



Bottskill Baptist Church History Minute

Church Historian Ken Perry

December 2025- Leonard W. Cronkhite

(Before introducing the subject, this additional comment was made.)

A question raised to me is why do we have three doors in the church entrance? The answer pertains to the architectural iconography of churches- it alludes first to the Trinity. But more importantly, it refers back to Biblical times when there were three entrances to the city of Jerusalem. It also refers to the Temple, where there were three entrances, the center being the Holiest of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was, limited only to the High Priests, while the other two entrances were for men and women, since Shabbat was observed with the genders separated.

The individual you see here, who resembles a college professor, is Leonard Woolsey Cronkhite (1), the subject of this month's History Minute, and another of the oversized photographs in the church collection. He was born in 1856 at Sandy Hill, N. Y., a son of Marvin Freeman Cronkhite and Louisa B. Sargent. For those unfamiliar with the area, Sandy Hill was the former name of Hudson Falls, N. Y.

A graduate of Madison University in 1877, later called Colgate University, he completed his doctorate at Hamilton Theological Seminary in 1881. As a member of this church, he served as assistant to Rev. James O. Mason from 1879-1880, and was an interim pastor, between Norris Tibbetts and Edgar Smith, from 1923-1924.

That might seem like an inconsequential fact, except that after July 1881, when he married Carrie Foster, a daughter of Frederick Foster and Mary Crandall of Jackson, N. Y., the couple set out in September for Rangoon, Burma, now called Myanmar, as Baptist missionaries. If we had a census of the Cronkhite family it would show that only one of their five children was born here in Greenwich, while the other four were born in Burma, then part of the Indian portion of the British Empire.

The Cronkhites spent their first two years at Bhamo, also called Banmaw, among the Kachin ethnic group, in a northeastern province (2) near the Chinese border. They were next permanently assigned to Bassein, now called Patheingyi, among the Karen ethnic group, in the delta of the Irrawaddy river (2) in the southern part of the country. Bassein is about 360 miles directly south of Mandalay, which was near the epicenter of the earthquake that occurred in Myanmar on March 28, 2025. While the Mandalay region experienced over 5300 deaths, over 1800 of them occurring in the city, Bassein received only minimal damage and no casualties.

In 1886, the Cronkhites were responsible for building this missionary school (3) and he appears in front of it, in the center of a group of Karens (4), wearing a white pith helmet. These photographs can be found in the Burma file of the archives of Colgate University, which can be viewed online.

For forty years, between 1882- 1922, the Cronkhite family served as missionaries, with Leonard sometimes serving there alone. In 1899, he was left there as Mrs. Cronkhite sailed for the United States with a sick infant son, who died enroute, and was buried at sea in the Bay of Bengal. She arrived here in late April, as The Greenwich Journal notes “with her three youngest children and a native Karen servant girl.” This young woman, about twenty one years old, was called Miss Norrie and may have resembled the woman seen here (5) wearing a traditional sarong called a longyi. She was noted at that time as the only Burmese woman living in America and resided in Greenwich for about seven years.

Returning to the States, Leonard Cronkhite lectured at Colgate in 1903 and was guest speaker at several area churches.

In 1909, he returned to Burma for another six years, and his last service there was from 1917- 1922.

He was perhaps one of the most fascinating individuals living in Greenwich during his generation. Two unusual facts about him were that he was a rare survivor of the bubonic plague, which he attributed to the power of prayer. The other fact was that he was proficient in Esperanto and kept a broad worldwide correspondence with this invented universal language.

The Cronkhite family plot (6, 7) is found in the Greenwich cemetery just below the hill where the Soldiers’ plot is located.

For his service to this church and his efforts as a missionary, we remember Leonard W. Cronkhite.