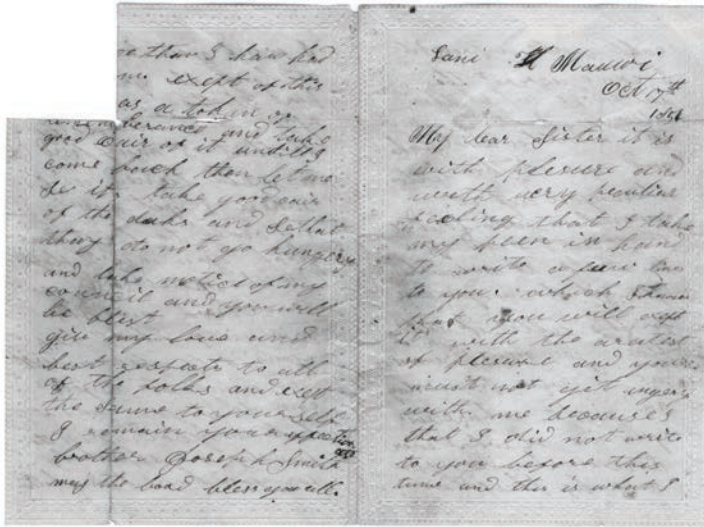
It was there in the Sandwich Isles that Joseph F. Smith as a young missionary learning a new language in the middle of a new culture, began writing his sister. Pen and paper strengthened the bond between these two siblings throughout their lives. Several themes are evident through their sixty years of correspondence of which three will be addressed in this article: Joseph F.'s counsel to Martha Ann on the importance of education, Joseph F.'s dedication to missionary work in spite of the many hardships he faced, and Joseph F.'s perspectives on marriage and family.

Joseph F. Smith's Counsel to Martha Ann on the Importance of Education

Three weeks after Joseph F. arrived in the Sandwich Islands, he wrote his first letter to Martha Ann. Once in the mission, Joseph F. quickly realized the importance of education, because he lacked formal education of his own, as this letter vividly demonstrates. "My dear Sister," he wrote, "it is with pleasure and with very peculiar feeling that I take my peen in hand to write a fuv lines to you. [. . .] you must not git angry with me because I that I did not write to you before this time and this is what I call quite a present I came across this envelope which this letter is sent to you in. martha ann take good cair of this letter when you cut it. remember who sent it to you. [. . .] you must remember me in your prars day and night whare ever you are or what ever sircumstances you may be placed in."¹⁵

Aware of his lack own of education, in a letter written June 9, 1855, the fifteen-year-old Joseph F. Smith told his sister, "Go to school, as much as you can,

Personal Glimpses of Joseph F. Smith



The first letter in the collection written by Joseph F. Smith to his sister Martha Ann was written on October 17, 1854. Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.

and be attentive to study, for I know what it is to be without it, and you donot, at the Present but will, when you are cast out into the woarld like I have been.”¹⁶

Following the death of their mother, Joseph F. felt responsible for Martha Ann. He was not only her older brother but had in many ways assumed the role of a surrogate father and teacher. This relationship continued throughout their lives. Joseph F.’s first letter encouraged her to study her books “diligently so that I may find a well lirned girl when I git home in order to lirn your book you must stop in the house and go to school and stop running about keep your self jest as still and composed as you can se if you cannot bete enybody in the famely me espeshely

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for you have had a better [*text missing*] then I hav had.”¹⁷ In the very next letter to Martha Ann, Joseph F. again told her to “study your Book with diligence.”¹⁸

Joseph F. also taught his sister about the need to make prayer part of the learning process, as evidenced in a short lesson on letter writing that he wrote as a sixteen-year-old to Martha Ann:

I want to see you improve in writing, and every thing els, when you write take pains and make the letters all plain and destinct, and be shure to spell all of the words right that you can, [. . .] therefore you must improve every moment of time that you can, [. . .] seek for wisdom and it shall be given to you, by an allmighty pour if you cannot get it by your own power, do you not know that there is a God in heven, who has said he that asketh recievth and he that seeketh find'th and he that knocketh it shall be opened, unto him,¹⁹ and again he said, If any one lacketh wisdom let him ask god who giveth liberally ~~upbra~~ abraideth none,²⁰ now I will worant that if you will go to school with a prayerful heart, and your mind on your studies, insted of being upon play and folly, that you will learn faster than ever you did in your life before.²¹

Beyond recognizing the inherent value of education, Joseph F. likely saw a practical need for Martha Ann to go school. Simply put, her poor penmanship, grammar, and spelling made Martha Ann's letters extremely difficult to read. The first letter in the letter collection written by Martha Ann is dated January 31, 1856. She was just fourteen years old. It is evident that in the letter she is responding to her brother's concerns about her schooling:

I hav been going to school to months now and am learning midling fast and I intend to learn a good deal faster than I have [. . .] I hav got a d<i>ctionary and I am sorry that I hav made mistakes in writing to you and both<e>ring you in reading my letters but you must excuse me this <time> and I will try to do better [*illegible strike-through*] <this [*illegible strike-through*]> time. [. . .] I intend to obey all that you counceled me to do iff it is in my pour. thank you dear brother for your good advice and if come up to the mark as you wish me to I will be good enough for enny thing and I shall indever ~~to~~ by the help of the lord to do as you <w>ish me to do.²²

It appears the demanding nature of farm life and lack of money prevented Martha Ann from attending school as often as she would have liked. Her

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G. S. L. ^{U.S.} ~~Openly~~ Sugar House, ^{Jan 31st 1856}
My dear and affectionate Brother Joseph
it is with pleasure that I
set down to write a few lines to you to answer
your kind and affectionate letter. I received it
this evening with the greatest of pleasure and
happiness. ~~to~~ to hear from you John told me
that you was sick and I was sorry to hear
that for it will put you back a good ^{deal} I am
affraid but I hope ere this letter reaches you
you will be as well and hearty as you ever ~~was~~
thank the lord for that of health is ablessing
that I enjoy I have not been sick so as to be
confined to my bed aday since you left home
and I wish that it had been so with you but
the lord orders all things for the best. I have
been going to school to months you and am learning
midding fast and I intend to learn a good
deal faster than I have we ~~have~~ got one of
the finest school houses in salt lake valley
and brother Eldredge keeps school and he is a
good school master. I have got additionary and
I am sorry that I have made mistakes in writing
to you and bothering you in reading my letters
but you must excuse me this ^{time} and I will try to
do better ~~if~~ ~~next~~ times there is ~~any~~ of declin
ary about and ~~if~~ if you have got a good one
I would advise you to keep it even if you could
send it for I presume that it is an article
that you need your self when you are writing
I have ~~written~~ written one letter to you below that I
gave to John to send and he sent another
that I had written in the hael of it I wrote
it when I received the book that you sent me
I have ~~not~~ got all off the things you sent me

Letter from Martha Ann Harris to Joseph F. Smith on January 31, 1856. Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.

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responsibilities at home kept her quite busy, as her daughter Sarah Harris Passey details in a family history: “[Martha Ann] did many chores, morning and night, before and after school. She herded sheep on the hills east of home, many time barefooted until her feet would bleed. She spun wool into yarn and wove the yarn into cloth, blankets, sheets, jeans for men’s clothing and linen with cotton war[p] and woolen wool for women’s clothing.”²³ At times, it was her poor circumstances that kept Martha Ann from school. In one letter, written in 1856, she explained, “I also live to Johns²⁴ yet, and and expect to this winter and go to school. school commenced last monday and I did not go then for I did not have enny shoos and I intend to start next mnday.”²⁵

Martha Ann recognized her poor writing skills and frequently apologized for them in her letters. When Joseph F. counseled her to write to her cousins in California (Ina Coolbrith and Agnes Smith),²⁶ she never followed through, possibly from embarrassment for her writing ability. Joseph F., however, may have unknowingly added to Martha Ann’s trepidation to correspond with their cousins. “I have received a letter lately from Cousin Josephine,” he once wrote. “She said she had written to you but had received no letter in return tolde me to speak to you about it, I would advise you to write to her. do your best to spell and write correct, for she is a good writer, this is what I wish you to progress in, till you are also a good writer.”²⁷

Whereas Joseph F. insisted that Martha Ann work hard in school, he explained why he did not expect much improvement in his own writing ability. In a letter dated July 25, 1857, he stated:

I have often tolde you I never expect to be a good writer, I’ve worked too much, at hard labor. I suppose you remember a certain ocasion on which I was lain up with a Broken Bone in my right hand,²⁸ I have never fully regained my usual agility in that hand, nor do I ever expect to;—It cramps my hand to write—so I am allways compelled to write as fast as possible—hence many mistakes and a bad hand-write.—I am verey careless too in writing—as I do not take much pride in it,—you should be more careful,—in writing—just say what you have to say—and then quit!²⁹

While Joseph F.’s early letters clearly demonstrate his own inexperience in letter writing, he would, in fact, go on to become an excellent writer. Martha Ann, however, would struggle with grammar and spelling throughout her life. To her

credit and despite her poor writing ability, it was Martha Ann's persistence in writing to her brother that provides us with this illuminating collection of letters that offers so many insights into the life of Joseph F. Smith—future prophet of the Church.

Joseph F. Smith would emphasize the importance of education throughout his life. When writing to Martha Ann in December 1894, he told of his own family “which now numbers 36 souls—including myself” and although he had limited financial resources at the time, he told Martha Ann that “many of them [were] going to school.”³⁰

Joseph F. Smith's Dedication to Missionary Work through Hardship and Trial

Another prevalent theme throughout Joseph F.'s life was missionary work. In total, he served seven missions: three in the Sandwich Islands, two in Great Britain, one as president over the Europe Mission, and one in the eastern United States. Not surprisingly, Joseph F.'s letters to Martha Ann include many stories and comments related to preaching the gospel and the love that he had for missionary work. For the purposes of this paper, only a small sampling of mission experiences will be shared, most from letters he wrote during his first mission to the Sandwich Isles.

When Joseph F. first arrived in the Sandwich Islands in 1854, the mission was only four years old.³¹ Joseph F. spent the first months of his mission very ill, but once he recovered, his determination and passion to preach the gospel quickly became apparent.³² Through hard work he became proficient in speaking the Hawaiian language. Joseph F. wrote, “I have . . . been greatly blessed in obtaining a portion of their language, and by the blessings of the Lord I have got so that I can chat quite freely with the natives in their own tongue.”³³ John Thomas Caine, a fellow missionary in the Sandwich Isles, wrote of Joseph F.'s linguistic ability: “Some of the brethren who came here first (I mean of our company) have advanced considerably in the language, and are speaking publicly. Among these, the most forward in the language is Joseph F. Smith, son of Hyrum.”³⁴ His success in learning the native language likely influenced other assignments he received as a missionary. In July 1855, at the age of sixteen, Joseph F. was called to preside over the Church on the island of Maui. He later presided over the Hilo Conference and the Kohala Conference on the island of Hawaii.³⁵

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Living conditions in the Sandwich Islands were, in general, quite difficult. Saints and missionaries alike were poor. "I have slept in places," Joseph F. wrote, "where should my hog sleep my stumiche would forbid me eating of it."³⁶ On June 9, 1855, he made reference to preaching the gospel and his own hardships as he encouraged Martha Ann to maintain an optimistic outlook in dealing with problems at home:

if you have any triyals to put up with, you must remember that it is to try you and to see whether you are smith grit or not, but sho your smith. [. . .] have patiance, and long suffering, be a Mormon out, and out, and you will be pl blessed, I find that there is nothing that will try a person so as to tell this world that he is a mormon, but I feel first rate. I am fat, and stout, I feel like I could through all the hays down that there is in the vales. [. . .] I am a Preaching (Marty) like a good one, (you had aught to here me) or (or my voys, (I suppose if you wase any where nee the Islands you could) we had a good meeting this morning, and I was caled upon to Preach, I acordingly, made an attempt, I expect, to go on my third trip around the Island. and if you ask Bro Lawson³⁷ he will tell you, how fare it is, and how bad the roads is, and what kind of houses we have to sleep in, and what kind of food to eat, & co,³⁸ and what kind of horses we have to ride also for we have to rid shanks horses³⁹ most of the time [. . .] and through all these difficultyes I get along first rate, and feel well.⁴⁰

Even when he was homesick, Joseph F. found ways to maintain a positive outlook. In one letter he told Martha Ann, "Once in a while I got rite down lonesome, and commence to think that I would like to see Marty and the (ducks). besides to see the (rest) of the folks, but it is little that my mind is trubled with these thoughts for I try and drive them away."⁴¹

In the spring of 1857, Joseph F. wrote to Martha Ann about a harrowing experience representative of his faith and trust in God and the assurance that he had been divinely called to preach the gospel:

Eight of us started from the Island of Lanai on Wednesday, and on acount of contrary and high winds we ware compelled to return to port, [. . .] at moon rise in the morning, (1 o clock) we went on board of our little Boat and started for this Island. Martha it would make you wonder if you could see us being tossed and driven by the waves of the mighty Pacific, when every wave seemed

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like it was the next moment going to engulf us in the its awful surge, yes, to see us in an open Boat, with a tract of Ocean before us of some 15 miles, and only a one fourth inch of pine boards between us and the tremendous, dreadful, yawning grave of thousands of poor ill-fated beings, who ware not so fortunate as ourselves; when you get with in a quarter of an inch of death itself, then who can save you?⁴² Marth, the arm on which we trusted is that which hath delivered, it is ever willing to deliver, and will deliver all who lean upon it, and put all their trust on it, therefore lets be faithful. [. . .] I do not believe, that man lives outside of the kingdom of God that would begin to endure to allmoste indurable trials and privations that seem to beset us on every hand, and that we have to pass thro' evry day of our lives on these degraded lands, yet it is all for the best. I feel to rejoice, Martha, all the day long. I feel buoyant & hopeful, and like pressing forward, notwithstanding the hardships I have to encounter, because I know what I am doing, and for whom I am laboring.⁴³

Through it all, the young missionary developed a great and tender love for the Saints on the Islands. Joseph F. noted the “good spirit” that prevailed at their meetings where he preached. Though some meetings were poorly attended, the Saints did occasionally enjoy some that were well attended. Joseph F. reported to his sister, “Where the saints are alive to the work, it is a chearing in sted of a labourious task to address them.”⁴⁴ Clearly his commitment to the Lord, the demands of the work, and his love for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ overshadowed all daunting tasks. In a letter written on July 25, 1857, he said:

Mormonism is the verry life of my soul—I love it—would die for it without a groan. when ever I bare my testimony to it—I feel as though I could sink the world—hurl the eternal Hills into perpetual space, or shake the verry heavens with my strength! by this I know that the Spirit of the Lord Bears record of the Latter Work, and I never can deny its truth unless I lie! [. . .] my soul burns with-in me, and I fear and tremble. but those who have the same thoughts will know that feelings of this kind are easier experiansed than expressed—O! that we may “live our Religion!”⁴⁵

Joseph F.’s mission was cut short in October 1857, when Brigham Young requested that all missionaries “that could be spared” be released and return home. US President James Buchanan sent an army to Utah to stop what had been

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Mormonism is the very life of my soul. I love it, would die for it without a groan. when ever I bare my testimony to it I feel as though I could sink the merest husk the stant' Staro into perpetual spine, and shake the very heavens with my strength! by this I know that the Spirit of the Lord bears record of the Latter Work, and I never can say its truth unless I lie! yet, as I a permanent mark in the place of Hell may get mine shake it is impossible for us, to overcome it. when I look at the mighty Men that have rent the veil of Heaven and gained the mansions of eternal bliss, seated at the throne of Abing'ly, Lord, and yet have fallen!! never more rise! my soul tremble with in me, and I fear and tremble, but those who have the same thoughts will know that feelings of this kind are easier experienced than expressed.

"O that we may live our Religion!"

I received a letter from Oliver Josephine not long ago, but I believe I told you of it when I wrote before. She was well, she did not do anything to cause a rupture said her Mother she feared she "Loving herself to death," they are living at a place called Los Angeles some distance from San Bernar' do, and about 600 miles from San Francisco. They seem to be anxious for my return, she says she has written to you several times, but has found no answer. just emulate her hand writes Martha, as near as possible she writes first rate, writes as much better as possible in learning to write. I have often told you I never expect to be a good writer, I've marked too much, as a hard labor. I suppose you remember a certain occasion on which I was laid up with a broken bone in my right hand, I have never fully regained my manual agility in that hand, now I can express the strength of my mind to write, but I am always compelled to write as fast as possible, hence many mistakes and a bad hand, write. I am very careless in writing and do not take much pride in it. You should be more careful. In writing just say what you have to say and then quit! Take no pains about your pen, to tell anything and make no apology for what you are going to say.

Page 3 of a letter written by Joseph F. Smith to Martha Ann dated July 25, 1857. The first line of the page begins, "Mormonism is the very life of my soul!" Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.

reported in the eastern newspapers as a "Mormon Rebellion."⁴⁶ President Young, expecting "to have warm times here," entreated the missionaries, "Would you not come and help us? if so, hasten to our midst."⁴⁷ Accordingly, Joseph F. and twelve other missionaries were released and gave farewell addresses during a conference

the following day. Joseph F. arrived home in the Salt Lake Valley on February 24, 1858, where he immediately reported to Brigham Young and was assigned guard duty to protect the Saints against the encroaching army.

Soon the crisis was averted, and the Utah War ended. Joseph F. helped resettle some of his relatives in into their homes, including his cousin and future wife Levira Annette Clark Smith.⁴⁸ Shortly after they were married, Joseph F. would be called to serve another mission, this time in the British Isles. By accepting the call to serve in Great Britain, Joseph F. Smith once again demonstrated his commitment to serve in whatever capacity he was needed, a pattern that would prevail throughout his life.

Joseph F. Smith's Perspectives on Marriage and Family

During the years 1856 and 1857, the Saints in Utah experienced a period of spiritual awakening that has come to be known as the Mormon Reformation, characterized by religious zeal, introspection, and soul-searching. Church leaders frequently spoke to the Saints about greater commitment to gospel principles and focused on increased devotion. Martha Ann noted her own focus on reformation in a letter to her brother: "I hav been looking at my self and noticeing my self and triiy to reform and I see that I need a good deal of tutuing before I can become perfect."⁴⁹

One aspect of the Mormon Reformation that profoundly influenced both Martha Ann and Joseph F. was the anxiety and enthusiasm with which the men in the territory pursued potential brides. "There is great excitment among the young folks here about getting married," wrote William Harris, a friend of Martha Ann's. "There is from twenty to forty a getting married evry day."⁵⁰ Historians estimate a 65 percent increase in plural marriages alone during 1856 and 1857 throughout the Utah Territory.⁵¹

Both Martha Ann and Joseph F. spoke often of marriage in their letters. In one letter written from the Sandwich Islands in 1856, Joseph F. wrote his sister about the importance of marriage. He said, in a somewhat humorous tone, "I hear that all the young people of your countrey are geting marred off—and that counsel is that they should continue to marrey. I think it is a good plan, the young folks are be-coming mormons fast. I am glad to here of it. I think it will be my turn next,(!)"⁵²

Joseph F. explained in his letters to Martha Ann the sacred nature of marriage. He wrote the following to his sister upon first hearing of his sister's marriage to William Jasper Harris:

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You will certainly leave off Girl-ism now. I hope you will remember your position, and let your actions and conduct in all things, and at all times be such as will store up for you Respect, Esteem, and Friendship in the heart of every honest and good person. now, do you want me to tell you the way to attain to this desirable position?—prayer—with faith, and hope on Jesus and his Gospel, will alone do it. a person that holds your station in the True Kingdom of God, need never fear the face of “Clay”. [. . .] “lean not upon the arm of flesh.”⁵³ I can never save you, neither can I be saved by aught but my own good faith and works—now if you are sincerely prayerful, the spirit of prayer is the spirit of God and it will lead you “into all truth”⁵⁴ & will never ~~err~~ <err>. you will never yeald to temptations, and allurements, but will stand fast, and ever True to him with whome you have covenanted to abide through all the vicissittudes of Life and death.⁵⁵

While it is clear that Joseph F. saw the importance of marriage, he also expressed some concern about Martha Ann getting married too young. On June 14, 1857, he wrote, “I do not want you to make any vows, with any one if you can avoid it.”⁵⁶ He warned that it would be better not to make such a promise without being sufficiently mature. Unbeknownst to him, however, Martha Ann had already married.

Two months earlier, fifteen-year-old Martha Ann had married William Jasper Harris.⁵⁷ The arrangement was rather sudden and unexpected. As William prepared to serve a mission in the British Isles, President Heber C. Kimball asked him if there was anyone he would consider marrying. When he gave the name of Martha Ann, President Heber C. Kimball instructed him to “go and get her right now and be married.”⁵⁸ William went home, asked Martha Ann for her hand, and they returned to the Endowment House to be married. It was a short honeymoon; William left on his mission two days later.⁵⁹

Martha Ann did not write her brother with the news for nearly a month, but finally, on May 3, 1857, she shared, “Dear b<rother> I have an itam of news to write to you and my hand trembles when I go to write it for my concence is guilty before my brother for I fear that he will think I have slited him but for give me dear brother if I say that I have [*illegible erasure*] but I fear that it will dampen your feelings but I can not help it now I must say it enny how I am married—to William harris.”⁶⁰

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Joseph F. answered his sister's announcement in a letter dated July 25, 1857. His response demonstrated his sincere concern and love for his sister that offers a perspective on his deep understanding of marriage: "I was somewhat surprised on hearing of your marriage. but as I was not there to partispate in the in-the scene, I can only wish you much joy;—and happy life You have now taken the moste important step of your life—or existance—under the Bonds of the Gospel. upon the step you have just taken is pending all the social enjoyments—and happiness of your present existance—and the Blessings of a happy and chearful home. as well as an obediant and God-like posterity."⁶¹

Some years later, as Martha Ann began to have children, Joseph F. shared his thoughts on raising a righteous family: "Inspire their youthful hearts to love virtue and dispise vice. Encourage and succor every noble and Godly aspiration of their Souls, and check with a kind and motherly affection, but with a firm, unwavering hand every tendancy to disobedience, or wrong. [. . .] Never—No! Never!! Scold them.—It is the greatest folly in the world to Scold. if any thing needs to be said, it may be said calmly, and affectionatly, not in a passion. Scolding of any kind is usless, and worse, it is a folley, and a crime. reason, counsel, instruct, but never scold."⁶²

Much later, in 1874, he discusses the great example that their mother, Mary Fielding Smith, had been in their own upbringing: "Indeed yours is a thorney path in this world as mothers was, your patience and endurance are almost if not quite equal to hers. I only wish you had her education and her bold and firm decision, from which when once the [. . .] aim was fixed, in truth & right—neither prayers, nor tears, nor sympathy could move it. I wish I had these qualities myself, as she had them. We would both be better off."⁶³

Joseph F. clearly understood the important role that mothers played in teaching and raising children. He eventually had five wives and forty-eight children and was frequently absent from home. On June 18, 1890, worried about being arrested by federal marshals for practicing plural marriage, he wrote:

God has blessed me with good wives, and my children with good mothers; and O, how I feel to bless them, and to thank God. How all hell would grin <with delight> and the Devils laugh to see me "go back" on them! And well they might! but I have not the remotest idea of gratifying them in that regard. Exilement for the remainder of my life, or imprisonment till death, would

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Joseph F. Smith family portrait dated November 13, 1904. Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.

be meat and drink to my soul, if necessity compelled me to suffer it for their sakes. They have been true to me, by Gods help I will be true to them in time and throughout all eternity!⁶⁴

However, just as his family brought Joseph F. some of his greatest joys, it also brought him some of his greatest sorrows. In late May 1870, his family was dealt a devastating blow when their two-year-old Mercy Josephine fell ill. Joseph F. tenderly cared for his young daughter throughout her illness. In his journal he recorded the toll it took on him. “I have no appetite,” he wrote. “My sympathy & solicitude for my darling little Josephine, has greatly bowed my spirit. . . . She is a sensitive, delicate, and tender little creature and loves her ‘papa.’”⁶⁵ On June 6, Joseph F. attended to his duties at the Endowment House during the day. When he returned home later that afternoon, he found that little Josephine had passed away.⁶⁶ Two months later, to the day, he wrote the following to Martha Ann:

The weather is very oppressive, and the atmosphere sultry and merky, as tho’ impregnated with smoke. Much as it was on the days memorable as the 27th, of June 1844. And the 21st. and 22nd of Sept. 1852—the day of fathers death, and the death and burial of Mother,⁶⁷ I recollect them distinctly. It is two months to day since my own sweet babe joined her grand father and mother [. . .] I mourn

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the earthly loss of the brightest, purest, dearest, treasure God ever gave me. the one, I prized and cherished most, within the great circle of that greatest gift of God “Eternal Life,” which is incomparable, being “All in All,” and yet as if to compensate in some degree, for my bereavement, fresh sweetness and beauty, increasing intelligence, and love daily develops in my precious, cheerful, merry little “rose bud”, left me to bloom and blossom in my cottage “alone.” O! in the midst of sorrow, I can say, I thank God for my three sweet, perfect little gifts, “one on earth and two in heaven”,⁶⁸ the centre of my love, my own sweet “Jode.”⁶⁹

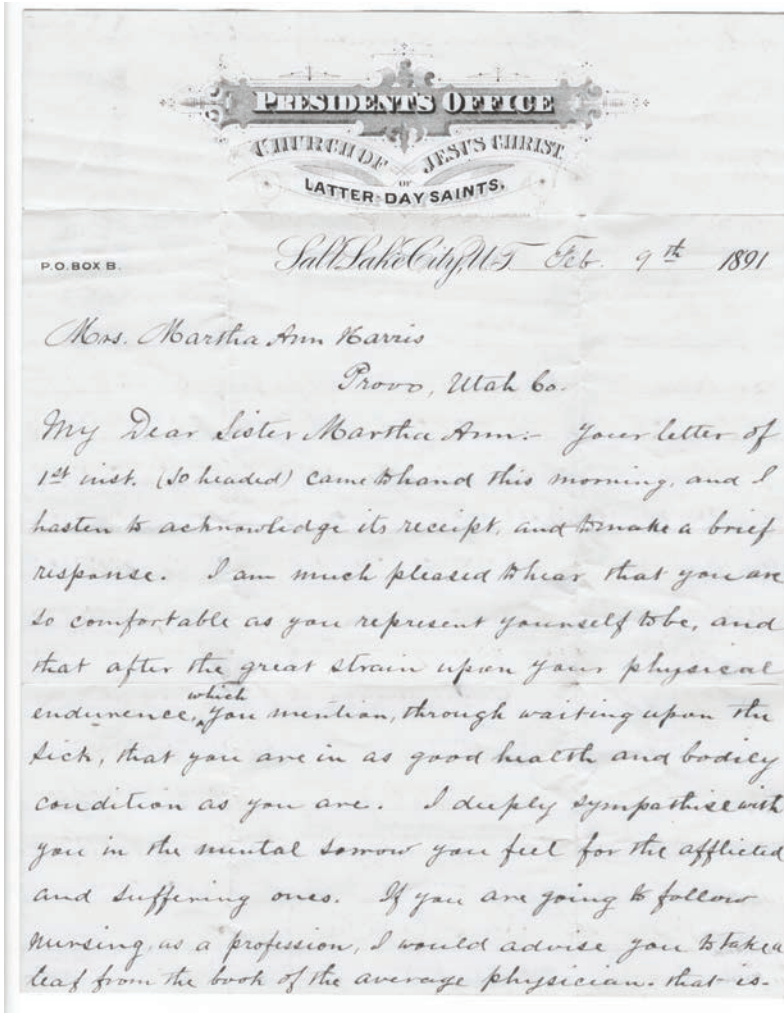
Joseph F. would bury thirteen of his children before his own passing. According to Julina, he loved them all but never got over losing his firstborn.⁷⁰ “He never got to where he could talk of his ‘Dodo’⁷¹ without tears in his eyes.”⁷² Nearly twenty years later, after he had buried his eighth child (Ruth),⁷³ he wrote his sister in words reminiscent of so many other letters of sorrow: “You will no doubt remember our sweet little Ruth—to be loved—she needed only to be seen. To be admired she had but to be heard—for she was one of the brightest little Souls I ever saw. But O! my Soul, we have had to yield her spirit up to God who gave her, and her sweet little body to the grave. She was buried to day. I should have written you sooner but to tell the truth my poor heart has been in the icy chamber with the cherished lovely form of my darling babe! I could not write.”⁷⁴

Joseph’s tender love for his family was apparent not only in letters throughout his life, but also in his teachings as a prophet. In 1915, President Joseph F. Smith encouraged the Saints of the Church to hold a “Home Evening” in which they could spend time together as a family. He said in introducing the program, “This ‘Home Evening’ should be devoted to prayer, singing hymns . . . scripture-reading, family topics and specific instruction on the principles of the Gospel. . . . Love at home and obedience to parents will increase. Faith will be developed in the hearts of the youth of Israel, and they will gain power to combat the evil influence and temptations which beset them.”⁷⁵

Conclusion

In a decisive move, Church president Brigham Young (1801–77) called fifteen-year-old Joseph F. on a mission to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaiian Islands) during the April 1854 general conference. Joseph F. left his young twelve-year old sister, Martha Ann, in Utah, and made his way to California and then on to Hawaii.

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Letter from Joseph F. Smith to Martha Ann Harris on February 9, 1891, written while he was serving as President of the Church. Courtesy of David M. Whitchurch.

It was during this three-year mission that Joseph F. began to correspond with his sister. They would continue to communicate through letters for six decades.

While only a few letters from Martha Ann have been included in this paper, her diligence and dedication in writing to her brother should not go unnoticed. Martha Ann's faithfulness, commitment to the gospel, and pioneering spirit

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reflect the heart and soul of a remarkable and courageous woman. Martha Ann often wrote to Joseph F. about the gratitude she had for him. An excerpt from Martha Ann's letter captures the heart and sensitivity of Joseph F. Smith, future prophet of the Church. "I am thankful to my father for giving me a brother that cears for mya. wefare," she wrote in one letter, "for I know that you care for my welfare more than enny boddy else can feel <care> fore upon this irth O Joseph would to god that I could expres feellings just as they are and [illegible erasure] I express my thanks to you for your kindness to me. I can never for git you for ever."⁷⁶

The Joseph F. Smith and Martha Ann Smith Harris Letter Collection provides a rare glimpse into the personal life of Joseph F., the sixth President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and his beloved sister. Their correspondence provides a rare view of the personal interaction between a brother and sister who were bound by blood and devotion to the cause of the Restoration. From the martyrdom of their father, Hyrum, in 1844, and the death of their mother, Mary, in 1852, they were strengthened in the furnace of affliction to confront the many trials that came their way. To Martha Ann, her brother was "my truest most faithfull friend,"⁷⁷ and to Joseph F., she would always be "My Dear beloved Sister Martha Ann."⁷⁸

Notes

1. For the complete collection of letters between Joseph F. Smith and his sister, see David M. Whitchurch and Richard Neitzel Holzappel, eds., *My Dear Sister: Letters between Joseph F. Smith and His Sister Martha Ann* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, forthcoming); original spelling preserved in all letters cited.
2. Leonard J. Arrington and Susan Arrington Madsen, *Mothers of the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 104–5.
3. Arrington and Madsen, *Mothers of the Prophets*, 105–6.
4. Joseph F. Smith (JFS) was born November 13, 1838, in Far West, Caldwell County, MO, to Hyrum Smith and Mary Fielding Smith. Martha Ann Harris (MHS) was born May 14, 1841, in Nauvoo, Hancock County, IL, to Hyrum Smith and Mary Fielding Smith.
5. Don Cecil Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith: Daughter of Britain* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), 270.
6. Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith*, 265.
7. When Hannah Grinnels died, a little more than a year later, it appears that Martha Ann lived with her half-brother, John, and his wife, Hellen Maria Fisher, in the family home and with her mother's sister, Mercy Rachel Fielding, who lived nearby. Following Martha Ann's marriage to William Jasper Harris, she lived with her mother-in-law, Emily Hill, a wife of Abraham Owen Smoot, while Martha Ann's husband served a mission in England. Upon his

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- return, they eventually settled in Provo, Utah, where she remained until her death in 1923. See Corbett, *Mary Fielding Smith*, 43, 273.
8. Joseph Fielding McConkie, ed., *Truth and Courage: Joseph F. Smith Letters* (unpublished manuscript, copy in possession of author, 1998), 6.
 9. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith, Sixth President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1938), 229.
 10. There is no record that explains why Merrick had chosen to discipline Martha Ann on this occasion. Later, B. D. Cummings reported that “President Smith speaks highly of him as a teacher . . . and states that under him made more rapid progress than any other teacher”; see B. F. Cummings, “Shining Lights: How They Acquired Brightness,” *Contributor*, January 1895, 174.
 11. Hyrum M. Smith and Scott G. Kenney, *From Prophet to Son: Advice of Joseph F. Smith to His Missionary Sons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 2.
 12. See *Deseret News*, April 13, 1854, 2.
 13. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 164–65.
 14. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 168.
 15. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated October 17, 1854.
 16. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 9, 1855.
 17. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated October 17, 1854.
 18. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated November 1, 1854.
 19. See Matthew 7:8; Luke 11:10; 3 Nephi 14:8.
 20. See James 1:5–6.
 21. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated October 18, 1855.
 22. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated January 31, 1856.
 23. Sarah Harris Passey, “Martha Ann Smith Harris,” unpublished manuscript in possession of authors, courtesy of Carole Call King, granddaughter of Sarah Harris Passey.
 24. John Smith, half brother of JFS and MSH. He was born September 22, 1832, in Kirtland, Geauga County, OH, to Hyrum Smith and Jerusha Barden. John married Hellen Maria Fisher on December 15, 1853, in Salt Lake City.
 25. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated December 17, 1856.
 26. Agnes Charlotte Smith and Josephine Donna Smith are the daughters of Don Carlos Smith and Agnes Moulton Coolbrith. Josephine Donna Smith would change her name to Ina Coolbrith and would be the first poet laureate of California. Ina’s father, Don Carlos Smith, was the brother of Hyrum Smith and Joseph Smith Jr. See Roy B. Huff, “Don Carlos Smith,” in *United by Faith: The Joseph Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith Family*, ed. Kyle R. Walker (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 384–86. See also Josephine DeWitt Rhodehamel and Raymund Francis Wood, *Ina Coolbrith: Librarian and Laureate of California* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1973), 316–17.
 27. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 14, 1857.
 28. During his childhood, JFS broke a bone in his hand when he hit a hired farmhand who was chasing his older brother John with a pitchfork. See Blaine M. Yorgason, *From Orphaned Boy to Prophet of God: The Story of Joseph F. Smith* (Ogden, UT: Living Scriptures, 2001), 159.
 29. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated July 25, 1857.
 30. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated December 24, 1894.

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31. George Q. Cannon, along with other missionaries, had visited the Islands in early December 1850. The mission had been dedicated on December 13, 1850. See R. Britsch, *Unto the Islands of the Sea: A History of the Latter-day Saints in the Pacific* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 94–95.
32. Francis M. Gibbons, *Joseph F. Smith: Patriarch and Preacher, Prophet of God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 32.
33. JFS to George A. Smith, March 19, 1855, published in *Deseret News*, July 11, 1855, 7.
34. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 173.
35. The conference referred to was probably held in October 1856. At this conference JFS was transferred to preside over the Kohala Conference, still on Maui. See Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 184.
36. Copied by JFS into his journal; letter dated July 4, 1856. Unless otherwise noted, all references to JFS's journal are taken from the document housed in the Church History Library in Salt Lake City.
37. James Lawson was a close friend of the Smith family. He was called on a mission to the Sandwich Islands in the fall of 1852, beginning his service there in 1853 and serving at least until the end of 1854. He appears to have been in Utah in 1855 but returned to the Sandwich Islands with his wife in 1856.
38. The abbreviation "&c." was commonly used for *et cetera* at this time. The abbreviation "& co." typically stood for "and company." JFS likely confused the two.
39. "Shanks' mare" or "shanks' horse" was an idiom referring to one's own legs, meaning here that the missionaries generally had to walk. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), "shank."
40. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 9, 1855.
41. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 9, 1855.
42. JFS's experiences on the ocean may well have been part of his determination, during a later mission to the Sandwich Islands in 1864, to advise a group of his brethren not to attempt to land their smaller boat in a harbor under the conditions at that time. Their refusal to heed his counsel resulted in a capsized boat and the near drowning of Apostle Lorenzo Snow. See Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 213–16.
43. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated April 17, 1857.
44. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated May 25, 1856.
45. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated July 25, 1857.
46. "The Mormon Rebellion," *New York Times*, February 16, 1858, 2.
47. JFS Journal, October 3, 1857. See also Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 186–87.
48. Levira Annette Clark Smith was the daughter of Levira Clark and Samuel Harrison Smith, brother of Joseph Smith Jr. JFS and Levira married on April 4, 1859, and she filed for legal separation on June 10, 1867.
49. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated December 17, 1856.
50. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated February 3, 1857.
51. See Stanley S. Ivins, "Notes on Mormon Polygamy," *Western Humanities Review* 10 (1956): 231.
52. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated February 18, 1856.
53. See 2 Chronicles 32:8; 2 Nephi 4:34; Doctrine and Covenants 1:19.
54. See John 16:13.

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55. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated July 25, 1857.
56. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 14, 1857.
57. William Jasper Harris was born October 25, 1836. He married Martha Ann Smith on April 21, 1857, at age twenty. Together they would have eleven children.
58. Richard P. Harris, "Martha Ann Smith Harris," *Relief Society Magazine*, January 1924, 15.
59. Harris, "Martha Ann Smith Harris," 15.
60. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated May 3, 1857.
61. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated July 25, 1857.
62. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated April 3, 1863. It is interesting to note that Joseph F. Smith was twenty-four years old when he wrote this letter and, at this point, still did not have children of his own.
63. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated August 5, 1874.
64. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 18, 1890.
65. JFS journal, June 5, 1870.
66. Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 456–57.
67. Joseph Smith Jr. and Hyrum Smith were martyred at Carthage Jail on June 27, 1844; September 21 and 22, 1852, as JFS indicates, were the death and burial of JFS and MSH's mother, Mary Fielding Smith.
68. The two children in heaven that JFS makes reference to are Sarah Ella (born February 5, 1869; died February 11, 1869; daughter of JFS and Sarah Ellen Richards Smith) and Mercy Josephine (born August 14, 1867; died June 6, 1970; daughter of JFS and Julina Lambson Smith).
69. See Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated August 6, 1870. The name "Jode" may be another nickname for Mercy Josephine Smith, JFS's recently deceased daughter, or it may be a simple spelling error. In other letters she is referred to as "Dode." Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 25, 1870.
70. While all the deaths of JFS's children were hard on him, it seems that Mercy Josephine's death took a particular toll on JFS because she was his firstborn child.
71. Likely another pet name for his daughter Josephine.
72. Julina Lambson, journal, 1912, as cited in Smith, *Life of Joseph F. Smith*, 458–59.
73. Ruth Smith, Edna's daughter (born December 21, 1893), died on March 17, 1898. See *Deseret News*, March 18, 1898.
74. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated March 19, 1898.
75. Joseph F. Smith, Anthon H. Lund, Charles W. Penrose, First Presidency letter, April 27, 1915. See also "Home Evening," *Improvement Era*, June 1915, 733–34.
76. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated May 3, 1857.
77. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated May 31, 1874.
78. Holzapfel and Whitchurch, *My Dear Sister*, letter dated June 21, 1869.