

River & Sound

Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.
"The history of Old Lyme – the people of Old Lyme"

2nd Quarter 2026 • Issue #54

Lyme, CT: Thursday, July 4, 1776



In 1776 the town of Lyme was nearly 100 square miles. It included all of today's Lyme and Old Lyme, with most of today's East Lyme (the rest came from Waterford) and the southern part of what today is Salem. It was a prosperous town, and in 1774 had a population of 4,088, placing it 13th among the 75 then-existing towns. The largest, New Haven, was only twice as populous. The whole colony had less than 200,000.

Most people were farmers in one degree or another: the poor as farm hands, the wealthy farmed as a part of their business interests. Even artisans and professionals often had a bit productive land or livestock to help support them. For the majority, the farm was both home and business. By July 4, the plowing and planting were done and the pastures prepared. The first haying was underway or about to begin.

Eighteenth century society had a degree of social hierarchy and an expectation of 'due deference' well beyond what our own time would tolerate. They accepted these distinctions as natural. At the same time, in a town like Lyme (or anywhere in Connecticut) the difference in wealth between the richest and poorest was not as extreme as it would later become, nor as it is in America today.

Lyme was a Whig stronghold, in tune with most of eastern Connecticut. Reverend Stephen Johnson of Lyme's First Society had preached and written against the Stamp Act, and John McCurdy, a prominent local merchant, had paid to publish the sermons. Johnson had served as Chaplain for

the 6th Regiment when it was on service in the siege of Boston in 1775. He had wanted to serve again this year, but his congregation voted against it, and he was back in Lyme.

Sentiment for independence now was strong. For months, the colony had been treating loyalty to Britain as a crime, but only a few weeks ago, on June 15, had it finally sent explicit instructions to its delegation in Philadelphia to vote for a total break with England. News of the actions of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia took many days to reach Lyme, so there was no celebration in town that Thursday.

British warships had been cruising the Connecticut coastline for the past year, foraging on offshore islands, chasing merchantmen, and generally making trouble. Lyme had a shore guard, but they had yet to be put to any severe test. Like much of military life, their duty was long stretches of boredom punctuated by occasional moments of alarm. Since the evacuation of Boston, no British troops had a permanent lodgment ashore anywhere near Lyme, and that was a good thing.

Connecticut troops around Boston, many Lyme men among them, had been transferred to New York in April in anticipation of a British attack on that place. Just last month, at Washington's request, a new group of units was forming, enlisted for six-months' service. The push was on to get them armed and equipped and to New York as quickly as possible. New York was on everyone's mind.

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The mission of the Old Lyme Historical Society is to collect, preserve, interpret and promote the rich history of Old Lyme and its environs for the benefit of residents and visitors.

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From the Co-Chairs



Photograph by James Meehan

Dear Members,

We have a full schedule of events planned at 55 Lyme Street as we celebrate America's 250th Anniversary this year. Our volunteers started with a bit of cleaning and maintenance; our ADA lift and 18th century tall case clock were each professionally serviced, and our hall decked with festive bunting. The Archives team and others diligently sourced items for three new exhibits in our main hall, featuring artifacts and commemorative items circa 1776, 1876, and 1976. Special thanks to Edie Twining, Eleanor Hufford, James Meehan, Mary Dangremond, Mary Jo Nosal, Mary Ellen Jewett, Sandra Downing, and Ted Freeman for making this all come together in record time! The exhibits and decorations will remain in place until December, so you may view them while attending our event series, or during Archives open hours (Monday 9am-1pm & Tuesday 12-3pm).

Archives Co-Chairs Mary Ellen Jewett and Michaëlle Pearson visited Lyme Consolidated School's 3rd and 5th grade classes in February, bringing artifacts from the Historical Society Archives. The students were very interested in learning about children's lives and education in the 18th and 19th centuries, and enjoyed being able to touch and interact with historic items. Thanks to Lyme School teacher Nelie Brown for arranging this fun visit, and for delivering the lovely thank you card with the students' observations and favorite items listed on post-it notes.

The Society recently received a piece of transportation history. The controller module for Amtrak's Connecticut River Bridge, used to open and close the drawbridge for decades, is now on display in our hall. Thanks to Ted Freeman for sourcing this unique item and crafting a sturdy, wall-mounted display for it.

Our lecture and event series began on April 23 with a book launch and talk by Bruce Stark Ph.D., whose 1976 book *Lyme, From Founding to Independence* was recently republished by the Society in a 50th Anniversary Edition. Keep an eye on our webpage and social media for upcoming events throughout 2026. There's a lot going on at 55 Lyme Street this year. Join Us!

– Michaëlle Pearson & Mark Terwilliger, Co-Chairs
Old Lyme Historical Society, Inc.

Lyme, CT: Thursday, July 4, 1776

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Compared to strongly Whig Connecticut, New York was more evenly split between Tory and Whig. Nevertheless, the Whigs had the upper hand there at the moment. Loyalists were under pressure. On March 20, William Tryon, Royal Governor of New York, had fled New York City and sought refuge aboard the 74-gun HMS *Duchess of Gordon* lying in New York Harbor off what is now Liberty Island. He remained there, plotting against the “rebels.”

Patriot soldiers might hold the land around New York harbor, but the fact that a British ship-of-the-line could safely anchor in its midst for months on end was proof of the non-existence of a meaningful American naval force.

Among Tryon's plots was one allegedly aimed at assassinating General Washington. In mid-June an investigation into the allegations implicated two members of Washington's personal Life Guards, Thomas Hickey and Michael Lynch. The chief witness was a counterfeiter facing charges, but Hickey never denied them, saying only he signed on with the Tories to protect himself when the British arrived and won. Colonel Samuel Holden Parsons of Lyme was President of the Court Martial that convicted Hickey of treason on June 26, so it is possible that some in Lyme knew of this affair. Connecticut Deputy Governor Matthew Griswold was also from Lyme. As a member of the colony's Council of Safety, he would likely have heard this news by July 4, though it may not yet have been general knowledge.

The most striking news of the past week in New York was the sighting off Sandy Hook on June 29 of the first ships of what would prove to be the British invasion fleet. By early August there would be nearly 400 ships and 32,000 troops – but that was in the unseen future. Especially compared to what would come, today was still mostly business as usual, but get ready!

– Mark Terwilliger



The Society's stage is set for a series of talks and events celebrating 250 years of American Independence. Thanks to Edie Twining for the great set design.

Exhibits



1776



1876



1976

America's 250th Exhibits are now on display at the Old Lyme Historical Society, 55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme.

Photographs by James Meehan



Celebrating
**250 YEARS OF
AMERICAN
INDEPENDENCE**

All events will be held at the Old Lyme Historical Society, 55 Lyme Street, Old Lyme, CT



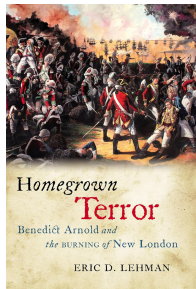
May 14th, 7pm

History of the Stars & Stripes
by James Meehan

Artist and antiquarian James Meehan presents examples of some of America's earliest flags and the symbolism and history behind these designs. The presentation timeline begins on June 14, 1777 and features the flag's role in historical events through the 21st century, as well its application to American painting, photography and commercial arts.

May 25th Memorial Day 10am - 1pm

Open House at the Old Lyme Historical Society, 55 Lyme St., featuring exhibits of memorabilia and commemorative items.



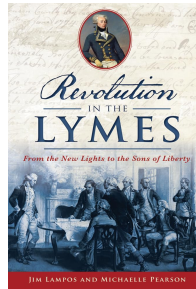
June 6th, 7pm

Homegrown Terror: Benedict Arnold and the Burning of New London
by Eric D. Lehman

On September 6, 1781, Connecticut native Benedict Arnold and a force of 1,700 British soldiers and loyalists took Fort Griswold and burnt New London to the ground. The brutality of the invasion galvanized the new nation, and "Remember New London!" would become a rallying cry for troops under General Lafayette. In *Homegrown Terror*, Eric D. Lehman chronicles the events leading up to the attack and highlights this key transformation in Arnold—the point where he went from betraying his comrades to massacring his neighbors and destroying their homes.

June 21st Make Music Day 5pm - 7pm

Join us at 55 Lyme Street for hands-on musical fun and kids' activities!



June 29th, 7pm

Revolution in the Lymes - From the New Lights to the Sons of Liberty
by Jim Lampos & Michelle Pearson

The Revolutionary War in the Lymes started as a rebellion of ideas. From its origins in the Cromwellian Saybrook Colony, Lyme (today's Lyme, Old Lyme, East Lyme and Salem) prospered under the free hand of self-governance and spurned King George III's efforts to rein in the wayward colonies. In 1765, Reverend Stephen Johnson wrote incendiary missives against the Stamp Act. A few years later, the town hosted its own Tea Party, burning one hundred pounds of British tea near the town green. When the alarm came from Lexington in 1775, Lyme's citizens were among the first to answer.

July 2nd, 7pm

What a Glorious Crash They Made: Musick of Connecticut's Revolution
by Richard Franklin Donohue

What a Glorious Crash They Made features "New Songs" and Hymns published in Connecticut during the American Revolution. From the time of the Stamp Act through the British surrender at Yorktown, Connecticut colonists used these works to foment rebellion, commemorate victory, and give thanks for preservation. Richard Franklin Donohue (Tenor, Harpsichord), will explore this fiery repertoire that in the words of John Adams "cultivated the sensations of Freedom."

September 26th, 6pm

Lyme's Native American Fighters of the Revolution
by John Pfeiffer

The indigenous Nehantic people who lived in Lyme long before European settlement were exceptional warriors who joined the Patriot cause during the American Revolution. Nehantics served at Bunker Hill, Ticonderoga, and Saratoga. They sailed on the Essex-built warship *Oliver Cromwell*, were at the retreat of New York, and imprisoned on the death ships at Wallabout Bay, Brooklyn. Nehantic men gave their lives for American freedom, but over the past 250 years their names, sacrifice, and contributions to America were forgotten. The 250th celebration will be the start of their remembrance.



October 22nd, 6³⁰pm

Kevin Johnson
as *Jordan Freeman of Lyme*

Jordan Freeman was an actual person, and although he did not enlist himself, he witnessed key events of the war for independence while with Col. Ledyard. Historians estimate the number of Black soldiers in this war to have been about 5,000, serving in militias, seagoing services, and support activities, including nearly 500 from Connecticut. Some enlisted because they felt it was their duty; others because they were offered their freedom in return for satisfactory completion of a set period of service. This presentation is based on extensive research in the collections of the Connecticut State Library and the Museum of Connecticut History.

December 3rd, 6pm

Nine Centuries of Christmas music
by Richard Franklin Donohue

Gregorian chant from the 10th century to music from the height of the Victorian era.