



## **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](mailto:Lee.Historical@hotmail.com)

Website: [leehistoricsociety.homestead.com](http://leehistoricsociety.homestead.com)

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*The Monthly Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, December 14 at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.*



### **FROM THE EDITORS**

December is one of those busy months, isn't it? So much going on. For one thing, the 21<sup>st</sup> is, supposedly, the start of winter. I think most of us would disagree with that, having had already a pretty decent snowfall on November 1<sup>st</sup>. Up here in the Northern Hemisphere, it's also the shortest day of the year. And then there's the holidays – believe it or not, there are an astonishing 24 in December! Oh, we all know about Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Christmas, of course, but who isn't waiting in anticipation for National Sock Day? Is that the day all the missing ones turn up and all the once-partnerless socks can be heard cheering around the world? Whatever you celebrate during the last month of 2023, your Historical Society wishes you all very happy and safe Holidays. And we hope you can relax after all those preparations with a glass of something as you read through our newsletter.

## A PORTRAIT AND A PAINTER

*Charles Flint and his wife Joy have been incredibly generous to the Society by making several important donations of items with local historical importance. We thank them for their generosity not only to the Society, but to the Town of Lee. These items included a box of matches manufactured by the Lee Match Company, some uniform pieces from the Lee Fire Department, a poster from the Lee Airport, and a patent plate issued to James Gardner, a millwright at the Hurlbut Paper Company. We will talk more about these items in future editions, but for now we will go in depth on a key piece, a very lovely portrait of two little girls, the Sturgis sisters, painted by Hiram Alonzo Pease.*

Who were these two little girls portrayed so beautifully by Pease, a renowned portrait artist and abolitionist? More on Hiram later.

Mary Jane, 1827, and Loretta, 1829, were born in East Lee in what was known as the Strickland House, later the East Lee Inn. Their parents were Samuel Dimmick Sturgis (1796 – 1852) and Eliza Leishman Sturgis (1803 – 1883). The Sturgises owned and operated the Sturgis House, which was not only their home, but also a tavern and stagecoach stop. A busy family, Samuel also owned the Sturgis Paper Mill. This was located in East Lee on the East Lee Brook south side of Cape Street and was where the Silver Street Bridge is now. In 1886, the mill was lost in the 1886 flood.

More information on Mary Jane and Loretta isn't known to us, but we hope they lived long and happy lives. But – we do know quite a bit about Hiram as much has been written about him. He was actually born in Stockbridge on December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1820, one of ten children, the son of a farmer, Hiram Abiff Pease. They upped sticks and moved to the area that became Oberlin, Ohio in 1828, some of the first white settlers in that area.

Hiram started painting at an early age, portraits and historical scenes such as *William Henry Harrison's Camp in the Wilderness* in 1840. He went on to become immensely successful, but this isn't to be about his accomplishments as an artist.

A bit of a mystery surrounds his career as a Captain in the 41<sup>st</sup> Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War. The story goes that he resigned after his commander, Colonel William B. Hazen, ordered him to return two runaway slaves back South to their master. Hazen, by all accounts, was a strict disciplinarian who insisted on the rules being followed.

On December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1861 the regiment was in Kentucky and moved from Kentucky to Wickliffe near the great Mississippi River. They stopped to camp for the night and two fugitive slaves crept in and joined them. Unfortunately, their owner discovered their whereabouts and met with Colonel Hazen. Hazen's brigade commander, a General Nelson, ordered Pease to deliver the guards to Hazen so they could be returned from whence they came. Against his better judgment, Pease did this, but then was horrified after his men reported that Hazen had offered to flog the slaves for their master. This was given as the reason for Pease's resignation.

It seems an article in the Lorain County News in Oberlin about Pease started a bit of a firestorm when it gave Pease's reasoning for his resignation. This article was read by a number of Captain Pease's men, some of whom put a different slant on the story. Hazen was somewhat exonerated as a scapegoat who had only offered the flogging after orders from Nelson. Pease was accused by one as being "unfit for command and



Portrait of Hiram Pease.  
Painted by his son, Alonzo c.  
1860. Source: Oberlin College.

of being drunk three-fourths of the time” in the months before his resignation. It was also stated that he had accepted the order to deliver the slaves back with “alacrity”, somewhat damning his reputation as a principled abolitionist.

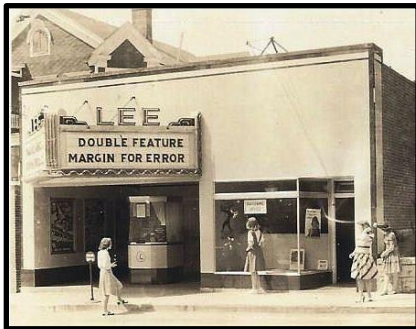
As much of history goes, we may never know the full story of whether Hiram Alonzo Pease was a conscientious anti-slavery gentleman who resigned his position in the Army because of his principles, or whether he was an unfit drunkard who wasn't really much of an abolitionist after all. But we do know he was very good at portrait painting!

*Editors' Note: Should you be inspired to emulate the Flints and wish to donate something you may have that you feel would be of historical interest, please contact Tracie Etheredge, Chairperson of the Collections Committee at [ethere@gmail.com](mailto:ethere@gmail.com).*

### **LEE THEATRE: THEN AND NOW**

*We are always delighted to either receive or see an article on Lee history from a member of the Society. Back in March, the Berkshire Edge published a piece from local historian Gary Leveille, which we have his kind permission to reproduce here along with a couple of photos.*

“Residents of Lee first enjoyed going to in-town movies in 1910. At that time, an upper floor in Memorial Town Hall was leased and operated as a movie theatre. By the early 1940's, the Lee Theatre had opened on Main Street, as shown in this photograph, taken circa 1943. The marquee advertises the film “Margin for Error” directed by Otto Preminger and starring Milton Berle. The movie was described by some reviewers as a peculiar, propaganda black comedy. The theatre was located immediately north of present-day Steve's Barber Shop.”



Gary's article was the impetus we needed to research more on what was once an enormously popular part of Lee's entertainment scene. For those of you who are unaware that Lee once had a movie theatre, it was located on Main Street where we now have Hyde Place, next to Steve's Barbershop. From a Valley Gleaner article dated September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1939 (a Friday), it announced that a Miss Elizabeth Formento had announced on the day before that Graves & Hemmes, Inc. of Great Barrington had been awarded the contract to construct her theatre. That news must have been very exciting for the pre-war Depression-era folks of Lee! Something fun to look forward to! The article went into a great deal of detail on the aesthetics of the building, although in the photo it does look a little austere. To quote the Gleaner, “*The front of the theatre on Main Street will be installed by the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company through their Albany office, the entire front being of blue and gray Cararra glass with stainless steel moldings. There will be six stainless steel display frames, three on each side of the theatre vestibule.*” Was the design modified, as often happens with such plans, or was it altered at a later date? If anyone reading this knows, please do share!

It was six months later on March 23rd, 1940, that the theatre was opened, too much excitement and anticipation, one would imagine. The doors opened at 2:00 p.m. to welcome the theatre's very first audience to watch the opening picture, "Little Old New York" with Alice Faye, a glamorous singer and actress of the silver screen. The theatre had a 620 seat capacity and so it seems from a Gleaner article of March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1940 that a capacity house attended the opening performance. It's pretty sure that any school-age children who may have attended would have been extremely well-behaved. Apparently, Superintendent of Schools, Charles A. Miller, spoke to all the Lee schoolchildren the day before, advising them to "*appreciate the new building and as citizens to properly conduct themselves while in attendance there.*"



*Alice Faye c.1940.*

That first night, there were dedication ceremonies conducted by Attorney James O'Brien. Miss Formento was summoned by Judge Bart Bossidy to the front and the entire audience rose to applaud her.

It seems for another thirty years or so, Lee's theatre was a popular and much-frequented entertainment destination. So, what happened in the '60's? It was announced on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1962 that Mrs. Anthony F. Serra\*, the owner and manager, made the announcement that the theatre had closed and there were no plans to re-open. However, it did open up for business again the next summer, but Ned J. Cristiano, a relative of Mrs. Serra, reported that after the busy summer season a drop-off in the attendance of local people seemed to indicate disinterest in it by the locals. He predicted it would close again as they couldn't run it at a financial loss.

It did re-open in 1967, but closed again after operating for less than a year. Edward J. Cristiano was Mrs. Serra's nephew and he ended up owning the theatre after her death along with other relatives as part of a Trust. He decided to do some very necessary and extensive repair work. But it seems the death knoll had been sounded and eventually the theatre was demolished.

*\*The assumption is that Mrs. Serra was the former Miss Formento.*

## **REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN**

### **LIEUTENANT J.G. THOMAS JAMES WICKHAM (1929 – 2018)**

There's so much to tell about Tom's life, so we'll try to be concise. He was born in Brooklyn, NY, but came to Lee and graduated from the High School in 1947. From an early age, he had a fascination with planes and was truly blessed to have parents who encouraged his passion. Toward this end, they arranged flying lessons for him in a Piper Cub plane at the old Great Barrington Airport.

He was obviously a smart young man and was awarded a full scholarship to the Pennsylvania Military Academy. He enlisted in the Navy in 1949 and went on to have a stellar career including being designated a Naval Aviator in 1951.

During the Korean War, he and his squadron hunted enemy submarines off the Pacific-based carriers USS Sicily and USS Badoeng Strait. During this time, he accomplished the 23,000<sup>th</sup> landing aboard the aircraft carrier Bataan in the Pacific. (Now, it's assumed he wasn't responsible for all 23,000 landings, but just happened to be in a plane in the right place at the right time.)



Tom's aviation career didn't end when he left the Navy. He joined TWA (Trans World Airlines, aka Tom Wickham's Airline according to his family), during which time he flew the media "chase" plane for Gerald Ford's presidential run in 1976.

In 1984, TWA announced him "Pilot of the Year". He was on a flight from New York to Rome in a fully loaded Boeing 747, which is a very large, long-range wide-bodied aircraft which can seat up to 660 people, not including the crew. It seems the aircraft experienced some kind of mechanical failure on the flight, but Captain Tom saved the day and everyone landed safely at their destination. What a guy!



## **THE LHS BULLETIN BOARD**

### **WELCOME TO OUR NEW PRESIDENT**

*As is customary within our Society, roles with their various responsibilities move from one member to another, and so William "Bill" Mathews passes the gauntlet of President to Gary Allen, Chairperson of the Finance Committee. Bill's incredible expertise will be transferring to other areas so this is not goodbye, but thank you for your leadership for the past three years, and also for your next in your new position. Let us introduce our next President for those who are not familiar.*



*Gary was one of our intrepid marchers in this year's Founders' Day Parade.*

Gary has been elected for the 2023/2024 year, and is not unfamiliar with the role, as he was also the founding Vice-President and in later years assumed the role of President. As a Founding Member of the Society's Board, Gary has more experience in the Society's ins and outs than most of us on the Board. As President, he will still be, as stated above, Chairperson of the Finance Committee, Keeper of the Society's website, and an active member of the Society's Veterans' Project. The latter is particularly close to Gary's heart as he was also a veteran himself, having been a Captain in the US Army from 1972 – 1975. Just in case he runs out of things to do, he is also the Treasurer for CTSB (Community

Television of Southern Berkshires), Lee's public access TV station.

Gary and his wife Barbara (Barb) moved to Lee in from Harrisburg, PA in 1983 and have been very active since then within the community. Barb has a keen interest in local history and as such was employed at both the Berkshire County Historical Society and the Stockbridge Library Historical Museum & Archives. Any of us who have visited the museum at the library can thank Barb as she was responsible for supervising the design and construction of the archives and for the creation of the fascinating exhibits there. Gary was employed as an Auditor for thirty years by the Office of the State Comptroller in New York State and for the Berkshire Life Insurance Company of America.

The Veterans' Project was initiated by Bill during his tenure and has gone on to become one of the Society's most respected projects. A website listing those from Lee who have served in the Armed Forces has been created to recognize their service, as well as a banner, the Society's version of The Wall, listing service members.

As our new President, Gary is confident in looking forward to working with fellow Society members to continue the important work on the Veterans' Project as well as the popular Speaker Series on topics of historical interest in Lee, to the creation of the educational displays that have been shown at the Lee Library, and to the expansion of the recorded programs available in the CTSB archives.

We all wish Gary much success and support within his new position and thank him, as always, for his dedication to the Society and the preservation of Lee's history.

## **ARTICLES BY BETTY DENNIS**

**JULY 5, 1972**

*Can it really be that this article was written by Betty some 51 years ago? Time really must fly when you're having fun. Or in the beautiful Berkshires!*

Many notable people have appeared on our streets and among them was William C. Whitney, whose death in 1904 aroused the country at large. He had served as Secretary of the Navy during one of President Cleveland's terms. When the first Mrs. Whitney entertained in Washington, society took note. Heart disease caused her untimely death.

Commencing quietly about 1895, Mr. Whitney bought parcels of land on October Mountain, including individual holdings of farms (some abandoned, perhaps some located in Dodgetown) and created a mountain preserve. This was located in the towns of Becket, Lee, Lenox and Washington, and comprised between twelve and fourteen thousand acres.

The preserve sheltered buffalo, deer, moose, elk, which Mr. Whitney brought, plus the farm stock and much timber. At one time Mr. Whitney was the largest land proprietor in the state. In 1896 in 30 days he had built the first cottage. Hundreds were employed, some working days, others nights. His son, Henry Payne Whitney and his bride Gertrude Vanderbilt were reputed to have spent their honeymoon there.

Mr. William Whitney's second marriage was to a highly esteemed widow, Mrs. E.S. Randolph. After this marriage, a mansion on the top of October Mountain was begun. A serious accident on her horse caused Mrs. Whitney's neck to be literally broken. Surgery kept her alive until 1898. She had been so enthusiastic over the October Mountain estate that after her death Mr. Whitney lost his interest.

By 1903 much of the game had been shipped off to Mr. Whitney's Adirondack Preserve, comprised of 90,000 acres. Mr. Sylvester Church recalls having visited this preserve. The moose that were left on October Mountain multiplied and for some few years were seen locally.

*Editor's Note: Just wondering what the buffalo (sic), usually found in open plains, savannahs, and grasslands, thought of being taken to a forest? Were they happy to be relocated to the similarly forested Adirondack Preserve? Maybe Yellowstone would have been a more suitable choice. Just for current interest, according to the Adirondack Explorer, back in May of 2021, 36,000 acres of the Whitney property were up for sale and could fetch \$238 million. If anyone can update its fate, we'd love to hear.*

**THE 2024 MEMBERSHIP DRIVE...**

**A BIG THANK YOU ...**

... to all the Members who have already renewed their membership for 2024! Our Membership Drive started in October and we've already had a great response. Not only are current Members staying with us into 2024, but new Members are coming on board as well and we welcome and thank them, also. The support of all of you is crucial to our Society and, therefore, to the continuing preservation of our Town's history.

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).

**LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2024 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, 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): \_\_\_\_\_

**Happy and Safe Holidays From the Lee Historical Society!**



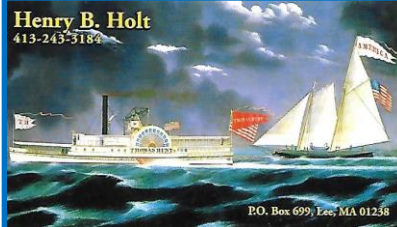
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