



Vol. 22, No. 7

July 2025

# The Gateway Gazette

*The Newsletter of the Lee Historical Society*

***Our unique history and blend of people defines the foundation of our Town.***

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*The Monthly Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, July 10<sup>th</sup> at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.*



## **FROM THE EDITORS**

For a small town like Lee, it's amazing that for as many stories we tell in this newsletter we still have an endless list to discover. People who think they don't like history (none of whom I'm sure are reading this right now) just need to be reminded that history is the story of the people who came before us, not just lists of dates and events. Like a conversation at a dinner party full of our friends - for every story we tell, we hear more, even better stories, from our friends. Even day to day experiences of others that are not our experiences (like life working in a paper mill) add to our knowledge of the history of Lee. Feel free to contact us to add to our stories, who knows, they may make it into the newsletter. Email Tracie at [ethere@gmail.com](mailto:ethere@gmail.com).

## FROM TRAGEDY TO REFORM

Lee, being an industrial town in an industrial state, experienced events that were part of the catalyst that led to changes in factory safety rules in the United States. Between 1850 and 1890 all types of factories across the country slowly transitioned from being powered by



water wheels to being powered by new industrial steam boilers, this obviously included the numerous paper mills along the Housatonic River. As with any other new technology that is adopted for use, there were no safety outlines guiding the installation or use of steam boilers, and any accidents that occurred in their use was chalked up to being the cost of doing business.

While it is difficult to know exactly when steam boilers were installed in each of the paper mills in Lee, we do know that during a rebuild of the Housatonic Mill by Platner and Smith in 1858 they installed a steam boiler, which sadly exploded only two years

later. According to the Valley Gleaner:

“One large steam boiler of the four used in Messrs. Platner & Smith’s new Housatonic paper-mill in this village, exploded this (Thursday) morning, with a tremendous report, a few minutes before 6 o’clk [sic]. The large boiler house, outside of the main building, is in ruins; fragments of the boiler and building were thrown a long distance around, many windows in the mill are gone, and other adjoining buildings injured, but very fortunately no person of the 139 usually employed on the premises, was injured.”

Just a few years later, again at the Housatonic Mill, one of the worse boiler related accidents in Lee occurred. This incident is cited as being one of the events that lead to Massachusetts looking into instituting new rules about the installation and maintenance of industrial boilers, and eventually the rest of the country following suit to do so as well. From the June 10th 1875 Valley Gleaner:

“One of the saddest accidents that ever occurred in Lee, took place on Tuesday last at about 1:15 pm. The people of the village were startled by a terrific crash which reverberated through the town followed by the hissing steam, caused by the bursting of one of the steam boilers in the Housatonic Mill of the Smith Paper Company. The explosion was followed by a shower of bricks, fragments of broken timber, and parts of the boiler, completely filling the air.”

This explosion completely destroyed the brick boiler house and damaged surrounding structures. Unlike the previous incident this one tragically had human casualties as well. The explosion resulted in two deaths and around thirty additional people injured. William Brown, a carpenter in the factory, was killed immediately as he walked past the boiler when it exploded, he was hit in the head by flying debris and died on the spot. Most of those injured were in the adjoining rag room when boiling water streamed through broken windows that connected the two rooms. Mary Fallon was on a platform between the rag and sorting rooms, and was found dead in the aftermath.

Because of the loss of life this incident required an inquest to discover the cause of the explosion. Expert witnesses from across the state were called in to investigate the boiler and resulting damage and to give their analysis of what had happened. The first witness questioned was Dr. Wright, the Lee physician responsible for Mary Fallon's autopsy. who testified that Mary's head and shoulders were badly bruised and her lungs and other internal organs injured, but "whether those injuries were occasioned from the missiles of the explosion, or by her falling from the elevated platform, he could not decide." The panel ruled that Mary's death was due to her falling off the platform while trying to flee the explosion.

Boiler experts from Pittsfield, Springfield, Hartford and Boston, including a representative from the boiler manufacturer, were called to offer their opinions about what happened. The cause of the accident was agreed to be a weak spot on a wall of the boiler caused by corrosion from the constant use the boiler was subjected to. Although seemingly well maintained and operated within acceptable parameters the weak spot had escaped notice and given way while the boiler was at pressure. This incident initiated discussions in the state to address how to prevent such accidents in the future.

The American Society of Mechanical Engineers was established in 1880 in response to boiler explosions like this one across the country. Between 1880 and 1890 there were over 2,000 boiler explosions in the United States. In 1895, the one of the first laws in the country addressing the problem was passed in Massachusetts to create rules around steam boilers used in industrial spaces. The "Boiler Inspection Department" was established under the auspices of the District Police (later the State Police), which was in charge of supervising ongoing maintenance of boilers and investigating any industrial accidents that involved them. The law required inspections of boilers when they were installed as well as rules about qualifications for people who were authorized to repair and maintain industrial steam boilers. The Industrial Revolution brought new dangers for workers as new technologies were introduced and slowly new safety rules were introduced to protect people from these new technologies.

Though decades have passed, Lee's early industrial tragedies were not in vain. The loss and damage endured by the local community helped fuel reforms that would protect workers nationwide. From water wheels to steam power, and ultimately to safer workplaces, Lee's story is a reminder of how even small towns can leave a lasting impact on history.

## **REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN**

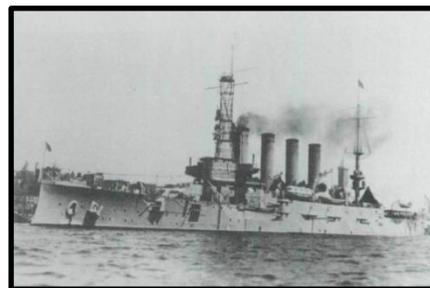
### **A Life Anchored in Duty:**

#### **Paul R. McGinty**



Born in Lee on September 3, 1919, Paul was the son of Thomas and Grace McGinty. He graduated from Lee High School in 1937 and later attended Berkshire Business College. Paul began his professional career in the purchasing department at the Smith Paper Company. But in January 1942, following the attack on Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy. He was assigned to the USS South Dakota, a newly commissioned battleship that would soon become one of the most formidable vessels of the war.

After a month’s duty in the Atlantic for a shakedown run, the ship and her crew were sent through the Panama Canal and into the Pacific theater to reinforce Allied forces waging the Guadalcanal campaign. The South Dakota—referred to in wartime press as “*Battleship X*” and “*Old Nameless*” due to military secrecy—earned legendary status for her role in key Pacific battles, including Guadalcanal, the Mariana and Palau Islands, the Philippines campaign, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Her crew, including McGinty, endured fierce combat and long stretches of tense anticipation. In less than five years of active service, the *South Dakota* earned more battle stars than many ships did in decades.



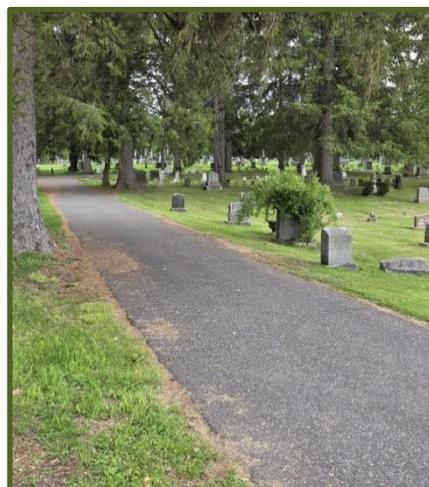
While stationed as an instructor at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, Paul married Rita Mary Norton, also of Lee, in 1944. Rita had worked in the same purchasing department at Smith Paper where they first met. They would eventually have a son and three daughters.

After his discharge in 1945, Paul returned briefly to Lee to work at Smith Paper again, before resigning his position to relocate to Los Altos, California, in 1948. There he began a long career in the sales department of Nationwide Papers, remaining with the company until his death on November 8, 1990, at age 71.

See the article below about our July History Exhibit to see why we profiled Paul McGinty as our Lee veteran this month.



### LEE THEN AND NOW



We’ve shown a Lee Then and Now in Fairmount Cemetery before from a different angle (in our September 2023 newsletter). As before, we are comparing an image taken in the 1880’s to one showing the same location taken this month. The older photo is showing what was the

northwest edge of the cemetery at the time, all the tree growth at the bottom of image indicates there had been no burials in that area. The newer photo shows stones are now surrounding the older ones as the cemetery expanded to the north and west.

This angle really demonstrates the growth of trees throughout the cemetery. From the old to the new image fewer small shrubs can be seen but the trees are much larger. The trees make the cemetery a pleasant place to visit and go for a walk, but sadly, they undermine and shift the headstones, which makes the preservation and care of each of the monuments difficult.



*Close ups of the center of each of the images, showing the headstones that helped to identify the location.*

This angle was located by the two stones in the middle of the image, the stone with the rounded top is particularly unique. The tall obelisks in the back of the older image are obscured by the trees in the newer image but also helped locate the correct angle. It's a fun coincidence that the headstones we cleaned last year are in the background, the clean white stones standing out against all the gray ones around them.

The monument with the rounded top is for Peter Sires (1832-1901), his wife Amelia (1844-1922) and their son Emile (1868-1923), all of whom were born in France and emigrated to Lee in the 1870's. Emile's life must have been a sad story, details are hard to find but he spent the end of this life at the Northampton State Hospital, a facility for the mentally ill. He died there with his cause of death listed as "general paralysis of the insane." The good news is that Peter and Amelia had seven other children who lived long lives in the area and had many children among them.

### **NEW TO OUR COLLECTION**

Thanks to Ellen Whittaker (a powerhouse for tracking down new items for our collection) we have two new donations. The first is thanks to a donor who wishes to remain unnamed, but it is definitely an elegant new addition. We have Lee souvenir items of all sorts, from ashtrays, to mugs, to plates, to pen knives, etc. but this is our first silver spoon! Because this spoon was found in a newly purchased house over 50 years ago, we don't have any background on it, including who purchased it originally and where it came from. Also, there is no maker's name on it, the back is simply marked "Sterling" so we don't even know who made it or its approximate time of production. Many collectible items like this have some connection to a particular celebration which will help date them, but this spoon has no indication of it being made for a specific reason. It's a fun (and elegant) item nonetheless and a very welcome addition to our collection.





The next items came directly from Ellen's family. This collection is much less glamorous, but perhaps of more historical value. This is a collection of photographs (most of them Polaroids) that were taken by J. Peter Scolforo in the course of his work with the Lee Department of Public Works. Not only are all the photos identified, which is very helpful for any photograph (especially as time passes), but, unlike the silver spoon, their provenance is very well defined.

"Provenance" is a term used in museums and archives to describe the origin and ownership history of particular items, which sometimes can be almost as important as the item itself in adding to our knowledge of history. We know who took the photographs, what they include, and we have dates for each of them. Although they are not the most glamorous or picturesque images, they are invaluable resources for anyone interested in the public works changes in Lee from the 1970's through 1990's.

Along with preserving pieces of our history for exhibition at some point. our ultimate goal with the Historical Society Collection is to make every item available for any research someone might want to conduct on the history of Lee. These photographs could some day answer a question about what was changed, when and how it was accomplished. If you have any items, whether beautiful and valuable in itself, or not so beautiful but full of information please think about donating them to us so we can keep preserving little pieces of Lee history.

## **LHS BULLETIN BOARD**

### **THE LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S ANNUAL EXHIBIT: THE TURBULENT 1960s**



*A photo from the 1964 LHS yearbook, recalls controversy about hair where crew cuts were viewed as traditional and long hair was rebellious.*

By popular demand, our major exhibit "Lee in the Tumultuous 1960's" will be featured at Lee Library throughout the month of July. After the sedate 1950's, came the chaotic '60's with the revolution in youth culture, the spread of drug abuse and the turmoil of a controversial war in Vietnam. If you remember that muddled decade, come and relive it; if not come and learn about our troubled past. It will be free and open to the public during regular library hours.

Also included with this exhibit will be a special display of the McGinty Scrapbook, a scrapbook we received under interesting circumstances that includes personal memorabilia from Paul McGinty's war service (see our "Remembering a Lee Veteran" article, above) as well as newspaper clippings relating to other veterans from Lee.

## 1960s MUSIC CONCERT

To celebrate the opening of the exhibit the Lee Library in partner with the Lee Historical Society will host a live concert on the front lawn of the library (100 Main Street, Lee). From 6 to 8 pm on Monday July 7<sup>th</sup> "The Happy Together Band" will perform '60s favorites for all to enjoy. The Solforo Gallery inside the Library will be open for those who wish to see the "Turbulent 1960s" exhibit.

Bring a chair or a blanket so you can relax and listen to the tunes! A rain date has been set for Monday July 28<sup>th</sup>.



### LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2025 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY – DECEMBER)

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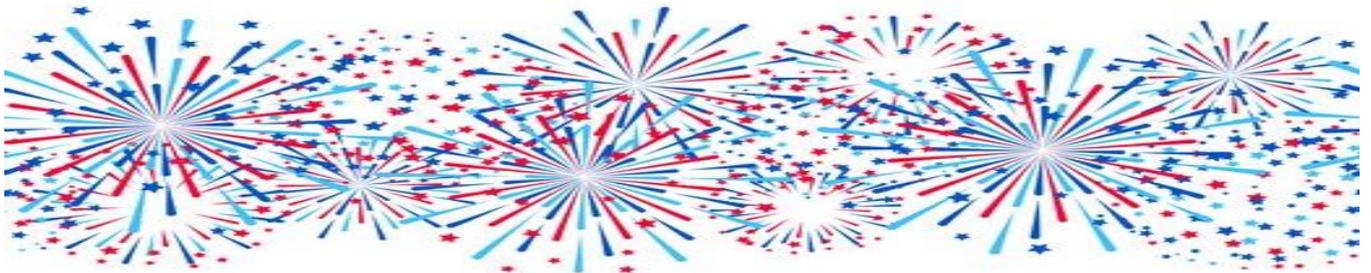
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Mail with Membership Fee to: Lee Historical Society, PO Box 170, Lee, MA 01238

The Society is always in search of volunteers for our various events – the more, the merrier! If you would like to assist, please check any or all of the following:

Program Set-up: \_\_\_ Provide Refreshments at Events: \_\_\_ Address Mailings: \_\_\_  
Founders Day: March in the parade \_\_\_ Assist at our booth: \_\_\_ Gravestone Cleaning: \_\_\_

We always have room for more volunteers to assist us in so many different ways. Kathy Smith is our Membership Committee Chairperson and knows of all the different areas. If you have any questions, thoughts, suggestions, feel free to email her at [kf23Smith@yahoo.com](mailto:kf23Smith@yahoo.com).



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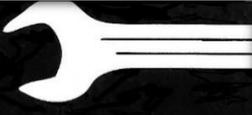


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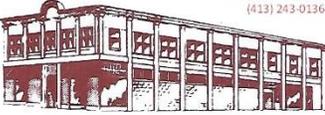
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