



Vol. 22, No. 11

November 2025

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, November 14th at the Historical Society Office, Crossway Tower, Lee. 6:30 pm – 8:00 pm.



FROM THE EDITOR

As the days get shorter we seem to have more and more to fill our time with the imminent arrival of the holiday season. Take the time to enjoy our beautiful autumn weather before the snow flies and we find ourselves in the midst of winter. Also take the time to enjoy chances to reconnect with family and reminisce about times gone by before getting caught up again in the list of tasks that have to be crossed off the to-do list. As part of this slowing down and recalling past times, enjoy the diversion into our history I hope this newsletter guides you through. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me, Tracie at ethere@gmail.com.

MAYWOOD: AN EAST LEE MANSION AND ESTATE

For much of the nineteenth century, the May family exerted a commanding influence over the industrial and social life of East Lee. Their estate, known as Maywood, still occupies a prominent hillside overlooking Cape Street (Route 20) and stands as a symbol of both the prosperity and innovation that epitomized the paper industry in Lee. Central to the growth of the Mays' empire were the waters of Goose Pond (which was called "Lake May" in Rev. C.M. Hyde's Centennial History of Lee, but was never officially named such) and Greenwater Pond. At one point the water ways in the area were all under the May family's control in the form of dams, mills, and a power station.



Maywood, 1938. Source: Lee Library Assoc.

The family's rise began with Edward S. May (born 1809) and his younger brother Sylvester S. May (born 1813), grandsons of the American artist Sybil Huntington May. Both were natives of Putney, Vermont. Edward began his career as a woolen manufacturer in Walpole, New Hampshire, later moving his business to Granby, Massachusetts. Sylvester, who had apprenticed in papermaking, arrived in Lee in 1834 to serve as foreman at the Columbia Mill, then operated by W. W. and C. Laflin. In 1837, the brothers joined in partnership with Jared Ingersoll to establish a small paper mill above the junction of the Goose Pond and Greenwater brooks, at that time a remote site with no roads connecting to the ponds.

When the original mill was destroyed by fire in 1839, the Mays purchased Ingersoll's interest, rebuilt, and greatly enlarged the existing dam. The structure's height was increased, creating a reservoir nearly one and a half miles in length and three-quarters of a mile in width. This newly expanded lake secured a reliable year-round water supply and allowed the mills to operate at full capacity regardless of seasonal fluctuations.

By 1845, the brothers had erected their massive two and a half story, multi-gabled Gothic Revival house, Maywood. The house served as a double residence, where each family occupied identical ends of the same structure. That same year, they constructed the Middle Mill to produce wrapping and wall papers. Within a few years, responding to changes in the market, they converted entirely to the manufacture of fine papers. In 1848, they installed the first Fourdrinier machine in Berkshire County, a major advancement that transformed paper production from a laborious, batch-based process to a continuous, mechanized operation.

In 1852, the Mays joined with Benjamin Dean to build a new four-engine mill for fine paper production; two years later Dean was succeeded by Samuel S. Rogers, creating the firm of May & Rogers. Under this partnership, the company became one of the most prominent paper manufacturers in New England. The firm's output included fine writing papers widely used by government offices, including those in Washington, D.C. The quality of their product was attributed in part to the purity of the wash water drawn from Chanter Spring, located on the former



Maywood, today.

Chanter farm, which the Mays purchased in its entirety to ensure an exclusive supply. The

firm of May & Rogers was dissolved in 1877, the May brothers taking the two lower mills and Mr. Rogers the Mahaiwe.

As prominent businessmen in the area the May brothers gave back to their community by serving as selectmen and legislators, Edward also served as County Commissioner. After their deaths, Sylvester in 1886 and Edward in 1887, the company was managed by their sons and reorganized as Eaton, May & Robbins. The mills were later taken over by the American Writing Paper Company and, like other mills in East Lee were closed by the 1920s.

The large home on Forest Street remained occupied by members of the May family until the 1940s when it was sold and converted into apartments. The house still stands today as a reminder of the large estates in town built by the profits from Lee's booming paper industry at the turn of the twentieth century, but it now serves modern needs as a multi-family home instead of an opulent estate for a single family.

REMEMBERING A LEE VETERAN **CORNELIUS BASSETT (1757-1841)**

Born in Sandwich, Massachusetts, the oldest town on Cape Cod, in 1757, Cornelius Bassett began his working life as a trained mason. When the American colonies took up arms against Britain, Bassett was among those who answered the call. In the early months of 1776, he served in Captain Nye's militia, stationed on the Elizabeth Islands, helping defend the Massachusetts coast from potential British incursions.



Massachusetts Sloop "Tyrannicide" sister ship to the "Republic" Source: Patrick O'Brien Studios.

As the Revolutionary War intensified, the Massachusetts government recognized the need for its own naval defense. The Massachusetts State Navy was formally established on December 29, 1775, to protect the state's commerce, coastal towns, and shipping lanes, as well as to launch offensive operations against British vessels. Over the course of the war, the state navy acquired twenty-five ships, serving as cruisers, dispatch boats, and prison ships.

Two of these vessels—the *Republic* and the *Tyrannicide*—were sloops built in Swansey under authorization of the state legislature. In August 1776, Cornelius Bassett was assigned to the *Republic*, which patrolled the waters off Nantucket. The ship successfully captured at least one British vessel, the *Julius Caesar*. Under maritime rules of the era, the entire crew shared in the proceeds of such captures, so Bassett concluded his naval service with prize money in hand, a rare fortune for a common sailor.

Like many of Lee's early settlers, Bassett migrated westward from Cape Cod after his time in the war, arriving in 1778 with his brother Nathaniel Bassett. The two men brought valuable trades to the young community: Nathaniel became Lee's first blacksmith, and Cornelius its first mason.

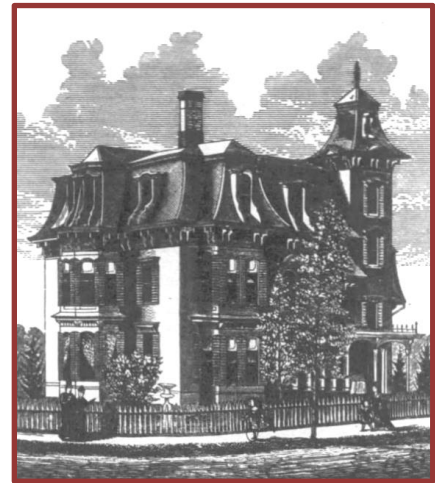
According to early town histories, Cornelius brought with him his privateer's prize money, £100 in Continental currency, which had by then lost much of its value. He later exchanged the depreciated notes for a watch, and eventually traded that watch for a parcel of land at the corner of Housatonic and Park Streets. There, in partnership with Nathan Dillingham, he

built the Red Lion Tavern, the first two-story structure in Lee and the site of the town's first store. The building served as a hotel until 1833. The site later became the home of Sheriff Abiel Pease, and today it is occupied by Berkshire Bank.

Bassett's own home stood nearby, on the corner of Main and West Park Streets. Remarkably, the timbers from his original one-story house still form part of the first story framework of the later Wellington Smith residence built on the same site (now the Kelly Funeral Home). The stonework and mortar of several early Lee buildings also bear Bassett's unmistakable craftsmanship, his work, as local historian Rev. C.M. Hyde noted, was "as hard as stone" even a century later.

Reverend Hyde also recorded Bassett's personal character:

"He was a good man, having a very humble opinion of himself, but true to his God, and faithful to his fellow men. In accordance with the custom of most, if not all, masons of his day, he took his bitters regularly at 11 o'clock a.m. and 4 o'clock p.m., but gave up the habit cheerfully when the temperance movement was started here in 1825."



Wellington Smith House, from Rev. C.M. Hyde's Centennial History of Lee

Cornelius Bassett died on April 27, 1841, at the age of 86, and was laid to rest in Fairmount Cemetery. His legacy endures in the sturdy foundations of early Lee buildings and in the story of a tradesman who helped shape both his town and his country's independence.



ARTICLES BY BETTY DENNIS

In keeping with our theme from a prior article in this newsletter here's an article from Betty Dennis about East Lee in the earlier days, this one was first published in April 5, 1972.

In the 1870's East Lee was busy with the hum of manufacture. The Baird, Benton, May, May & Morin, Garfield, Verran and Decker mills and the McLaughlin Machine Shop were all in full swing. Further down the stream the Tanner Foundry and Bostwick factory were all doing a very good business. In those days the front yards along Route 20 and "Yankee Lane" usually boasted of very fine gardens, belonging to the mill employees. (Yankee Lane was a short street, running from Route 20 to the brook, on which three or four houses were built and at its end, a small mill right on the edge of the brook. It was located perhaps a hundred yards East of Forrest street, but it, with so many other landmarks was completely destroyed in the Mud Pond Flood of 1886.)



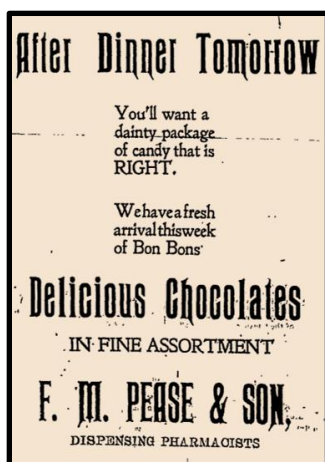
Around the turn of the century those gardens had given way to shady lawns, the flood had quieted the hum of manufacture and East Lee became a little village known to many summer people for its exclusive quietness. One very old Berkshire Gleaner reported a visitor's description as "its merry brook and shady lawns offer the ideal country life".

The country hotel, "Strickland House" (now the East Lee Steak House) and "Brooklawn Cottage" (now the home of Mr. & Mrs. Thomas Garrity and family) were two of the leading resorts in the center of the village. Across from "Brooklawn Cottage" was a delightful little pond, made from damming up of the brook for the running of power for the Couch and Oakly Woodworking Shop. This accommodated boats and canoes, the lawns provided courts for serious games of croquet and the surrounding hills perfect vantage points for viewing sunsets, a combination appealing to the city summer guests of those days.

FROM THE GLEANER

Reading the news in the old papers is always entertaining, here's an excerpt outlining the local festivities in Lee around Thanksgiving.

From the Berkshire Gleaner, Wednesday, November 30, 1904:



In the midst of somewhat uncertain weather, Thanksgiving day came with brightness and sunshine, fleecy cloud mingling with blue sky tending to the enjoyment of all. This is especially a glad anniversary and weather need to be in harmony with the spirit of gladness to make the day complete.

Lee being a place of ancestral homes there were more to come than to go and there was a generous influx of returning wanderers. A number of these were reported in advance of our last. We group other arrivals some of whom were here for the day only, other remaining until Monday.

At Mountain View, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Charles N. Foote, there was a house party of twenty-two, relatives and a

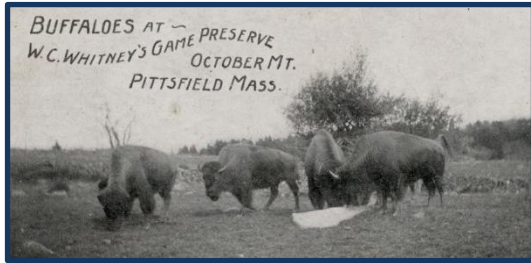
few invited friends. The substantials and delicacies of an old time farmer's Thanksgiving with modern additions were set out. Each guest was given a hand painted souvenir, the work of a member of the family in LaGrange, Ill., Miss Bunker. A novel center piece for the table was a decorated wire cage in which six two weeks old Plymouth Rock chicks added life to the festivities by their peepings. Guests were present from Pittsfield and Rochester. The story of the Foote foundation in Lee was told. There was present two boys of the sixth generation from the original settler Alvan Foote, sons of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Foss. In the evening games and songs were enjoyed around the big fireplace, where logs blasted in the old time fervor amidst surroundings of corn, pumpkins and apples.

A number of young people in town including those home on the vacation held a dance at Greenock Inn Thanksgiving evening, tripping the measures to the music of the piano.



LHS BULLETIN BOARD

LEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY SPEAKER SERIES: WHITNEY'S OCTOBER MOUNTAIN



October Mountain Man Tom Hoffman will give an illustrated talk, Whitney's October Mountain, Wednesday, November 19, 2025 at 6:30pm at the Lee Senior Center, 21 Crossway Street, Lee. Have you heard about William C. Whitney, President Grover Cleveland's Secretary of State, and his 11,000 acre estate in Washington, MA? Or the 800 acre fenced-in game preserve on the property? Now is your chance

to learn about this interesting man and his life on October Mountain!

Hoffman, a member of the Lee Historical Society, Washington Historic Commission and a director of Western Mass Hilltown Hikers, is a historical hiker who enjoys exploring for historical sites using old maps. He has made amazing discoveries, including the foundations of this home and barn on October Mountain. His talk will cover Whitney's connections with Lee – including the story about the Lee family who wouldn't sell out to Whitney.

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 entrance. Parking is available along the North entrance to Crossway Village as well as on Academy Street. Refreshments will be served.

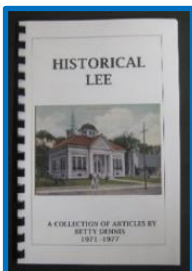
WHAT'S FOR SALE

The holidays are coming! Keep our Lee items in mind for great gifts for all your friends and relatives!



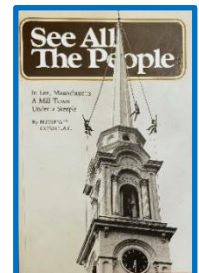
MUGS depicting various places of historical interest in Lee, including the covered bridge, Memorial Hall and the Kilbon Fountain. At just **\$5** each, this would normally be a steal, but on offer at BOGO, how can you not take advantage? Rumor has it that the morning coffee tastes extra delicious in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

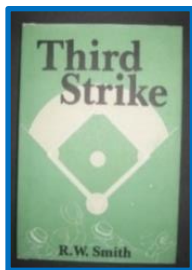
PICTURE PACKETS These beautiful prints depict scenes of Lee from yesteryear, including Main Street before the automobile, and the magnificent Congregational Church. Perfect for framing and only **\$6 per packet or 2 for \$10**. The dingiest of walls will look even more Berkshirish once embellished with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



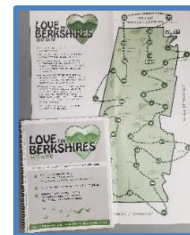


“SEE ALL THE PEOPLE” by Florence Consolati. For any who are intrigued by what happened way back when in our Town, this is THE social history of Lee, filled with important pictures of the people and places that make Lee what it is. **\$26**

‘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 **\$15**, with all proceeds going to the Society.



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 2025 MEMBERSHIP FORM (JANUARY – DECEMBER)

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

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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. 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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