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



FROM THE EDITORS

We sweltered through July and now we wonder what August will bring? Hopefully, the weather gods will be kinder and let us enjoy everything outdoors that the beautiful Berkshires have to offer without us passing out! Have we all noticed those wonderful people painting our street lamps in the heat? They really needed a fresh coat of paint and now look as good as the day they were erected. And the hanging baskets – don't they look so lovely? Thank you to the Lee Chamber of Commerce and all the people whose donations paid for them and the volunteers who are keeping them watered. Lee is such a great town and it's the special touches such as the painting of the crosswalks and the street lamps, the hanging baskets and the flowers filling the window boxes on the bridge over the Housatonic, the cigarette butt holders the Lee Greener Gateway Committee put out, and so much more that make it a place to be proud to call home.

HISTORY'S MYSTERIES

Delving into history can be fraught with danger, the danger of losing credibility and integrity, like stepping into a quicksand made up of assumptions, inaccuracies, falsehoods, misunderstandings, hearsay, and wishful thinking. This cannot be better illustrated than in our endeavor to tell the story of Peter Wilcox, known locally as the once-inhabitant of the cave supposedly named after him. Not only do historians contradict other historians when recounting the history of the same events, they also contradict themselves at times.

When we decided upon the subject of "Peter's Cave" for this article, it seemed quite straightforward. Peter Wilcox had a pretty well-documented history, or so it seemed, but then the questions started to arise as we researched. We discovered there were, in fact, three Peter Wilcoxes – Senior, Junior and just plain little Peter. There was no clear definition in either Rev. C.M. Hyde's "The Centennial History of the Town of Lee" (1878) or in that of Amory Gale's "A History of the Town of Lee, MA – A Lecture" (1854) as to exactly which Peter did what.

Therefore, we are sharing with you the story of the Peters as well as we can with the disclaimer that we have used common sense and stated where facts are obvious to clarify who did what when. Unless we can escape back in time and personally witness all events, there is no way to confirm one hundred percent accuracy. But then this is true, whether stated honestly or not, of how most historical accounts are reported.

Having made this long-winded explanation, let's get into the story of the Wilcoxes, Shay's Rebellion, the Battle of Sheffield, Ferncliff, and even the Lee Library!

Peter Wilcox, Sr. was one of Lee's first settlers and his homestead consisted of a one-room log cabin and a barn on Main Street. This was located where Lee Library now stands. The very first town meeting was held in Peter's cabin on December 22nd, 1777. The population of Lee was then about two hundred (*a number also in dispute*), but by 1780 had increased to the point where a town meeting had to be adjourned for eight minutes so the much larger number of attendees could repair to Peter's barn.

Peter, Sr. married Jerusha Griffin in 1758, and they had several children, including Peter Wilcox, Jr., on July 12, 1765. Peter had a brother, Oziel, who was born on August 19th, 1759 and he enlisted in the army on February 23rd, 1777 to fight in the Revolutionary War. His rather dubious distinction was achieved on February 27th, 1787 by being the only man killed in the Battle of Sheffield during Shays' Rebellion.

What exactly was Shays' Rebellion all about and how did it impact the Berkshires and specifically Lee? There are many different versions, including those written by the aforementioned Hyde and Gale, our local historians, and also in Wikipedia and Britannica Online. At the close of the Revolutionary War in 1783, Massachusetts was in the hole, financially, to the tune of \$3,050,000, or \$90,369,060 approximately today. Many families were also drowning in debt while the menfolk had been away at war and, therefore, bringing in a much-decreased income or, even worse, killed in battle. After the war ended, the economy was acutely depressed. Seizures for overdue debts and delinquent taxes incurred by the impoverished citizens resulted in the debtors prisons becoming full of citizens who just couldn't get out from under the delinquency imposed by heavy taxes and stringent economic conditions.

Unable to face the consequences of being forced to fund higher taxes, the people started to protest and this was the beginning of what we know as Shays' Rebellion. In a nutshell, according to Wikipedia, it was caused by "economic conflict between farmers and merchants;



*Shays' Rebellion Monument,
Sheffield, MA.*

aggressive tax and debt collection; political corruption and cronyism.” The rebellion was an armed uprising that took place from August 29, 1786 to February 1787 in Western Massachusetts and Worcester, but we’ll concentrate on Western Mass.

Who was Daniel Shays? He was a veteran and farmer who had taken part in the Revolutionary War. Scholars seem to disagree on the actual role that he played in the rebellion which bears his name so let us move on to what supposedly happened in Lee with Peter Wilcox, a Shays supporter.

Stepping away for a moment, was this Peter, Jr. or Sr.? This is unconfirmed.

Sometime in 1786 (*actual dates are like hens’ teeth*) a company of two hundred and fifty men from Lee and the surrounding area with Peter at their head made their way to the property of the Perry family on Cape Street. Now a General Pattison was at the head of the Government forces trying to quell the uprising and at that time he and his men were in Stockbridge. Upon hearing of the gathering of so many protesters, he made his way to Lee with a considerable force equipped with cannons to take care of the rebels. They took a position on Mr. Hamblin’s hill upon the opposite side of the Greenwater River. (*If any of you know where that could have been, do share!*)



“Petition and Protest”. ©2008 Bryant White

Shays’ men had no armory, but they were very inventive. They gathered at the Perry place, took Mrs. Perry’s yarnbeam and mounted it upon a pair of wheels to replicate the appearance of a cannon. As Pattison’s men approached, an ignited tar rope was swung in the air, giving the impression that the “cannon”, aka Mrs. Perry’s yarnbeam, was about to blow them to Kingdom Come. According to Gale’s History of Lee, “The ramrod and other appendages for cannon in actual service, were exhibited to their enemies in the most impressive way. The ignited tar rope was freely swung in the

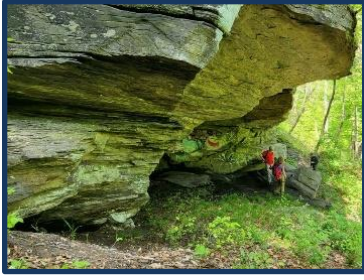
air, and the men were running in every direction to put everything in order for battle, and when Peter Wilcox, their leader, with a stentorian voice, heard by their enemies, gave the order to fire, the valiant Pattison with his men fled for life before Mother Perry’s old beam.”

Victory was short-lived and Peter Wilcox and another rebel, Nathaniel Austin, were captured, tried for treason, and thrown into the County prison in Pittsfield where they did little, we’re sure, but grumble about the unfair state of their affairs. Their wives meanwhile were not ladies to sit around and be miserable. They made it a habit to visit their incarcerated husbands, bringing them food and, assumedly, good cheer, especially on one occasion when they brought in a loaf of bread in which they had baked a saw. (This was not any old saw, by the way, but the one, according to Gale, that was used to amputate the frozen feet of John Winegar. Moving on!!!)



Peter’s Cave from Views of Lee, 1895.

The plot continued and one day not long after, Peter and Nathaniel managed to use the saw to extricate themselves from their shackles. The unobservant guards did not notice that, when the wives left that day, their voices had deepened and their womanly shapes were now decidedly unladylike. This was indeed because there had been a quick swapping of clothes and Peter and Nathaniel walked out to freedom dressed as their wives, leaving their womenfolk in the cell in their clothes. Fortunately, these faithful and brave women were soon released.



*Western Mass Hilltown Hikers
visit Peter's Cave in 2023.*

The last part of our story tells of what happened to Peter; we found no other mention of the fate of Nathaniel Austin immediately after the escape. Many of you will have heard of, and perhaps visited, Peter's Cave up on Ferncliff. This is where Peter took refuge, the cave being on what was then Henry Bowen's farm at the rear of what is now Crossway Village. There Peter stayed, being fed by local friends and sympathizers until the civil authorities withdrew the prosecution.

Access today to the cave is said to be very limited, if not impossible, due to the movement of the rocks that have closed the entrance.

In conclusion, we do not feel we are incorrect in talking of Peter Wilcox; we just cannot confirm whether this is Peter Senior or Junior, but it's still a great story!

MEET THE BOARD

MAL ECKERT

It was exactly a year ago that the Gateway Gazette introduced Mal to our readers. At that time, we were talking about Mal's many years of experience as the Maintenance Foreman for Kimberly-Clark/Schweitzer-Mauduit paper-making plants in Lee. But, to start at the beginning as, according to Mary Poppins, that's a very good place to start, Mal was born in Lee to Millard "Midge" Eckert and Alice Gop Eckert. His grandparents came to East Lee from Mount Kisco, New York in 1889 and had a brood of ten children.

Now, Midge Eckert worked for thirty-seven years at the Columbia Mill and retired as a Tour Foreman. He did not want his son to be a "mill rat", thinking Mal could become better than that, but Mal disagreed. After graduating from the old High School on High Street, he started working at Kimberly-Clark in November 1960 and retired forty years and four months later in 2001. He worked for many years as an electrician before accepting a salaried position. His duties were many and varied where he worked in all of the Kimberly-Clark/Schweitzer-Mauduit mills in Lee.

Mal married Dolores Navin and they raised three children, Edward Eckert, Darlene Eckert Moulton, and Doreen Eckert Bartini. Their family has now increased to six grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, with Dolores passing in 2013.

It was in late 2002 that Mal, along with Dolores and a group led by Charlotte Davis, founded the Lee Historical Society. After being our Treasurer for sixteen years and President for four, Mal had to step down from active participation on the Board due to ill health. He is now a Board Member Emeritus. Mal is proud that the Society he helped found has a great cast of volunteers who are preserving the material and history of Lee with many ideas and plans taking fruition as they move forward.

LEE BULLETIN BOARD

WHERE WERE YOU IN '52?

August is upon us and the Society's exhibit, curated by Phil Smith, will now be open at the J. Peter Scolforo Gallery at Lee Library through the entire month of August. Phil and his team have been working hard on this exhibit since September 2023, so we're hoping all of Lee will visit the library to enjoy it.



The 1952 South Berkshire Champion Lee High Girls Basketball Team.

The exhibit will be featuring life in the 1950's. Only one in twenty-five Americans today was born early enough to remember the 1950's, a controversial decade in which President Dwight D. Eisenhower symbolized stability and trust in war and peace before a gyrating baritone named Elvis Presley came along and got us "all shook up".

Entitled "Happy Days: Lee in the 1950's", this year's exhibit will recall this fascinating decade of contrasts. For the few who can remember that time, the exhibit will be a walk down Memory Lane. For those too young to recall, it will be a time to learn about the era that shaped their parents and grandparents.

It will reveal a decade of peace and prosperity, but one that also produced the frivolous "hula hoop" and the deadly serious threat of nuclear war. Davy Crockett coonskin hats became a fad while Sputnik rocketed us into the space age. And poodle skirts covered up the earthshaking Brown decision by the Supreme Court.

Closer to home, we will learn about life in Lee during the '50's; cleaning up the river, repressive attitudes toward girls, losing part of our heritage, the coming of the Mass Pike, slow response to trendy music, edgy nightlife, bowling together, law and order's response to rebellious youth and much more..

It is free and open to the public. It can be viewed during most regular library hours by inquiring at the desk. Please come and enjoy "Happy Days".

For more information, contact Phil Smith, curator, 413-243-1060

MAIN STREET HISTORY WALKS

These walks, sponsored by the Upper Housatonic Valley Heritage Area, are conducted by Tracie Etheredge, the Society's leading expert on the history of Main Street, Lee's main thoroughfare, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Tracie will give an in-depth tour on not only the buildings, but will recount tales of their maybe not-so-well-known past and that of the people who lived or worked in them, some dating back to the early 1800's. The first walk will be on Sunday, September 8th, leaving from the gazebo on Railroad Street at 10 a.m. The next walk will be on Saturday, September 28th, also leaving from the Gazebo, but starting at 3:00 p.m.

For any questions, please contact Tracie at ethere@gmail.com.

CEMETERY TOURS

This year we will again have our very popular tours of both St. Mary's and Fairmount Cemeteries. For those who haven't yet attended, each year we research the lives of various people of Lee who have departed so we can tell you their stories as we walk our beautiful cemeteries. Last year, we included St. Mary's for the first time to much acclaim and so we are including it again this year.

That tour will be on Thursday, September 19th, commencing at 10:00 a.m. The following day, Friday, September 20th, we will tour Fairmount, also commencing at 10:00. The tours generally last between one to one and a half hours, are free of charge, and no registration is required. Just turn up with your bug spray and sunscreen!

For any questions, please contact Tracie Etheredge at ethere@gmail.com.



THE PARADE



The Adamsville Ancients at Colonial Williamsburg, May 2023.

We'd probably all agree that Founders Weekend is one event of the year that we all look forward to with anticipation and great excitement. There is so much going on, opening with the Taste of Lee on Friday, September 21st. As is the tradition, Main Street will be closed to traffic so that our local eateries can bring their gastronomic delights to the sidewalk to feed the happy revelers filling the street with chatter and laughter instead of rumbling trucks and SUV's. The end of the evening will culminate in the best firework display in Berkshire County! Saturday will get off to a phenomenal start with THE PARADE! And that is what we want to tell you about here.

This year, the Historical Society will be leading the parade with Phil Smith and Linda Buttery holding the banner and followed by the Adamsville Ancients Fife and Drum Corps from Delmar, NY. This is the first time in the history of the parade that these folks will be joining us and we are delighted to have them. Let's give you a little background.

Adamsville was an 1800's village, named after Nathaniel Adams, one of the original settlers and landowners. It later became Delmar in 1884. The reason for the renaming was because mail to Adamsville was being sent in some kind of confusion to Adams, the one in New York, not Massachusetts. Nathaniel had actually become the first postmaster in 1840, so he may have been a little perplexed that the town named after him had a name change due to errors by the postal service!

The Adamsville Ancients came together as a group of experienced fife and drum musicians back in February 1988. Since their debut in May of that year, they've been participating in numerous parades, mainly during the summer months, throughout New York and New England.

We understand from their website that the purpose of founding the Corps was to perpetuate the art of fife and drum playing. Back in the 18th Century, fifes and drums served as signal instruments for the infantry, relaying the commander's orders to soldiers in camp and on the battlefield. The steady rhythm and spirited tunes of the fifers and drummers kept the soldiers' minds off the tedious march. The fife first appeared in the 14th Century. Of course, now they are limited to marching in peaceful parades as well as in musters, which is probably a good thing.

When the parade finally reaches its conclusion, the Adamsville Ancients are not finished! Just to make the day even more perfect, they will be returning to the Park and will be playing for all of us outside the Congregational Church between about 11 until 11:30, providing a wonderful musical backdrop to the festivities. This is definitely a Not To Miss event!

FOUNDERS DAY BOOTH

As we do every year on Founders Day, Saturday, September 21st this year, we will be manning our Society booth at the corner of Memorial Hall where you can meet various of our Board members, browse our selection of merchandise from mugs to t-shirts to books and so much more, and hopefully make a purchase or two. Our members will be more than happy to discuss aspects of Lee history with you, so come equipped with your questions. Interested in joining our Society? You can do that right there at our table. Hope to see you then!

BERKSHIRE MARBLE QUARRIES



Our Speaker Series will continue with a presentation on *Berkshire Marble Quarries* by Verne Tower on Thursday, September 26th at 6:30 p.m. Verne will tell us about the tectonic forces that formed the extensive marble and limestone deposits that stretch along the westernmost edge of Massachusetts northward into Vermont and Canada. We will also learn how the marble industries, together with the paper mills, sustained the vibrant economy throughout much of the nineteenth century. The quarry workers endured incredible physical demands, long hours, and low pay. Verne is best known here in Lee for his artistry in carefully crafting the recent restoration of the Kilbon Fountain in the Congregational Church Park.

As always, this presentation is free and open to the public. Parking is available along the North entrance to Crossway Village as well as on nearby Academy Street. Refreshments, provided by the Society, will be available so please come along for a special evening.

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2024 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY – DECEMBER)

Individual: \$10.00 Family: \$25.00
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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): ____

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.

The Membership Committee extends their thanks to all those who have renewed their membership for 2024. We are grateful for your continued support. For those of you who are yet to rejoin our great Society, please feel free to use this form. Our Business Members will by now have received their renewal notices and we look forward to hearing from them as well. If you are a current Business Member and wish to update the business card which appears on Page 8 of our newsletter, please contact Tracie Etheredge, co-editor, at ethere@gmail.com.

Thanks to all for supporting the Lee Historical Society!

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