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The Gateway Gazette

The Newsletter of the Lee Historical Society

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

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The Monthly Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, February 12th at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



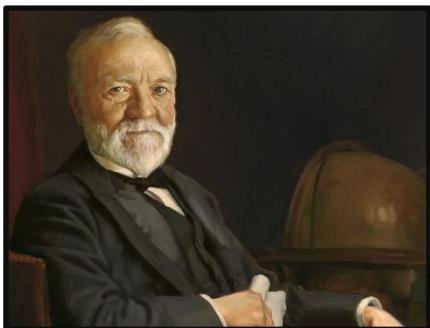
FROM THE EDITOR

We've found that a lot of people are interested in the Town of Lee and our history. This newsletter has an impressive audience and has been receiving consistent positive reviews. As a group, however, we at the Lee Historical Society are at a loss for how to get more people directly involved in our activities in order to help us achieve our goals. Especially now as the 250th anniversary of the town is fast approaching and many of us are trying to figure the best way to acknowledge such a milestone we will be increasingly reaching out to our audience for volunteers to lend a hand with our activities. See below (page 7) for such a call to arms.

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

RISING THROUGH LEARNING – A CARNEGIE LIBRARY IN LEE

The story of the Lee Public Library is unique in that we have detailed original documents showing every step of its planning and construction, as well as its history. This article is merely an introduction to what will probably be a series of articles detailing many aspects of the history of the library and its building. The primary resource for this article is the documents in the Carnegie Archives held by Columbia University. These documents are available to view online at: <https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/carnegie>



Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919)

Source: National Portrait Gallery

A major feature that makes the Lee Library unique and interesting is the fact that it is the only surviving Carnegie Library in the Berkshires. The only other one built in the region was in New Marlborough, which was constructed in 1920 and sadly was destroyed by fire in 1996. The Lee Library stands as a landmark in Lee and continues to attract tourists who wander in to see the building that many recognize as a legacy of the Carnegie library program.

Andrew Carnegie (1835 – 1919) one of America's richest industrialists, spent the last decades of his life giving away almost everything he had. By the time he was done, he had

donated the equivalent of nearly \$7 billion in today's dollars, most of it aimed at one big idea: helping ordinary people better themselves through knowledge.

Carnegie made his fortune in steel, building an empire that helped shape modern America. But what he's remembered for today isn't the mills it's the libraries. His famous 1889 essay, *The Gospel of Wealth*, argued that the rich had a responsibility to use their money for the public good. Starting in 1881, he began funding public libraries, beginning with one in his hometown of Dunfermline, Scotland. From there, the idea spread like wildfire.

By the time he was finished, Carnegie had funded 2,509 libraries around the world, including 1,681 in the United States. Many were built in small towns that had never had a public library before. These libraries weren't just book depositories; they were symbols of opportunity. The staircases leading up to the front doors were intentionally designed to represent "rising" through learning, and the lanterns by the entrance symbolized enlightenment.

Carnegie didn't just hand out money, though. Towns had to prove they were serious. His secretary, James Bertram, sent out questionnaires asking about population, book collections, circulation numbers, and, most importantly, whether the town would commit to maintaining the library after it was built. Carnegie believed in helping people who were willing to help themselves, and he wanted to make sure each community would support its library for the long haul.

The first Carnegie library in the United States opened in Braddock, Pennsylvania, in 1889, right in the shadow of one of Carnegie's steel mills. Many of the earliest libraries were built in southwestern Pennsylvania, but soon the idea spread across the country and throughout the English-speaking world from New Zealand to South Africa to the West Indies. Women's clubs



The New Marlborough Carnegie Library

played a huge role in this expansion, organizing local fundraising and lobbying efforts in hundreds of towns.

Carnegie's philanthropy didn't stop with libraries. In 1911, he created the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a foundation dedicated to spreading knowledge and understanding. He endowed it with \$125 million and left it another \$10 million in his will. The Corporation is still active today, focusing on education, democracy, and peace, the same issues Carnegie cared about more than a century ago.

By the time he died in 1919, Carnegie had given away nearly 90 percent of his fortune. His libraries, with their distinctive architecture and welcoming design, remain some of the most visible reminders of his belief that access to knowledge could change a person's life. In many towns, the Carnegie library was the first real public building, the first place where anyone, regardless of income, could walk in and learn something new.

Lee's quest for its own impressive library building was led by Dr. J.J. Hassett, the director of the Lee Library Association. The Association had been founded in 1874 and in 1903, when Dr. Hassett started his efforts for the new building, the library collection was housed in Memorial Hall. The first people credited for reaching out informally to Carnegie were Sarah Hyde Shannon and Eliza Gibbs who apparently met him during a trip abroad. Dr. Hassett, however, conducted the entire course of formal communication with Carnegie (primarily through his secretary, James Bertram who was in charge of the library program).

Hassett's opening letter:

The questionnaire filled out as part of the application.

Lee, Mass.
April 16, 1903

Mr. Andrew Carnegie

Dear Sir:

My interest in the betterment of our town induces me to solicit your kindly interest in us. Knowing your great philanthropy. We have a small circulating library – private corporation and need growth along this line. I thought possibly you might consider us as worthy of attention, and we certainly should like to be numbered among your beneficiaries.

Trusting that I have not trespassed to much upon your valuable time. I am,

Very truly yours,

J.J. Hassett

Communication continued between Hassett and Bertram, for months with Hassett sending details about Lee, its population and the Library Association. He had to convince Carnegie and Bertram that Lee and the Association were serious about having and maintaining a library far into the future. By the end of 1903, Lee was granted a donation of \$10,000, the amount determined by the population of the town. At

that point it was up to Hassett and the Library Association to get the town of Lee to agree to the donation, find a location for the library to be built, and raise enough money to make up the rest of the funding needed to complete the project.

Convincing the town to accept the money was not easy and the issue was voted down at town meetings more than once. Hassett had to inform Bertram of the slow progress but ensure him the Association was still very interested in the gift.

Lee, Mass.
February 29, 1904

Mr. James Bertram,
Private Secretary,

Dear Sir:

I wish to inform you of the status of progress in the matter of Library. We are waiting to get a very desirable location here for the Library, but is at present included in an unsettled estate. We are very anxious for this particular location, but as you will appreciate, can't be had without a great deal of trouble.

If it will in no wise interfere with the wishes of Mr. Carnegie, it will be a great favor to allow us to wait until this title is settled. If not too much to ask, will you kindly advise in the matter.

Yours very truly,
J.J. Hassett
For the Library Comm.

It was not until April 1906 that Hassett could report to Carnegie that the town had agreed to use the money to build the library. It had taken all that time to convince the town to accept the donation for a new building, and to also agree upon a site in town on which to build it.

Lee, Mass
April 30, 1906

Mr. Andrew Carnegie,
Dear Sir:

I have the honor and great pleasure to announce the acceptance of your valued gift to the town of Lee. For this gift permit us at this time to extend the grateful sense of our people. Your munificence will be even still more effectually estimated by the generations of the coming years.

Herewith I enclose a certified copy of the vote of the town. Trusting that we have complied satisfactorily with the requirement of gift, and assuring

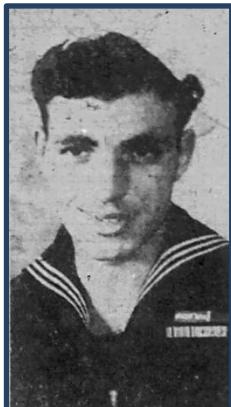
you of still further acknowledgement and evidence of the town's appreciation, I am,

Yours very truly,

J.J. Hassett

From that point things moved quickly, the new library building was formally opened in October 1908. Watch this space for more details including a story about how a librarian over stepped her position, got reprimanded but prevailed in the end to gain what she was hoping for.

REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN



Anthony Charles "Tony" Avanzato grew up in Lee, Massachusetts, where his talent on the basketball court made him one of the standout athletes of the Lee High School Class of 1937. He earned a place on the Western Massachusetts All-Star Team that year, a distinction that hinted at the determination and discipline that would later define his wartime service. After graduation, he worked at Smith Paper, alongside two other young men from Lee, George Bordeau and John H. Bridge, friendships that would follow them into the Navy and onto the same ship.

Just days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Tony enlisted in the United States Navy on December 11, 1941. He completed his training at Newport, Rhode Island, and was assigned to the light cruiser *USS Atlanta* as a member of a gun crew. The ship would soon become one of the most heavily engaged vessels in the Pacific. Tony saw his first action at the Battle of Midway, and from August to November 1942, the *Atlanta* was almost constantly in combat as American forces fought to hold the Solomon Islands. He ultimately took part in seven major naval engagements, including the battles of the Santa Cruz Islands, the Coral Sea, the Bismarck Sea, and the fierce night actions off Guadalcanal.

On November 13, 1942, Friday the 13th, as Tony later noted, the *Atlanta* was struck repeatedly during the chaotic nighttime Battle of Guadalcanal. Tony was wounded by shrapnel in the leg and near his right eye as the ship was fatally damaged. He survived the sinking and found himself on a raft with other crewmen, from which they were soon rescued. Tony's evacuation took him through a chain of medical stations: a field hospital on Guadalcanal, then the New Hebrides, Auckland, and finally Wellington, New Zealand, where he spent four months recovering from surgery. For his wounds and his service aboard the *Atlanta*, he received the Purple Heart and the Presidential Unit Citation which had been awarded to the ship's crew for their "heroic example of invincible fighting spirit."

Once recovered, Tony returned to duty. He served in the Wellington Boat Pool before receiving assignment to another ship and soon found himself back in combat. He took part in the landing on Rendova Island on June 30, 1943, where he witnessed a fierce attack by 23 Japanese torpedo bombers, all of which were shot down by American fighters and anti-aircraft fire. His service carried him across the Pacific to Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia, and eventually back to the United States in September 1943, marking his first return home in nineteen months.

During his furlough in Lee, he reunited with his friend and former shipmate John Bridge, who had been discharged due to injuries sustained in action. Service ran deep in the Avanzato family: Tony's younger brother Joseph also served in the Navy, while another brother, Sgt. Angelo Avanzato, was stationed in Australia with the Army.



USS Atlanta

After the war, Tony returned to the Berkshires and built a life rooted in steady work and community ties. He spent many years in the traffic division of the Lenox Department of Public Works, earning the respect of

colleagues and townspeople alike. He remained active in veterans' and Italian-American organizations, including VFW Post 893 in Lee and the Sons of Italy.

Tony died at age 56 after a long illness, leaving behind his wife, Priscilla (Raveling) Avanzato, his daughter Pearce Chapman, two brothers, two sisters, and three grandchildren. He was laid to rest at St. Mary's Cemetery in Lee.

His story is one of quiet heroism, an athlete turned sailor who endured some of the most intense naval battles of World War II, survived the sinking of his ship, and returned home to live a life of work, family, and community. For Lee, Massachusetts, Tony Avanzato remains one of the hometown sons whose courage in the Pacific and steadfastness in civilian life continue to reflect the character of the town he called home



LHS BULLETIN BOARD

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPEAKER SERIES: **Lee's 1928 Deadly Strep Epidemic**



*Old Hyde School transformed into Lee Emergency Hospital
Photo courtesy of The Berkshire Eagle*

Dr. Bob Wespiser will give an illustrated talk, Lee's 1928 Deadly Strep Epidemic, on Thursday, March 26, 2026 at 6:30pm at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee. A prize cow named Pansy caused a catastrophe in Lee! The tainted, unpasteurized milk from this single cow at Lee's largest milk dealer left at least 48 dead and over 1,000 residents ill. Dr. Wespiser will tell us the story of this event and its influence on many important wide sweeping public health improvements which were made following it. These include regulations for pasteurization, public health emergency management, state and national policies and the science of bacterial illness and prevention of infection.

Dr. Wespiser recently retired after practicing primary care medicine for 37 years in Lee. He is familiar with the families and descendants of many of the people affected by this epidemic. Dr. Wespiser currently serves as chair of the Lee Board of Health and is a member of the Lee Historical Society.

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.

A CALL FOR HELP

Our calendar raffle has historically been our largest fund raiser. In an attempt to bring it back to its former glory, a new committee has been formed to develop it for this year. If you are willing to help in any way, please contact Mal Eckert: MalEckert@msn.com

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2025 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY - DECEMBER)

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

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY/TOWN: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

TELEPHONE: _____ EMAIL: _____

NEW: _____ RENEWAL: _____

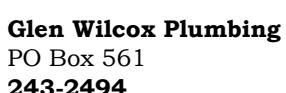
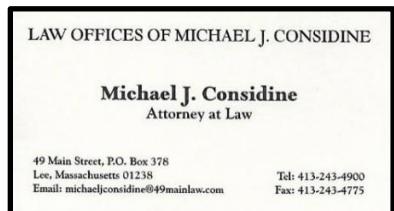
Mail with Membership Fee to: Lee Historical Society, PO Box 170, Lee, MA 01238

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. 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.

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