



# 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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Facebook: Lee Historical Society Lee MA

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



## **FROM THE EDITORS**

Hands up anyone who knows what is unusual about February 2024! Top marks to those who said, "It's a leap year!" So, all you ladies who've been waiting for the guy on one knee with a ring in a box can get in on the act and scoop him up. Moving on – or back, in this case – to a brief notification in the Berkshire Gleaner 100 years ago (February 22, 1924, to be exact), which read as follows: "There will be a leap year dance at the K. of C. Hall tonight under the direction of a group of young men. Whalen's Orchestra will furnish music." An evening of fun and frivolity, no doubt, finishing with a number of young men wondering how they suddenly became a fiancé. It's surprising they didn't hold the dance on February 14<sup>th</sup>, Valentine's Day, but maybe because that was a Thursday. But that would have been a double whammy for all the single ladies, chocolate hearts, flowers, AND a husband-to-be! Have a Happy February and don't forget, you can reach Linda at [lindabreader@icloud.com](mailto:lindabreader@icloud.com) and Tracie at [ethere@gmail.com](mailto:ethere@gmail.com) with any comments, questions, or suggestions.

## **ARTICLES BY BETTY DENNIS**

**OCTOBER 7<sup>TH</sup>, 1971**



*The January edition of our newsletter showcased two articles that spoke about Moses Pease and his match factory, one by our local historian Charles Flint and the other by another beloved Lee historian, Betty Dennis. This next article isn't about Moses Pease, but it does seem he was well woven into Lee's tapestry. So many of Lee's stories and characters are intertwined! As you read this article, you'll see how that is as the names of other characters we've mentioned in previous articles pop up here. So, without further ado ....*

“Cornelius Bassett and Nathan Dillingham in 1779 built the “Red Lion” tavern on the corner of Park and Housatonic Streets, now part of the Pero Apartment House, or old “Pease’s Corner”. *(And here again, Mr. Pease’s name crops up. The site where the Berkshire Bank now stands has seen so much of Lee’s history! Let us continue ...)* It was used as a hotel and remained as a landmark and memento of earlier days, for many years after the “modern” Housatonic house was built (where our Memorial Hall now stands). It was the first two story house built in Lee, and history tells us it hosted the first store in town. No doubt this, together with the site chosen for the “Meeting House” had a great bearing on locating the present “center” of Lee.

Nathan “Major” Dillingham is listed as the first merchant in Lee. He first sold dry goods, spices, and rum in the “Red Lion Inn”, but later put up a small building and took Cornelius Fessenden as his partner. It was in these two places of business that men would gather to talk over the village politics, relate former experiences and often amuse themselves by playing practical jokes on one another. No person made it their business to furnish amusement for one another, yet they had fun, often boisterous and rude.

Other early merchants were Mr. Jenkins who had a store about where today's A & P store stands, and Foote and Hinman, who conducted their business until 1817 when they sold to Oliver Ives. Ives sold to Church and Bassett, who were engaged in the manufacture of paper and paper bonnets. They ran this business for a short time, but the paper business finally engaged their full attention, so they sold to William Taylor in 1837.”

*For those of our readers with good memories, our article, “Then and Now” on the history of the Park Block refers to Messrs. Church & Bassett and their paper bonnets, and also to Mr. Taylor and his grocery store. If any of you would like to refresh your memories, you can find our newsletters on the Society’s website at [leehistoricsociety.homestead.com](http://leehistoricsociety.homestead.com).*

## **STORIES FROM THE GRAVE**

*It was back in April of last year that we wrote one of our most intriguing articles of the unique friendship between Tim Schaefer of Lee and Emerson McKegg, the latter having passed away over 100 years ago. In September, the Society hosted a walk through Fairmount Cemetery and we stopped at Emerson’s gravesite to admire the work that Tim had put in to clean not only Emerson’s headstone, but also that of his neighbors, and to maintain the site to keep the grass around it trimmed, free of weeds, leaves, pine cones, etc., making it a pristine example of how beautiful a well-maintained gravesite can be.*

*Tim’s dedication to the residents of Fairmount has continued as he almost daily walks the cemetery, raising fallen headstones, cleaning others to look like new, and during his endeavors has sent some photos to us of other headstones that have piqued his interest. We decided to investigate a bit further into the lives of these individuals and felt this could make an interesting topic for an article for our readers, so please read on!*

## JARED SMITH



Jared was born into one of Lee's old families on September 16, 1802, and died quite young on December 4, 1848 aged 46 years. He was actually born in Sandisfield to Stephen and Polly and, unusually, has gravestones in both Lee and there, but we think he's buried in Lee as his headstone at Fairmount includes the name of his wife Caroline Julia Sheldon, who passed away before him on February 4, 1845 aged only 34. Their epitaph reads, "The grave the treasury of Heaven". Most of you will recognize the name Elizur Smith, of High Lawn Farm and mill owner fame, and he was Jared's brother. Jared was the father of DeWitt Smith, who died from a cerebral hemorrhage on June 25, 1908. Jared worked for his brother at Smith Paper Mills, but we don't know in what capacity.

## NATHANIEL BACKUS



His epitaph reads, "All you that read with little care, Who walk away and leave me here, Should not forget that you will die, And be entombed as well as I". He sounds a little embittered, doesn't he, if it was actually he who chose this epitaph. His premature death at the age of 35 was most unfortunate as he was killed on June 22, 1782 by a falling tree, being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

*Now here we must refer you to this edition's "Articles by Betty Dennis" feature in which we mention the intertwining of Lee's characters. This next piece is a great example of that where, in the second paragraph of her article, she mentions how the men of the village would gather and play practical jokes. Read on and you'll see what we mean. This is taken from Hyde's Centennial History of Lee:*

"One Winter evening, Messrs. Porter and Goodspeed had been boasting in Dillingham's store of the merits of their horses. The clerk, Nat. Backus, slyly fastened a coil of rope to the hitching post and to the sleigh; then urged them to show the speed of the old mare which stood waiting for them at the door. He backed the sleigh up to the post, handed them the reins, and at the word "Go", off they started. The old horse sprang forward, went about two rods, and then stopped with a sudden jerk that sent the men out of the sleigh over the dasher. A second trial resulted in a similar spill, when suspecting the trick, Goodspeed dumped out, cut off the rope at the post, threw it into the sleigh, and without a word of inquiry or reprimand drove off, undoubtedly thinking he had the best of the joke."

## LUCY D. BLISS



The Valley Gleaner of March 1, 1899, heads Lucy's obituary as "A Faithful Teacher", which indeed it seems she was. Lucy was 79 years old when she passed away on February 26, 1899 at home from dropsy, which is known today as edema. For 58 of her years, she was a teacher and would have taught hundreds of Lee children over those years at the primary school. Lucy had been a resident of the Town her entire life. She never married and was buried with her sister Grace with whom she had shared a home and who had also passed away not long before.

## **AMOS B. THATCHER**



His headstone reads just this short and somewhat obvious epitaph “Passed to spirit life”. He died on September 26, 1866, aged 38 years and 4 months.

This account from the Berkshire County Eagle of November 8, 1866 is a good lesson in why not to put off until tomorrow what should be done today.

“Mr. Amos Thacher (sic), recently deceased here, but a few days before his illness began, applied for a policy in the Berkshire Life Insurance Co., and the policy was made out, but, unfortunately, he delayed paying the premium until it was too late.”

Another article from the Berkshire County Eagle dated January 1, 1867 gives us a little more information on what Amos left behind. “The property of the late Amos B. Thatcher, pleasantly situated on Main street, consisting of Dwelling House, barn, blacksmith shop, and 1 acre of land, long known as one of the best blacksmith stands in the country. Buildings in good repair with a never failing supply of excellent water, and good supply of choice fruit trees. The above property will be sold on reasonable terms. Apply to C.S. Thatcher.”

We learned that, prior to becoming a downtown Lee blacksmith, he was a farmer and a prominent member of the Berkshire County Agricultural Society. He had a 65 acre farm which he sold to buy a property with the above-mentioned blacksmith shop on it from his brother Elial in 1865.

## **REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN**

### **MAJOR GENERAL JOSEPH WHITON (1759 – 1828)**

By the time he passed away at the age of 69, Joseph had achieved an awful lot, but his life hadn’t started off that well. Born in Chatham, Connecticut, he was orphaned in childhood, one of four brothers, and all were then raised by their father’s cousin, Elijah Whiton of Ashford. A hero in his own right, we assume!

As an adult, he moved on from what may have been a difficult beginning to achieve a stellar military career, beginning with enlisting in Captain Simon Smith’s Company, Colonel Experience Storr’s Connecticut Regiment in 1776 to fight in the Revolutionary War. In August 1777, he moved on to Captain Isaac Stone’s Company, Colonel Jonathan Lattimer’s Connecticut Regiment. Emulating the proverbial rolling stone, he enlisted again in April 1780 and was Acting Steward in Captain Bottome’s Company, Colonel Levi Well’s Connecticut Regiment. Finally, in April 1781, he became an Adjutant in General Waterbury’s Regiment in defense of New Haven.

While in the first regiment, it seems he must have had a problem with the enemy as he received pay as a wounded soldier and was later granted a pension. Obviously, as one who enjoyed a skirmish, he also served in the War of 1812 and was appointed General after leading a detachment in Boston.

His civilian life was none less frenetic as after leaving the military he taught school, entered the mercantile business, served as a Justice of the Peace, and as a member of the Lee legislature, plus representing Berkshire County in the State Senate, and being an Associate Justice of Court Sessions. He also found the time to marry Amanda Garfield in 1793.

One last interesting fact is that the Merrell Inn that most of us will be familiar with on Route 102, Pleasant Street, was constructed around 1794 as Major Whiton’s private

residence. He sold it to William Merrell in 1817, when it was then operated as a tavern and stagecoach inn.

We don't know from what Major Whiton eventually gave up the ghost and retired to Fairmount Cemetery, but one has to assume it may have been exhaustion!

## **AN UPDATE FROM A MEMBER**

### **LEE THEATER PLUS MORE!**

*Nothing pleases us more than to hear from our readers as one of the aspirations we have as editors of our Society's newsletter is to ensure our Members and non-Members alike know that this is not just our newsletter, but one for all of you. Participation and contribution is all part of making the Gateway Gazette an integral part of our Town's fabric, the sharing of its history, both past and present.*

*Our December edition featured a story on the history of the Lee Theatre and we mentioned at the end that we had assumed that its owner, Miss Elizabeth Formento became by marriage Mrs. Anthony F. Serra. The result of the inquiry has been more than we could have wished for, not only confirmation that our assumption was correct, but an insight into life in Lee in the 1950's from former resident Peggy Westergard (nee O'Neill). Peggy has kindly agreed to share her email to us in this edition of the newsletter. Many of you will, we are sure, have shared Peggy's experiences in a Lee back then that gave so many wonderful childhood memories. Read on!*

"I remember so well watching the thermometer outside our kitchen window in Lee years ago, to see if the schools were going to close due to weather (and praying they would). They didn't close until the thermometer hit four degrees above zero. (I went to St. Mary's School first eight years, but assume the Lee Public Schools were on the same schedule.)

I've often wondered what our youths would have been like if it were not for the Lee Theater. In high school it was the very center of social activity on Friday nights. (I was in high school 1954 – 1958, so don't know if this was the case after I left, nor do I know when Friday nights at the Lee Theater were taken over by teenagers.) But for those four years, much of the teenage population of Lee could be found in the theater on Friday nights. I'm not sure how much of the movies we actually saw, as most of our time was taken up sitting with boyfriends/girlfriends, or just a group of friends (talking through the whole movie), or going up and down the aisles to see who was sitting with whom. There were also gatherings in the restrooms to discuss who was sitting with whom, or who wanted to sit with whom. The activity and noise levels in the theater were far beyond what most adults could tolerate and so most Lee adults avoided going to the movies on Friday nights.

In fact, such was the reputation of teens at the movies on Fridays that when Cookie Serra (Liz's {Elizabeth Formento's} husband) was returning from a business meeting in Great Barrington and was killed when he crashed his car into the only roadside tree in sight, many of the townspeople blamed the Lee teenagers for his death, saying he was rushing home to get to the theater because the "kids" were so unruly. (I think Cookie died of a heart attack or stroke, not the threat of teenage behavior.) By the way, I think Cookie's name was actually Anthony, but I never heard him called anything but "Cookie".

She was a very friendly woman and well-liked. After the theater closed, she worked on and off at Johansson's store. My uncle Peter Vaninetti was Manager there, first when it was Ben Franklin's and later purchased and moved down the street by Harold Johansson.



*Cora Vaninetti Angelini Shay,  
c.1980.*

Another little bit of Lee history is that Liz Formento Serra’s father, Gus, used to have a little candy shop under the Town Hall in a small space where the Police Department is (or was – I haven’t been back to Lee in some time). I used to go in there with my grandmother, Filomena Vaninetti, when I was a little kid. She and Gus would speak Italian so I never knew what they talked about, but Gus had one of those husky Italian-men voices (not unlike The Godfather) and when Nona and I would get home I used to imitate him, rasping out, “I am Gus Formento” to anyone who would listen. My brother, Bud O’Neill, thought it was hilarious, but the Italian side of the family gave me hell for being “disrespectful to Mr. Formento. My Irish aunts told me if I didn’t stop doing that, my voice would get stuck that way. This is how I learned the word “disrespectful” at the age of five.”

*We would truly like to thank Peggy for her fascinating, and sometimes amusing, recounting of life back in Lee in the 1950’s. Peggy left Lee after high school for sunny San Diego where she lived for 53 years and has only been back to Lee for occasional visits since. Her family connections to Lee go way back, her grandfather being Charles Vaninetti, an Italian mason-contractor who lived on South Prospect Street and for whom a dam on Washington Mountain was named.*



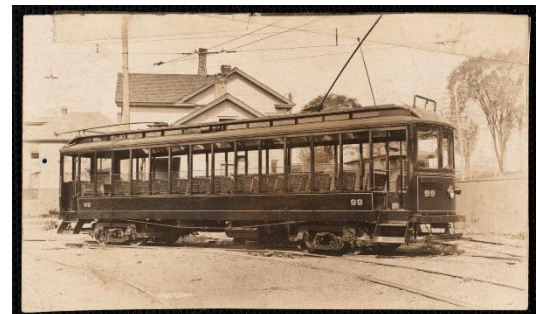
*Charles Vaninetti*

## **THE LHS BULLETIN BOARD**

### **“RIDING THE BERKSHIRE TROLLEY”**

We’re delighted to announce the first of our 2024 Speaker Series presentations. Local Historian Gary Leveille will give an illustrated talk on Thursday, March 28<sup>th</sup> at 6:30 pm at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee.

Before introduction of the automobile, Berkshire Street Railway was one of the largest trolley systems in the country, transporting riders as they commuted to school and work, shopping, visiting friends and touring. His interesting photographic review,



focusing on South County and Lee, will help us to understand how important this line was to Berkshire County, why it disappeared, and what remains of it today.

As always, this presentation is free and open to members of the public as part of the Lee Historical Society Speaker Series. Parking is available along the North entrance to Crossway Village as well as on Academy Street. Refreshments will be served, so please come on over for an educational, interesting, and sociable evening!

Although Gary will be discussing materials in his own personal collection, the Lee Historical Society also has a significant trove of Berkshire Street Railway items that were diligently collated by Kinsley Goodrich. There will be a follow-on lecture centered on that collection in the future.

We look forward to seeing you!

**BY-LAW REVISIONS 2024**

*The following is an official notice to our membership of By-law Revisions. These revisions were introduced at the November 9<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Society’s Board of Directors and unanimously adopted at their meeting on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2024.*

**Article 3, Section E** formerly read: “Members holding twenty-five percent of the votes shall constitute a quorum.” It is revised to read: “After prior notice, those present will constitute a quorum.”

**Section F** now reads: “Written proxy votes valid for 30 days shall be accepted.” It is deleted.

**Section G** now reads: “Lacking a quorum any legally constituted meeting may be adjourned to a specific time and place by a majority of those present without further notice.” It is deleted.

The revisions are intended to simplify a voting process that has proven to be unwieldy. All members are still qualified to make nominations and to vote at the Annual Meeting.

**Article 4, Section C** now reads: “No Director shall be elected to more than three consecutive terms.” It is deleted.

**Section D** now reads: “At its discretion, the Board may confer emeriti status on any member who has served more than three consecutive terms and such members shall be in addition to the limit stated in A.” The words “who has served more than three consecutive terms” are deleted. The Section letters will be reordered. The revisions are intended to eliminate terms which have never been observed and which are counterproductive in that they could dismiss productive Board members.

These revisions will soon be completed in the online copy of our By-laws at [leehistoricsociety.homestead.com](http://leehistoricsociety.homestead.com) where you can see them in context with the whole document. If you have questions or comments, please send them to [2rockpaper9@gmail.com](mailto:2rockpaper9@gmail.com).

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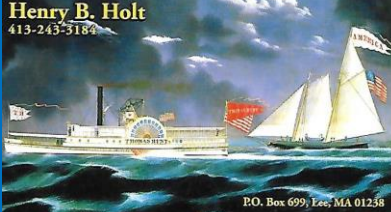
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