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The Mormons of the Wisconsin Territory: 1835–1848

Upriver from Nauvoo, Wisconsin Territory became home to all kinds of Saints—faithful, independent, or apostate—who played interesting roles in the development of this frontier region.

David L. Clark

Introduction

Only one part of the history of Mormons in Wisconsin before 1848 has received much attention—that is the response of many members in Wisconsin to the succession crisis following Joseph Smith’s death in 1844. But the story of the Church in Wisconsin includes more than schisms and splinter groups. It also is the story of Saints who established a sizable and important presence in the newly organized Wisconsin territory. Many of those Saints followed Brigham Young rather than schismatic leaders.

Early Church members in Wisconsin were largely native-born Americans or immigrants who joined the Church after they moved to Wisconsin. Their decision to remain on the frontier instead of gathering with the main body of Saints demonstrates their independence, but until the death of the Prophet Joseph, they were generally orthodox in their beliefs. After 1844 a number of Wisconsin members challenged Brigham Young’s succession to the presidency, in fact, the most significant challenges to Brigham Young’s leadership originated with Wisconsin members. Despite these instances of separation, the most enduring legacy of Latter-day Saints in Wisconsin is the role Church members played in the early development of the territory and the impact Wisconsin converts and resources had on the emerging Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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Background and Context

In 1830 the central and northern portion of Wisconsin included an immense pine forest that extended from Lake Michigan across Wisconsin to Minnesota. Abundant game lived in both forest and water. White miners with dreams of gaining a fortune in the Wisconsin-Iowa-Illinois area eventually replaced Native American miners, excluding them from mining activity. In 1829 there were 4,253 miners and 52 licensed smelters.²

Gradually, between 1829 and 1833, European settlers began to outnumber Native Americans in the land south of the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers, and in 1833 the area officially became U.S. territory. In 1834 the U.S. Congress initiated legislation to remove Native Americans from most parts of Wisconsin to sites west of the Mississippi River. In 1835 perhaps only twelve to fourteen hundred Native Americans remained in the area of the Mendota and Koshkonong Lakes, adjacent to the region where Latter-day Saints first lived. By 1836, in contrast, the non-native population of Wisconsin was 11,683, an increase of eight thousand in just six years. On July 3, 1836, the Michigan Territory was divided to create the Wisconsin Territory, which also included present-day Iowa and part of Minnesota. The population of the territory continued to grow rapidly, increasing by almost 7,000 by 1838, 12,000 more by 1840, and growing to a population of 155,000 by 1846.³ Most of the Native Americans had left southern Wisconsin by 1837.

The largest group of Americans purchasing land in Wisconsin between 1834 and 1839 were from New England and New York—the area where, several years earlier, religious excitement had prompted Joseph Smith’s first prayers and where the Church was organized. Evidently, both political and economic activities—and perhaps religious ideas—in early Wisconsin were modeled after those that existed in New York.⁴

The Methodists became the first Protestant group to make much progress in the territory; by 1833 they were meeting in Platteville and Mineral Point. Other new immigrants requested religious instruction from Presbyterian and Congregationalist missionaries. Although Catholics had been the first to proselyte in the area, no missionaries had been sent to the territory for more than
one hundred years. The Catholics resumed missionary work in the area, but by 1840, what had been the Wisconsin Territory’s probable Catholic majority had become a Protestant majority.5

Some religious organizations in Wisconsin during this time seem to have considered the LDS Church as only a minor contender. In a 1845 letter, Reverend Stephan Peet, an agent of the Presbyterian Home Missionary Society, wrote, “Romanism, though endeavoring to establish itself among us, had not as strong a hold in the Ter[ritory] as in some other portions of the west. . . . Mormonism had little or no influence among us.”6 Others, however, were more concerned: “We are struggling amidst the error and delusions by which we are surrounded. Such as Catholicism, Mormonism, and many other species of Infidelity, which are making rapid strides in our community.”7

Mormon Beginnings in Southern Wisconsin

Burlington. In December 1835, Moses Smith, a member of the Church from New York, claimed land in what is today the city of Burlington, Wisconsin.8 Early in 1836, he constructed a log cabin on his claim. Thus Burlington got its first resident, and Mormonism arrived in southern Wisconsin—just a few months before the territory was formally organized. Moses and his companion, Sam Vaughn, built the area’s first dam and mill on the White River. In 1837, Moses planted and harvested the first grain in the area and constructed grain mills. When he was appointed postmaster for the new village, he became the first Latter-day Saint to hold civic office in Wisconsin.9

Moses served as the link between Wisconsin Saints and the Church in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. In 1837, Moses wrote to Kirtland requesting “instructions in the gospel” and news about the Saints in Missouri.10 In 1838 or 1839, Joseph Smith Sr. designated Moses and his brother Aaron as presiding elders for Wisconsin. The branch in Burlington reportedly consisted of about one hundred members by 1839.11

Not all of the Burlington members have been identified, but we know that Smith’s wife, Lydia, and their two children, his parents, and at least two of his brothers, Lemuel and Aaron, and their
Wisconsin communities with mid-nineteenth-century Mormon connections. Mormons either established or were involved in the establishment of Burlington, Zarahemla (Blanchardville), Jenkynsville, the community at Lake Koshkonong, Black River Falls, and La Crosse. Communities with branches of the Church and towns where important missionary work was accomplished are also shown.
families joined him in Burlington. Of these, Moses’ parents and his brother Aaron were Church members. A large family of Saints named Perce also moved from New York to Burlington. If the branch numbered one hundred members, it must have included other relatives and converts as well. Considering the small populations of surrounding areas, Latter-day Saints may have constituted as much as 10 percent of the population in the Burlington region (approximately fifty square miles in two counties).¹²

Moses Smith moved from Burlington to western Illinois in 1839, leaving the congregation under Aaron’s direction. What motivated Moses’ move is unknown, but he likely returned to Wisconsin at intervals to visit his family and perhaps to continue to work with the members there.

Jenkynsville. Following the initial 1835–1836 settlements in Burlington and adjacent Spring Prairie, Latter-day Saints settled several other communities in southern Wisconsin. In 1837, Jenkynsville (also called Meeker’s Grove), La Fayette County, was founded by Jacob Jenkins and two associates named Stephenson and Parker. Parker was a Latter-day Saint, and, although nothing additional is known of him, his contribution to the establishment of this village is acknowledged.¹³

Blanchardville. Additional development of the southwestern part of the Territory of Wisconsin by members of the Church occurred in 1842, when William Cline, Cyrus Newkirk, and their families established a small community that eventually became the village of Blanchardville. According to the 1842 Wisconsin census, this community of Latter-day Saints included a dozen or so people.¹⁴ These Church members gave the community its original name, Zarahemla. Other families—including Cline’s in-laws, the Wilder- muths—joined the small group of Saints in Zarahemla until its population reached at least twenty, and the group organized the Yellowstone Branch of the Church.¹⁵

Following the martyrdom of the Prophet, the Yellowstone Branch grew when several families who elected not to join the westward exodus moved to Zarahemla. This group included the Horners, the Deams, and a few others. In 1848, S. Horner built a dam and gristmill on the east bank of the Pecatonica River below the residential part of Zarahemla. Parts of the mill stand today in
Aerial view of Blanchardville, 1957. Mormons founded the community of Zarahemla on the high ground in the vicinity of the cemetery in the center of the photograph. Most of the later town development (photograph background) followed the departure of the Mormons, when the town was renamed Blanchardville. Mormons in Zarahemla declined to follow Brigham Young in 1844, joined briefly with the Strang church, and, for a short time, were part of a “nondenominational” group of Mormons. Eventually, the Zarahemla Saints, along with Mormons in Beloit, established the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1860. Courtesy State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Downtown Blanchardville. In 1849, Horner sold the mill to Cyrus Newkirk, one of the original Zarahemla residents, who, in turn, sold it to Alvin Blanchard, who was not a Latter-day Saint. Blanchard constructed additional buildings in the area of Horner’s dam and gristmill, and, with the departure of most of the Saints during the 1850s, the community was renamed Blanchardville.16

Norwegian Settlements. At about the same time the Cline and Newkirk families settled Blanchardville, a group of Norwegian
immigrants settled in the Fox River Valley of northern Illinois, near the southern Wisconsin border. By March of 1842, Mormon missionaries baptized at least five of the Norwegians and organized the La Salle Illinois Branch of the Church.

Important for the growth of Wisconsin is the fact that a number of the Fox River Norwegian immigrants moved to south-central Wisconsin and established farms in the Lake Koshkonong area of Dane and Jefferson Counties, a region not yet populated by Latter-day Saints. Early in 1843, Gudmund Haugaas and Ole Heier, Latter-day Saint missionaries from the Illinois group of Norwegians, visited the Lake Koshkonong settlers. They reported success in establishing a foundation for future missionary work but no converts. In 1844, Gudmund Haugaas returned, this time with Canute Peterson, and succeeded in converting enough people to organize a Lake Koshkonong branch—an event that was particularly disturbing to Lutheran pastor J. W. C. Dietrichson. Dietrichson wrote letters to Norway denouncing the Church and calling Norwegians who were converted in Illinois and Wisconsin “credulous and simple countrymen.”

A parallel account by another Lutheran indicates that the “dignified Episcopalian and the unspeakable Mormon” were both busy converting the “Norwegian Indians.” Lutheran pastors evidently believed they had exclusive rights to the religious affiliation of the Norwegians, as did the Episcopalian bishop Gustof Unonius, who publicly attacked “sympathy for . . . Shakers, women’s-rights associations, yes, even Mormonism’ which ‘judicious Americans regard as more or less noxious weeds sown by the enemy into good ground.’” Although all of this Mormon bashing may have delayed conversions, Norwegians joined the Church in considerable numbers both in Illinois and Wisconsin. After the death of Joseph Smith in 1844, a branch of at least twenty converts remained in the Lake Koshkonong area. This group later joined James Strang’s church.

As is typical for so much of nineteenth-century Mormon history, the story of Saints in Wisconsin includes controversy and intolerance. However, the complete record of harassment of the Church in territorial Wisconsin is difficult to substantiate because most of the accounts were written thirty to forty years after the
events took place—in the midst of the late-nineteenth-century antipolygamy sentiments. A few contemporary records exist that suggest residents of the Wisconsin Territory were just slightly less critical of the young LDS church and its members than were residents of New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. Perhaps the Saints in territorial Wisconsin were a curiosity and were considered as little more than a temporary blemish on the otherwise pure Wisconsin landscape.\textsuperscript{23}

The sum of Latter-day Saint influence on the early development of the southern Wisconsin Territory has been scarcely recognized. Yet by the early 1840s, Saints lived in at least eight southern Wisconsin counties.\textsuperscript{24} In these counties, they were instrumental in the establishment of the communities of Burlington, Zarahemla (the present Blanchardville), and Jenkynsville. They organized branches of the Church in at least the first two of these communities as well as in Beloit, Waukesha, and the Lake Koshkonong area. In addition to establishing farms and building dams and mills, Latter-day Saints worked in the lead-mining district of southwestern Wisconsin and brought important converts into the Church there and at sites along the Mississippi River. All of this activity appears to have resulted from a combination of member initiative and Church-generated missionary assignments in Wisconsin. No record of official involvement by Church leadership in Wisconsin colonization exists.\textsuperscript{25}

Albert Carrington. Baptized in Wiota, La Fayette County, in 1841, Carrington worked in the lead mines in La Fayette County until 1844, when he moved to Nauvoo. He later was a counselor to Brigham Young and a member of the Quorum of the Twelve from 1870 to 1885. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.
Missionary Work

Perhaps because of the temporary stability of the Church in Nauvoo, Moses Smith's 1837 request for gospel instruction was finally answered in 1840. Elisha H. Groves and Lyman Stoddard were called as missionaries to labor in Iowa County, Wisconsin. By 1841 a number of missionaries were working in the northern Illinois–southern Wisconsin area. Of particular note are Amasa Lyman and William O. Clark, who preached in the area around Mineral Point. These elders baptized men who would later become significant figures in Church history. On October 7, 1841, Elder Clark baptized Albert Carrington, who became a member of the Quorum of the Twelve in 1870. Carrington had moved from Pennsylvania to Wisconsin earlier that year and worked in the lead mines near Wiota, La Fayette County, until 1844, when he moved to Nauvoo. At about the same time Elder Clark baptized Carrington, he also converted Jason Briggs, who later was instrumental in organizing the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

Additional missionaries were called to Wisconsin from Nauvoo in the early 1840s, but no record of baptisms they may have performed exists. Additional missionary activities by Latter-day Saints during this time in Wisconsin probably occurred but remain undocumented.
Latter-day Saint Lumbermen in Western Wisconsin

Black River Falls. At the same time Saints established communities and organized branches in the southern part of Wisconsin, they also developed communities along the Black River in the western territory. The story of the Latter-day Saints’ role in the development of Black River Falls is well known, thanks largely to Dennis Rowley’s comprehensive study of the Wisconsin pineries.31

The story of Mormon influence in the western and northwestern part of Wisconsin begins with the Church’s need for lumber to build the Nauvoo Temple, the Nauvoo House, and other buildings. In 1841, Apostle Lyman Wight and Bishop George Miller were named to committees whose duties included the major Nauvoo building construction. Local lumber was too scarce to accommodate the building boom in Nauvoo, and imported lumber was too costly for the Saints. The committees learned of a Wisconsin lumber mill that could be purchased at the juncture of Roaring Creek and the Black River. By late fall of 1841, a community of Saints were harvesting and milling lumber at the Roaring Creek site, and, prior to the winter freeze, the first raft of lumber floated down the Black River to the Mississippi and then to Nauvoo.32

After a full year’s lumbering experience, the Roaring Creek group decided they could take more and better lumber from the area surrounding the falls of the Black River, just north of Roaring Creek. Through a series of negotiations, the history of which includes an apocryphal tale of “takeovers” and a Mormon War,33

Lyman Wight. Wight and George Miller were entrusted with securing Wisconsin lumber for construction in Nauvoo. After the martyrdom of Joseph Smith, Saints who had earlier worked at Black River Falls followed Wight from Nauvoo to La Crosse and eventually to Texas. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.
the Saints established themselves at Black River Falls by the spring of 1843.

The 1842 territorial census lists forty-one people—most of whom were probably Latter-day Saints—at the Roaring Creek community.\textsuperscript{34} By the early spring of 1843, the Black River Falls community of Saints was established, and, during the next few years (until 1845), at least 160 Nauvoo Saints were involved in the lumbering activity.\textsuperscript{35} Moses Smith, Wisconsin’s first Latter-day Saint, joined this group. In contrast to the temporary nature of most lumbering operations, the Black River Falls group may have intended to establish a permanent Mormon community.\textsuperscript{36} At the peak of the lumber production, a Black River Falls branch of the Church functioned with Lyman Wight, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve, as president, George Miller as bishop, and David Clayton as clerk.\textsuperscript{37} These men were also the secular leadership of the group.

In addition to their milling operations, the Saints operated at least six logging camps along the Black River and its tributaries north of the falls.\textsuperscript{38} In 1843 a choice Black River Falls pine could produce four to five thousand board feet of lumber. Even thirty years later, a single tree could yield only three hundred board feet.\textsuperscript{39} Rowley calculated that from 1841 until the spring of 1845, some 1.5 million board feet of milled lumber, more than two hundred thousand shingles, and a large number of miscellaneous logs, barn boards, and timbers floated to Nauvoo.\textsuperscript{40}
Historical markers noting the successful large-scale Latter-day Saint lumbering venture in Wisconsin stand in Black River Falls and north in the town of Greenwood. A less satisfying monument is at Cunningham Creek, about fifteen miles north of Black River Falls. The creek is named for Elijah Cunningham, a member of the Church who drowned there in 1843 while rafting lumber to the Black River.  

Wisconsin lumber was obviously important for the Church. The pineries supplied Nauvoo’s construction needs, using the plentiful labor of new converts and plentiful Wisconsin lumber. Black River Falls lumber enabled construction of the two most significant buildings in Nauvoo and an unrecorded number of Nauvoo houses. Certainly Nauvoo would not have been the city it briefly was without Wisconsin lumber.  

Conversely, Latter-day Saint involvement in Black River Falls was significant for the Wisconsin Territory. During the 1830s, Wisconsin logging was done on a small scale, and in 1836 even the first territorial capitol building was built with lumber from eastern states. Separate logging operations developed in at least four parts of northern and western Wisconsin (Green Bay, Wisconsin River, Black River, and Chippewa areas), but none of these produced permanent results until after 1837. In the definitive work on nineteenth-century lumbering in Wisconsin, Robert F. Fries suggests that by 1840, the combination of robust forests and the market economy set a marvelous stage for the lumbering boom that followed. By 1842 logging along the Black River produced more than seven million board feet of milled lumber. In 1843 the Chippewa area, which eventually became the most important area of Wisconsin white pine production, produced five million board feet.  

The Saints’ work on the Black River beginning in 1842 fits into this rapid expansion of Wisconsin lumbering. Only minor lumbering had occurred, and only a small lumber camp existed in the Black River Falls region before the arrival of the Nauvoo lumbermen and their families. During 1843 an estimated three million board feet of lumber was transported down the Black River, and almost half of this was for construction at Nauvoo. While the Saints did not produce the most lumber in the territory, they made a sizable contribution to Wisconsin’s lumbering boom. In addition, their successful transportation of milled lumber down the Mississippi
Mormon logging camps and river route to Nauvoo. The Saints' Wisconsin lumbering effort included mills and logging camps in Jackson and Clark Counties. Lumber rafted down the Black River to the Mississippi and then to Nauvoo was used in construction of the temple and other buildings in Nauvoo.
River to Nauvoo is thought to have inspired the development of additional lumbering and the business of Mississippi log rafting, which became an important part of the middle- and late-nineteenth-century Wisconsin economy.49

Elder Wight and Bishop Miller returned from Wisconsin to Nauvoo in the spring of 1844, after suggesting to Joseph Smith that Texas would be a good site for future missionary work among Native Americans. The Prophet agreed and assigned Wight and Miller to lead a settlement there. However, with others of the Council of Fifty, Wight and Miller left on political missions in behalf of the Prophet, who had decided to run for President in the 1844 election. The Prophet’s death in June changed a number of plans. The lumbering venture at the pineries declined, and most of the Saints working at Black River Falls returned to Nauvoo.50

**La Crosse.** A raft of pine lumber shipments from Black River Falls floated to Nauvoo during July 1844.51 The lumbermen and their families, who had been aware of the death of their Prophet since at least early July, evidently returned to Nauvoo at about the same time. By August of that troubled year, Lyman Wight returned from his East Coast campaigning. In Nauvoo he found the Black River Falls group dispirited, many of them ill with chills and fevers. He quickly resolved to move them. Wight returned to the idea of taking the Black River Falls Saints to Texas, as he and the Prophet had planned earlier that year.52 However, in response to the Church’s new circumstances, Church leaders discouraged Wight from the venture. Heber C. Kimball (and perhaps Brigham Young) advised Wight to instead take the Black River Falls group back to Wisconsin to settle in the La Crosse area.53

Every trip along the Mississippi River between Nauvoo and Black River Falls involved passing through the La Crosse region, so the Black River Falls group certainly would have known that La Crosse is a beautiful part of the upper Mississippi Valley. Sandstone ledges reach down to the west bank of the river, and rolling hills on the east side fuse with the majestic river landscape. Many islands emerge above the sluggish waters of the Mississippi, and a number of streams join the river from both sides. However, the reasons that Wight, who believed he had an assignment from the martyred prophet to settle in Texas, would move his followers
Nathan Myrick’s house at La Crosse, Wisconsin. Myrick’s home, erected at Prairie la Crosse in 1842, was the first house in La Crosse. Courtesy State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

back to Wisconsin have never been fully explained. If Texas was the ultimate objective, why the detour to Wisconsin?

Albert Sanford, who in the 1940s described Mormon activity in western Wisconsin, considered the possible reasons for the group’s move from Nauvoo to Wisconsin and noted that Lyman Wight stated that he moved the former Black River Falls Saints to La Crosse because chills and fever had affected many in Nauvoo and he wanted the group to be healthy before the long trek to Texas. The return to Wisconsin may also have been motivated by pleasant memories of the La Crosse area or possibly by financial prospects. One of the few people living in La Crosse at the time, Nathan Myrick, hired some of the Saints to cut wood and even negotiated to have a few members return to Black River Falls to make shingles. Dr. Lafayette Houghton Bunnel hired others to plow fields and build fences. The Saints may have known of these limited economic opportunities before their move, although no evidence exists that the group had contracted for this work prior to leaving for La Crosse. Another factor in moving from Nauvoo may simply have been to avoid the persecution and confusion that prevailed in western Illinois at that time. But foremost in Wight’s mind must have been that La Crosse would be a good, if temporary, staging area before beginning the appointed task of moving to Texas.

Wight and his group traveled to La Crosse in late summer or fall of 1844. Apparently, Bishop Miller, who was also a member of the Nauvoo building committee, decided to stay in Nauvoo. Wight located his group at a site south of, but adjacent to, the present
city of La Crosse. According to one account, the settlers named their location the "Valley of Loami," but this may be an inaccurate rendering of "Lamoni," and they named the prominent creek the "Waters of Helaman." Approximately 160 people—more than twenty families—made the move, making the Latter-day Saint community easily the largest in the La Crosse area at that time. Thus, by November 1844, another branch of the Church was functioning in Wisconsin, and Saints established the first viable, if temporary, community along the western Wisconsin border.

As with so much of 1840s Mormon history, the facts surrounding the activities of the La Crosse Saints are difficult to reconstruct. Secondary accounts either err or ignore the entire La Crosse story. For example, one report indicates that the Saints lived in tents, while contemporary accounts maintain that they built log cabins. We do know that they enjoyed an uncommonly mild winter and in exchange for wages or provisions spent their time working in the area for some of the few settlers who were not Latter-day Saints. On March 25, 1845, with the onset of an early and mild spring, the Saints left La Crosse as quickly as they had come. Renewed in strength and spirit, they floated down the Mississippi in four boats they had built during the winter. They landed just north of the present city of Davenport, Iowa, where they began their cross-country trek to Texas. They arrived in the area near Austin, Texas, eight months later.

The history of the Nauvoo/Wisconsin expatriates in Texas is a story itself. A few years after reaching Texas, Wight and many of the group were excommunicated from the Church when they failed to respond to Brigham Young's request that they join the main body of the Church in Utah. Some of the group eventually did rejoin the Church, but Wight died and was buried in Texas in 1858.

The Saints never visualized La Crosse as a permanent Latter-day Saint settlement as they had envisioned the settlement at Black River Falls. However, they were the first sizable group to live in the area and were the largest community during the brief time they lived there. During the winter of 1844-45, the Saints demonstrated that the area could support a viable community, and within seven years, farmers and lumbermen resettled the area around La Crosse. By the 1990 census, La Crosse had a population
of more than fifty-one thousand. While two Latter-day Saint wards function in the area today, the only evidence of the Saints’ presence during the winter of 1844–45 is the “Mormon cemetery,” the Mormon Coulee Road, and Mormon Creek, all located adjacent to the south end of the business district of modern La Crosse. Interestingly, probably none of the 1844–45 Mormons are buried in the “Mormon cemetery.”

James J. Strang. Strang’s connections with prominent Wisconsin Mormons may have lent credence to his claim that he was Joseph Smith’s successor. He became president and prophet of his own church, with its headquarters established first in Voree then moved to Beaver Island in Lake Michigan. After being shot, he returned to Voree, where he died in 1856, only twelve years after claiming the prophet’s mantle. Courtesy LDS Church Archives.

Postmartyrdom
Wisconsin Mormons

After the murder of Joseph and Hyrum Smith in June 1844, a number of Wisconsin Saints followed the main body of the Church and recognized Brigham Young as their leader. Prominent among these is Albert Carrington, who moved to Nauvoo from Wisconsin, followed Brigham Young to Utah, and later became a member of the Quorum of the Twelve. Moses Smith also followed Brigham Young for a time, but he died without real affiliation with any group of Mormons. However, the death of Joseph Smith also triggered the proliferation of splinter groups in Wisconsin. The majority of Wisconsin Saints formed the base membership of a succession of these groups.

The first person to claim succession to Joseph Smith and perhaps the most serious threat to Brigham Young’s authority was
James J. Strang from Burlington, Wisconsin. The story of the Strangite church has been documented in detail elsewhere, yet it is worth noting Strang’s connections with prominent Wisconsin Church members. In 1836, Strang married Mary Perce of the Perce family, who had been among the first Latter-day Saints in Wisconsin in the 1830s. Mary Perce’s sister Lydia married Moses Smith, and Lydia and Mary’s brother Benjamin had accompanied Moses to Wisconsin in 1835. Strang was himself good friends with Benjamin Perce.

Strang relied on these connections as he sought support and followers for his new church. Strang had been a member of the Church only since February 1844, and although he was baptized by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo, he remained essentially unknown outside the Burlington Branch. Strang produced a letter, purportedly written by the Prophet, that appointed Strang as the new president of the Church and designated Moses Smith as part of the new Church leadership. Strang also claimed to have received a “revelation” that supported his claims. The gathering place for Strang’s new church would be Voree, a new city to be built on the western edge of Burlington on land owned by Aaron Smith and Benjamin Perce.

Jason W. Briggs. Baptized in Potosi, Briggs later returned to his home near Beloit, where he organized a branch in Beloit as well as in Waukesha. He elected not to follow Brigham Young, affiliated for a short time with Strang’s group, and later was influential in the founding of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Courtesy Library-Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, The Auditorium, Independence, Missouri.
Mormons of the Wisconsin Territory

The initial reaction of the Burlington congregation to this spectacular claim is not recorded. But Strang soon showed the letter containing the revelation to a conference of elders that included Moses Smith. The conference remained uncertain of the letter, but agreed that Moses Smith, presiding elder in Wisconsin and Strang's brother-in-law as well as recent Nauvoo businessman, should take the letter to Nauvoo, where the Quorum of the Twelve could react to Strang's claim. It is possible that Strang's relationship with the respected Moses Smith was the principle reason the elders considered him seriously.

Smith arrived in Nauvoo in August only to discover that most of the Nauvoo members had already decided that Brigham Young, as President of the Quorum of the Twelve, was the rightful successor to Joseph Smith. Smith accepted Brigham Young's leadership and stayed in Nauvoo to make plans to leave on a long-delayed missionary assignment with the James Emmett group. However, Strang persevered. He tried to convince Moses Smith of the error of his ways, but his effort was not immediately successful.

Strang established a new church—as well as a new Wisconsin community. For several years, Strang's church was the largest Mormon splinter group. This significant schism took its roots and momentum from Strang's association with Wisconsin Saints.

Strang's followers also provided leadership for two smaller schisms in nineteenth-century Wisconsin. William Smith, Joseph's brother, was excommunicated from Strang's group in 1846. He formed his own group, made up largely of Wisconsin Mormons, most of whom presumably had been followers of Strang. Smith at first emphasized the "lineal succession" doctrine that appealed to those who did not follow Brigham Young or could not stay with James Strang. This church endured for only a few years but attracted a significant portion of Wisconsin's Saints. Gladdon Bishop, another former Strangite, organized a version of the kingdom of God that made some converts among Wisconsin Mormons in 1848. The significance of this group of dissidents has not been fully explored.

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints also has roots in Wisconsin. In 1836, Jason Briggs moved to Beloit to live with his parents. In a few years, he left Beloit to work in
the lead-mining district, where he joined the Church in 1841. Following his conversion, he returned to Beloit and was instrumental in organizing the Beloit-Newark Branch, which, by 1843, consisted of approximately twenty-five members. He also brought the Yellowstone Branch to join with the Beloit-Waukesha group. These branches eventually became the nucleus for the Reorganized Church. These splinter groups increased the visibility of Mormons in Wisconsin, although Wisconsin histories generally do not identify any clear distinction among the different Mormon groups.

The most prominent of Wisconsin’s postmartyrdom Mormon residents is Oliver Cowdery. In 1847, nine years after he was excommunicated from the LDS Church, Oliver Cowdery moved to Elkhorn, Wisconsin, to practice law with his brother Lyman. Although this Wisconsin venture was a small part of Cowdery’s career, Cowdery became a respected figure in local politics. He became an active member of the Democratic party, edited a Democratic newspaper, and in 1848 represented his party as a candidate for the first state legislature. Criticized by Milwaukee newspapers for his role in the development of the Church and a victim of the Free Soil Party–Democratic Party 1848 split, Oliver lost the election by only a few votes. In spite of this political setback, Democrats in Wisconsin’s new capital city, Madison, praised Oliver’s integrity and criticized both the religious and political factors that caused his defeat. A short time later, Phinehas Young, Brigham’s brother, returned to Wisconsin and in late 1848 helped Oliver and his family prepare to join the Saints in Utah. Oliver was rebaptized at Council Bluffs, but bad health delayed his trip west. In 1850 he died at the home of his in-laws in Richmond, Missouri.

Conclusion

Despite their relatively small numbers, Latter-day Saints in Wisconsin aided the territory of Wisconsin in its rapid expansion. They either established or were involved in the establishment of several towns and villages in Wisconsin; they pioneered the development of various kinds of agriculture, built the first dams and mills in several parts of the territory, and participated in civic activities. Latter-day Saints developed one of the first successful
large-scale lumbering operations in the Black River Falls area of Wisconsin and demonstrated the feasibility of long-distance Mississippi River transportation of milled lumber. For a small group of members of a persecuted religion, this is a respectable record.

In a kind of unconscious reciprocity, the Territory of Wisconsin aided in the early development of the Church. Latter-day Saints utilized Wisconsin resources for the construction of the temple and a number of other structures in Nauvoo. Obviously, members also benefited from the economic growth of the territory and used its resources to support their families.

Frederick Jackson Turner proposed the well-known thesis that the harsh realities of frontier existence stripped settlers of European culture and transformed them into strong, rugged people—individualists. Although Turner’s exaggeration of the transformative impact of the frontier is still warmly debated, he was quite correct in noting that the rigors of frontier life encouraged self-reliance and independence.83 Perhaps that independence is related to the Wisconsin Mormons’ choice to live on the margins of the Church and is the reason so many chose to affiliate with Wisconsin-based splinter groups, or perhaps simple chance attracted several charismatic types with their own millennial views to Wisconsin. Whatever the reason, from 1844 to 1860, most Wisconsin Mormons either were without affiliation, were Strangites, or, eventually, were members of the Reorganized Church.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was poorly represented in Wisconsin following the martyrdom, although missionaries were present from time to time. It was not until after 1870 that the Church attained a second presence in Wisconsin and re-established branches. By the end of the nineteenth century, converts no longer immediately moved to Utah but began to remain in Wisconsin. In 1998, Wisconsin could boast at least eighteen thousand Saints and more than fifty Latter-day Saint congregations, some of which have chapels at or near the sites established by Saints in the 1840s. None of these congregations trace their history directly to a early-nineteenth-century congregation, but they are cultural heirs of pioneers who aided in the early development of Wisconsin.

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NOTES

1 Members of LDS Church from 1833 to 1844 were the first to be called Mormons, but following the martyrdom of the Prophet, the original group as well as various groups that splintered from the main body of the Church in Wisconsin were all called Mormons. Lawrence N. Crumblin, "Religion," in Racine: Growth and Change in a Wisconsin County, ed. Nicholas C. Burkel (Racine, Wisc.: privately published, 1977), 502; History of Lafayette County, Wisconsin (Chicago: Western Historical, 1881), 641. The term "Mormon" will be used in this paper to denote in general all groups which had their origins in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, although most no longer refer to themselves as such. "Saints" or "Latter-day Saints" will refer to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

2 Alice E. Smith, From Exploration to Statehood, vol. 1 of The History of Wisconsin (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973), 183. This is the best summary available concerning the early history of Wisconsin.

3 Smith, From Exploration to Statehood, 120-21, 143-44, 196, 466. Smith writes that "the amazing thing about the settlement of Wisconsin was the rapidity with which it occurred" (464). In 1838 the Iowa Territory was separated from Wisconsin. Smith, From Exploration to Statehood, 269-70.

4 Smith, From Exploration to Statehood, 385, 471, 580, 641. Much of the anti-Mormon sentiment of the late nineteenth century had its roots in New England. At least some of Wisconsin’s anti-Mormon feeling, both before and after statehood in 1848, may have had a similar origin.

5 Smith, From Exploration to Statehood, 6, 8, 26, 28, 603-4, 606-8.


7 Stephen Peet, History of the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches and Ministers in Wisconsin (Milwaukee: Silas Chapman, 1851). [Based on author’s notes. Book now missing from Wisconsin State Historical Society.]


9 "Obituary," Gospel Herald 4 (June 14, 1849), 53-55. Moses Smith’s obituary was published in James Strang’s newspaper and was probably written by Strang, although no author is cited.

10 Andrew Jenson, Journal History of the Church, May 28, 1837, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City (hereafter cited as JH). Reference to other churches’ appeals for help are found in Smith, From Exploration to Statehood, 600.

11 "Obituary," 53. The report in Smith’s obituary of “about” one hundred members in the Burlington Branch by 1839 may be exaggerated, as were Strang’s reports of the size of his church on Beaver Island; see Roger Van Noord, King of Beaver Island (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 211-12.

12 The Wisconsin census for 1838 reports only 247 people in the Spring Prairie area of eastern Walworth County, where a number of the Burlington Branch families lived. At that time, only 1,019 people lived in all of Walworth...
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County and only 2,054 in adjacent Racine County, most in Racine. *Wisconsin Territorial Census Records for 1838 and 1842* (Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical Society Microform Library, Wisconsin State Census, 1836–95), reel 1. No population data is available for Burlington in 1838. The 1842 census lists Burlington’s population as 1,183. This figure would accommodate one hundred LDS members, but no names are available in the census for cross-checking. *Wisconsin Territorial Census Records*, reel 1.

13*History of Lafayette County*, 562.

14*Wisconsin Territorial Census Records*, reel 1.


16Among other contributions to the development of Lafayette County, members of the original Mormon community of Zarahemla are credited with establishing the first school in this part of Wisconsin. It enrolled between fifteen and twenty students. *History of Lafayette County*, 639.


22*Voree Herald* 1, no. 5 (May 1846), 3. This is a report on a conference of Church members in Lake Koshkonong in 1846. The *Voree Herald* was the name of Strang’s first newspaper, the predecessor of the *Gospel Herald*. It was issued irregularly, with each number usually consisting of one to four pages. Writers’ names were usually not given, but Strang probably wrote most of the articles.

23This view is illustrated in Clark S. Matteson, *History of Wisconsin from Prehistoric to Present Periods: The Story of the State Interpreted with Realistic and Romantic Events* (Milwaukee: Wisconsin Historical Publishing, 1895), 458. Matteson’s discussion of Mormons begins, “The pure air and virgin soil of Wisconsin were once polluted by that social leprosy—Mormonism” (458).

24The communities and farms inhabited and/or founded by members of the Church in the late 1830s and early 1840s were located in the southern Wisconsin counties of Racine, Walworth, Rock, Green, Iowa, Grant, Dane, and Jefferson. The combined 1840 population of these counties was just under eighteen thousand. Smith, *From Exploration to Statehood*, 468.
In 1836, at a meeting of the Church in Liberty County, Missouri, Church leaders discussed the possibility of moving the Church to Wisconsin. Andrew Jenson, *Encyclopedic History of the Church* (Salt Lake City: Desert News, 1941), 958. No record of any action on the proposal exists. A second suggestion of relocating the main body of the Church to Wisconsin is noted in the February 26, 1845, edition of the *Nauvoo Neighbor*. The article was based on a suggestion made by a resident of Macomb, Illinois, to Bishop George Miller during the months following the Prophet's death, when the future of the Illinois Saints was unsettled. According to Robert Bruce Flanders, the suggestion generated some interest and prompted a letter from the governing Quorum of the Twelve to a number of state governors requesting help in relocating somewhere. Robert Bruce Flanders, *Nauvoo: Kingdom on the Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 330–31.

JH, October 7, 1841. No evidence exists that either missionary actually worked in Wisconsin. Stoddard did not serve at all, and Isaac Cleveland spent time with Groves in Illinois.

JH, August 2, 1841.

Carrington, a Dartmouth graduate, followed Brigham Young to Utah, served as European Mission president on three different occasions, was a counselor to Brigham Young in 1873, an assistant counselor in 1874, and editor of the Church's *Deseret News*. He served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve from 1870 to 1885, perhaps the most important office in the Church held by a Wisconsin convert. He was excommunicated in 1885 but was rebaptized before he died in 1889 in Salt Lake City. “Albert Carrington,” *Millennial Star* 51 (October 28, 1889): 678; Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia: A Compilation of Biographical Sketches of Prominent Men and Women in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Andrew Jenson History, 1901–36), 1:126–27.

JH, May 29, 1843.

For example, William Buckminster Lindsay was baptized July 1841 at Fox Lake, Dodge County. Most of his family was baptized within a few years and stayed in Wisconsin until joining Brigham Young in Winter Quarters in 1846. Lindsay left a son, who was not a member, in Argyle, Lafayette County, and a daughter of this son eventually joined the Church. She was influential in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century growth of the Church in the Eau Claire area of northwestern Wisconsin. Marval Davis, “The History of the Eau Claire Branch,” *Eau Claire, Wisconsin*, 1992, holograph, in the author’s possession.

Saints continued to inhabit different parts of the southern boundary of the territory. For example, from 1841 to 1842, Joseph Holbrook, baptized in 1833 in New York and originally part of the Kirtland-Missouri-Nauvoo group of Mormons, moved to the Wisconsin-Illinois-Iowa border area and, with other Mormons, worked in the lead mines of Wisconsin and Galena, Illinois. After his first wife and child died, Holbrook remarried and in 1843 moved farther north in the territory to join the Mormon Black River Falls lumber group. Joseph Holbrook, “The Life of Joseph Holbrook, 1806–1871,” 52–53, 56–58, Mormon Collection, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; see also William Greenwood, “Autobiography of William Greenwood, Pioneer,” Mormon Collection, Special Collections and Manuscripts, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
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34 Wisconsin Territorial Census Records, reel 1.


37 The ecclesiastical leadership of the lumbering community functioned in a manner similar to leadership elsewhere in the Church. For instance, Church leaders in Black River Falls excommunicated members for various offenses, then sent a letter to Nauvoo notifying leaders of the Church in Nauvoo of their actions:

To: Quorum of the High Priesthood assembled in Nauvoo.

Dear Brethren: We tender to you the names and number of members cut off from this branch of the Church, that they be considered by you, belonging no longer to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Oct. 29th, 1843, Mrs. [P. F.] was cut off from the Church for lying, back-biting, and tattling from house to house, and disobeying the orders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

October 29th. [A. P.] was cut off the Church for lying, stealing and speaking evil of the heads of the church and taking a false oath at Prairie du Chien, etc.

Oct. 29th [W. H.] and [W. H.], unitedly were cut off for stealing, lying and cursing the Bishop, etc.

The three last characters in particular, conducted themselves in such a manner as bringing an eternal disgrace upon them. Yours in the bond of the everlasting covenant,

Lyman Wight, Prest.
George Miller, Bishop
David Clayton, Cler.

JH, January 30, 1844.

Ironically, the waterway remains a source of tragedy. The bridge on present Highway 95 that crosses Cunningham Creek was the site of a 1995 accident that killed two bikers. A runaway trailer filled with lumber was responsible. "Runaway Truck Kills Bicyclist," *Wisconsin State (Madison) Journal*, August 9, 1995.


Fries, *Empire in Pine*, 17–21. Logging along the Wisconsin River produced more than seven million board feet by 1842.


Rowley, "Wisconsin Pineries," 121.

Fries, *Empire in Pine*, 55. Several years after the Mormon pioneering effort in the long-range transportation of lumber, mills were constructed at La Crosse and other Mississippi River sites. Lumber activity along the Mississippi peaked late in the nineteenth century, but Wisconsin led all states in white pine production as late as 1900. The last large stands of Wisconsin’s white pine were harvested in the 1930s; see Fries, *Empire in Pine*, 20, 141, 240–41.

Rowley, "Wisconsin Pineries," 139.

JH, July 5, 1844.

Correspondence of Bishop George Miller," 19, 21.

Correspondence of Bishop George Miller," 24.


The group settled at the site where, apparently, Valentine Oehler (not a Mormon) built a mill in 1854. Sanford, "Mormons of Mormon Coulee," 136.

JH, November 6, 1844. The creek is now known as Mormon Creek, and the area where the group lived, a few miles south of the present downtown La Crosse, is now called the Mormon Coulee. The name "Lamoni" is the name of a Book of Mormon king who was miraculously converted (Alma 17–19).

Sanford, "Mormons of Mormon Coulee," 138 n. 7. In the early 1840s, the La Crosse area consisted of little more than a handful of settlers. The John Levy family moved to La Crosse in May 1846, more than a year after the Mormons had left the area. They reported only two settlers in the entire valley that year. In contrast, the Mormon population was 150 to 160 during their 1844–45 sojourn in La Crosse. The 1847 census, taken two years after the Mormons had left Wisconsin, recorded only 74 residents at La Crosse and 153 in Black River Falls. *Wisconsin Territorial Census Records for 1847* (Madison, Wisconsin: State Historical
Society Microform Library, Wisconsin State Census, 1836–95), reel 3. Interestingly, the 1842 territorial census lists eighty-five males and nine females in the entire area from La Crosse to Black River Falls. The 150 to 160 Mormons who lived in Black River Falls and who later made up the main body of the group that lived in La Crosse probably were the dominant numbers of the respective populations during the 1842–45 period. Robert Fries reports that the first lumber mill was not built in La Crosse until 1852, some seven years after the Mormons left. Fries, *Empire in Pine*, 20.

60 *Milwaukee Sentinel (The Republican-Sentinel)*, September 23, 1882. The late-nineteenth-century intolerance of Mormons is well illustrated in this newspaper article, written long after the main body of Mormons had moved to Utah but during the height of anti-Mormon polygamy hysteria. In this article, almost every description of the Mormon experience at La Crosse is false or exaggerated. The story begins with reference to the “fact” that “a more chronic lot of thieves never inflicted a county” although no account of thievery is given. According to the article, the Mormons were driven to La Crosse in the spring of 1843 from localities along the Black River by vigilante groups. Rafts of lumber were confiscated, Mormons were hungry, but no one would give them credit because no one trusted them. The winter was particularly severe, and when they left, they stole a boat, burned their cabins, and left graves along the Mississippi as they retreated to Quincy, Illinois, “while one mob after another attacked them.” Even the weather reports in this article for the winter of 1844–45 do not agree with the records that were kept in nearby Ft. Crawford and are informally filed in the State Climatologist’s Office in Madison. The only complimentary note in this highly inaccurate account is the mention of the Mormons’ “bright and beautiful” daughters. This almost completely fabricated account probably reflects the mood of the 1882 period. It does not reflect the reality of what occurred in the 1844–45 period.

Discrepancies seem to characterize the account of the La Crosse Saints (see above). James Allen and Glen Leonard imply that the La Crosse venture did not even take place. Allen and Leonard, *Story of the Latter-day Saints*, 218. Davis Bitton has suggested in an oral presentation that Wight took the entire group from Nauvoo back to Black River Falls, not to La Crosse. Davis Bitton, “The Lion and the Ram: Brigham Young and Lyman Wight” (paper presented at the twentieth annual meeting of the Mormon History Association, Park City, Utah, May 20, 1994). Sanford reviewed some of the inaccurate and highly biased accounts that were written concerning the brief stay of Mormons in La Crosse and concluded that many of the accounts were simply wrong. Sanford, “The Mormons of Mormon Coulee,” 142.

61 Bitton, “Mormons in Texas,” 11–12; Sanford, “Mormons of Mormon Coulee,” 130–31 (accounts of Nathan Myrick and Lafayette Bunnell). Considering the coming winter season, the log cabin story seems more reasonable. However, even tents are a viable option, since the winter of 1844–45 was uncommonly mild. No freezing temperatures were recorded during November. During December and January, approximately only half of the days were below freezing, and precipitation was recorded for only eight to ten days during the two-month period. February had twelve days above freezing and no below-zero weather. Weather records for Ft. Crawford, Wisconsin, State Climatologist’s Office, Madison, Wisconsin.
The mild weather the Saints enjoyed during the winter continued into March. During the early part of the month, nine days had above freezing temperatures, and on March 25, temperatures climbed to seventy degrees and reached above eighty degrees before the month’s end. Weather records for Ft. Crawford.

Bitton, “Mormons in Texas,” 12. One account of the final hours of the La Crosse Saints reports that the group left the area in the dead of the night without paying their debts and burned their cabins behind them. Sanford, “Mormons of Mormon Coulee,” 141. This is the account of La Crosse newspaper editor, E. B. Usher. The Usher account, like that of the Milwaukee Sentinel (see above), is simply an anti-Mormon story. Because the LDS settlement was the only major settlement in an area that consisted of just a few other families, it is difficult to understand what kind of debts the Saints might have accrued, and no reason has been given why they would have burned their winter homes. Myrick recorded that before the Saints left they came to his store and traded oxen and horses to cover debts they owed him. Myrick, Biographical History of La Crosse, 559. In several other accounts as well, published inaccuracies almost outnumber facts. These include the story in the “History of La Crosse County” and the highly inaccurate Milwaukee Sentinel account. Sanford concluded his summary of the La Crosse Mormon story by pointing out “the necessity for careful examination in the light of authentic records” (141-42). Unfortunately, few authentic records have been found.


Apparantly, at least one man (Loomis) who was part of the Mormon group remained in La Crosse after the main body had moved to Texas. Along with two non-Mormons, he is credited with raising the first wheat of the area. Within a few years, at least one additional Mormon family moved into the La Crosse area for a short time. Milwaukee Sentinel, September 23, 1882.

Sanford, “Mormons of Mormon Coulee,” 141.

The succession “crisis” in the Church has been extensively treated by a number of historians. A recent excellent summary is that of Allen and Leonard, Story of the Latter-day Saints, 213-19, 250-52.

Jenson, Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia, 1:126-27.


Van Noord, King of Beaver Island, 28.

Voree Herald 1, no. 1 (January 1846): 1.

JH, August 5, 1844.


Launius, Joseph Smith III, 82-84.
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78The history of the Reorganized Church is outlined in Launius, Joseph Smith III.

79Briggs's home, a few miles northwest of downtown Beloit, is an important historical site for the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Smith and Smith, History of the Reorganized Church, 3:203.

80Smith and Smith, History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints: 1844-1872, 204.

