Vol. 23, No. 11 **November 2026**

The Gateway Gazette

The Newsletter of the Lee Historical Society

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

Email: Lee.Historical@hotmail.com
Website: leehistoricsociety.homestead.com
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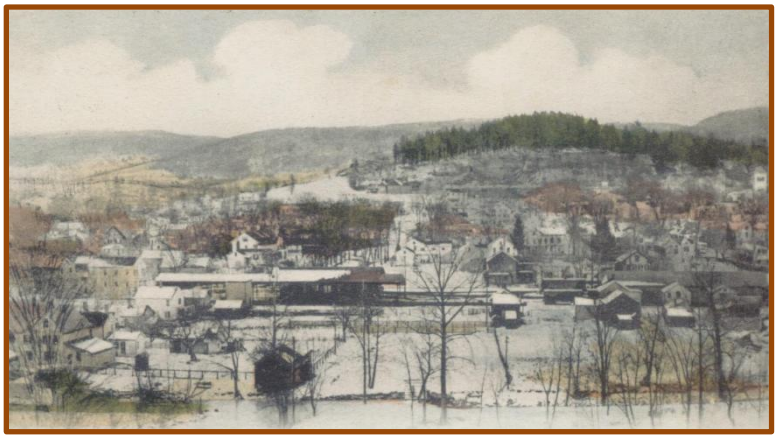
The Lee Historical Society Monthly Meeting will be Thursday, November 12th at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



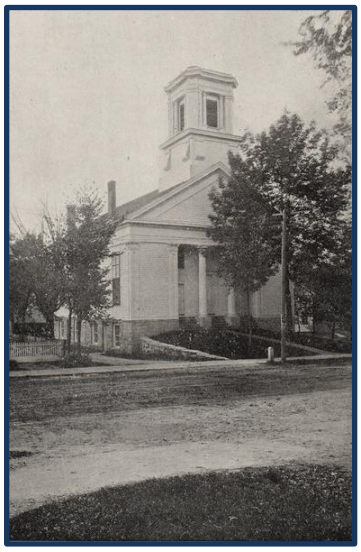
Bird's eye view of Lee, looking east from Prospect Street, c. 1900.

FROM THE EDITOR

Things are slowing down and the days are getting shorter, but somehow this is the best (in my opinion) season of the year in the Berkshires. We have all the wonderful foliage colors, cooler temperatures and many local harvest festivals. With any luck the snow will stay away for a while so we can enjoy this without having winter hit us with its full power - let that wait until January!

If you have any questions or comments, please contact me, Tracie at ethere@gmail.com.

THE REMARKABLE JOURNEY OF LEE'S BAPTIST CHURCH



Lee Baptist Church, c. 1890.
Source: *Views of Lee.*

Some in Lee may still remember the storied Baptist Church that no longer stands on Main Street, but during its life it served many roles as part of the community.

The story begins even before the church itself existed. In 1827, residents of South Lee and Tyringham joined together to build a community meetinghouse. Around that time local interest in the Baptist religion was stirred by the preaching of minister Ira Hall. Recognizing that no single denomination was large enough to support its own building, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and others who wanted a place of worship in their neighborhood came together to construct a church. Dedicated in 1828, it became a rare example of religious collaboration, with different congregations using the building on alternate Sundays.

By 1850, Lee's growing Baptist population was ready for a church of its own in the center of town. Under the leadership of Reverend Amory Gale, the Lee Baptist Church was organized with twenty members. Confident that the town's prosperity would continue and the congregation would grow, they built an ambitious new church on Main Street, dedicating it in 1852.

Unfortunately, the building proved larger than the congregation could comfortably support. Although membership grew rapidly, debts mounted as economic conditions worsened. In 1863, the church property, valued at $7,000, was sold at auction for only $2,325. Yet the congregation persevered. Pittsfield businessman S. V. R. Daniels, the buildings buyer, generously allowed the church to continue worshipping in the building, and later the Berkshire Baptist Association helped keep the church alive.

The church played an important role in community life. When Lee's Congregational Church was destroyed by fire in 1857, the Baptists opened their doors to the displaced congregation for more than two years. The church's bell, purchased by public subscription after that fire, became the town's principal church bell.

Over the decades, a long succession of pastors guided the congregation through periods of growth and decline. Among the most notable were Rev. Amory Gale, whose leadership established the church, and Rev. Fred M. Clay, remembered for his energetic community work and for helping organize what may have been Lee's first Boy Scout troop.

As membership dwindled in the early twentieth century, the church eventually ceased operations. The building then entered one of the more unusual chapters of its history. In 1924, it became the Ferncliff Theatre, where local residents attended silent films, including Charlie Chaplin's "The Kid." The theater venture was short-lived, and the building stood vacant after 1925.

Garrett F. Troy of West Stockbridge obtained an option of the property in October 1929, but a permit for a gas station he submitted was not granted by the town, following a hearing at which St. Mary's church members protested its being granted.

In 1930, a dramatic rescue preserved the structure from possible commercial redevelopment. James T. Owens, a local retailer, purchased the property and donated it to St. Mary's Parish, where it became a parish house and community center. For decades, parish dinners, card parties, and social events filled the old church with new life.

The building's final chapter came in 1965 when it was demolished to make way for additional parking for St. Mary's Church. Its disappearance left a noticeable gap in the streetscape, but not in local memory.

Just a faded memory, the Lee Baptist Church holds a place in the religious and civic life of Lee and deserves to be remembered as part of its history.

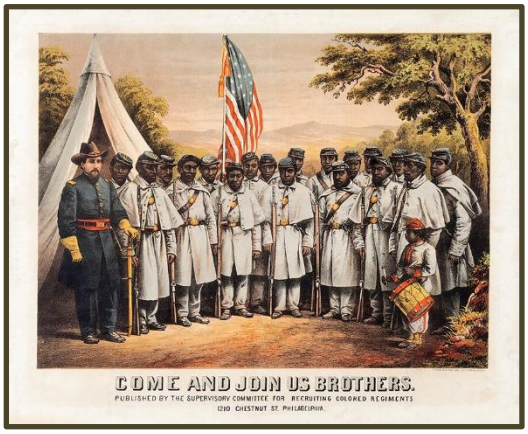


Baptist Church destruction August 1965.
Source: *The Berkshire Eagle*.

REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN

Captain James R. Cranston (1842-1888)

Among the many Civil War veterans with ties to Lee, few compiled a military record as remarkable as that of Captain James R. Cranston. Born in Lee in 1842, Cranston devoted nearly his entire adult life to military service, through the Civil War and beyond until his death in 1888.

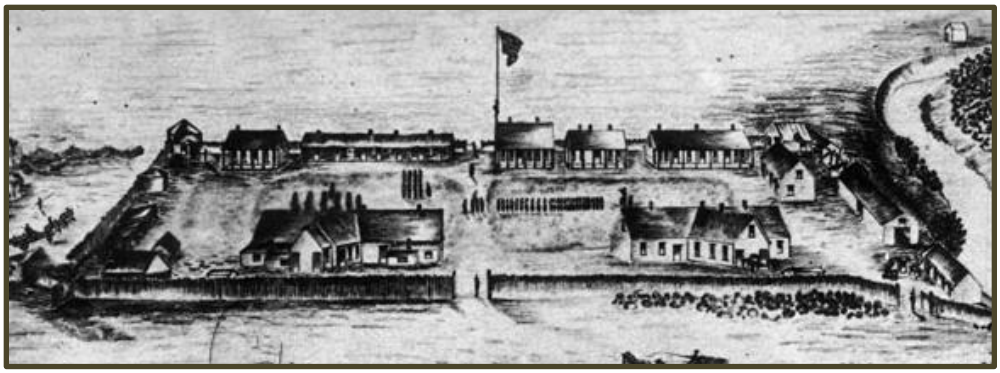


Source: Library Company of Philadelphia

As a young man, Cranston learned the printer's trade in the office of the *Pittsfield Eagle* newspaper. With the outbreak of the Civil War, however, the 19-year-old left the printing business and enlisted on September 9, 1861, as a private in Company E of the 24th Massachusetts Infantry. He served with distinction in Gen. Burnside's North Carolina Expedition, one of the Union's important early coastal campaigns. His regiment later became the first Union regiment to enter Fort Wagner after its evacuation by Confederate forces.

In 1864, Cranston took an unusual path for a Berkshire County soldier. He attended the Free Military School for Applicants for Command of Colored Troops in Philadelphia, an institution established to train white officers for leadership positions in the newly formed United States Colored Troops (almost all officer and leadership positions in the African-American military units in the Civil War were assigned to white officers). After completing the course, he was commissioned a captain in the 119th United States Colored Infantry, serving until the close of the war in May 1865.

Rather than return permanently to civilian life, Cranston chose the army as a profession. After a brief period working in New Lebanon, he traveled to Washington in 1866 and was offered a commission in the Regular Army by General Ulysses S. Grant, then serving as acting secretary of war. Appointed a second lieutenant in the 10th U.S. Infantry, he began a second military career that would last more than two decades.



Fort Abercrombie, South Dakota. Source: State Historical Society of South Dakota

Cranston spent the next twenty-two years on frontier duty in the American West, earning promotion to first lieutenant and building a reputation as a dependable officer. He was stationed at Fort Abercrombie in North Dakota, and Fort Union in New Mexico. In August 1888, while leading a detachment near Amargo, New Mexico, assigned to protect Native Americans from encroachers on reservation lands, he became ill and died after a three-day struggle with what was described as a congestive chill. He was 45 years old.

His death brought widespread attention in Berkshire County. Some early reports speculated that he had been killed while confronting squatters, but later accounts confirmed that illness was the cause. His remains were returned to Lee, where he was buried in Fairmount Cemetery. The funeral was attended by local veterans and townspeople, and the community extended its sympathy to his elderly parents, who still lived in the house where he had been born.

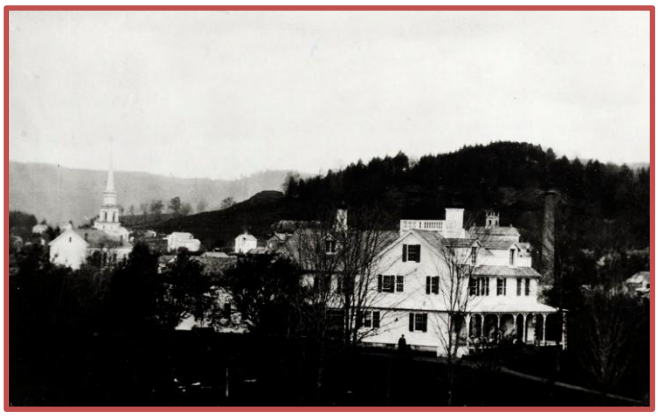
Writing in 1911, the *North Adams Transcript* credited James R. Cranston with one of the longest military careers of any Berkshire County native. From a printer's apprentice in Lee to a Civil War officer and veteran of the frontier army, his life reflected a generation shaped by war, service, and duty.

THE HYDE HOUSE: A LANDMARK OF LEE'S RELIGIOUS, EDUCATIONAL, AND ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

Standing at 144 West Park Street, the Hyde House remains one of Lee's most significant historic homes, and one of the town's buildings that has made it on the National Register of Historic Places. Built in 1792 by Reverend Alvan Hyde, the first minister of the Lee Congregational Church, the house has served many roles over more than two centuries, reflecting the changing needs and character of the community.

The original structure is an impressive example of vernacular Georgian architecture. Its symmetrical five-bay façade, central entrance framed by fluted pilasters and a triangular pediment, and regularly spaced windows exemplify the balance and proportion associated

with the Georgian style. Constructed on a fieldstone foundation with wood-frame plank construction and clapboard siding, the house remains one of the finest eighteenth-century buildings in Lee.



Hyde House c. 1900. Source: Lee Library Association

Following Reverend Hyde's death, the property passed to his son, Alexander Hyde, a prominent educator and civic leader, and the house moved beyond being simply a private family home. In 1837, Alexander established the Hyde Park Family Boarding School for Boys within the house. A large rear addition was constructed to accommodate classrooms and student lodging. The school attracted students from across the country, including James Roosevelt, father of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and educator Arthur Gilman, later a founder of Radcliffe College. The boarding school operated until 1867, after which the house returned to residential use.

Both father and son left lasting marks on Lee's history. Reverend Alvan Hyde guided the town's religious life for forty-one years, while Alexander Hyde helped establish educational institutions, promoted agricultural innovation, served as the first president of the Berkshire Historical and Scientific Society, and was elected to the Massachusetts Legislature in 1880.

The Hyde family retained ownership of the house until 1967, when it was gifted to the newly established Lee YMCA. The gift included a provision that the exterior remain unchanged and that ownership revert to the family should the YMCA no longer wish to hold the property. After 1976, when the Lee YMCA merged with the Southern Berkshire YMCA the Hyde House was no longer used by the organization.



Hyde House, 1976. Source: National Register of Historic Places

In 1977, a brief negotiation to sell the house to the VFW fell through when Mrs. George Hyde refused to sell when she heard the VFW planned to apply for a club license and serve alcoholic beverages on the premises

The building later housed Aardenberg Antiques during the 1980s before once again becoming a private residence.

Today, the Hyde House stands as a visible reminder of Lee's early development. Through its architectural distinction and its connections to religion, education, and civic life, the house continues to tell an important story about the people who helped shape the town and the region.

LHS BULLETIN BOARD

LHS SPEAKERS SERIES – Tom Ragusa



Local historian Tom Ragusa will give an illustrated talk, Following Knox's Footsteps: Mapping the Trail Through Otis and Sandisfield, on Tuesday, November 17, 2026 at 6:30pm at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee. General Knox was commissioned by General Washington in December 1775 to bring captured artillery, including 59 cannons, from Fort Ticonderoga, located on the south end of New York's Lake Champlain, to Boston. Washington desperately needed this artillery to defend Boston against the British. During this presentation he will share his extensive research to rediscover the seven-mile segment of the Knox Trail which runs through the Otis State Forest in Sandisfield and Otis. This section is the longest surviving original stretch of the one-time colonial "military road" that connected Boston and Albany.

Tom Ragusa, a retired DCR parks employee and longtime member of the Otis Historical Commission, started this quest in 2008 and worked part time on the project since then. He is also one of the co-authors of the recently published book, Ye Trodden Path: A History of the Knox Trail.

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.

WHAT'S IN OUR STORE

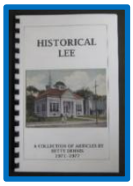
The Holidays are coming! hint, hint, hint…
Contact Tracie to purchase any of these items: ethere@gmail.com



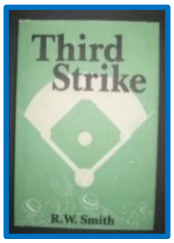
MUGS depicting various places of historical interest in Lee, including the covered bridge, Memorial Hall and the Kilbon Fountain. At just **$5** each, this would normally be a steal, but on offer at BOGO, how can you not take advantage? Rumor has it that the morning coffee tastes extra delicious in one of these exquisite beverage containers!



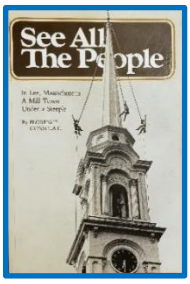
PICTURE PACKETS These beautiful prints depict scenes of Lee from yesteryear, including Main Street before the automobile, and the magnificent Congregational Church. Perfect for framing and only **$6 per packet or 2 for $10.** The dingiest of walls will look even more Berkshirish once embellished with these!



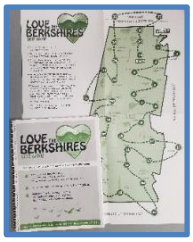
"HISTORICAL LEE" If you've read any of beloved Lee Librarian Betty Dennis' articles reprinted in our newsletter from time to time, you know what a great gift this will be for anyone interested in our Town's diverse and fascinating history, so pick one up for just **$12** and get it wrapped!



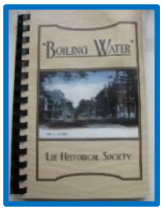
"THIRD STRIKE" by R.W. Smith. This is a wonderful book chock full of stories of the everyday people of Lee. An incredible bargain for only **$5!**



"SEE ALL THE PEOPLE" by Florence Consolati. For any who are intrigued by what happened way back when in our Town, this is THE social history of Lee, filled with important pictures of the people and places that make Lee what it is. **$26**



'LOVE THE BERKSHIRES QUIZ GAME" A new offering to our selection of merchandise, this is a trivia game designed and produced by our own Phil Smith. First brought to the market in 2010, it sold like hot cakes and of the original one thousand, only a handful are left. A fun and educational game to play after the turkey has been consumed and it's time to settle down and relax. Originally selling for $30, we have decided on only **$20**, with all proceeds going to the Society.



"BOILING WATER" This delightful book was compiled by the Society's Cookbook Committee back in 2005 and is full of the most mouth-watering recipes, such as Molasses Spice Cookies. It includes some pages by Florence Consolati on various places of historical interest in Lee. **$8**

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2026 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY – DECEMBER)

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

NAME: _____

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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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