

A History of the Rise of  
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day  
Saints  
in  
Wisconsin

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*Anyone with historical information about the rise of the Church is invited to share that information by sending it to this website and it will be added. Thanks.*

## Sources

Sources include, "Polygamy on the Pedernales" by Melvin C. Johnson, Utah State University Press 2006; and "Minnesota Mormons" by Fayone B. Willes, 1990; "The Quest for Mormons in the Lead Mines of Wisconsin" and "Potosi Branch History" by Daniel M. Kelty, and "Wikipedea."

# EARLY WISCONSIN CHURCH HISTORY

Wisconsin Territory was created during 1836 and became a State of the Union on 29 May 1848.

The seemingly inexhaustible supply of pine trees of Wisconsin and their easy access by the Black and Mississippi rivers became a wonderful source of wood for building the Nauvoo Illinois houses, business enterprises and Church buildings, including the temple, after the Saints settled there in the spring of 1839. Also, skilled lumbermen had joined the Church and their talents could be put to good use.

During June and July 1841 **William Oglesby Clark** laid groundwork for the first Branches of the Church in Western Wisconsin. William was born 25 June 1817 in Madison, Indiana and joined the Church on 12 April 1835. His mission involved finding and mining Lead in extreme southwestern Wisconsin. He worked in the area of Potosi. At the beginning of his Mission in Wisconsin he visited the home of Church members **Isaac Zanes** and **Alvira Gilmore Whitaker**. There were several members of the Strong family in the area that had joined the Church and most were likely related to **Moses Strong** who had migrated from Vermont. William was allowed to preach at a Methodist Church in Platteville.

Issac Zanes Whitaker was born during 1812 in Chesire England and arrived in Potosi Wisconsin during the summer of 1832 or 1833 with **Willis St. John**. The two men discovered a large quantity of Lead ore in a cave near the area. The Whitakers had three daughters: **Josephine**, **Marie Emily** and **Henrietta**. All

eventually made their way to Utah with their mother after Isaac's death. **William Hooper**, who later became President of ZCMI in Salt Lake City, was from this area at a place called La Fayette as was **John Coons** who once resided at Kirtland Ohio with the Saints.

A very early Branch of the Church was the Coon Branch located near Mineral Point in Iowa County. It included the families of **Peter Maughan, John Thompson, John Craig, Mother Saunders, Joseph Hutchison, Nicholas Thompson, Jonathan Teasdale** and likely the John Coons family. Most of these members went west to Utah while most of those in the Potosi area initially followed **James J. Strang**. Other members in the Potosi area were **James F. Chapman, Nathaniel Jones, Jason Briggs**, and perhaps a **Michel Mitchell**.

Nathaniel Vary Jones was born on 13 Oct 1822 in Brighton New York, moved to Potosi about 1839 and joined the Church. He was later a member of the Mormon Battalion and marched to California. He served four Missions including one to Calcutta India.

Jason Briggs founded Branches of the Church in Eastern Wisconsin at Beloit and Waukesha. He initially followed James J. Strang but during the 1850s he established his "New Organization" Church.

The Clark family later moved to Santa Rosa California.

### **The Potosi Branch**

**Amasa Lyman** and **Charles Shumway** labored as missionaries in the area of Potosi until October 1841 and **Zenos H. Gurley** was called to work here during January 1842. Zenos Gurley stated in a letter that he had organized a Branch at British Hollow, three miles from the Potosi Mines where there was a Miner's Branch of the Church. He stated that many in the area were anxious to have the gospel preached to them. Zenos Gurley did not follow the Saints to Utah and in 1850 established a church he called the Yellowstone Branch in Lafayette County Wisconsin.

By 1850 Potosi was very small because many had headed to the gold fields of California or followed James J. Strang to Beaver Island.

Three brothers who were originally from Ontario Canada named **Benjamin, Phineas** and **Samuel Wright** became disillusioned with the Church in Nauvoo and moved to Potosi during 1842 to work in the mines. Benjamin became leader of the Potosi Branch. Members of this Branch included the Wrights, Zenos Gurley, **Isaac Whitaker (Alvira Gilmore), David Powell (Ann Evans), Samuel Blair,** and **George Brownson**. During 1847 most of the group joined the James J. Strang led Church which was headquartered at Voree Wisconsin and that later moved to Beaver Island Michigan. Some of those who dispersed from Nauvoo after Joseph's death settled in Potosi.

James J. Strang had been baptized in Nauvoo by Joseph Smith on 25 February 1844, ordained an Elder and instructed to create a Stake of the Church in Voree Wisconsin. After Joseph's death in June 1844 he claimed to be Joseph's successor and continued leading his group in Voree until 1848 when he re-established the group on Beaver Island in Lake Michigan. He was shot by dissidents of his group on 16 June 1856 and died 9 July 1856. At one time it was said he had as many as 12,000 followers.

Later, after the dissolution of the James J. Strang group in Michigan, many of his former followers settled in the area of Wisconsin.

### **The Pinery Mission**

During September 1841 a group of about 20 men left Nauvoo and traveled by boat up the Mississippi River and the Black River to near the Black River Falls. Some men took their families with them on this trip. Their leaders at this time were, **Alpheus Cutler**, a master mason for the Nauvoo Temple construction, and **Peter Haws**. Their mission was to take possession of a saw mill that the Church had purchased and begin logging operations. These logs would be brought to Nauvoo by river. The operation was called the "Pineries Mission."

Other men who would later become prominent leaders of the group included Apostle **Lyman Wight**, Bishop **George Miller** and **Henry W. Miller**. Of

these men who led the pine operation only Henry W. Miller would later follow Brigham Young and the Church to Utah. Henry Miller became the first Mission President to Indian Territory in what would become Oklahoma. Much cold weather, hard labor, hunger, sickness and suffering awaited those who took on this assignment from the Lord.

The first raft of timber from the operation reached Nauvoo by the end of the summer 1842 but no milled lumber had yet been produced and the operation was \$3000 in debt.

A previous settler in the area, **Jacob Spaulding**, claimed to own the timber and recruited an armed band to enforce his claim. He attempted to run the Church group from the area. Since no survey had taken place in the area it was not possible to make legal title to the land or lumber. The Church group had obtained permission from the Indians of the area to harvest the logs. Operations were slowed because of the threatening environment.

Bishop George Miller arrived in the late fall of 1842 to take over leadership of the operation with Peter Haws. Before arriving he had negotiated a settlement with Spaulding to purchase additional mills on the Black River and purchase Spaulding's claims to logging rights for \$12,000 and the first mill that was owned by the Church.

A supply boat led by Henry W. Miller during the fall of 1842 was to bring food supplies up the Mississippi to be rafted up the Black River to the settlement area but was so late it was hopelessly stranded in ice until spring and did not arrive at its destination. Ox teams were used to transport some of the supplies to the people at the logging camp to prevent them from starving during the winter. Miraculously no deaths occurred but the hardships in the snow and cold were indescribable and totally exhausted those who were in the supply march.

During the winter, trips were made back to the original supply by sled and by foot to obtain needed food in spite of the high snow and excruciating cold weather. When the ice melted sufficiently to begin rafting the rivers again all the

food was brought to camp, but even that was an enormous task because of ice flows and cold.

During the winter months of 1842 and 1843 some traders in the area convinced the Winnebago Indians to make trouble for the Mormons which they readily did. The Indians demanded food and said the trees they harvested belonged to them and they would burn the Mormon settlement.

George Miller had to accompany the Indians to a trading post where he could have an interpreter explain their demands and needs. He was able to pacify the Indians by purchasing flour and pork for them and assuring them he would never try to cheat or mistreat them.

During the cold winter months the group was able to continue harvesting logs and drag them over the frozen ground to the river bank where they were ready for floating when spring came. The logs were floated to a saw mill where they were cut into rough lumber and then floated to Nauvoo. Very long pieces of lumber had to be cut at Nauvoo because the Wisconsin mill could not supply them.

After floating the smaller rafts down the Black River to the mouth of the Black River they were formed into much larger rafts for floating to Nauvoo. Lumber was marked for identification before floating.

Production in the Pineries greatly increased during the summer of 1843 as lumber and shingles were made at a rate of about 12,000 feet of lumber per day. It took approximately two weeks to float the rafts to Nauvoo. Also excess lumber was sold for a profit which reduced their debt.

During the summer of 1843 George Miller persuaded Apostle Lyman Wight to gather a company of young men and families to go to the Pineries and help with the work. Wight did so but also recruited some widows and children which required efforts to house, feed and maintain them. Wight's reasoning was that the extra women could help cook and wash for the needs of the men. New houses had to be constructed. About 150 people lived in the settlement during the winter of 1843 and 1844.

However, oxen and milk cows had now been brought into the settlement and 500 bushels of wheat was harvested that summer from 50 acres of land that had been cleared and planted the previous spring. Also Bishop Miller had procured a boat called the “Maid of Iowa” for travel between Nauvoo and Wisconsin that facilitated their travel.

This boat became a sore point with Lyman Wight and the people there when they later wanted to use it in their migration to Texas during 1845 but found it had been sold by Priesthood leaders. Brigham Young may not have had anything to do with the sale but he got the blame. This seemed to help convince Apostle Wight that he would never follow Brigham Young’s leadership.

During the winter of 1843 and 1844 some of the members of the community were excommunicated for lying, back biting and speaking evil of Church leadership. Also at this time the Indian Agent prohibited cutting of trees in the area above the falls on the river. This was where the better trees were found. **Chief Oshkosh** of the Winnebago visited the Mormon settlement in January 1844 with his interpreter and a feast was prepared for him.

After hearing of the Mormon persecutions and of their love of the Indians, Chief Oshkosh asked Bishop Miller and **Cyrus Daniels** to accompany him 40 miles through deep snow to see the Agent where he promised the Mormon’s exclusive rights to harvest trees above the falls. The Agent would not agree and said he would have to consult his leadership in Washington.

Chief Oshkosh then invited his traveling friends to make a presentation to his people about their afflictions, which they did. Some of the Indians wept when they heard of the persecutions of the Mormons. They also remembered Bishop Miller’s earlier feeding of the Indians which was greatly appreciated.

During the summer of 1844 two large rafts of lumber were floated to Nauvoo, one with 87,000 feet of lumber and one with 68,000 feet of lumber. These were to be the last large shipments to Nauvoo as Joseph Smith was murdered on June 27, 1844 which greatly disrupted the Church’s plans.

When word came to Wisconsin of Joseph Smith's death George Miller was in Kentucky and Lyman Wight was in Maryland as both were involved in promoting Joseph Smith's run for President of the United States. The operation including the mills and their rights to harvest were traded to Jacob Spaulding for lumber before leaving the area.

Some few stayed in Wisconsin but most returned to Nauvoo. In Nauvoo Lyman Wight placed himself at the head of the Wisconsin Pinery group and tried to convince Brigham Young that all the Saints should be moved to the southwest in the area of what would become Texas. Apostle Wight was apparently convinced that it was Joseph's wish to move to that area.

Brigham however instructed Lyman to take a group back to the Black River Falls area and establish a settlement there. In September 1844 Lyman led a group of about 130 people back to Wisconsin but further south than Brigham had suggested. He explained that the people in their weakened condition needed a more suitable location. They did find an excellent valley that became known as Mormon Coulee. George Miller and apparently Henry W. Miller (no relation) were not with them.

After a very difficult winter Lyman Wight's group left Wisconsin on 28 March 1845 on their trek to Texas where they initially settled just north of present day Austin. See "A History of the Rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Oklahoma" for a description of what ultimately happened to these hardy people from the pine area of Wisconsin.