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[Content Note](#)

### Institutional History

In 1867, residents of Lawrence Township felt it necessary to organize a society that would pursue and apprehend horse thieves, robbers, incendiaries, or other such criminals who threatened the well being of the community. The constitution and by laws of the society provided for the appointment of "pursuers" who attempted to apprehend the criminals who had committed offenses against society members. A state law passed in 1884 authorized members of "thief detecting" societies, "without warrant, to apprehend and arrest all persons committing breaches of the peace." The Lawrence Vigilant Society generally drew its members from the more affluent sections of township society: hotel owners, prosperous farmers and eminent professional men. In 1891 the Lawrence Vigilant Society, together with several other such Societies from the central Jersey Pennsylvania area, formed the Grand Consolidated Vigilante Society of New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

In spite of its several powers and responsibilities, the society proved to be rather ineffective in curbing criminal activity in the Lawrence Township area. The society reported only eight cases of thievery or arson in the first seventy-five years of its existence, none of which led to the arrest of suspected perpetrators. Gradually, the society became more of a social club, rather than a true vigilante organization. Instead of relying on their own members as amateur "pursuers," the society hired professional detectives in seeking to arrest criminals and recover stolen articles. The society's annual dinner meeting became the highlight of its activities.

### Bibliography

Barnsley, Edward R. *Golden Jubilee, 1891-1941*. (Princeton Press, 1941).

Lawrence Vigilant Society. *75th Anniversary: Diamond Jubilee, 1867-1942*.

### Content Note

The Lawrence Vigilant Society record book includes the constitution, by-laws, officers, members, and minutes of each meeting. The minutes include business of the meeting, roll call, dues, accounts of infractions committed against members of the society, and how such infractions were resolved.

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