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This view of the St. George Temple, ca. early 1876, shows the lower half of the sandstone being prepared for a whitewash coating, symbolizing purity and light. The main tower did not match Brigham Young's expectations; when it was damaged by lightning, it was replaced with a taller tower. This is the only known image of the temple under construction that includes a group of citizens in the foreground. Courtesy Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University.

Probing the High Prevalence of Polygyny in St. George, 1861–1880

An Introduction

*Davis Bitton, Val Lambson, Lowell C. “Ben” Bennion, and
Kathryn M. Daynes*

The three articles presented in the following pages interpret and map the unusually high incidence of polygamy (or polygyny, the proper term) that characterized St. George, Utah, from its founding in 1861 until the federal census of 1880. Each article approaches the topic from a different angle, reflecting the perspectives of an economist, a geographer, and two historians. Although our primary emphasis is on St. George, we believe the methods employed here can contribute to understanding the complex dynamics of polygyny as practiced in nineteenth-century Utah more broadly.

In *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History* (published by BYU Studies), 122–23, Bennion has mapped polygyny’s prevalence in sixty Mormon towns as of 1870. His map-essay includes a population pyramid of Utah for the same year that shows an even balance of males and females for each age group. In spite of the pyramid’s symmetry, an average of 25 to 30 percent of those sixty towns’ residents were in plural households. Interestingly, on the map, no town with more than five hundred inhabitants shows a percentage of polygamous households higher than St. George, at almost 50 percent.

The first of our three papers, by Bitton and Lambson, recognizes for the first time in Mormon studies the limits that demography imposed upon the number of Latter-day Saints who could have practiced plural marriage during the pioneer period. Their model suggests that if the ratio of females to males of similar age was roughly equal, it seems implausible that more



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than 15 to 20 percent of the territory's husbands and 25 to 30 percent of its wives normally could have lived in polygyny. This of course does not rule out geographic pockets of higher prevalence such as St. George, but then we want to ask, what made St. George special? Did Church leaders consciously select polygamists with large families to settle Utah's Dixie? Were "very committed" polygamous members less likely than monogamists to "back out" of Dixie's hostile desert environment? In probing possible answers to these questions, our second article, by Bennion, focuses on the marital status of the men called to southern Utah in 1861 and 1862 and on the prevalence of polygyny in St. George and elsewhere in Dixie at the time of the 1870 census.

Finally, Daynes concentrates on the makeup of the town's population of marriageable age as of 1880. Her article identifies the three most common sources of women who chose to enter plurality, with a surprisingly high number coming from plural families. She also explores the role that the presence of Utah's first temple exerted in maintaining St. George's exceptional level of polygyny. Applying the Bitton-Lambson model to St. George and Manti and drawing on other related research, she outlines the changing levels of plural marriage in nineteenth-century Utah.

Together, these three articles underscore the importance of understanding not only the high prevalence of polygyny in Dixie, especially in Utah's first temple town, but also what such high percentages reveal about the general importance of plural marriage throughout Utah between 1847 and 1890. The territory functioned as a "polygamous society," which in the 1860s and 1870s in many places, certainly in Dixie, approached or exceeded the sustainable level of plural marriage imposed by the limits inherent in the population's age-gender structure.

Deeply committed to their faith, many Latter-day Saints strove to put their beliefs into practice, even the Principle, resulting in the relatively large percentage that spent at least part of their lives in plural households.