

James Wanlass (1846-1921) the “Polygamist”

James Wanlass’s daughter, Margaret Wanlass Schmith, told her nephew, Leslie Reuben Wanlass, an account about how her father had been sealed to multiple women. The account was recorded on an audio cassette tape and later converted to an MP3 file, named JamesWanlass1846-Polygamist.MP3 by her grand-nephew J. Wanless Southwick. She was 88 years old at the time of the interview. Details as she remembered them may have been a little foggy, but here’s what apparently happened:

Ellen Stacey (1833-1895) was born in England, the daughter of John Stacey and Elizabeth White. Ellen apparently had a turbulent family life. Her four children were born in England, but apparently she was not married to their father (Joseph Bamford (1830-?)). In 1860 she married a man named James Charlesworth (born about 1826 or 1833). Then in 1863 she was baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons). Apparently her husband did not share her religious persuasion and may have been openly “anti-Mormon.” Perhaps she was unhappy with his lack of acceptance of her faith and frustrated by the prospect of not being blessed with an “eternal marriage,” which required being “sealed” to a husband in an LDS temple.

At some time she immigrated to the United States and took up residence in or near Almy, Wyoming, where James and Edith Elizabeth Fowkes Wanlass were living and raising their family. They may have been members of the same LDS ward in Almy. She may have admired James Wanlass and his Mormon family. At some time, she apparently approached James Wanlass to inquire if he would be willing to have her sealed to him after she died. That way she could expect to enjoy the blessings of “eternal marriage” that she could not attain with her “anti-Mormon” husband or her first “non-husband.” Apparently, James spoke with his wife and got her concurrence. Furthermore, Ellen may have also sought to provide the same “eternal marriage” blessings for her three deceased sisters, Ann Stacey (1822-1843), Mary Stacey (1824-1846), and Elizabeth Stacey (1826-1846).

Ellen Stacey Charlesworth died in 1895. Twenty two years later, in 1917, the 71 year-old James Wanlass and his 52 year-old wife Edith Elizabeth Fowkes Wanlass went to the Salt Lake LDS Temple and had Ellen sealed to him, with his wife Edith Elizabeth acting as proxy for Ellen. Thus Ellen was granted her wish for an “eternal marriage.” Much later, in 1953 (32 years after the death of James Wanlass, and 4 years after the death of his wife Edith Elizabeth Fowkes) his family obtained permission from David O. McKay, President of the Church, to go to a temple (Idaho Falls?) and have Ellen’s three sisters also sealed to him.

Although James Wanlass only had one wife, Edith Elizabeth Fowkes (1865-1949) who bore all of his 11 children, he was sealed to five women. Does that count as “polygamy?”