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**James Strang and the Sabbath-keeping Mormons**

by Elder John J. Hajicek

One of the earliest Sabbath keeping churches in America is a minor Latter Day Saint church that is separate from the larger Utah-based Mormon church. When the Latter Day Saint church was founded in 1830, they rested on the first day, consistent with the New England Protestant climate where they had their cultural beginnings. How this small group diverged is an interesting episode in the history of American folk religions.

From its inception, the Latter Day Saints considered themselves a "restored church" wherein God would one by one restore all prior laws, priesthood, and ordinances which existed from Adam until Moses, and among Christ and his apostles. Thus, Joseph Smith wrote more scripture that the church compiled into books called the Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants. They gradually added high priests, a first presidency, and apostles into their priesthood. Over time, they added temples, washing of feet, and baptism for the dead, all before Joseph Smith was suddenly killed in 1844. But in 1850, the small variant of the Mormons carried on and restored the seventh-day Sabbath, and has been keeping it ever since.

This tiny branch believes that when Joseph Smith was killed, he appointed a successor named James Strang to lead the church to Wisconsin and Michigan. Brigham Young led the larger opposition group to Utah in 1847. Strang presented authentic archival documents in the hand of Joseph Smith, that appointed him to be the prophetic successor, and he claimed an ordination by angels. He was a brilliant backwoods lawyer, violinist, newspaper editor, and country preacher, who persuaded many of the earliest Mormons to join him.

The Sabbath was important to Strang early in his ministry. Though he made a foretelling distinction between the first day and the seventh day, he initially directed his missionaries to hold their meetings on the first day as had Joseph Smith. Thus, one year had not even passed when he claimed a revelation from God from which the following is extracted: *"And there [Voree, Wisconsin] let them assemble together on the first day of every week, to strengthen one another, and to receive instruction and blessings from me. Again I require of all who have received the Priesthood, that they go out and preach the Gospel, and teach as they are sent the first day of every week,"*(Revelation of 17 January 1845).

Five years later, as his church was being resettled on the Beaver Islands of Lake Michigan, he clarified that the seventh day would be the day of rest in the new island kingdom. *"The saints have been compelled, partly by law, but more by that public opinion or prejudice, which is above all law, to observe it accordingly. God gave them a dispensation to observe the first day, which they have done while under the Gentile power. . . . When the saints are redeemed from Gentile bondage, what shall excuse them from keeping God's everlasting law . . . ?"*[***Gospel Herald***, (23 May 1850): 78-79.]

However, the change to the seventh day was not universal for the church, but principally for those living in their own communities on the islands of the Great Lakes. That was clarified in the newspaper printed on Big Beaver Island: *"The Saints, when by themselves, and not restrained by the institutions of man, keep the Sabbath of God."*[***Northern Islander***, 12 December 1850.]

Strang soon produced a famous eighty-page imprint called *The Book of the Law of the Lord* on the island in 1851. He purportedly stated that the book was a translation of an ancient Israel text mentioned in the Book of Mormon and the Bible and inscribed on brass plates. The laws, he suggested, were those which existed prior to the added law which was later fulfilled. The book included an expanded or "restored" ten commandments text. When the book was being reprinted in 1856 in a 336-page edition, and while the sheets still lay gathered in the bindery, Strang was killed like his predecessor Joseph Smith. The church press was destroyed by an angry mob, with some of the uncut sheets being rescued. The church dwindled in size after the death of Strang, but stabilized and has survived intact if barely.

Today, most of several hundred believers in the church he led still keep the seventh-day Sabbath, although members who feel uncomfortable sometimes keep the first day depending on their own social environment. Many people leave the larger Utah-based Mormon church when they discover the original Sabbath day, but never learn about this other Mormon church. More information on this unique church, which has survived so long as such a small remnant, is available at [http://www.Strangite.org](http://www.strangite.org/).

**James J. Strang (1813-1856)** is loved by many as Michigan's greatest prophet, and hated by more as Michigan's most dangerous pirate-but recognized by everyone as America's only monarch. He was a debater, lawyer, abolitionist, land developer (Wisconsin and Michigan), Mormon leader, newspaper editor (New York, Wisconsin, and Michigan), temple designer, violinist, historian (*Michilimackinac* ), news correspondent (New York *Tribune* ), political lobbyist (Washington), and scientist (*Smithsonian* ). He was crowned king (1850), successfully defended himself against charges of treason (1851), and was twice elected to the Michigan legislature (1853 and 1855). He was assassinated on Big Beaver Island, Lake Michigan in 1856.

Strang entered the Mormon scene swiftly when in 1844 he claimed that the Mormon founders Joseph and Hyrum Smith had appointed him to succeed them just before their mob deaths. In barely a year, he had already duplicated Joseph Smith's style when he announced that he discovered an ancient American record inscribed on brass tablets in a Wisconsin hillside. Before long, he was issuing thousands of tracts and newspapers from his press in Wisconsin, and had gathered together several thousand members to his church. Brigham Young ignored Strang's affirmations, and took a separate group to near Council Bluffs, Iowa, and eventually to Utah in 1847. In the same year, Strang claimed to have a vision that the gathering place of God's faithful was instead to be in Michigan, on the Beaver Island archipelago. Land ownership disputes broke out with non-Mormons in the area, as well as jealousies over economic prosperity with neighboring Mackinac. Strang developed the city of Saint James, the best sheltered harbor on Lake Michigan, and established a steamboat wood trade and salted fish export industry. When his followers handed him a tin crown and wooden scepter in 1850, other area residents accused him of treason and robbing the U.S. mail sled. President Millard Fillmore stepped in by ordering the U.S. steamer *Michigan* to Saint James to take Strang to a federal trial in Detroit. Strang gained national fame and statewide favoritism from the press during the trial in which he and other Mormon leaders were acquitted. Strang had a political battle in Lansing that required an equally vigorous defense, as other politicians tried to unseat him from a late election victory in the legislative race of 1853-over a quarter of Michigan's geography in the sparsely-populated north. By 1856 his movement was growing so rapidly that a daily paper was implemented, his tabernacle neared completion, his capstone *Book of the Law of the Lord* lay in the bindery, and he was planning a run for congress. Former Mormons conspired in his murder with the captain of the U.S. steamer *Michigan*, and after a few pistol shots from behind a dockside woodpile, Strang lay dying in his wounds with the assassins claiming U.S. protection aboard the boat.

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