



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 Annual Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, November 9 at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Towers, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



FROM THE EDITORS

It's about this time of year that we can feel a bit of an anti-climax – the beauty of the Fall foliage is now depositing itself on our lawns and sidewalks, the days are getting shorter, the tourists, for the most part, have gone back to where they came from. There are comments about the falling temperatures and some trepidation about the coming winter – how much snow, how cold, how long? Your Society is here to assure you there is much to look forward to, particularly our new President, Gary Allan's presentation on the history of the Lee Fire Department! That should warm us all up! So, Tuesday 14th, 6:30 pm, make your way to the Senior Center (details inside) for an entertaining evening and, as always, good food and good company! See you then!

THEN & NOW



Main Street West Side, From: Views of Lee, 1895.

Have you ever walked along Railroad Street and wondered about the big grey and green clapboard Italianate building next to Dresser Hull's office building? It looks rather out of place, doesn't it? That's because it really is. You see, it used to be on Main Street. As buildings go, it was very mobile considering its size, and its history quite something to unravel, but let's have a go!

Most of us know where the Park Block is as its name is carved on it and it is the home of the Zabian's, Fine Clothing on one side and Exquisite Jewelry on the

other. But how many know that that is the SECOND Park Block? The original is the above-mentioned building on Railroad Street.

On the sight of the Park Block we all know on Main Street there was once the oldest business building in the town center, which belonged to the company of Church & Bassett. Here were sold paper and paper bonnets, produced in the small mill owned by this company on the site where the Eagle Mill is today.

In 1837, it was sold to one William Taylor and he opened a grocery store there. It did so well that he needed a bigger building, so the old one was torn down in 1848 and a new building, the first Park Block, was built in its place by Leonard Church, he of Church & Bassett. Mr. Taylor continued to run his grocery store there until his death in 1878 after 41 years of successful commerce in Lee.

Now, here it gets interesting, because the original Park Block was not moved once, but twice! In 1880, it was moved by a William Porter 100' north adjacent to a law office building just south of the Morgan House. This building was demolished in the 1950's, so some of you may well remember it. Back to the Park Block, though. The reason it was moved was to give more lawn to Wellington Smith's grand house, now home to the Kelly Funeral Home.



The Old Park Block on Railroad Street, 2023.



The "New" Park Block on Main Street, 2023.

After Mr. Taylor passed away in 1878, the grocery store was taken over by Messrs. Barnes & Bassett; Barnes retired in 1886, Bassett in 1893. The lower floor was then leased to the town to be used as offices, and the upper floor to the Reliance Hook & Ladder Company, who seemed much into entertainment as it was used for a billiard room and stag parties.

In 1898, the Post Office, which had been located in Memorial Hall, moved across the road to the Park Block and the town employees moved back across the road to the Memorial Hall.

The Park Block's second move occurred in 1904 when it was purchased by the Lee Savings Bank. A new law had been brought out to separate Savings Banks and National Banks so the move was made to make room for the construction of now-gone Lee Savings Bank. Some time after this move, the second floor was once again used for entertainment, as it became the Old Fellows Lodge.

And, for those who are wondering, the new Park Block was built in 1914. So many dates!

REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN

LT. CDR. DR. CHARLES W. STRATTON, JR. (1918 – 1996)

Dr. Charles Stratton was an accomplished man descended from a long line of accomplished men, becoming a respected third generation physician in Lee. During his long career as a doctor in Lee, he delivered an astonishing twelve hundred babies, that's getting close to 25% of Lee's current population, although these births were, of course, spread out over a number of years!

He also had a stellar career in the Armed Forces starting with sixteen months in the US Navy during World War II. He was awarded the Silver Star for his service in Iwo Jima. After attending the School of Aviation Medicine in Pensacola, Florida he graduated as a Navy flight surgeon. He did return to Lee after the war, but was recalled to serve once more in the April of 1953 due to the Korean conflict.

In 1955, he resumed his medical practice in Lee after release as a Lieutenant Commander from a tour of active duty which included ten months aboard the USS Midway in the Caribbean and Mediterranean areas.

In a very successful attempt to keep the tradition going, he had five sons, two of whom also became physicians. A life well spent!



THE LHS BULLETIN BOARD

THE HISTORY OF EAST LEE



Union Chapel, East Lee, 1886

In the latest of the Society's Speaker Series, Caroline Meyer Young gave a presentation on the history of East Lee at the Lee Senior Center on Thursday, September 28th. The enthusiastic crowd who took their seats in the Cafeteria were not disappointed as Caroline gave a thoroughly absorbing view into the life of East Lee back in the 18th and 19th Centuries. With many vintage photographs, she took us back in time to when that community, the oldest Lee settlement, was both a farming and industrial community.

Caroline covered as much of East Lee's diverse history that time would allow from the Shay's Rebellion uprising, to the devastating floods of 1886 and 1968 that took out so many mills and homes, the hurricane of 1927, and so much more. She took many of Lee's current long-time residents back in time to the days of the Huckleberry (aka Berkshire Street) trolley line, the East Lee Drum & Bugle Corps, the Mud (now Basin) Pond, the beautiful Union Chapel, demolished in 1955.



Chapel Street, East Lee, after the 1886 flood.

Space in the Gazette does not allow us to cover the whole of Caroline's presentation, but for those of you who missed it or would like to revisit it, do go to www.ctsbvtv.org, Public Channel 1301, and search "The History of East Lee".



Devarences General Store, East Lee, c.1920.

Editor's Note: Caroline Meyer Young is a long-time Board Member and Treasurer of the Lee Historical Society and in 2016 received the prestigious Consolati/Davis/Dennis award for significant contributions. She is also a founding member of the Lee Historical Commission. Caroline has been a resident of Lee for nearly 50 years.

THE 2023 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Society's meeting took place at the Crossway Senior Center Cafeteria on Thursday, October 12 and commenced at 6:30 pm.

The majority of our Board Members were in attendance, although unfortunately the turnout of non-Board Members was rather thin on the ground. Due to the lack of a quorum, this necessitated the scheduling of a second meeting for the Board Members in order to determine nominations to the Board and the election of officers. This will be done by Zoom next Thursday, the 19th.

In attendance as Members were Charlie Flint and Tom Barenski, well-known to all Lee history lovers as the go-to experts on the history of Dodgetown. We also had a traveler from afar – Dan Nevin from Carson City, Nevada, accompanied by his brother Jack. Barb Allen, always a great supporter, was there.

This was an abbreviated version of the regular monthly Board Meetings with a quick overview from the various Committees and a summary of the year by our President, Bill Mathews. Bill is stepping down from this position after three years of dedication, peppered with accomplishments in so many areas. We shall miss him holding us all to task at the helm, but we won't miss his presence as he will still be with us, but in a different capacity.

One final act before moving on to the more social side of our meeting was for Phil Smith to present to Tom Barenski the Consolati/Davis/Dennis Award for Outstanding Dedication. This award is shared between Tom and his fellow Dodgetown researcher, Art Stringer. Unfortunately, due to ill health, Art couldn't be with us, but we wish him all the very best and thank both he and Tom for their many years of research.

Some pretty amazing delicacies of the chocolate and pumpkin kind were enjoyed by all after the adjournment of the meeting thanks to our dedicated Board Members.



Phil Smith presenting the award to Tom Barenski.

UPCOMING PROGRAM

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPEAKER SERIES LEE FIRE DEPARTMENT: BUCKETS, PEOPLE, WITCHES



Lee Water Witch, c.1890. From the Lee Library Historical Collection.

Gary Allen, Lee Historical Society's President, will be the next presenter in the Society's popular Speaker Series. The topic on this occasion will be the long history of the Lee Fire Department and will be held on Tuesday, November 14th.

2006 was the 250th anniversary of the Department and the story has been updated for this presentation. Lee's volunteer and full-time firefighters deserve our recognition for their service. The talk will follow the development of the Department and include the advances in firefighting

equipment, plus highlighting some of the key members.

This presentation is free of charge, open to the public, and will start at 6:30 pm at the Lee Senior Center. The entrance to the program is on the south side of the Center at 21 Crossway Street, which is off High Street. Parking is available on the north side of the building and also on Academy, High, or Crossway Streets.

Refreshments will be served, so do come and enjoy an educational and entertaining evening with the Society.



Gary Allen

WALKS OF HISTORICAL LEE

During September, the Historical Society had a multitude of events as you will already have read about in our October newsletter. The walks we'll write about in this edition were sponsored by the Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area and the Lee Historical Society, and were led by the Society's Tracie Etheredge, and what a terrific job she did, both as a representative of the Society and as a guide to the many people who joined her on the walks.

The walks were held on Saturday, September 9th and Sunday, September 24th respectively and were really well attended, amazing considering the weather on the 24th, chill wind and threat of downpours. Such resilience of these hearty

history hikers! Both walks covered the same area, starting at the gazebo near the Post Office, where Tracie gave a short presentation on the history of Lee. Most entertaining was her rendition of how Lee got its name – from General Charles Lee – the ironically British-born expat who served for the States during the Revolutionary War, was something of a hero, but ended up being court-martialed, and was very much disliked by Washington for egotistical reasons. That's it in a nutshell.

Then, armed with a copy of the September newsletter and Tracie's excellent brochure as a guide to the attractions on the walk, the procession started along Railroad Street. First stop on the route was to discuss the long history of Dresser Hull, which included a very historic building currently being used by them as a showroom, but this will be discussed in a separate 'Then & Now' article. Onward to the railroad station, now awaiting a new purpose, but originally built in 1893 by the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad and from where happy Lee residents were zipped away to the joys of New York City.



Up Main Street to West Center to view in awe the newly-emerged vista of the Eagle Mill sans the houses once fronting it, and to discuss the iconic Joe's Diner at Norton's Corner. Reference was made to the Wonder Woman house, another Lee icon, up Center Street, a must-view for those who may still have the energy to walk up there after the walk.

Marching – or drifting, perhaps – the next stop was to discuss the history and the joys of the Chambery Inn, once St. Mary's School and home to six nuns from Chambery in France, only two of whom spoke English. There must have been an unusual proliferation of French-speaking Lee students around that time! Next on the agenda, our rather lovely fire station with its down-sized fire trucks. Built of Lee Marble in 1912 and designed by architect Henry Moul, the trucks are smaller than usual due to the undersized entrances to the station, which are a challenge.

We were blessed at St. Mary's Church to have Fr. Brian join us. He shared his concern with us for the Church's lovely, possibly 300-year old beech tree, which is suffering from the effects of some nasty bug. We were advised it's been treated by an arborist, so all fingers crossed for its recovery.

Next door is, of course, another of Henry Moul's works of art, the Lee Library, a vision in Lee Marble and a beneficiary from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. The library was a great spot for Tracie to give an overview of the history of marble in Lee, which along with Lee's own library is seen in the Senate and House wings of the U.S. Capitol building, New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral, and Philadelphia's City Hall, to name a few.

Marching onwards, Tracie recounted the history of St. George's Episcopal Church on Franklin Street, built in 1865, but repurposed in 2011 as a theatre and art gallery for CIP, the College Internship Program, dedicated to helping college age students on the autism spectrum and now known as the Spectrum Playhouse.



Round the corner to Main Street, Memorial Hall has such an interesting history. It was built in 1873 to memorialize the 38 men of Lee who perished in the Civil War and whose names appear on the plaques up on the second floor. It's now home to the Town offices and Lee's finest, the men and women who safeguard us – Lee's police force. It was also the scene of the infamous and well-sung-about trial of Arlo Guthrie in his song and later movie, both entitled "Alice's Restaurant". Here sat the blind Judge Hannon with his trusty guide dog, Susie, who presided over Arlo's trial.

Opposite Memorial Hall, a brief history of the Morgan House was given. Originally a private residence, the home of William Porter that was built circa 1813. The eponymous building went on to become a stagecoach stop back in 1853 after having its doors opened by new owner Edwin Morgan. We must pause for a moment to give a few more details on the Inn's history as it's just so interesting! As well as a large number of Lee residents, other illustrious visitors include President Ulysses S. Grant, George Bernard Shaw, and President Grover Cleveland. The latter was so in love with the Morgan House and Lee that he hosted the 1895 Summer Army Games in Tyringham, presumably so he could stay at the Morgan House. And then, of course, we have Robert Titus. For those unfamiliar, he was the archeologist who opened up the tomb of King Tutankhamun back in Luxor, Egypt. Even more interesting is that he actually held his annual Raccoon Hunting Banquets at the Morgan House. Here's hoping that was because he really enjoyed the Inn and not because they served up the deceased raccoons for dinner!

Back to the walk and the First Congregational Church which stands there in all its glory to greet all who arrive in Lee. It was built in 1800 for \$3,500 and burnt to the ground in 1857,

the victim of a burning shingle from a conflagration on Main Street, thus joining the long list of burned down buildings in Lee. Its stalwart congregation had it rebuilt the same year.

Just outside the Church, in the Park, was the penultimate stop, the Kilbon Fountain. Now beautifully restored by Vern Tower and the efforts of Berkshire Gateway Preservation and rededicated in 2000, it was originally dedicated in 1857. It was designed by the sculptor Daniel Chester French and carved by local artisan, Dante Baccolini.

The walk terminated at the Visitors Bureau and finally everyone thanked and bade farewell to Tracie, all leaving with a much deeper understanding of what an historically significant and interesting town our Gateway to the Berkshires is.

THE 2024 MEMBERSHIP DRIVE...

... has begun! Why do we need one you may ask? There are many reasons why we need to continue to reach out to expand our membership. Some of these provide benefits to the Society, but some are beneficial to potential members and to the Town of Lee.

As we've said many times, Lee has a fascinating, intriguing, interesting history. Without Societies such as ours, and the invaluable research continued by many who understand the importance of recording it, it would be irretrievably lost.

As a member of the Society, you can be of invaluable help in this. We are always in need of "more hands on deck" to assist in the massive amount of behind the scenes activities. Being a member of the Society can be very rewarding. It opens a social opportunity for those who may be new to the Town or who feel the need to get out and make new friends, especially in the long days of winter! There's a sense of satisfaction from doing something that has worth and purpose.

Kathy Smith is the Chair of the Membership Committee and is always available to answer your questions or hear your thoughts. She can be reached by email at kf23smith@yahoo.com.

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): _____

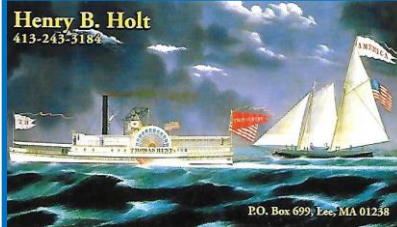
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