

# **The Rev. J.D. Pope, Baptist Pastor of Lee**

**by Linda Cantoni**

It is probably no accident that the great Christian revivals of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century coincided with the rise of the railroad. The new ease of travel provided an excellent opportunity for ministers to tend their flocks – and gain new sheep in the form of converts – from New England to the western wilderness. And so it became common for ministers to answer the call to serve in many different localities in the course of their careers – leading to some interesting experiences. The Reverend John Deming Pope, pastor of the Lee Baptist Church from 1881 to 1899, was no exception.

## **A Boy Becomes a Preacher**

J.D. Pope's youth and early adulthood were fairly uneventful. He was born January 9, 1829 in Edmeston, New York, the sixth of the 12 children of farmer Perry Foster Pope and Hannah Webster (of the same family that produced Noah and Daniel). J.D. was, according to his own recollection, the “most delicate” of the children – but he outlived them all.

J.D. had early exposure to the Baptist church. His parents were among the original members of the newly formed Second Baptist Church of Edmeston in 1846. J.D. began preaching at age 20 and at 21 was serving as a Baptist clergyman in Otsego County, New York.

J.D. went to Madison University (now Colgate), which had been founded in 1819 as the Baptist Education Society of the State of New York. He had worked his way through college by preaching, starting with only \$7 to his name. An 1843 course catalogue (when the school was the Hamilton Literary and Theological Institute) gives an idea of the rigorous theological education Rev. Pope must have had: close analysis of the Bible; Hebrew studies; “Antiquities of the Jews”; the geography and natural history of the Bible; “Syriac Grammar, and Syriac Chrestomathy”; ecclesiastical history; theology; sacred music; composition of a sermon; and Church government and pastoral duties. J.D. graduated in 1856 and was officially ordained a Baptist minister in 1857.



**Rev. J.D. Pope at the time  
he was serving in St. Paul**

## **Frontier Dangers**

In September 1857, the now Reverend J.D. Pope moved to St. Paul, in the Minnesota Territory, where he entered upon his first pastorate at the First Baptist Church. During the first six months that he was pastor, the church gained 66 new members, many of them baptized in the Mississippi River that winter when temperatures plunged well below zero.

Rev. Pope briefly went back to New York to marry Lucy Hough Bodurtha Morrison in May 1858. Lucy was born in West Colesville, New York, in 1833, one of the many children of Jerre Bodurtha, who was originally from West Springfield, Massachusetts. She had been adopted at age four by John and Mary Ann Morrison, and she used the maiden name Morrison throughout her life. She began teaching when she was only 15. She converted to the Baptist faith around the same time, and probably met Rev. Pope at a local church. After their wedding, he took her back to St. Paul with him. Minnesota had achieved statehood around the same time. The Popes' first child, Eugene, was born in St. Paul the following year.

Life was difficult on the frontier. Apart from the intensely cold winters, there was the ever-present specter of disease. One of Rev. Pope's early sermons in St. Paul was for the funeral of a nine-year-old boy who had died in February 1859 of scarlet fever. Rev. Pope urged the mourners to find "consolation ... in the deaths of infants and children. Christ has purchased them as his peculiar inheritance. Through him they receive 'the crown of their age, the purification of their stained nature, the sanctification of their persons, and the saving of their souls.'" One hopes that when, in 1863, Rev. and Mrs. Pope lost their second child, John, who was only six months old, they were able to take solace from these words. They were tragically destined to lose three more children over the ensuing years.

Another grave danger of the frontier also threatened their peaceful lives in St. Paul. In the summer of 1862, tensions between Native Americans and white settlers

in southwestern Minnesota were brought to the boiling point by the corruption of government agents who had cheated the natives out of hunting grounds, supplies, and money, causing many of them to starve. The Dakota War of 1862, also known as the Sioux Uprising, resulted in the murder of hundreds of white settlers, the mass execution of 38 Native Americans and the imprisonment of over 1,000 more, and the expulsion of the Sioux from Minnesota. Rev. Pope officiated at funeral services for several victims of the Dakota War that year.

The Civil War was raging at the same time. Rev. Pope, who had proudly voted for Abraham Lincoln in 1860, was most likely an abolitionist, like many Northern clergy at the time. In 1864, upon an appeal by escaped slaves who had fled to St. Paul, he welcomed them to his church and later helped them form their own congregation, the Pilgrim Baptist Church, still in existence today.

Rev. Pope also had the privilege of baptizing Russell H. Conwell, the famed Baptist minister and orator who later founded Temple University. Conwell, who was originally from South Worthington, Massachusetts, had come to practice law in St. Paul after serving in the Union Army. Rev. Pope was very proud of having received Conwell into the church.

The Popes' third child, Mary, was born in St. Paul in 1865. Rev. Pope resigned that pastorate in 1866, and the family relocated to Madison, Wisconsin, where their fourth child, George, was born in 1867. In the same year, they moved to Peoria, Illinois, where Rev. Pope headed up the Peoria First Baptist Church.

### **Back East: Ministering to a Murderer**

In 1868, the Popes relocated to Norwich, New York, not far from where Rev. and Mrs. Pope had been born and raised. In November 1868, he preached the dedicatory sermon at the renovated Baptist Church building there. The church then had over 500 members.

The Popes had their next two children in Norwich: Florence (known as Flora) was born in 1869, and Edward was born in 1872.

During his time in Norwich, Rev. Pope's ministry extended to a convicted murderer facing the death penalty. Though forgotten today, Edward Rulloff was a fascinating criminal whose doings garnered quite a bit of press attention in his day. Known as "the Genius Killer," he was (or purported to be) a doctor, lawyer, schoolmaster, photographer, inventor, carpet designer, phrenologist, philologist – and serial killer. His crime spree lasted nearly 30 years, including the murders of his wife and young daughter in upstate New York; the robbery of a jewelry store in Pennsylvania; a string of burglaries in New York City; and finally the robbery of a dry-goods store in Binghamton, New York, during which he shot a clerk to death. It

was then that the law finally caught up to him for good, and his death sentence gained him the sympathy of Rev. Pope.

According to a *New York Times* article from May 19, 1871, on the morning of Ruloff's execution in Binghamton, "A message was brought to him that Rev. J.D. Pope, pastor of a Baptist Church in Norwich, Broome County, [and another pastor] were downstairs, and while not desiring to thrust themselves upon him, were ready to extend to him all the consolation in their power." But Ruloff was apparently unregenerate. "The churlish heathen could not declare his independence of God and man except by sending word to these meek servants of the lowly Master, 'I won't see them – their stuff's all — bosh.'" Nonetheless, Rev. Pope and his colleague stayed to witness Ruloff being hanged.

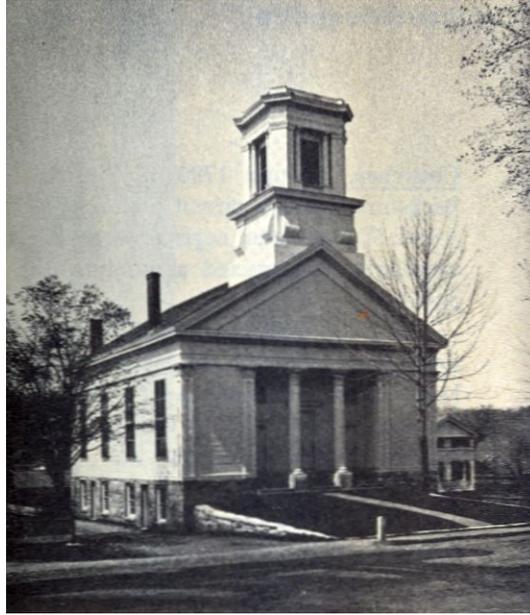
Rev. Pope resigned the Norwich pastorate in 1873, and the family headed to Canada.

## **Two Bereavements and a Catastrophic Fire**

The Popes relocated to St. John in New Brunswick, Canada, where Rev. Pope became the pastor of the Leinster Street Baptist Church. During this period, their lives were marked by two personal tragedies: Eight-year-old Mary died in 1873, and little Edward, aged only two, died of diphtheria on Christmas Eve, 1874. Rev. and Mrs. Pope brought them both back home to New York for burial in Cortland. But in between these terrible losses, some joy had come into their lives when their seventh and last child, Albert, was born in April 1874.

Tragedy struck again on June 20, 1877, when a terrible fire ravaged much of St. John on June 20, 1877, killing 18 people and rendering 13,000 people homeless. The Leinster Street Baptist Church and the parsonage were burned to the ground. Luckily, the Pope family escaped unharmed, though they had lost everything. Rev. Pope traveled to England and Scotland on a successful mission for funds to rebuild his church. But the fire had a profound effect on Mrs. Pope. Her nerves were "badly shattered" and she never got over it.

So, in early 1878, Rev. Pope resigned his pastorate in St. John and the family traveled to New York. By 1880, they were settled in Tully, New York, not far from where Eugene was attending his father's alma mater, Madison.



**The Baptist Church on Main Street, Lee**

### **Rev. Pope Comes to Lee**

In October 1881, Rev. Pope came to Lee to be the new pastor of the Lee Baptist Church. He bought a lot on High Street in November 1881 and had a house built to his own design. He and the family – Mrs. Pope, George, Flora, and Albert – moved in during the summer of 1882.

Rev. Pope's first service at the Lee Baptist Church was "greeted with a good congregation." The following week, Rev. Pope preached at a Sunday evening prayer service. The *Valley Gleaner* of October 21, 1881, reported that he "enters upon his work with zeal, and judging by the preaching and meetings since he has been in charge, an earnest effort is being made in a revival of religion." The following month, the *Valley Gleaner* of November 25, 1881, noted that Rev. Pope, at a "union service" of the Baptist and Methodist churches, preached a sermon from the text "The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof." It described this sermon as "an able exposition of the perfection and beauty of God's government."

In 1882, Eugene graduated from Madison with honors. Rev. Pope had the joy of officiating at his wedding on Christmas Day, 1883. The newlyweds then went to Chicago, where Eugene entered the University of Chicago law school. Tragically, their first child, Wright, died in 1884 at less than two months old. The baby was buried in Cortland with the children that Rev. and Mrs. Pope had already lost.

Mrs. Pope occupied herself with the work of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). She served as president of the Lee chapter, and in 1885 she was elected president of the Berkshire County chapter.

Rev. and Mrs. Pope sold the High Street house to A.P. Hollenbeck in May, 1885. Rev. Pope bought 12 acres of the Alexander Hyde estate and built a new home on William Street (then off West Park Street in the vicinity of the present St. James Avenue) in Lee. He seems to have enjoyed gardening; the *Valley Gleaner* reported in July 1885 that Rev. Pope had picked a “mammoth strawberry,” four and a half inches around, on his property.



**Flora Pope (standing second from left) with the Lee High School class of 1887**

Flora graduated from Lee High School in 1887. She went to Oberlin College to study music, then the New England Conservatory of Music, and later the University of Chicago. She became a music teacher at the Vermont Academy in Saxtons River, Vermont. George went off to Chicago to study at the Veterinary College there; by 1891 he had settled in Chicago with his bride. That left the youngest, Albert, still at home.

Albert graduated from Lee High School in 1890 (giving the “honor oration”), then went to Brown University, from which he graduated with honors in 1894. Like his sister, he taught at the Vermont Academy, but for only a year. For Albert was sickly, beset with that all-too-common scourge of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, tuberculosis. He had had a hemorrhage in the fall of 1895, but his doctors, blaming “overwork,” did not think it was serious. He resigned from his job, spent the winter of 1895-96 in Florida with his mother, and improved greatly. Rev. Pope also stayed with him for a few months. Albert felt so much better that he was planning to return north and resume work, but he had another hemorrhage, and his health gradually failed after

that. He died of a hemorrhage on May 21, 1896, at the age of 22, in DeLand, Florida. Flora arrived at his bedside just a few hours before he died. His brothers George and Eugene came to Lee to attend the funeral at Rev. Pope's house.

Albert was described in his obituary as "a young man of fine abilities and of sterling Christian character." Dr. Williams, who was the principal of Vermont Academy and "connected with Brown University," conducted the funeral service, and "spoke in very feeling eulogy of the splendid character and the helpful influence of the deceased during his college course, of his success and flattering prospects as a teacher, and of the very high esteem in which he was held in both institutions." Albert was buried in the Pope family plot in Cortland, New York, alongside the siblings who had died so young.

Despite his grief, Rev. Pope still led an active ministry throughout Berkshire County. In 1896, he served on a "committee of prominent Berkshire Baptists" who intervened to solve a divisive controversy in the Baptist church in nearby Cheshire. The controversy appears to have revolved around some alleged improper conduct (not specified) on the part of the Cheshire pastor. Rev. Pope preached a sermon at the Cheshire Baptist Church based on Jeremiah 31:12: "Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the Lord, for wheat and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all."

Mrs. Pope also kept busy, remaining active in the WCTU. In 1898, she presented a paper on Frances Willard at the Berkshire County WCTU convention in Lee. Miss Willard, a leading light of the temperance and women's suffrage movements, was a founder and longtime president of the WCTU. She had died a few months before Mrs. Pope presented her paper, which was probably a memorial. (A memorial paper for Miss Amelia Kilbon of Lee was also presented on that occasion.)

Rev. Pope resigned from the Lee pastorate in 1899. He was at that time the longest-serving Baptist minister in Lee, having served 18 years. He was then 70 years old, and the *Valley Gleaner* reported that he was resigning for "a somewhat prolonged rest from active work," made necessary in part to Mrs. Pope's "nervous prostration." He had offered his house for sale and was planning to attend the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in early October of the Baptist church in St. Paul where he had served his first pastorate. He was also planning to visit Eugene in Chicago and his brother in Michigan.

But Mrs. Pope died on October 19, 1899. Her obituary listed the cause of death as "nervous troubles culminating in paresis of the spine." It attributed her "nervous troubles" to "the terrible fire at St. John's," but failed to mention that she had also endured the deaths of four of her children, that of the youngest only three years

earlier. She was buried with her children and grandson in in the Pope family plot in Cortland.

In early November 1899, Rev. Pope left Lee to spend the winter with his son George, who was then in Boston. A letter from Rev. Pope to his niece, Lois Pope Prosser, indicates that in June 1900 he was visiting Flora in Vermont for a few months: “You will see by this that I am here on a visit with Flora, came up from Garfield [New Jersey, where George was then living] about two months ago, and may remain until the end of the term, a little over two weeks from now... Flora is well and sends special love to you all. She is too busy to write and can hardly get time to talk with me except by little snatches along the way. When the term is over I hope she may have a little time for rest.” On Christmas Day, 1900, he wrote again to Mrs. Prosser: “Last spring I spent several months with Flora at Saxtons River, Vermont where she is doing good work as Lady Principal.”

### **Life after Lee**

Rev. Pope sold his Lee house and went to live with Flora at some point soon afterward. She left Vermont and for a time was teaching at Marshall College in Huntington, West Virginia. Rev. Pope went with her and was still busy with his ministry. In 1905, for example, he conducted a funeral service in West Virginia for a 17-year-old girl named Nellie Mowen.

By 1909, Rev. Pope was living with Flora in Lynn, Massachusetts, where she had relocated to become assistant superintendent of schools. In 1920, they were living with two elderly female lodgers in Swampscott, Massachusetts. It could not have been easy for a retired minister and a “lady principal” to manage without the extra income from taking in boarders – even though one newspaper account from 1909 stated that she was then the highest paid woman in Lynn’s school department, with a starting salary of \$1,500 and an annual raise of \$100 until her salary reached \$1,800.

In 1919, Rev. Pope, then aged 90, traveled to St. Paul to visit the African-American Baptist church he had helped to organize. He attended services there and was warmly greeted by the congregation.

Rev. Pope was interviewed by the *New York Times* on the occasion of his 96<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1925, as the “oldest citizen” of Marblehead, Massachusetts, where he was then living with Flora. He described himself as a prohibitionist and a Republican (having voted for Abraham Lincoln). He attributed his long life to temperance in all things – he had never used liquor or tobacco, even when a doctor prescribed brandy to save his life. He enjoyed gardening and driving automobiles until his declining health confined him to the house after a serious illness at age 90 (which was probably influenza – Rev. Pope would have been 90 in 1919, during the pandemic). He added,

however, that “life is still worth while” and that he “would like to live to be a hundred.”

Rev. Pope died later that year, on December 29, 1925, of myocarditis and arteriosclerosis. He was a month shy of his 97<sup>th</sup> birthday. He is buried with his wife Lucy, his children, and his grandson in the Pope family plot in Cortland.

Rev. Pope’s surviving children did well. Eugene became a lawyer and editor in Illinois. He and his wife had four children after little Wright died. Eugene died in 1934.

George became a veterinarian for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He and his wife had one daughter. George died in 1937.

Flora, always affectionately referred to in the family as the “Lady Principal,” never married. She died in 1958 and is buried in the Pope family plot in Cortland.

The Lee Baptist church, which had been founded in 1850 with 20 members, was disbanded in 1917, and the church building on Main Street became a movie theater in the 1920s. Ironically, it was ultimately razed to make a parking lot for St. Mary’s Roman Catholic Church across the street. But the memory of Rev. J.D. Pope lives on in the home he built on High Street.



***Author’s Note:** In 2003, my husband and I bought the J.D. Pope House on High Street in Lee. Its history piqued our interest, so I began to delve further into the life of its first owner. Over the years, more and more material about him has become available, especially on the Internet, enabling me to find out a great deal about his life, his family, and his ministry. My research into his life revealed to me a kindly man of God, devoted to his faith and his family. It is a privilege to live in his home.*

*Many thanks to Mal Eckert and the Lee Historical Society for keeping the history of Lee alive and encouraging me to write this piece, and to the Lee Library*

*for making available so much valuable source material. Thanks are also due to the Minnesota Historical Society; the Minnesota Association of Baptist Churches; the Cortland Rural Cemetery; and the family of J.D. Pope. I welcome any comments or corrections. Sources are available on request by emailing me at [linda.cantoni@verizon.net](mailto:linda.cantoni@verizon.net).*