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April 2024

The Gateway Gazette

The Newsletter of the Lee Historical Society

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

Email: Lee.Historical@hotmail.com

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The Monthly Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, April 11 at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



FROM THE EDITORS

Breaking news, and we hope all of you folks out there who actually open and read your emailed newsletter or pick up your physical copy on the first of the month will be able to say, "We were the first to know!" It seems our little local newsletter has been getting further afield and creating some positive waves along the way. Wait for the drum roll! Tracie and Linda, co-editors, have been contacted by none other than the Editor in Chief of the New York Times and both have been asked to come onboard as contributors to this incredibly prestigious newspaper. We are both beyond excited and filled with gratitude to Lee that it has been a vehicle via the Gateway Gazette to lead us to such exalted heights in our careers. Of course, there is a somewhat downside to this news in that we will both be relocating to Queens and relinquishing our positions within the Society. So, farewell dear friends and let us emphasize that this is indeed April the First, aka April Fools Day...

JAMES GARDNER – INVENTOR!

Yet again, we must thank Charles Flint and wife Joy for another unique donation to our archives. Charles recalls that he struggled to find much information on Mr. Gardner or his invention, or to understand the details of the description, but he has donated the pewter plaque on which his patent (or pattend, as it was spelt back then) is inscribed, and perhaps some of you engineering types out there might have a clue. If so, please do enlighten!

Born in 1801 in Lee, James worked at the Hurlbut Paper Company as a millwright and lived close by in the second house before the Stockbridge line on the river side. James was married to Caroline, six years his junior, and they had four children. Esther was born in 1837 and became a dressmaker. She was followed by Carrie in 1839 and she became a music teacher. Andrew, born in 1847, followed in his father's footsteps to become a millwright. Finally came Sarah in 1849. She married Isaac H. Pixley, proprietor of the South Lee post office and general store.

James' parents had very interesting names; his father (1772 – 1819) was called Varmun. Research on the nationality hasn't given out much to enlighten – possibly German? Again, if any of you are familiar with this name, please advise! His mother, born in 1770, was called Mehitable, and research has shown this is of Hebrew origin and means "God rejoices". James had two brothers and two sisters of whom he was the eldest, Elisha, Benjamin, Mehitable, and Caroline.

So now we know a bit about his family, what did James invent? Well, it was an improvement to the water wheel. The patent was issued on January 6th, 1845 under "Hydraulics and Pneumatics", so that gives us a bit of a clue. It must have been quite an impressive accomplishment for James as it was mentioned in an edition of a publication called *New England Farmers and Mechanics Journal*, printed in New York in 1848. As an aside, it seems this may not have appealed to many as it was only published from October 6th, 1847 – May 1848. The patent explains his invention as such:



"Curved outer parts and of the shorter inwardly-projecting oblique guides. It's the combination of adjusting ring E with the gates DD and ledges LL to constitute sand channel."

Now it has been made perfectly clear to us, we must think of how such an improvement must have been of great assistance to the local mill owners, all of whom had water wheels operating at their mills.

Although we may not understand what James came up with, we have to give him due credit for back then there were, of course, no computers, calculators or Google for research. However, with those wonderful assets now available, research tells us that there is no other country in the world that has made such rapid progress and expansion as the United States due to the inventive spirit of its citizens, a spirit obviously possessed by James Gardner. Toward that end, and at the urging of Thomas Jefferson, the US Patent Office was founded in 1790, not that long, historically speaking, before James took advantage of it to patent his improvement to the water wheel. For those of you who enjoy a good read, there is actually a rather interesting paper issued by the University of New Hampshire, Franklin Pierce School of Law, entitled "Brief History of the United States Patent Office from Its Foundation – 1790-1886". For those of you not overly excited by this, we would emphasize the word "Brief"...

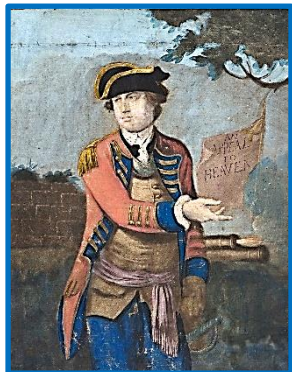


GENERAL CHARLES LEE: SCOUNDREL OR HERO?

(and why did we name our Town after him?)

PART TWO

In our second installment of the history of General Charles Lee, we address the reasoning behind the title of our article. Was he a war hero or a bit of a blackguard? We'll pass along the facts as history presents them and you can draw your own conclusions.



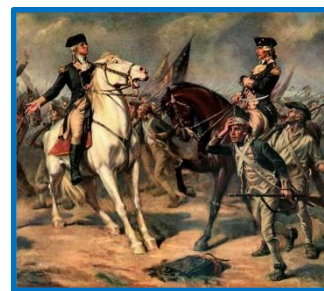
In May 1778, after being released in a prisoner exchange from prison by the British, Lee returned to duty as second-in-command to George Washington. In June of that year, the British left Philadelphia and made their way to New York via New Jersey. During two separate war councils with his generals, Washington had their agreement that a major battle should be avoided. At the first council, Lee made the argument that it would be criminal to get into such a conflict; at the second meeting, he opined that the Continental Army couldn't stand up to the British Army and that the British should be allowed to keep on going until the French military intervention following the Franco-American alliance could step in to help out the Americans.

On June 28th, news came that the British were on the move, so Lee got into action, leading a vanguard towards Monmouth Court House in what is now Freehold Borough, New Jersey. Once there, he found a British rearguard of approximately 2,000 men. He gave an order to Brigadier General Anthony Wayne to use his 550 men to keep the rearguard in place while he negotiated the rest of the vanguard on a left hook, intending to outflank the British. His neglecting to inform his subordinates, Brigadier General Charles Scott and Brigadier General William Maxwell of this plan, had major repercussions.

Because of this oversight, those 550 troops were withdrawing without orders, leaving Lee reduced to 2,500 men. It became clear to him that his plan to surround the British rearguard was now not going to work. He ordered a general retreat in order to save his troops. Lee did have communication issues with his subordinates and so his command and control of the vanguard was limited. However, with excellent training beforehand, the retreat was generally well-disciplined and they suffered few casualties.

Lee's take on the situation was that he had conducted a "retrograde manoeuver in the face and under fire of the enemy" and that his men had moved with "order and precision". Therefore, he was taken aback when Washington addressed him, "I desire to know, sir, what is the reason – whence arises this disorder and confusion?" Lee tried to explain his rationale, blaming faulty intelligence and his officers, especially Scott, giving him no choice but to retreat after the two subordinates pulled back their men without orders. After reminding Washington that he had not been in favor of the attack, Washington's response was. "This may be very true, sir, but you ought not to have undertaken it unless you intended to go through with it." He made it clear he was not happy with Lee's direction and went off to take charge of the battle he felt Lee should have organized.

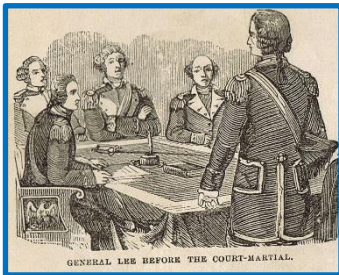
After this unraveled, Lee was now made out to be a villain rather than a hero, as written in the reports by Washington's officers. The furor would probably have died down, but Lee set fire to it by writing an insubordinate letter to Washington, calling Washington's officers "dirty earwigs" for turning Washington against him. He went on to claim he had saved the day by his actions and that



"The Battle of Monmouth (Washington Rebukes Lee)" by John Ward Dunsmore (1856-1945)

Washington was “guilty of an act of cruel injustice” towards him. Washington was not amused by Lee’s letter and initiated an official inquiry into Lee’s conduct. Lee responded by demanding a court martial after which Washington obliged and ordered his arrest.

On July 4th, 1778, Lee faced three charges: disobeying orders in not attacking on the morning of the battle, contrary to “repeated instructions”, conducting an “unnecessary, disorderly, and shameful retreat”, and disrespect towards the commander-in-chief. The trial concluded on August 12th, 1778 and the verdict was finally confirmed by Congress on December 5th. Lee did rather shoot himself in the foot, so to speak, by his attitude by attacking Washington, calling Washington’s account “from beginning to end a most abominable lie”, and calling his own decision to retreat “a masterful manoeuver”. Wisely, perhaps, Washington stayed out of the mud-slinging, but allowed his allies to portray Lee as a traitor who, by his actions, had allowed the British to escape and also linked him to a conspiracy the previous winter against him.



The first two charges levied against Lee were somewhat doubtful, although the third was accurate in that Lee had definitely been disrespectful toward Washington. The historian John Sty noted, “Under the circumstances, an acquittal on the first two charges would have been a vote of no-confidence in Washington.” Lee was found guilty on all three counts, although the court did make a couple of concessions toward him by taking out the word “shameful” in the first charge and noting that the retreat was “disorderly” only “in some few instances”.

Lee’s punishment was to be suspended from the army for a year and he continued to argue his case and speak against Washington. Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens, one of Washington’s aides, and Friedrich Steuben, the officer who molded the Continental Army into a disciplined and professional fighting force, were so incensed that they challenged Lee to a duel. Lee did end up in a duel with Laurens in which he was wounded. He finished off his army career by sending a letter to Congress that was so badly written that they terminated his services. An ignominious end to what had been a brilliant career.

Leaving his military career behind him, Lee went off to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia where he decided to do something completely different and raise horses and dogs. However, he lived beyond his means and was often in debt. He had frequent attacks of gout and by the spring of 1780 he also had a chronic cough, which may have been due to tuberculosis. He eventually died in debt on October 2nd, 1782.

During his life, Lee had led a nomadic and extravagant lifestyle and this had led understandably to him having financial difficulties. After his death, his executors, future Congressman Alexander White and former Rev. Charles Mynn Thruston, paid off his debts and some specific bequests, leaving an estate worth about \$700, which was left to his sister Sidney.

Besides our Town, Fort Lee, New Jersey, Lee, New Hampshire, and Leetown, West Virginia were all named after him.

For those who may have been under the impression once that our Town was named after General Robert E. Lee and thus wondered why a Northern town would be named after a Southern General from the Civil War, you now will know that it wasn't. Interesting factoid: and here is a quote from Tracie, our Researcher Extraordinaire: “George Washington is more closely related to Robert E. Lee than General Charles Lee was. George Washington was Robert E.’s wife’s (Mary Custis) step-grandfather. His stepson, George Washington Parke Custis, was her father. That has to be read a few times to make sense, doesn’t it!

REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN
PRIVATE JAMES SHARTS (1827 – 1916)

On April 12th, 1916, the Berkshire Gleaner reported the sudden death on April 5th of one of Lee’s veterans and oldest citizens. J.J. Hasset, the Medical Examiner, reported that James had passed from heart disease while sitting on a chair and placing an order with a store clerk. James left behind quite a history, so let us start at the very beginning.

James was a lifetime man of Lee, having been born there circa 1827 on the 4th of July. He had told that when he was born, there were only six or eight houses on Main Street; what would he think if he could see it now in 2024, over 100 years later.

James’ trade was as a wagon maker, training in Stockbridge, and then being employed as a carpenter for Gibbons & Harding. He helped build what was back then a wooden bridge over the Housatonic on West Park Street. This was later replaced by a tubular iron bridge. Now, of course, there is no sign of that bridge, either, as the river has been moved and a tarmac road crosses where they once stood.

He enlisted on February 18, 1863, in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, Company A, as a private to fight in the Civil War. Unfortunately his service was ended some two-odd years later on June 3rd, 1865, as he was mustered-out due to being wounded in a battle at Fort Wagner, Charleston, South Carolina. It seems he was shot and one bullet remained in his leg for the rest of his life and gave him a lot of grief. Despite this, he did live to a good age, The Berkshire Gleaner of July 30th, 1913, records him at 86 as the third oldest Lee citizen, beaten out by E.M. Laugdon, who carried the gold-headed cane at the age of 88, and James Cullen, aged 87.

Back home in Lee, Mr. Sharts married twice, his second wife, unfortunately an invalid, outliving him. He was a member of the Baptist chapel which once stood on Main Street where the parking lot opposite Café Triskele now is, and this is where his funeral took place. His escort and pall bearers was made up of a contingent from the colored regiment, of which he had been a member, and a number of men from different towns in the county, as per the Berkshire Gleaner of April 12th, 1916.



THE LHS BULLETIN BOARD



WOMEN OF '76

In the second of our Speaker Series for 2024, we welcome actress Rita Parisi presenting “Women of ‘76”, the story of five women who witnessed and changed the course of the American Revolution. We will meet Baroness von Riedesal, wife of a Hessian General and chronicler of life in the military camps, and Prudence Wright, a Massachusetts housewife who led an all-female militia in search of British spies. These and other patriots will be introduced to us in this entertaining and educational theatrical experience.

Rita founded her production company Waterfall Productions in 2005 to create original theatrical presentations that entertain and inspire. Her unique shows highlight her passion for storytelling, theatre, history, costuming and literature.

Please mark your calendars for May 23rd at 6:30 pm. This event will be held at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street in Lee. It is free and open to the public and has been partially funded by the Lee Cultural Council through grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Parking is available along the North entrance to Crossway Village as well as on nearby Academy Street. As always, the Society will be providing refreshments so please come on over and have a wonderful evening with us.

THE PRESERVATION OF OUR LOCAL HISTORY

Charles Flint, one of the Society's good friends, succinctly penned his thoughts and opinions on why historical societies, such as Lee's, are necessary and important. We were so impressed that we asked Charles if we could share these with our readership and he kindly agreed.

Historical Societies: The keepers of local history and objects. They collect, research, preserve, and catalog artifacts, documents, photographs, and other materials related to the history of the town. This helps to ensure that important historical resources are not lost or forgotten over time.

Education and Outreach: Historical societies often organize educational programs, exhibits, lectures, and tours for both residents and visitors. These activities help to raise awareness about local history and its significance, fostering a sense of pride and connection to the community.

Cultural Identity: Understanding and appreciating local history can foster a sense of identity and belonging among community members. Historical societies often play a key role in celebrating local traditions, customs, and landmarks, which can strengthen community cohesion.

Research Opportunities: Historical societies provide researchers, scholars, educators, genealogists, and students with access to valuable primary sources and archival materials.

Historic Preservation and Advocacy: Historical societies advocate for the preservation of historic buildings, sites, and landscapes. By raising awareness about the importance of preserving these resources, they help to preserve the character and integrity of the community.

Tourism and Economic Development: A vibrant local history can attract tourists and visitors interested in the heritage of a region. Historical societies often collaborate with local businesses, governments, and tourism organizations to promote heritage tourism and stimulate economic development.

Community Engagement: Historical societies provide opportunities for community members to get involved in preserving and sharing local history. Volunteers play a crucial role in the operation of historical societies, contributing their time, expertise, and resources to support the organization's mission.

Get involved with your local historical society. Not only do you meet new people, but you also find it an honor to be a part of the exciting organization. You will learn about your town's rich history, its first people, the colonists and why and how they came here. Serve on the Board of Directors.

We think Charles has really made it abundantly clear as to how incredibly valuable the Historical Society is to our Town. When asking people to consider joining us, we often hear, "What could I do? I don't know how I could help." Perhaps after reading this, any of those on the fence can now realize how very necessary it is for there to be more hands on deck, as many as possible. There is so much to do to keep Lee's history alive. If you are already a member, please consider volunteering some of your time. If you are not a member yet, do fill out the Membership Form and join us in preserving Lee's fascinating history. We thank you.

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2024 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY – DECEMBER)

Individual: \$10.00 Family: \$25.00
Supporting: \$50.00 or more Sponsor: \$100.00 or more

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

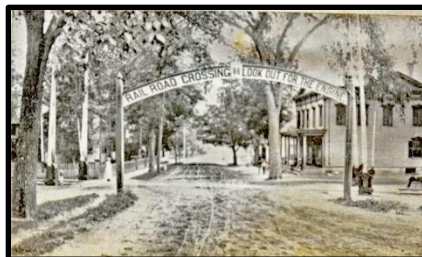
The Society is always in search of volunteers for our various events – the more, the merrier! If you would like to assist, please check any or all of the following, and thank you for your support:

Program Set-up: _____ Provide Refreshments at Events: _____ Address Mailings: _____
Founders Day (march in the parade/assist at our booth): _____

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.

The Membership Committee extends their thanks to all those who have renewed their membership for 2024. We are grateful for your continued support. For those of you who are yet to rejoin our great Society, please feel free to use this form. Our Business Members will by now have received their renewal notices and we look forward to hearing from them as well. If you are a current Business Member and wish to update the business card which appears on Page 8 of our newsletter, please contact Tracie Etheredge, co-editor at ethere@gmail.com.

Thanks to all for supporting the Lee Historical Society!



Center Street, Lee c.1895.

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