



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 next meeting of the Society will be Thursday, September 14 at the Meeting Room at the Crossway Tower on High Street, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



*“If conscience disapproves, the loudest applauses of the world are of little value.”
–John Adams –*

FROM THE EDITORS

Ah, September in Lee, when the Gateway to the Berkshires comes into its own, as it has done historically for decades. The Lee Historical Society joins in with great relish and enthusiasm as we start to leave the summer behind and head into the Fall, one of New England’s grandest seasons! The Society has so many events planned, as all who have read and inwardly digested the reports on our newsletter’s Bulletin Board will be aware. Tracie will be leading the charge with two Tours of Lee’s Historic Main Street for the Upper Housatonic Valley Heritage Area, and then we co-editors join up for two Cemetery Tours. Founders Weekend will, no doubt, see some of us taking our usual place in the Saturday parade, and

others manning our table where we'll be selling our wares. Caroline Young will finish off with her presentation on East Lee on the 28th.

THE RISE & FALL & RISE AGAIN OF THE EAGLE MILL

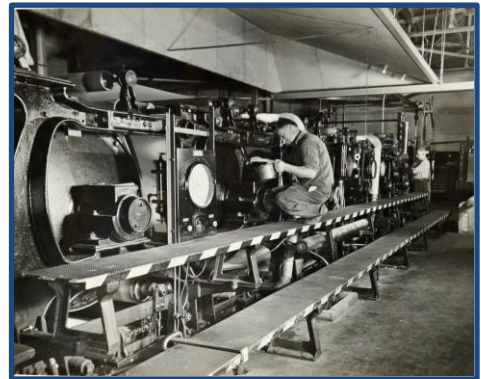
To try to condense the 200-odd year history of the Eagle Mill into just a couple of pages would be an exercise in futility. Therefore, we will give more or less an overview with a few anecdotes thrown into the mix. Tracie must be credited with the massive amount of research she put in, while I am trying to piece together a cohesive article that will be both interesting and entertaining. We hope it works! – Linda

“Mill Rats, that’s what we were called.” Mal Eckert, previous President of our Society, sat at my dining table and shared some of the experiences of his 40 years and 4 months tenure as an employee at the mill. He had followed in the footsteps of his dad, Millard “Midge” Eckert who had retired in 1967 after 37 years as a Tour Foreman for the four paper machines at the Columbia Mill. Midge hadn’t wanted his son to be a “Mill Rat” as he had felt he could do better, but Mal started at the Eagle Mill in November of 1960 at the age of 18 and stayed until he retired in 2001. Mal, an electrician, was called upon to travel to Elizabeth, New Jersey to disconnect equipment that was then transported back to Lee. He later became one of four Maintenance Foremen where his duties were many and varied and which took him to the other Lee mills that were part of what was then Schweitzer, Inc.

Holding out his hand, he showed me the scars from when the fingers got too close to a slitter machine. “There wasn’t a man there who didn’t have scars from the machinery. My Dad lost a finger,” he explained as visions of the menfolk of Lee wandering Main Street swathed in bloody bandages jumped into my head. “One finger still hurts now and again.”

But let us start at the beginning at 1806 when Samuel Church arrived in Lee from East Hartford. Being the entrepreneurial type, within that same year, he built the county’s second paper mill in South Lee. Samuel was a trained papermaker, having been employed by the Hudson & Goodwin firm that made paper for the Hartford Courant. When he arrived in the Berkshires, he visited Zenas Crane’s paper mill in Dalton, the first in the Berkshires, and took a look around. Possibly thinking, “I can do that!” he went off and built a mill in South Lee. Two years later saw the building of the Eagle Mill in 1808. *(Editors’ Note: We have to say that because of the vagaries of the reporting of local history back then, we can’t say definitively that it was Samuel who built the Eagle Mill. We know that Luman Church, his brother, sold it.*

It was 1835 when Elizur Smith, the owner of High Lawn Farm where he raised racehorses, founded the Platner & Smith Co., which became known as the Smith Paper Company in 1876. The company went on to either acquire or establish several mills in Lee, the Eagle Mill being one of them. Since then, the mills have gone through several acquisitions. In 1917, they were acquired by the British-American Tobacco Company; sold to the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company in 1947, and on January 4, 1950 to the Peter J. Schweitzer Company, established 1908, which became a division of the Kimberly-Clark Corporation in 1957. On December 1, 1995, Kimberly-Clark announced that the company would join eight other of their sites and become Schweitzer-Mauduit International, Inc.



#6 Machine, Eagle Mill

Source: Petel Collection, Lee Historical Society



Quality control worker, Eagle Mill, c. 1950.

Source: Lee Historical Society

Peter J. Schweitzer was the founder, but he unfortunately died in 1922 at the age of 47. Two of his three sons then moved into executive positions within the company that was now headed by their 42 year old mother, Rebecca. As still very young men, twenty-three year old Louis became President, his twenty-one year old brother William Vice-President. Later, they were joined by M. Peter, who became Treasurer. Even though mother and sons were reasonably young, the company not only survived, but was very successful for many years. They looked after their employees who were paid the highest wages in the area and had the best benefits.

At the time of the purchase, they already had several plants in New Jersey and one in Pennsylvania, manufacturing paper used in the production of cigarettes, such as Lucky Strikes, Pall Mall, etc. They also owned Papeteries de Malasce in Carpentras in France,

which also produced cigarette paper.

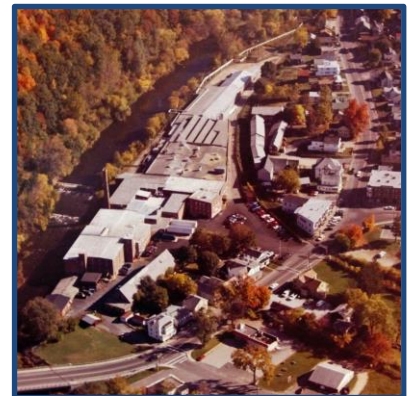
Back to Mal, who had an extensive knowledge of the Eagle Mill's equipment. "They had five paper machines, No.'s 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10. No.'s 5 and 7 made paper for condensers used in radios, telephones, televisions, and many other products; 6 and 9 made coffee filters and tea bags; No. 10 made specialty papers." When the water from the Housatonic River rose in the basement under #9 machine, people were needed to unhook and raise the equipment. This often happened in the spring.

There are many other topics to discuss with regard to the function of the Eagle Mill, such as the rag paper that was originally produced there and how it was made, the conversion to paper made from wood pulp, the upgrading in the 1840's to the French Fourdrier paper machines, but space precludes that. We must move forward to what caused the inevitable closure of the mill.

So, what did cause the eventual closing of not only Eagle Mill, but so many of the others? There were, as there always are, several factors. One of the main ones went by the name of Holyoke. The mills of much smaller Lee had to pay high prices to transport their goods via the Housatonic Railroad who had exclusive control over the train transportation system in the area, whereas the Holyoke mills could transport their goods more cheaply and had more choices for conveyance due to their proximity to the Connecticut River. Another nail in Lee's coffin was when the plans to build the Lee-New Haven and Lee-Hudson Railroads fell flat. Lee's position as the top paper producer started to slide down the pole. This decline started as far back as the late 1800's and Lee's paper industry never reclaimed its top position.

As early as 1982, local newspaper articles started to report on lay-offs and temporary production halts at the mills. Naturally, this caused alarm among Lee's residents that the possibility of the mills closing and/or relocating to other parts of the country may become actual. Victor Blache, a Lee resident, was quoted, "If the mills ever go out, goodbye town. They are that important to Lee." Joseph Sorrentino, known to most of us as the founder of Joe's Diner, stated, "We feed the whole mill. That's the backbone of our business." He estimated that of the 250 meals they served daily, 30% were to mill workers. Harold A. Johansson had run a five-and-ten-cent-store on Main Street for 31 years. He agreed with Joe. "Our workers in town are our bread and butter."

The mills still continued to keep their financial heads above water, but a national sluggish economy and changing markets – a big drop in cigarette production after people realized



Eagle Mill c. 1995.

Source: Petel Collection, Lee Historical Society.

smoking them could kill you in a particularly unpleasant fashion – and a drop-off in the market for dialectic capacitor papers, used in high voltage, high current, electrical and electronic applications, and various other complicated-sounding devices, forced the Schweitzer Company to start laying off their employees, this back in the 1980's. The death knoll finally sounded in May of 2008 as annual losses in the millions of dollars could no longer be sustained and the Eagle Mill became silent.

Mill Renaissance, LLC owned by Jeffrey Cohen of Great Barrington bought the property in 2014 from Eagle Mills Enterprises LLC who had purchased it in 2008, the year the mill closed. They are half owners of Eagle Mill Redevelopment, LLC along with DEW Construction, the builder/developer.

Now, after a long stretch of “on again/off again” reports, plans changed due, in part, to the 2020 – 2022 COVID pandemic, hopes rising and falling, the Eagle Mill is set to be reborn as a predominantly residential facility. Abatement and demolition is in full swing of the properties lining West Center Street, built in the late 1800's and early 1900's and not part of the mill itself. One house has been reduced to rubble, and the rest hopefully soon to follow. Workers in hard hats swarm over the mill as windows are removed and, far from our inquisitive eyes, other things are obviously happening inside the mill's buildings. We await to see how the Phoenix will look as it arises from the ashes.

We are adding a disclaimer here that we have been extremely diligent in verifying the information in this article, but it's very convoluted and there are many sources that disagree with each other. Trying to separate the history of one mill from another is enough to give each of us a migraine. We hope you will bear with us and appreciate that we are as sure as is possible that the majority of what we have written is correct, but neither of us has the power to return to the 1800's to confirm this.

REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN

LULA GRACE RYALS MOREYN (1911 – 1985)

HILLARD “MIKE” MOREYN (1929 – 2019)

Here's a rather romantic story, and one of the first to include a female veteran. Lula and her husband, Hillard were both Lee veterans, although Mike is not buried in Fairmount Cemetery with Lula, but we shall combine their stories as they are, of course, intertwined.

Lula was actually a Georgia native and became a First Lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps in World War II. She spent a year of her time in the Army on transport ships in the European Theater. She and Mike met when they were both on a transport carrying war brides from France to the US. Mike was on his way back as a veteran of major battles at Leyte and Iwo Jima; Lula was a shipboard nurse. They married upon their return to the States.

Mike was born in Philadelphia, PA and went to the University of Florida from where he graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Electrical Engineering. He joined the Navy in August 1943 and served until August 1946 as an Electronics Technician on board the USS Minos. During that time he served in the Pacific Theater Operations.

The Moreyns retired in Lee and lived here until they passed.



THE LHS BULLETIN BOARD

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPEAKER SERIES



*Caroline and
Murray*

As a reminder, Caroline Meyer Young, the Society's Treasurer and longtime resident of East Lee, will be giving an illustrated talk on the history of East Lee's industries and also on the catastrophic floods which impacted so many of them on Thursday, September 28th. *Editor's Note: Murray the Rooster will not be in attendance with Caroline ...*

Once a thriving commercial village as well as the most populated section of Lee, here were once paper mills, a grist mill, tannery, foundry, carpentry and machine shops. Many historic occurrences changed East Lee's landscape and these will be shared with us by Caroline.

This free-of-charge presentation is open to the public and will start at 6:30 p.m. at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee. For parking, enter the Crossway Village north driveway on High Street where visitor parking is available on the left. Walk across the front of Crossway Village to the Senior Center entrance on Crossway Street. Parking is also available along nearby Academy Street. Refreshments will be served, so why not come on over and spend a delightful, educational, and entertaining evening with us.

HISTORICAL LEE WALK AND CEMETERY TOURS

Once again, Tracie will be taking Lee history lovers on a tour of Lee's historic Main Street. Two dates are scheduled in September, the 9th at 9:30 and the 24th at 11:00, lasting about one hour each. She will meet participants at the gazebo next to the post office. Tracie is a seasoned historical Tour Guide with a wealth of knowledge to share, so make sure you put at least one of these dates on your calendar. These tours are part of the Upper Housatonic Valley Heritage Area September events program.



Tracie and Linda will be hosting TWO cemetery tours this month; the traditional annual Cemetery Tour at Fairmount on Greylock Street will be on Friday, September 15th. Many of you will be familiar with Lee's oldest cemetery, once known locally as the Town Cemetery, and so will be aware of its somewhat rough terrain once off its main thoroughfares. Having held several tours there, we are aware that for some this can cause issues. Therefore, as a first this year, we are holding a tour of St. Mary's

Cemetery on Spring Street the day before on Thursday, September 14. This is much flatter for those who may prefer an easier walk.

We anticipate that the Fairmount Tour will be the longer of the two, an hour or so. St. Mary's is shorter and easier to walk, so we estimate just under an hour for that one. We will meet up at 10 a.m. at the cemeteries for both tours and then set off to share the stories of some of Lee's eminent, interesting, famous, and infamous deceased citizens.



For more information on the Historical Lee Walk and the cemetery tours, please contact Tracie at ethere@gmail.com. There is no charge for any of our tours.

ANNUAL MEETING

The Society's Annual Meeting will be at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, October 12 at the Senior Center Cafeteria in the Crossway Tower on High Street. This is the occasion when we need all of our members to attend in order that we can have a quorum to nominate Board members. Ballots will be sent out so please ensure these are returned before the meeting. Long-time members Ed Forfa and Linda Buttery have 3-year terms coming up for renewal. We would welcome any member who would be interested in joining the Board, so feel free to attend one of our monthly meetings to give it a test.

Please remember that this is YOUR Society and your attendance is not only very welcome, but also quite essential. As usual, delectable refreshments will be served, along with tea and coffee. If you have a favorite delicacy that is the pride of your kitchen, we wouldn't turn it away if you brought it for us! We, the Board, are only twelve members, so if only we show up, what are we to do with all that food?! We look forward to meeting and greeting you!

LEE THEN AND NOW



Fairmount Cemetery has been part of Lee's landscape since the 1700's and so has seen many changes. We thought it might be interesting to explore some of those, so Tracie has been doing her research and this is what she's discovered for us.

Here are two images from approximately the same area, but about one hundred and forty three years apart. The first photo is from the Society's collection of glass plate negatives, taken c.1880; the second was taken by Tracie's camera in July 2023. What a shame they didn't have such technology back then so we could see a much clearer image!

Tracie identified the area by using the large, rather squat monument at the far left, this for the Henderson/Colby family; the large monument in the center for the Rice/Sackett family; the tall column in the distance to the right for the Couch family. The tall column in the center of the older image is now obscured by trees, as you can see in the 2023 image. If you can go there to view in person, it will be much clearer, of course

What other changes can be noticed? Pretty obvious is the fact the road is no longer a dirt track, but paved. The biggest change is the extreme growth of the trees, and that some are actually no longer there – note the deciduous tree in the center of the older image. There are new stones, but, somewhat mysteriously, some of the older ones have disappeared – note the rectangular stone in the forefront of the older photo that isn't in the newer image. (Tracie did look around to see if it was anywhere else in the general area, but it wasn't...) Lastly, on the far right, the gate has been added across the road.

These old photos of Lee are quite fascinating. We're so fortunate to have a pretty large collection of them in our archives, but are always happy to receive more so, should you have any you'd like to donate, please contact Tracie at ethere@gmail.com.

IF YOU LOVE LOCAL HISTORY ...

You may note that our Membership Form that is usually included in the newsletter is absent this month. In anticipation for our 2024 membership drive starting in October our Membership Committee is reworking the form. Keep your eyes peeled for the new form and the new membership drive.

FROM THE VALLEY GLEANER ...

MAY 5, 1859

FRIGHTFUL RIDE AND NARROW ESCAPE

We have a feeling this article, plucked from the Valley Gleaner, will leave us all grateful that we no longer rely upon our equine friends for transportation! Read on and you'll see what we mean!

A few evenings since, a gentleman and lady started from this town, for a drive of some fifteen or twenty miles north, in a light pleasure wagon with a span of spirited young horses; the night was exceedingly dark, with signs of rain. When about two miles south of Pittsfield village, it began to rain, and the lady attempted to raise an umbrella which frightened the horses and in the driver's efforts to check them the horses got out of the road, and he was thrown from the wagon. The lady clung to the seat, and was carried on at a frightful rate in the darkness, nearly three miles, passing through Pittsfield village. At one time the horses turned on to the sidewalk and struck a hitching post near the Berkshire Hotel, but without damage except for a severe shock, then turned into the street and continued on to the fork of the road north of the village when they again got out of the road and one of the horses fell and became tangled in the harness.

The lady, who had remained clinging to the seat alone during the ride, now sprang from the wagon and made her way to the nearest house, but owing to the darkness she was unable to find the gate, and so climbed over two fences and rapped on the side of the house until she obtained assistance. The lady and horses were properly cared for, and persons sent in search of the gentleman who it was found had reached the village and procured a team and gone back in search of his lady, uncertain whether she was laying insensible somewhere on the road or whether she was yet in company with the frightened horses. As he was unable to find the lady or any trace of his team, he returned to the stable and was there informed where were the objects of his search. Suffice it to say, the parties soon found each other, and were enabled to pursue their journey in the morning without having sustained any serious injury to themselves or team.

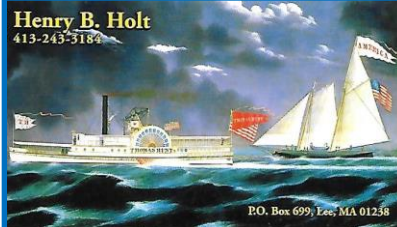
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