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BEAVER ISLAND AND ITS MORMON KINGDOM

BY CHAS. J. STRANG, ONE OF "KING" STRANG'S SONS

BEAVER ISLAND, the largest in Lake Michigan, lies about thirty miles northwest of Little Traverse Bay. From 1850 to 1856 this island was the headquarters of a band of people who assumed for themselves rights and prerogatives contrary to the spirit of our constitution and laws, and whose acts made a considerable portion of the history of the Traverse region for that decade. The rise and fall of the "kingdom" which then flourished there will always be a prolific subject for writers who visit this northern country.

These people called themselves "Latter Day Saints," but they were better



JAMES J. STRANG

(FROM THE ONLY PHOTOGRAPH OF HIM KNOWN TO BE IN EXISTENCE)

known as Mormons. Their leader was James J. Strang, who called himself a "king," and assumed many of the prerogatives of a monarch.

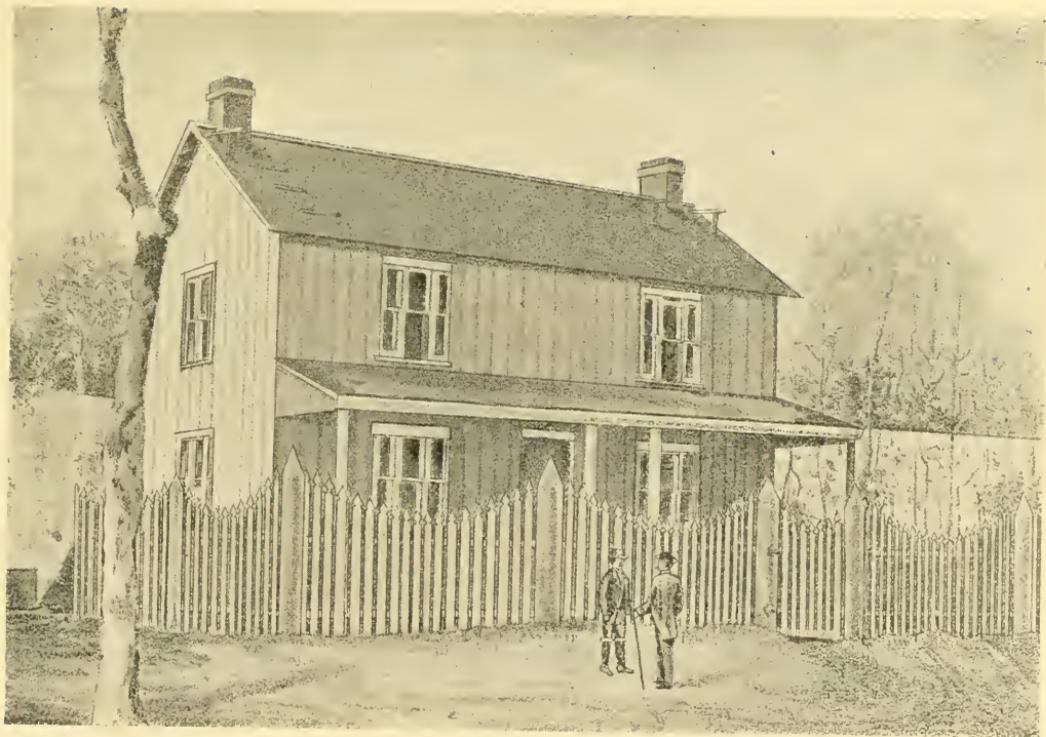
Mr. Strang was born in Scipio, N. Y., March 21, 1813, but grew to manhood in Chautauqua County. His education was obtained in the public schools of the county, closing with a course in the Fredonia Academy. He studied law, and was admitted to the bar. In 1843 he settled in Burlington, Wis., and some time before the death of Joseph Smith, in 1844, he visited Nauvoo and became a Mormon. After Smith's death, Strang disputed with Brigham Young the right to lead the church, and succeeded in gathering quite a large following at his "stake of Zion" in Wisconsin. In 1847 he visited Beaver Island, and decided to establish his people there, founding the village of St. James, which was named in honor of himself. On July 8, 1850, he reorganized his church and established the "kingdom," and from that day he was known as "King Strang." His authority was respected and obeyed by the "Saints," and as cheerfully hated and opposed by the "Gentiles." He controlled the Mormon vote, and was elected to the Legislature of 1853, and again in 1855.

The practice of "consecration" led to many conflicts between the Mor-

mons and Gentile fishermen in that vicinity. Such expressions as "The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof," and, "We are the Lord's chosen people," stilled the consciences and justified the use of property lawfully owned by others, yet it is undoubtedly true that many depredations were committed by irresponsible persons and deliberately charged to the Mormons.

Mr. Strang had frequent collisions with the authorities at Mackinac, but with his knowledge of the law, and his readiness in debate, he cleared himself from every charge. At one time the Sheriff of Mackinac County hunted him three days in the wilds of the island with a posse of ten whites and thirty Indians, and offered a reward of \$300 for his body, dead or alive, but Mr. Strang eluded them and avoided arrest.

In the spring of 1856 matters reached a crisis. A resident of the island, Mr. Thomas Bedford, had been publicly flogged by Mr. Strang's authority, and he determined to have revenge. He enlisted the support of a few others, among them Mr. Alex. Wentworth, and they decided to kill Mr. Strang. The opportunity came on June 20, when the U. S. steamer Michigan was in the harbor at St. James, Strang was fatally shot, after which Bedford, Wentworth, and some



RESIDENCE OF JAMES J. STRANG ON BEAVER ISLAND FROM 1850 TO 1856

others were taken to Mackinac, "tried," and acquitted. After the acquittal, Bedford and his friends organized a company at Mackinac and other points near the islands, and returned to St. James and drove from their homes every Mormon except a very few who were willing to renounce their religion. Strang's house and printing office were ransacked and robbed of everything of value; the tabernacle was destroyed, and the property of the Mormons confiscated and divided among the raiders. Warning was served on the Mormons to leave the island within a specified time. The warning was heeded, a few going to the mainland near Charlevoix, but the main body proceeded to Milwaukee and Chicago. Mr. Strang was removed to Wisconsin, where he died July 9, 1856.

Strang's house, which has been raised by recent writers to the dignity of a "royal palace," was substantially built of hewn logs, and after the dispersion of the Mormons it became the mecca of relic hunters, and so continued until 1892, when it was destroyed by fire.

Of the present residents of the village of St. James, the majority are Irish Catholics, many of them having gone there directly from Ireland. The principal occupation of the people is fishing, and they live happy and contented in their island home.