



Vol. 23, No. 4

April 2026

# The Gateway Gazette

*The Newsletter of the Lee Historical Society*

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

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*The Monthly Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, April 9th at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.*



## **FROM THE EDITOR**

Why a picture of a pretty lady holding a fish? If you've ever searched for vintage April Fools related images, you've consistently been returned pictures of nicely dressed people with fish. Simply because "April Fools" in French is "Poisson d'avril," which translates to "April Fish."

The history of April Fool's Day in France can be traced back hundreds of years. While the exact origins of the holiday are unclear, one popular theory is that it began with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar by Charles IX around 1564. Prior to the change, New Year's Day had been celebrated with the spring equinox, often falling at the end of March or on April 1st. Those who were slow to realize the change had been made became April fools, or *poisson d'avril*. Thus, many April Fools pranks in France often involved fish.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact me, Tracie at [ethere@gmail.com](mailto:ethere@gmail.com).

## **A CENTURY OF CARE: THE STORY OF THE LEE VISITING NURSE ASSOCIATION**

The Lee Visiting Nurse Association began in 1912 with the energy and vision of Minnie Baird, one of those remarkable local women who seemed able to make anything happen. Minnie, daughter of a prominent Lee paper mill owner, graduated from Lee High School in 1888 and Wellesley College in 1893. After several years doing social work in New York City, she returned home to manage bookkeeping at her father's mill. With her experience in public welfare, she knew firsthand how illness or injury could overwhelm families, especially those without means, and how much difference good hygiene and proper nursing could make.



*Minnie Baird*

So, on January 22, 1912, Minnie gathered thirty-one townspeople in Memorial Hall to discuss her idea for a community nursing service. From that meeting, the Lee Visiting Nurse Association was born.

A Berkshire Gleaner article from January 31, 1912 captured the spirit of the new organization, noting that trained nursing had become “indispensable in the sick room” and that the LVNA would provide a resident nurse whose services could be called upon in emergencies, sudden illness, or by those unable to afford private care. The visiting nurse would also make brief calls to offer advice on hygiene, sanitation, and care of the sick, a lifeline for many families.

The first nurse hired was Anna Rohan, RN, of Ware, a Springfield Nursing School graduate who earned \$75 a month. In her first year she made 1,032 visits and brought in \$139.90 in fees, that ranged from five to fifty cents per visit depending on ability to pay. The program was so successful that Lenox soon created a similar organization. Funding came from public donations, local businesses, and the LVNA's popular fundraising galas, often held at the Cranwell Resort.

In 1915, Nurse Rohan was succeeded by Annie Nihill, RN, also Springfield-trained and experienced as a visiting nurse in Boston. In 1917, the LVNA organized “Good Health Week,” with displays on hygiene, child welfare, and tuberculosis (in both English and Italian), along with lectures and even contests where babies were judged on health indicators.

Nurse Nihill was followed in 1918 by Nancy Ryan, RN, who served until 1940. Ryan also acted as the town's school nurse, conducting health and dental checks in all schools. She was on duty during the devastating 1928 strep epidemic, when 1,000 of Lee's 4,000 residents fell ill and 40 died. Doctors and nurses from across the region came to help, and the Hyde School was converted into an emergency hospital.



*Lee VNA sign outside the Stratton House. Source: Berkshire Eagle.*

By 1954, the LVNA hired a second full-time nurse for the first time. With two nurses, the agency launched “Well-Child Clinics” staffed by a pediatrician, nutritionist, and dental hygienist. Nurses also visited the paper mills daily to monitor worker health and safety.

School nursing remained under the LVNA until 1967, when the town created its own school nurse position and hired Helen Brunell, who had spent twenty years with the VNA. In 1971, the agency added a Homemaker/Home Health Aide Program to provide temporary home assistance.

The 1970s brought new challenges. Medicare regulations reshaped home health care, and the Massachusetts Department of Health

imposed new supervision requirements. The LVNA fought to preserve its independence and community-based model, meeting with state officials in Boston to negotiate more flexible rules. A compromise was reached: the state reduced its required supervisory hours, and the LVNA increased staffing to meet the new standards.

As the agency grew, it outgrew its offices. After several moves, from the Central School to the Park Building (now Zabians) to Town Hall, the LVNA relocated in 1976 to the Airoldi Building on Railroad Street. By 1980, space was again tight. The Town needed the Airoldi Building for its own expanding offices, and the LVNA needed more room. A suitable property was found at 21 High Street, formerly Bob's TV. The agency purchased the house and moved in on September 27, 1980, naming it "Stratton House" after longtime Lee physician Dr. Charles Stratton. Fittingly, it sat across from the Baird House, where Minnie Baird had lived throughout her life.



21 High Street, Lee

The 1980s brought new pressures: Diagnosis Related Groups (DRGs), competition from larger agencies, and the breakdown of territorial boundaries. By 1987, the VNA of Southern Berkshire had closed, and the Pittsfield-based VNA, now Berkshire VNA, was expanding rapidly. Both the Lee VNA and the Community Health Association of Richmond and West Stockbridge were urged to merge, but both chose to remain independent.

Despite the shifting landscape, the LVNA grew dramatically. By 1990, it employed fifteen nurses and served nine towns instead of the original two, Lee and Tyringham. Monthly nursing visits doubled from 350 in 1988 to 700 in 1990. Home Health Aide services increased by 50%, and the agency added physical, speech, and occupational therapists, as well as a medical social worker. By 1991, professional visits exceeded 1,000 per month, and Homemaker/Home Health Aide visits topped another 1,000. Staff reached 130 employees.

Funding evolved as well. Early support came from annual drives, and later from the Lee Board of Health, which paid for clinics, newborn visits, tuberculosis care, and school nursing. With Medicare and Medicaid, federal reimbursements eventually made up more than 80% of income. But Medicare funds could not be used for capital expenses, so the LVNA relied on bequests and fundraising, everything from bake sales to raffles to tag sales.

As staff numbers soared, Stratton House again proved too small. The agency explored renovations and additions, but ultimately purchased the nearby Kingsleigh Bed and Breakfast at 32 Park Street, formerly the Sturgis House. Most clinical staff moved there, and the building was named "Tracy House" in honor of the longtime local family, including Marguerite Tracy, who had left the LVNA an \$8,000 bequest.



32 Park Street

By 2012, the organization had become Porchlight/VNA. It merged with Chicopee VNA in 2014 and with Collective Home Care in 2018, expanding services across Berkshire, Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin counties.

But like many small, independent VNAs nationwide, Porchlight struggled financially in the changing healthcare environment. Without the steady referral pipeline available to hospital-based agencies, sustaining operations became increasingly difficult. In March 2020, CEO Ruth Odgren announced that Porchlight would discontinue operations in Lee, Chicopee, and West Hatfield as of May 5. Nearly 300 employees were affected, though the organization worked to help staff transition to other agencies

during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus the Lee Visiting Nurse Association was completely dissolved.

After more than a century of service, from Minnie Baird's vision in 1912 to its final days in 2020, the Lee Visiting Nurse Association left behind a legacy of care, community, and steadfast commitment to the people of the Berkshires.

## **REMEMBERING LEE VETERANS** **PHILLIP A. HOLLENBECK: A LEE SOLDIER IN AN UNKNOWN WAR**

Phillip A. Hollenbeck was a young man from Lee who found himself halfway around the world in a war few Americans have heard of. His letters home, faithfully printed in the local paper, give us a rare, personal look at what it meant for a small-town soldier to serve in the Philippine-American War.

The Philippine-American War, was a war between the United States and Filipino revolutionaries from 1899 to 1902, an insurrection that may be seen as a continuation of the Philippine Revolution against Spanish rule. It began after the United States assumed sovereignty of the Philippines following the defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War. Although an end to the insurrection was declared in 1902, sporadic fighting continued for several years thereafter.



Hollenbeck enlisted in Company D of the 47th US Volunteers in 1899. His first published letter, written home from Philadelphia, had the tone of a young man stepping into adventure: he was well, he liked soldiering so far, and he expected to ship out to San Francisco soon. Within months he was in Manila, and by late 1900 he was deep in the interior of Luzon, a Philippine island, where the fighting was far more personal than the grand battles Americans usually imagine.

Phillip's letters home paint a vivid picture of the daily tension. In July 1900 he wrote from Donsol, describing the long rainy season and the constant work of fortifying the town. "Occasionally we have a scrap with the enemy," he wrote with the understatement common to soldiers everywhere.

One scouting trip turned into a sharp, close-quarters fight with Filipino forces. A rifle shot passed so close to one soldier that it "shot his moustache off," and another man beside him was badly wounded. For several days things quieted down, until word spread of a feared local group known as the Bolomen (the Sandatahanes), fighters who moved silently, struck quickly, and were considered among the most dangerous opponents in the region. One night, about 200 of them crept toward the American position and were spotted just in time to prevent disaster.

Phillip's own luck nearly ran out in early 1901, when he was shot in the thumb during a skirmish. By March he wrote home that the wound was healing well and he expected to return to Lee in June.

Combat wasn't the only danger. In November 1900, Phillip described a far more destructive enemy: typhoons. One storm hit Donsol with such force that it flattened buildings, uprooted trees, and left nearly the entire native population homeless. The soldiers were driven out of their quarters in the middle of the night, stumbling through rain and darkness until daylight revealed the devastation. A second typhoon followed soon after.

Despite the hardship, the men found ways to keep morale up. They even held a mock presidential election, voting for William Jennings Bryan (who had lost the actual election to William McKinley). Their major, apparently not amused, sent them out for two hours of heavy duty tearing down storm-wrecked buildings.

By early 1901, the 47th Massachusetts Volunteers were expecting to be relieved by the 15th U.S. Infantry. Phillip hoped to be home by April or June, and by May 1901 the Eagle reported that he was preparing to leave Manila at last.

After the war, Phillip returned to Lee and, like many veterans, quietly rebuilt his life. He married Grace LeRoy of Lee on October 16, 1901. He worked for the Berkshire Street Railway in Lee and Housatonic as superintendent of the substation, later moving to Pittsfield to work as an electrician at General Electric.

Phillip was active in veterans' circles, becoming a Mason and a member of Scott Bradley Post, VFW. His brother Carl, a Marine who traveled the world during his service, also returned home and remained in the area for a time.

Phillip eventually settled in West Haven, Connecticut, where he lived from 1918 until his death in 1957 at age 79. He left behind his wife Grace, four children, and a life that stretched from the quiet streets of Lee to the storm-torn jungles of Luzon and back again.

### **ADDENDUM TO A PREVIOUS ARTICLE** **MORE LEE VETERANS WHO WERE PRISONERS AT ANDERSONVILLE**

In our "Remembering Lee Veterans" article last month we told the story of Lee veterans who were listed on the Memorial Hall plaques as having been imprisoned in Andersonville. Apparently, I missed a few men. Karen Norton, a member of our board has for years been diligently uncovering the names and military records of Lee veterans of all wars. Her work is part of the Lee Historical Society's attempt to create memorial banners listing all the Lee veterans who served. After the release of last month's newsletter, she gave me the names of men I had missed: Eldad Moore and Charles Wilson who would not have been listed on the memorial plaques because they survived the prison camp, and Ransom Bailey and James E, Lewis who should have been.

At this point I couldn't find specifics on Lewis and Wilson (perhaps because their very common names make them hard to research), but I have a few facts about Bailey and Moore.

Ransom Bailey (1833-1864) enlisted on August 19, 1861 and served with the 21<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Infantry. He was captured at Blain's Crossroads during the Battle of Bean Station, Tennessee on December 23, 1863. He died the following year of what was listed as "disease".

We know a lot more about Eldad Moore. He was a carpenter from Lee who enlisted into the 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry (along with Hugh Dolan, who was mentioned in the previous article). He was captured along side Dolan and over 200 of their comrades at the Battle of Proctor's Creek. His story has a happier outcome, which was outlined in a "Letter to the Editor" in the Berkshire Eagle, published in February 1904. The story was submitted by E.H. Saunders who apparently knew Moore and related the story of his escape from the prison camp as it was written in the Hyde Centennial History of Lee:

"In fear of Sherman's raid, the prisoners were removed to places of greater security. Sent from Andersonville, Sept. 26, Moore jumped from the [train] cars, when they had gone 10 miles, and started off in a

northwest direction for Atlanta and freedom. When he had traveled about 75 miles, he was recaptured and sent to Columbus, GA.”

Apparently, he then escaped again by exchanging clothes with a Southern soldier and walked to Atlanta where he met up with the Union Army, which had taken over the city. He eventually made it back to Washington DC.

He mustered out of the army in December 1864, after three years of service, and returned to Lee where he worked as a carpenter and homebuilder, until he moved with his family to Pittsfield and then New Bedford and continued the trade with his son F. Russell Moore. He died in 1922 at the age of 81 and is buried in the Pittsfield Cemetery alongside family members who had passed before him.

*As noted above, the Historical Society is trying to make a comprehensive list of military veterans from Lee, not only to maintain a database, which will be accessible and searchable by the public, but also to make the memorial banners which will be on display as time, and space makes possible. In this vein, we would love assistance from the public. If you have names and information relating to any recent veterans (who are harder to research than those from the past), please contact me at [ethere@gmail.com](mailto:ethere@gmail.com).*



### **ARTICLES BY BETTY DENNIS**

*Lee has seen its share of fires, floods and other disasters which have left permanent marks on the community, but sometimes things aren't what they seem. Below is a Betty Dennis article from a May 20, 1975 discussing the "Great Northern Fire".*



In the February 17, 1892 issue of the Valley Gleaner the headlines informed us of a GREAT NORTHERN FIRE---The Lee Fire Department called to Rescue Frigid Zone---The greatest undertaking of the nineteenth Century!

There appeared in the North Western sky a brilliant red glare around 7:30 that evening, it grew deeper with each passing moment, and its brilliance seemed to the people of Lee to be telling them that something was very wrong up Lenox way.

Telephone calls were made but no news was forthcoming of any location of a fire! Repeated calls made to the Westinghouse mansion (now Foxhollow School) were unanswered, making this the suspicious location. Within minutes the rumor spread like fire---that Westinghouse was in flames! Before long the whistle at the Westinghouse electric station started to blow---which seemed to confirm suspicions.

Nothing like this "blaze" had ever been seen before and it seemed to grow deeper every minute. The "flames" shot up in a grand and glorious display which to some people seemed to spell DOOM.

With a blare of whistles the Lee Fire Department started out. Quoted from the article "we venture to say that Lee has a fire department unexcelled by any town of its size and as good firemen individually but they were no match for the Northern Lights!" Imagine how you would feel in retreat of such an occasion? The write-up states that some of our fire Department members wore faces somewhat the same hue as the sky!

It wasn't only our townspeople who were fooled that night, as reports came from other towns, one as far away as Brooklyn. A few people were reported as insisting that there had been a big fire someplace in the North and that Northern lights could not have caused such a brilliant show.

### **LHS BULLETIN BOARD**



Tyringham resident John Hanson will give an illustrated talk, *The Stones Cry Out: Early Epitaphs from Lee*, on Thursday, May 28, 2026 at 6:30pm at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee. Hanson has been collecting and studying early New England epitaph verse for years. He will share some outstanding verses on old stones in Lee, explaining their sources from Scripture and poetry. What do these engravings tell us about these early New Englanders' attitudes about life, death and eternity?

John Hanson is a Williamstown native who lives in Boston and Tyringham. A member of the American Antiquarian Association, he is the author of *Reading the Gravestones of Old New England* and has published and spoken extensively on the topic. He will have copies of his book available for purchase at the end of his presentation.

This presentation is free and open to the public and is part of the Lee Historical Society Speaker Series. Look for the lanterns near the Senior Center entrance. Parking is available along the North entrance to Crossway Village as well as on Academy Street. Refreshments will be served.

### **LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2026 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY – DECEMBER)**

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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.

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