

JOSEPH THEROUX

The Reverend Joseph Dwight Strong

HE WAS AN early New England missionary to Hawai'i, a poet, preacher, photographer, editor, translator, traveler (fig. 1). Yet because of his restlessness and his temper, he was never popular, never remained long in any one place. His children would find varying degrees of success: his son and namesake would become King Kalākaua's government artist, while daughter Elizabeth would be called the "American Rosa Bonheur"¹ for her lifelike animal portraits.

The Reverend Joseph Dwight Strong was born June 5, 1823, in Granby, Connecticut, and could trace his family back to the Elder John Strong, a tanner, who had arrived in Massachusetts from England in 1630, nearly 200 years before. Reverend Joseph married 21-year-old Margaret Dewing Bixby of Williamstown, Massachusetts, on September 7, 1852. His older brother, John Cotton Strong, born in 1818, was educated at Williams College, where he excelled at languages, especially Greek and German, and went on to study at the Theological Institute at East Windsor (now Hartford Seminary). Joseph followed him to Williams and East Windsor, where he completed his studies in 1852. John was assigned to convert the Choctaws at Mt. Pleasant, Minnesota, where he eventually settled.²

Joseph hoped to serve the foreign missions, to convert the heathen. Instead he was assigned to Westport, where Joe was born, in 1853, and served there for three years. In 1855, a daughter was born,

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whom they named Elizabeth. About the same time, Reverend Joseph got word that there was an opening in the Sandwich Islands.³ He could go on his own because, for some reason, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions would not sponsor him, as they did most New England missionaries.

The early missionaries to the Hawaiian Islands, who first departed in the 1820s, had to travel around the Horn, but by the 1850s many came by way of Panama. The Strong family traveled to New York City in early March and booked passage on the Pacific Mail Steamship Company's SS *George Law*, a three-year-old wooden side-wheel steamer, which departed March 5, 1855. Their voyage to San Fran-

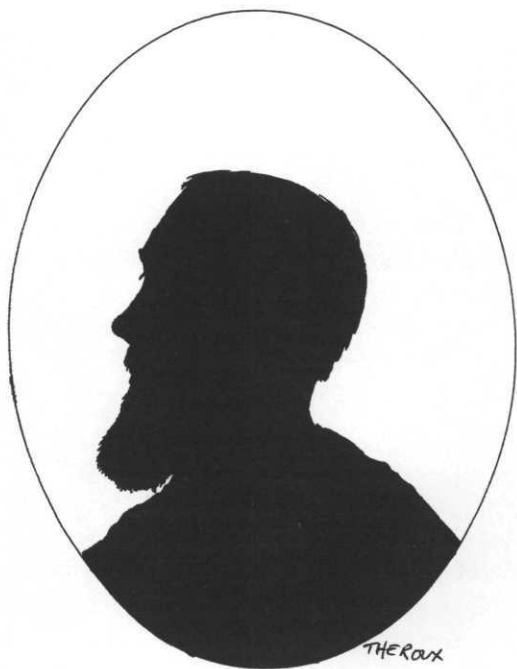


FIG. 1. Although many of the Strong Family were artists and photographers, no likeness of Reverend Strong has turned up. This silhouette is based on a study of composite profiles of several of his sons, as well as his self-description of having "great whiskers." Silhouette by the author.

cisco would be over 5,000 nautical miles. Also aboard the *George Law* were California's first senator, William M. Gwinn, and the founder of the Pacific Mail Lines, William H. Aspinwall. They sailed to the Isthmus of Panama, to the town called Aspinwall (now Colon, on Limon Bay), named for their shipmate. When they disembarked, they were put on a train—then up and running for only two months—which took them across the Isthmus.⁴ On the Pacific side, they boarded one of the company's coastal steamers to San Francisco. In San Francisco, they booked passage for Honolulu, departed on the clippership *Spitfire*, on April 18, and arrived in Honolulu on May 1, 1855.⁵

Reverend Joseph was named "interim pastor" at the Fort Street Church, also known as the "foreign church" in Honolulu. The Fort Street Church resembled New England Congregational structures, pale, high-steeped and wide-naved. The street was named for the fort erected in 1816. It was still there in 1855, although it would be torn down two years later when Strong was officially appointed pastor, on January 15, 1857.⁶ His first sermon as pastor was "The Right Hand of Fellowship," delivered on February 1.⁷ It was generally agreed that pulpit work was his strength, rather than the day-to-day responsibilities associated with the life of a pastor: visiting the sick, consoling the aggrieved, handling administrative tasks, and so forth. His sermons were admired; later some were even published.⁸

The Strongs visited the other islands, taking a mission boat to Maui and the Big Island of Hawai'i. Hawaiian children were fascinated by Reverend Strong's "great whiskers" (fig. 1) and his wife's "long neck."⁹ Margaret became pregnant again, and on October 25, 1857, she gave birth to a son whom they called Wallace Kealoha.¹⁰ The children enjoyed the tropics, the weather, and the water. But apparently they only had each other as playmates. Some years later Strong wrote:

Still those missionary children sometimes got lonesome, and very tired of these beautiful surroundings. There are no other little boys and girls of their own race anywhere in the region round, and the native children are still so uncultivated and unrefined, and have so many bad words on their lips, and such depraved thoughts in their hearts, in spite of all their wonderful improvement, as to make them very unsafe companions for well-trained foreign children. The consequence is that the little missionaries have to play nearly all the time by themselves.¹¹

The missionaries became friendly with Kamehameha IV, Alexander Liholiho (1834–1863), and his wife Emma Rooke (1836–1885). Elizabeth Strong's "earliest impression" was sitting in Queen Emma's lap, "while she told my mother about the cruelties of her elderly [sic] husband, crying briefly until she made me cry too. She was so young and handsome we had a little [daguerreotype] of her for years."¹² (Since Liholiho was only in his mid-twenties at the time, he was hardly "elderly"; either Emma was being sarcastic, or Elizabeth's memory was playing her false: after all, her memoir was penned some 60 years later.)

Missionaries were daily confronted with cultural differences, but the Strong's seemed to take them in stride. Elizabeth wrote:

Another memory was of going to the door with my mother one Sunday morning to find a splendid bronze figure of a Chieftess, there just from her morning swim, dripping wet with her one dress over her arm, so as not to get it wet for Church. All she had on was a wreath of flowers.¹³

Reverend Joseph had a love of horses which he passed on to his children. He took daily rides, sometimes taking tiny daughter Elizabeth in the saddle with him. She recalled that "my father always took me before him on his early morning horse-back ride . . .".¹⁴

But the congregation had not been happy with their pastor. The missionary paper recounted the complaints that came to authorities in letters, but they did not specify them. A church history does not go into detail, only saying that "some in the congregation were dissatisfied with his ministry . . .".¹⁵ On July 19, 1857, two years after his arrival, he resigned his position, he later wrote, due to "the failure of his health."¹⁶ But the complaints reached the Ecclesiastical Council, and his resignation letter was accepted on October 19. The council met on November 24 to "dissolve the pastoral relations." The council expressed "deep regret" at "any train of circumstance [that led] to his separation."¹⁷

An unsigned letter to the editor of the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* chastened him for misleading people about his accomplishments at the Fort Street Church, as well as for having claimed to have increased the congregation. "His observations in regard to doubling of his congregation since he has been here must have been made

with a pair of spectacles that saw double,” the writer stated, adding a bit of doggerel:

Of optics sharp it needs I ween
To see what is not to be seen.¹⁸

The family lingered in the Islands until December 9, when they departed Honolulu aboard the bark *Yankee*.¹⁹ As the ship pulled away from the harbor, Joe, now aged five, studied the view. He would return in 24 years and paint that same harbor for King Kalākaua’s birthday. (His two seven-foot murals of the harbor are now displayed at the Barracks building, next to ‘Iolani Palace.)

Joseph and Margaret, with their three children—Joseph Dwight Jr., Elizabeth, and Wallace Kealoha—sailed for California and settled in Oakland. Margaret had been pregnant during the voyage, and, upon their arrival, it fell to her to unpack and set up housekeeping. Joseph served at the First Presbyterian Church. On December 2, 1858, Margaret gave birth to a daughter, Ninole, whose name in Hawaiian means “weak, as an infant.” (Ninole is also a village on the east coast of the Big Island.) She may have been a sickly child, but she grew, according to all accounts, into a beautiful girl. Three sons followed in two-year intervals: Nathan Bixby (1860), Mark Hopkins (1862) and Dwight (1864).²⁰

Yet he was never able to stay at any one church—or at any one profession—for more than a couple of years. Over the next dozen years, he would be at various times a preacher, an editor, a school superintendent, a writer, and finally set up shop as a photographer. Though talented in many ways, his crusty temperament and his inability to work with others prevented his succeeding in any but solitary enterprises. The longest employment he would have would be some 15 years as a photographer, and even that was not as a portraitist but as a “landscape photographer.” He even traveled around Southern California for a time in a “photography car” taking pictures.²¹

His friend and fellow clergyman, Henry Durant (1802–1875), offered him a job teaching Greek at the newly established College of California (which evolved into the University of California at Berkeley, Durant becoming its first president), but Reverend Joseph declined, and instead founded the Presbyterian Church on Larkin

Street in San Francisco, in 1862.²² With seven children to support, he took to writing poems, articles, and moral stories for publication in *The Hesperian*. Margaret's stories were also published, albeit posthumously.²³

In August 1862, both took over the job of editing *The Hesperian*, a women's journal produced for the purpose of "inculcating lessons of morality, purity and wisdom" as well as a fashion sense. The Stronges "changed its title to *The Pacific Monthly* and broadened its offerings to appeal to the men."²⁴

His work for the *Pacific Monthly* included essays on a variety of topics, such as "The American Flag," "Craters of the Hawaiian Islands," an "Essay on Music," and "Mrs. Amelia B. Welby as a Poet." Having studied German at college, he was able to translate poems by Goethe, Karl Korner, Christian Alexander, and Johann Uhland, as well as contribute original poetry.²⁵

In addition to his magazine work and moral stories, Strong published at least two sermons. The first was on the notorious Broderick-Terry Duel, which had occurred September 13, 1859. His "*Plea Against Dueling: A Discourse Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church at Oakland California Sunday Sept. 25, 1859,*" was published as a 16-page pamphlet. His "Plea" alone may not have been the cause, but that duel was the last in San Francisco's history. And upon the assassination of President Lincoln, he published "*The Nation's Sorrow: A Discourse on the Death of Abraham Lincoln, Delivered in the Larkin St. Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, April 16, 1865.*"

The Stronges edited the *Pacific Monthly* from September 1862 until January 1864. Two years later Margaret died. She was buried at Lone Mountain, San Francisco.

The family continued living at Larkin Street for two more years, until Strong decided he needed a change. In early 1868, he was employed as superintendent of schools at Alameda County, but he either did not find the administrative tasks congenial or he did not get along with the teachers he supervised.

He took an assignment to preach at two parishes on the south side of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, which had had five different pastors in seven years, and had been without any preacher since September 1867.²⁶ He set out with his seven children in March 1868. It's possible

that he parceled his children out to relatives, since church and newspaper records make no reference to his family. Certainly the parishes could not afford a full-time preacher (and could not until as late as 1956), and he would be shared between the Congregational parishes of Hyannis and West Yarmouth.²⁷ It is known that son Joseph, Jr., spent some of this period with his mother's relatives in Vermont.²⁸

Reverend Joseph arrived at Hyannis on March 29, 1868, and served until September 1870.²⁹

Baptismal, marriage, funeral, and "admission" records from his tenure are sketchy, though it is known that in the two-and-a-half years he was there he succeeded in "admitting" or enrolling "eight or ten" souls, and officiating at the marriages of several couples. Local papers carried accounts of church activities and the church histories are full of details about their well-loved preachers, yet the same church histories only mention Reverend Joseph.³⁰

In 1869, while at Hyannis, Strong struck a deal with the publisher Daniel Lothrop and Co., of Boston, to bring out collections of stories he and wife Margaret had compiled while at the *Pacific Monthly*. The following year, Lothrop brought out a dozen of his collections with titles like *Truthful Jenny* and *Minna's Proud Heart*. They also published at least one of Margaret's titles, *New Year and Other Stories*. Lothrop made a real success with the publication of his own wife's work. Her name was Harriet, but she published under the name Margaret Sidney. Her book was *The Five Little Peppers and How They Grew*. Lothrop encouraged her to produce sequels which were equally popular.³¹

He returned to Oakland with his children. Faced with raising "a large family of small children" and little money, Reverend Joseph home-schooled his children. Yet, despite his strict views, they were often on their own and fending for themselves. Joe's brother, Wallace Kealoha recalled being "thrown upon my own resources much earlier than the average boy." He worked his way through school doing a variety of jobs such as a "coal miner at Mt. Diablo," and a shepherd tending a flock of sheep near Monterey.³²

Young Joe was out early on his own, like Wallace, and once referred to his "unhappy orphan days"³³—even though his father would outlive him—because of his estrangement from Reverend Joseph. The father's crustiness in alienating his Honolulu congregation appar-

ently extended to relations with his son. Once, apologizing for a “nasty” drunken episode, Joe wrote, “I am afraid that my father’s disposition predominates in my make up after all—what a mean thing to lay to one’s father.”³⁴ But, in fact, most people were struck by Joe’s genial disposition. He gained a reputation as both a portrait and landscape painter. He went to Hawai‘i in 1882 and made a name for himself as the king’s court painter and government artist. He also married Robert Louis Stevenson’s stepdaughter Belle and lived for several years at Vailima, the novelist’s estate in Samoa. He died of heart failure in 1899. Their son, Joseph Austin Strong, became a successful playwright and returned to New England, where he summered on Nantucket and was buried with his wife’s people in Rhode Island.³⁵

The strain of travel, along with editing, raising seven children, and appeasing a cranky Connecticut preacher had been too much for Mrs. Strong. From her, it is said, the children got their artistic taste. Following her death in 1866,³⁶ Strong was at loose ends, associated with six different churches and frequently moving around Oakland. He first lived near the waterfront, at the “Bay near Jones,” then at Brush Street, San Pablo Avenue, Gilbert Street, and lastly at Montgomery Avenue.³⁷ His children all lived nearby (after some travel) and pursued professions single-mindedly in photography (Mark), real estate (Ninole), art (Joseph and Elizabeth), and court stenography (Wallace), but son Dwight would take after him the most, being shiftless for many years before finding his niche as a librarian.

In 1904, ill with heart problems, Reverend Joseph was living alone at Gilbert Street.³⁸ At the beginning of January 1907, he became seriously ill. He was adjudged “senile” and treated for “fatty decomposition of the heart.” He died at his home on January 25. He was 83 years old. Dr. Bodle, his brother-in-law, signed his death certificate the same day.³⁹ His surviving children attended his wake and funeral, and he was cremated two days later. He was buried next to Margaret at Lone Mountain Cemetery in San Francisco.

His obituary, “Rev. Strong is Called to Rest,” appeared in the *Oakland Tribune* the day after he died. It recounted his career in Hawai‘i and called him “a pioneer resident of Oakland,” and, though it would have irritated him no end, listed Wellesley College as his alma mater.⁴⁰

NOTES:

- ¹ Dwight Strong obituary, *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 6, 1938
- ² Dwight, Rev. Benjamin W., *The History of the Descendants of Elder John Strong of Northhampton, Mass.*, Vol. 1 of 2 vols., (Albany, New York: Joel Munsell, 1871) 412–413
- ³ Dwight, *History of the Descendants* 412.
- ⁴ *New York Times*, Mar. 6, 1855: “Rev. J. D. Strong, lady and infant” sailed on the *SS George Law* (i.e., Elizabeth, but Joe, though with them, was not recorded in the paper; *The Friend*, however, reported in its June 1855 issue that “Rev. J.D. Strong, lady and two children” arrived on the *Spitfire* on May 1.); see also web-site: “Passenger Lists—Bound for California,” www.pt5dome.com/PassHome.html
- ⁵ *F*, June 1855.
- ⁶ *F*, Feb. 3, 1855.
- ⁷ *F*, Dec. 1857.
- ⁸ Strong’s sermons were: *The Nation’s Sorrow: A Discourse on the Death of Abraham Lincoln, delivered in the Larkin St. Presbyterian Church, San Francisco, Apr. 16, 1865*, (San Francisco: G.L. Kenney & Co., 1865); and *A Plea Against Killing: A Discourse Occasioned by the Terry-Broderick Duel, Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church at Oakland, California, Sunday, Sept. 25, 1859*, (San Francisco: Towne, 1859).
- ⁹ Strong, Rev. J. D. *Child Life in Many Lands* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Co., undated, but 1870) 9.
- ¹⁰ Dwight, *History of the Descendants* 412.
- ¹¹ Strong, *Child Life* 178.
- ¹² Strong, Elizabeth, *Autobiographical Sketch*, (10-page memoir by Joseph Strong’s sister, handwritten, unpaginated, and undated, but possibly ca. 1915; BANC Mss. C-H 171, Bancroft Library, U of California at Berkeley), [Page numbers refer to author’s annotated typescript] 1
- ¹³ Strong, *Sketch* 1
- ¹⁴ Strong, *Sketch* 1
- ¹⁵ Dabagh, Jean L., and Esperett-Case, Suzette, *Central Union Church: A Hundred and One years 1887–1988*, (Honolulu, 1988) 23–24.
- ¹⁶ Dwight, *History of the Descendants* 412.
- ¹⁷ *F*, Dec. 1857.
- ¹⁸ *PCA*, Dec. 10, 1857.
- ¹⁹ *PCA*, Dec. 10, 1857.
- ²⁰ Dwight, *History of the Descendants* 412.
- ²¹ Issler, Anne R., *Happier For His Presence: San Francisco and Robert Louis Stevenson* (Standford, California: Stanford U P, 1949).
- ²² Strong, *Sketch* 2.
- ²³ Dwight, *History of the Descendants* 412.

- ²⁴ Walker, Franklin, *San Francisco's Literary Frontier*, (New York: Knopf, 1939) 258.
- ²⁵ California Information File: *Rev. J.D. Strong*, California State Library at Sacramento.
- ²⁶ *West Yarmouth Congregational Church History* (bound, handwritten mss. summary of church records, 1840–1940, 271 pp., “Copy from the old Records.” (List of pastors, birth, marriage, funeral, and admission records, chronology, index) WYCC archives, West Yarmouth, Mass.) 260.
- ²⁷ *Barnstable Patriot*, “The Congregational Church in Hyannis” Apr. 24, 1877 (newspapers, bound volumes, Hyannis Public Library, Hyannis, Mass.); and Vuilleumier, Marion Rawson, *Churches on Cape Cod* (Taunton, Mass.: Wm. S. Sullwold Publishing, 1974) 74, 76.
- ²⁸ Strong, Joseph Dwight, Jr., Letters (identified in the Notes as “JDS to CWS,” refer to letters from Joseph Dwight Strong and Belle Strong in the Charles Warren Stoddard Collection, reference HM 37959-38165, originals at the Huntington Library, San Marino, Calif.) JDS to CWS, 22 July 1893.
- ²⁹ *West Yarmouth Congregational Church History* 260.
- ³⁰ *Barnstable Patriot* issues May 12, 1868, June 23, 1868, May 4, 1868, Aug. 4, 1868, Aug. 8, 1868, and Apr. 24, 1877.
- ³¹ “Authors and Books for Children, Margaret Sidney: The Five Little Peppers and Their Creator,” at www.elliemik.com/sidney
- ³² Strong, Wallace K[ealoha], *Souvenir: Thirtieth Anniversary of the Official Reporter, 1876–1906*, (Eureka, California: Jewett Brothers, 1906) copy at the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento 2
- ³³ Letters, JDS to CWS, Dec. 18, 1894.
- ³⁴ Letters, JDS to CWS, undated, probably July 1895.
- ³⁵ Joseph Theroux, “Stevenson’s Pillow: A Sketch of Austin Strong,” *Historic Nantucket*, (Winter, 2002) 5–9.
- ³⁶ *E*, Sept. 1, 1886; Greene, Charles S., “California Artists: II. Joseph D. Strong Jr.,” *Overland Monthly*, 27 (May 1896): 502.
- ³⁷ California Information File: *Rev. J.D. Strong*.
- ³⁸ California Information File: *Rev. J.D. Strong*.
- ³⁹ California Board of Health death certificate #7-000285, filed Jan. 25, 1907.
- ⁴⁰ *Oakland Tribune*, Jan. 26, 1907; another obituary (unidentified source) is attached opposite p. 1 of Strong’s *Souvenir*.