

Vol. 23, No. 9



September 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
Facebook: Lee Historical Society Lee MA
Mail: PO Box 170, Lee, MA 01238

The Monthly Meeting of the Society will be Thursday, September 11th at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



Lee Bicycle Parade participants, September 25, 1894.

FROM THE EDITOR

I'm sorry to say that this edition of the newsletter is light on historical articles because of all the news we need to relate about what the Historical Society will be doing in the coming month. September, especially Founders week, is jam packed with events we'll be hosting or are involved in, see the end of the newsletter for details.

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

THE LONG LIFE OF THE MERRELL TAVERN: A SOUTH LEE LANDMARK THROUGH TWO CENTURIES



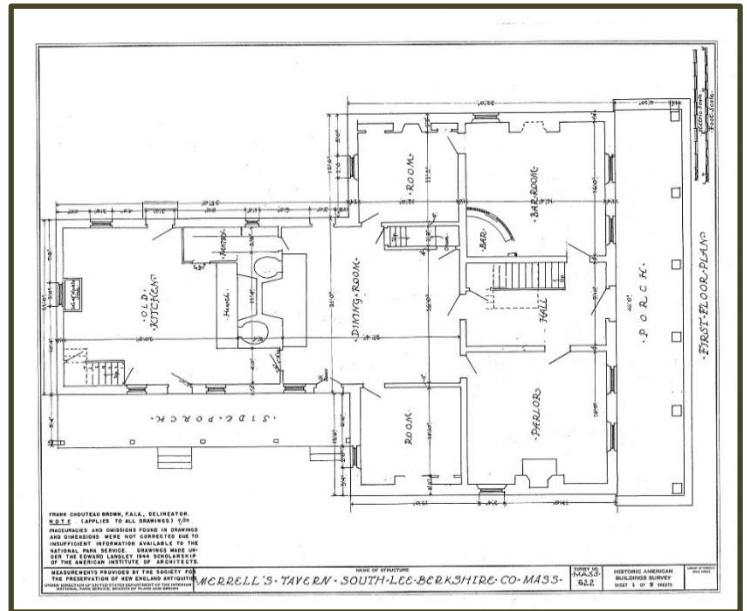
If you drive along Route 102 in South Lee, it's easy to pass the old brick building without realizing just how many lives it has lived. The Merrell Tavern, later the Davis Hotel, the Old Tavern Tea Room, and today a historic inn has stood for more than two centuries as one of the village's most enduring landmarks. Its story is not just one of architecture, but of the people, travelers, and community traditions that shaped South Lee from the 1790s onward.

The tavern began not as a tavern at all, but as the private home of General Joseph Whiton, who built the brick residence around 1794 according to some sources. The house was built on a four-acre parcel that included a grist mill, sawmill, forge, and clay yard. Whiton was no ordinary homeowner. A Continental soldier during the Revolution, he later commanded western Massachusetts troops in the War of 1812 and served as selectman, representative, and state senator. (Whiton was profiled in a "Remembering a Lee Veteran" segment of this newsletter in February 2024.)

His house stood along the newly laid Housatonic River Turnpike, incorporated in 1806, which quickly became the main route between Boston and Albany. As one early description put it, South Lee "lay on the north-south route from southeast Connecticut to Vermont," making Whiton's property a natural stopping point for travelers.

In 1815, Whiton sold the house and mills to the State of Connecticut for \$16,000. Two years later, the property entered the chapter that would define its identity for the next century: it was purchased by William G. Merrell, a local tavern keeper. Merrell added the remarkable circular bar, still intact today and believed to be the only original example of its kind in America, and converted the residence into a stagecoach inn. The Albany-to-Boston line passed directly in front of the door once a day, and the tavern quickly became the social center of South Lee. Important town news and announcements, including those about town meetings, were even required to be posted on its doors.

The Merrell family operated the tavern for generations. William's son, William Merrell Jr., took over in 1831, followed by another son, John Titus Merrell, in 1837. Around that same time, the building gained its most dramatic architectural change: a third-floor ballroom and a



Ground floor plan from the Historic American Buildings Survey, 1945. Source: Library of Congress.

Greek Revival porch, added in 1838. The ballroom, later divided into guest rooms, was once a lively space where locals and visitors “waltzed with abandon,” as one later account recalled.

By the mid-19th century, the tavern was more than a traveler’s stop. Census records show a bustling household: John Merrell, his wife Elizabeth, their daughter Caroline, his mother Asenath (still listed as landlady), a seamstress, a servant, and a farm laborer all lived on the



Guest room. Source: Cohen + White Associates.

premises. In the 1870s, the building even served as a boarding house for girls working at the nearby Hurlbut Mill.

The Merrell era ended in 1880, when the property was sold to William Milford Davis, whose wife was a Merrell descendant. Davis operated the Davis Hotel for twenty years, and it was this period, 1880 to 1900, that later preservationists would choose as the target era for restoration. A Berkshire Eagle article from 1970 noted that the exterior paint applied during the early 19th century had survived untouched for more than 150 years, preserving even

the chimney mortar beneath it.

The hotel was open sporadically from the turn of the century until 1918 when Miss Mable Choate of Naumkeag in Stockbridge bought it. At that point sisters Elsie, Mina, and Jean Ross opened the Old Tavern Tea Room on behalf of Miss Choate. They furnished it with “old-fashioned furniture which has been in the house about 100 years,” creating a nostalgic summer retreat that operated through the 1920s and ’30s. World War II brought an end to the tea-room era, and in 1947, Mabel Choate donated the property to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA), now Historic New England, along with a \$4,000 endowment.

SPNEA undertook major restoration work beginning in the 1960s and ’70s. Morgan Phillips, the society’s supervisor of properties, became deeply involved in researching the tavern’s early history and original appearance. He determined that the building was not an 18th-century structure, as long believed, but a Federal-period building constructed between 1810 and 1815, a conclusion drawn from “exhaustive scrutiny of old deeds and other legal papers,” as one article reported. Phillips also faced challenges such as replacing a tin roof that had been removed years earlier and reconstructing interior paint schemes based on conflicting recollections from former employees of Mabel Choate.

In 1981, SPNEA sold the tavern under a historic covenant to Charles and Faith Reynolds, who operated it as a bed-and-breakfast. Later owners included George Crockett (2001), Lighthouse Catholic Media (2014), and the Marian Missionaries of Divine Mercy (2016). Through all these transitions, the building’s architectural integrity, Federal masonry, Greek Revival additions, eight fireplaces, beehive oven, original hardware, and that extraordinary circular bar, remained protected.



Hallway. Source: Cohen + White Associates

Today, the Merrell Inn is for sale, standing as both a business and a landmark, offering ten

guest rooms, fireplaces, gardens stretching to the Housatonic River, and the quiet charm of a place that has welcomed travelers for more than two centuries. Whether known as Whiton's house, Merrell's Tavern, the Davis Hotel, or the Old Tavern Tea Room, the building remains one of South Lee's most enduring witnesses to local history, hopefully to be lovingly preserved into the future by new owners.

LHS BULLETIN BOARD

LHS SPEAKERS SERIES – BOB DRINKWATER



Historical archaeologist Bob Drinkwater will give an illustrated talk, Local Gravestone Carvers and Their Work (ca. 1720-1850), on Thursday, September 24, 2026 at 6:30pm at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee. During this presentation he will share his extensive knowledge about these craftsmen who worked in Lee and vicinity and the local marble industry.

Bob Drinkwater is a charter member, former Board member and past President of the Association for Gravestone Studies and currently chairs the Western New England Chapter of AGS. For much of the past 50 years he has been studying and photographing 18th and early 19th century gravestones in western Massachusetts, as well as researching the people who made them. He is the author of *In Memory of Susan Freedom: Searching for Gravestones of African Americans in Western Massachusetts* (2020) as well as a new book to be released later in 2026, *Keeping Memory Alive in Western Massachusetts*, a regional guide to more than 100 of the men who made gravestones in Western Massachusetts ca. 1720 to 1850.

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.

FOUNDERS' WEEK EVENTS

EVERYBODY LOVES A PARADE!

Would you like to be in one?



The Historical Society will be in the Founders' Day Parade again this year, and again we will be accompanied by music. This year the Berkshire Fife and Drum Corps will march with us to motivate us and keep us marching in time. They will also give a performance after the parade in the park for everyone to enjoy.

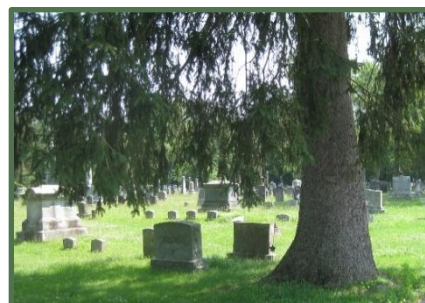
Along with Historical Society board members who will be marching with our banner, a group will also be riding in a 1948 restored Ford pickup (provided and driven by Garth Story). If you would like to march or ride in the parade with our board members, please contact Karen Norton at knorton2@hotmail.com.

CEMETERY TOURS

We will be leading two cemetery tours again this year for Founders Week. Both tours are open to everyone, will be held rain or shine, and should last about an hour. Obviously, they will be outside so dress for the weather, and bring bug repellent since we will be walking through grass.

The Saint Mary's tour will be on Thursday September 17th at 10am. This tour will be over fairly flat surfaces and should be an easy walk. We will meet on the road at the back of the cemetery where there is parking away from any monuments.

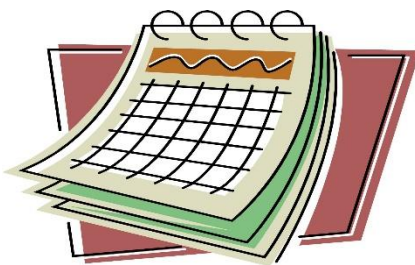
The Fairmount tour will be Friday September 18th at 10am. This tour will be concentrating on the older section of the cemetery and will therefore be over uneven, rough terrain. We will meet at the cemetery vault (the building in the middle of the cemetery), park along any of the pathways around the area.



CALENDAR RAFFLE

Our biggest fundraiser every year has traditionally been our calendar raffle. The money raised will fund two scholarships the Historical Society awards every year to help Lee students with their further education expenses.

We have a small team (led by Mal Eckert and Doreen Bartini) that have worked hard over the past months to bring in donations from local businesses to provide our prizes.



Tickets will be sold starting during Founders through the end of October. The winners will be drawn for prizes assigned to every day in November, that means 30 prizes will be available! This year, most of the prizes will be cold hard cash, something everyone can find a use for.

We will have raffle tickets for sale at our booth during Founders' Weekend, and we would love to have volunteers selling packs of tickets before during and after Founders' so we can reach those who may miss us at our booth. Please contact Mal Eckert if you can help us sell tickets: maleckert@msn.com.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS! **OUR ANNUAL MEETING**

The Lee Historical Society holds our annual meeting in October. Traditionally it is a bigger affair than our regular monthly meetings with a speaker and an award presentation for a volunteer who is honored for all the work they have done for the Society.

This year's meeting will be October 8th at 6:30. All Lee Historical Society members are welcome, more specific details will be in our next newsletter.

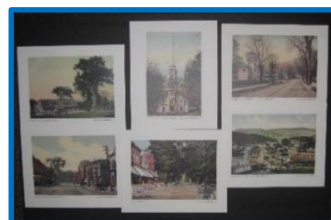
WHAT'S IN OUR STORE

We'll have all these items for sale at our booth Friday and Saturday during Founders Weekend, stop by and have a look! Or contact Tracie to purchase: ethere@gmail.com



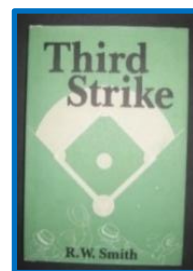
MUGS depicting various places of historical interest in Lee, including the covered bridge, Memorial Hall and the Kilbon Fountain. At just **\$5** each, this would normally be a steal, but on offer at BOGO, how can you not take advantage? Rumor has it that the morning coffee tastes extra delicious in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

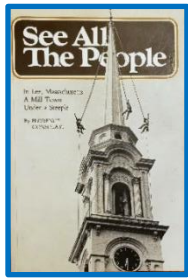
PICTURE PACKETS These beautiful prints depict scenes of Lee from yesteryear, including Main Street before the automobile, and the magnificent Congregational Church. Perfect for framing and only **\$6 per packet or 2 for \$10**. The dingiest of walls will look even more Berkshirish once embellished with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



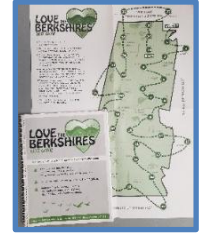
"HISTORICAL LEE" If you've read any of beloved Lee Librarian Betty Dennis' articles reprinted in our newsletter from time to time, you know what a great gift this will be for anyone interested in our Town's diverse and fascinating history, so pick one up for just **\$12** and get it wrapped!

"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!**



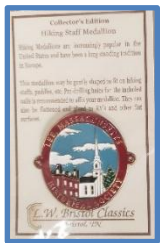
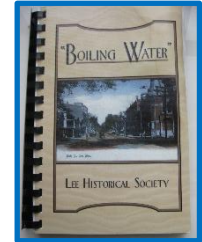


“SEE ALL THE PEOPLE” by Florence Consolati. For any who are intrigued by what happened way back when in our Town, this is THE social history of Lee, filled with important pictures of the people and places that make Lee what it is. **\$26**



‘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**



HIKING STAFF MEDALLION Another great addition to our selection! For all your hiking people out there who love to pound the beautiful trails with which the Berkshires are blessed, this is something totally unique. (Okay, we do get that this may not be for Aunt Matilda...) Our metal medallions depict two of our landmarks – the Congregational Church and Memorial Hall. Their use is very versatile, initially designed to adorn a favorite hiking pole, they can also be flattened out and attached to, say, the camper, sewn on to a favorite cap or hiking jacket.

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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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.

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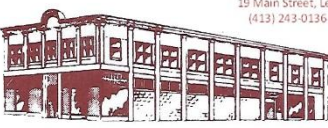
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