

Meetings @ 7:00 pm
Fourth Monday of the month
At Bethany E.C. Church
308 Main Street, Leesport
Parking in rear of building

128 Main Street
P.O. Box 204
Leesport, PA 19533



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CALENDAR OF EVENTS

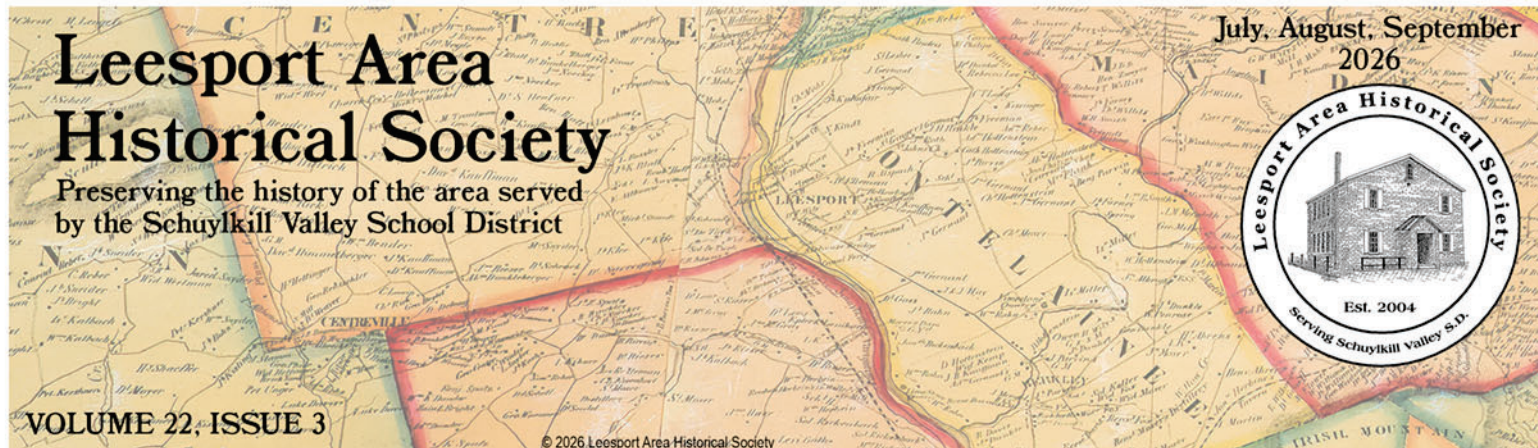
July 5 - Open House 1pm - 4pm
Surprise visit from a Founding
Father for our nation's birthday.
July 27 - Indians of Berks County
Speaker - David Ray
Aug 1 - Open House 10am - 2pm
Aug 2 - Open house 1pm - 4pm
Aug 24 - Business Meeting 7pm
Sep 5 - Open House 10am - 2pm
Sep 6 - Open House 1pm - 4pm
Sep 11 - Leesport Area Community Days
Sep 12 - Leesport Area Community Days
Sep 28 - Speaker Program :
Witchcraft of PA



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SOAPBOX RACING HISTORY IN LEESPORT

Forrest J. Graeff

During the mid-1950's, magazines and newspapers began covering the popularity of gravity racing, home-built, four wheeled carts down hills in communities all over America. What you are about to read is my story that starts in the summer of 1958 with my first race, and concludes in 1964 when racing stopped. However, the history of soapbox racing in Leesport started a few years earlier. This was when the boys born in the last half of the 1940's, after WWII, became enthralled with the sport.

Early cars, that I'll call 1st Generation, were built by the boys themselves - although some kids had a parent or older sibling help. The platform that supported the four wheels, the seat, and rope steering of the front wheels, was an old plank of wood - much like a bed board. The body was made from a couple of old fruit crates sourced from their parent's stash in the basement, or from the Leesport Farmers Market's dump. The wheels were from whatever was handy at home. These wheels came from an old children's wagon, a tricycle, a scooter, or their own baby carriage that their mother had pushed them in around town. The grand cost to build was \$0 - plus skinned knuckles and mis-sawed fingers.

The 2nd Generation cars happened in the late 1950's. These came about because kids learned to innovate and dream about going faster than their competition. The car bodies were sleeker in front and cut from a single piece of plywood. The bodies could also be made of thin sheet metal formed over two half steel hoops. The platform for the wheels and seat were generally cut-lumber boards. The steering was still done by ropes for simplicity. The wheels are what made the 2nd Gen car faster. They were solid, rubber tread cart wheels with ball bearings. The final improvement that made the 2nd Gen cars even faster in the early 1960's, were inflated rubber tires with ball bearings. The cost to build a car jumped to about \$12-15.

So now let's talk about rules. The older kids set the rules generally to limit too much innovation from year to year. Inflated rubber tires didn't become acceptable until about 1962. The skinny wheels that were official tires for National Soapbox Derby Cars were never allowed because they were expensive, and not fair to us "poor kids". Children's wagons were allowed to race alongside soapbox cars until about 1960. Their narrow and top-heavy stature, especially holding heavier boys, made them sometimes uncontrollable by the bottom of the hill.

Briefly, I want to cover safety. The short answer is, except for banning wagons, there was little consideration. Cars did not have brakes. Helmets were not worn. A trouser belt was sometimes nailed to the platform as a seat belt. But this belt did not keep you upright in the seat when you locked wheels with another car. Nor, did a belt prevent your head from whipping forward, and your mouth smacking the bodywork, upon hitting other cars stopped on course.

So now, let's talk about the where and when these races were held in Leesport. I started racing in 1958 on the west side of the river. The start line was at the west end of Nichols St. - where it meets Main St. This street was known to be called 'The Flat.' Three or four cars were started abreast. The first block of the course was all downhill to Pine Street. Then the hill leveled-out somewhat, and the finish line was about another hundred feet into the 2nd block of Nichols - at the first telephone pole. From there, the cars continued along Nichols St, gradually losing speed, and then turned right onto Reeser St. About fifty feet down Reeser, you pulled your steering ropes hard right - making your car do a tight circle to stop. I raced this venue mostly on Saturday mornings. After 1962, most of the boys aged-out of racing, and Nichols Street racing came to a halt. A few of us boys continued to use the hill for testing. Nichols St. did play host to Tuesday evening racing in 1960- 61. LeRoy Seip, who was our Leesport Playground Director, obtained backing from the Boro to hold races on Tuesday evenings - prior to each Tuesday's playground movienight. Points were awarded and a trophy presented at the end of each summer.

Continued on page 3

PRESIDENT'S REPORT – SPRINGING AHEAD!

The flowers are blooming – Spring is in the air. As we look forward to warmer weather and all the wonderful events Spring and Summer bring, LAHS also looks forward to exciting new changes.

The upper hallway is being spackled and painted to showcase the Trinity Church collection which will allow us to open the upper hallway to tours. LAHS also purchased a new computer to better organize and centralize our records and membership rolls. We have been blessed with the generosity of members which allows LAHS to make these improvements.

As we celebrate our country's 250 Birthday, the museum will feature John Lutz's George Washington collection. The Magical History Tour will also showcase homes/properties present during the birth of our country. At the same time, Leesport celebrates 125 years!

Preserving these traditions and our history is what makes a community worth living in. Thank you to all our members, supporters and volunteers who help make this happen.

With much appreciation,
Robin Schappell, LAHS/President

DID YOU KNOW?

by Millie Reber

George Washington reigns prominently over conversations or articles that are written about the 250 th anniversary of our country. Pictures of events in his life are currently a central display in Leesport's Historical Museum on Main Street in Leesport. Stories abound of his life and accomplishments. The one story I wish to focus on is, did George Washington really have wooden teeth? Please stay with me... I'm not insane. I simply find this extremely interesting. Mostly because of his defective teeth. Most portraits show him with a closed mouth. The best-known portrait of him was done by Gilbert Stuart in 1796. His mouth was closed in this portrait. Back to his teeth, I didn't mean to stray from the main topic. Many stories have been told about Washington, some are probably not true. Washington did not have wooden teeth. There I said it. During Washington's lifetime (1732-1799), dentures were made from mixtures of various materials. Some included other human teeth or teeth from animals such as cows or horses. Ivory tusks from hippopotamus or walrus if available would be used. Additives of gold, brass or lead would round out the possibilities. The result would make the finished denture bulky and stained in appearance. Not at all like today's pearly whites. No, doesn't that sound better than wooden teeth? Chew on that fact for awhile!!

MEMBERSHIP PROFILE – MARK MAUER



This issue's member spotlight showcases, Mark Maurer. Mark has been a member of the Leesport Area Historical Society for a number of years now. Mark first got involved to help out his dear friend Richard Strause, beginning with just lending a helping hand with setting up and help being the "muscle" for what ever tasks Rich needed help with. Now you will see Mark at almost every event helping with setting up tents, tables, running electrical cords, hanging up signs and many many other tasks that are needed to help make our events a success. You may have seen him in the past making burgers in the concession stand at our Community Days event. He is a very active member on that committee. Mark is also our Leesport elected State Constable, elected by our wonderful community that we all are proud to call home. Mark's hard work and helping hand do not go unnoticed and will always be appreciated. His sense of humor and willingness to 'suit up' in various costumes at our events, goes a long way to enhance every occasion he's involved with. LAHS is blessed and grateful for all he does for our organization.

MYSTERY IN THE MUSEUM



Last issue we had a picture of George Washington to highlight our current exhibit on display in our museum. This time we are going to feature a recent donation which will be displayed in the near future. Most of you will know what they are, but the mystery is where they came from. We are also looking for ideas for future exhibits in our museum. Since these items were donated we've acquired another crock, a 6 gallon model that was definitely used in Leesport. Along with it came this cast iron Enterprise item, on the right, also used in Leesport. The mystery for this gadget will be what it was used for.



SOAPBOX RACING

FROM PAGE 1

In 1963, I started racing with the boys on the east side of the river on Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings, using the hill on the south end of Hafer Drive. Most of us were by now driving 2 nd Gen cars. Adding to the speed was the fact that this hill was much steeper than Nichols St. The hill on Hafer was only one block long. At the bottom of the hill, the course required a hard right turn onto Apple Street. The course continued two hundred feet farther on Apple - to the finish line at the 2 nd telephone pole. The dangerous part was the right-hander onto Apple St. Remember - no brakes, 1 st Gen cars upgraded to ball bearing wheels, and some 2 nd Gen cars even upgraded to inflated wheels. The only method for three or four cars to safely make the turn onto Apple, was single file or two abreast - while holding your breath. Sadly, not every car came away undamaged. The "totaled" cars were known to be abandoned in the high grass and scrub trees down the embankment off Hafer Drive. After 1964, soapbox racing concluded here also.

If you find yourself at the Leesport Historical Society, ask to see the two soapbox racers in their possession. My 1 st Gen car is numbered 750, and my 2 nd Gen car is numbered 3.



BUSHONG PAPER MILL

Jim Freeman



I grew up in NW Reading. Lived within a hundred yards of the Schuylkill River near the Schuylkill Avenue Bridge. Along with other buddies from my block of Lincoln Street, we extensively explored the banks of the river and were regular visitors to the Bushong Paper Mill near the confluence of the Tulpehocken with the Schuylkill River. We fished the creek from the raceway for the mill, just below the falls. We were allowed into the mill to use their water fountain. Once I got a complete tour, showing the entire paper making process from liquid pulp to the rolled up kraft paper. All the machinery was run by water power. They also used steam as part of the process, heating the rollers that the pulp passed over on its way to the end of the line. I'll never forget the smell that filled the air around the mill.

Recently, I read that the 10' dam at the mill was removed. The City of Reading, who owns the mill property, was ordered by the State of PA to remove it some time ago. I took my grandson to the site to see what it looks like now, wondering what all was removed. We parked at Stonecliff Park, which is a short walk to the Mill site. It was a bit of a shock to me, seeing the entire dam gone, with water flowing freely. The concrete raceway and turbine machinery are still there. I remember the turbines being housed inside a small building at the end of the race. As we explored the exposed banks, upstream from where the dam was removed, we found some real treasures. With the lower water level, another dam made of wooden timbers was exposed about 200 feet upstream. It too was dismantled. Timbers were piled on the far shore of the Tully. We found some iron spikes that held the timbers together. I don't know what kind of wood it is, but it's hard enough to make a sharp axe bounce off it. Remarkable, after being submerged for likely 200+ years. Some of the spikes will be donated to LAHS and the Lock House as relics of wooden dam building. The mill property was part of Bern Township at one time. There were a number of 'owners' of this mill property, but Bushong is the name most often associated with it.

Once I discovered the old dam remains, I dove into some deed research to see what I could find out about this property. Every Deed going back mentioned there being a mill on the 10 1/4 acre plot. I found the first mention of a dam being built around 1768 by Henry Fiedler, a miller. After his dam was constructed, the creek overflowed its banks upstream. One neighbor, Michael Kissinger, lost his water supply. The rising water of the creek covered the spring that the Kissinger family used as their sole source of water. After paying 40 Pounds in damages to Kissinger, Fiedler was allowed to build the dam higher without any further payment to Kissinger if the water level rose higher..

BUSHONG PAPER MILL



The turbines shown on the left were powered by the water coming through the race. They turned the giant gears that were above, which in turn rotated the driveshaft that entered the mill to power the machinery. All of this was enclosed inside a building. Water exited the building into the tail race, one of my favorite fishing spots back in the day.



The view on the left is looking downstream at the head of the race depicted in the plan on the right. When the "proposed dam" was built, the old race and stone bulkhead became submerged for over 120 years. All that stone on the creek side of the race was put there to protect the race from being washed away. The line across the creek from the bulkhead in the plan is where the older wooden dam was built. There are some wooden foundation timbers still in place in the creek.



The photo on the left shows some of those foundation timbers on which the old wooden dam was built. Piled across the creek are the timbers that were removed. Just up over the bank on the far side was a stretch of the Union Canal. A lock was located just below the confluence with the schuylkill River. The Union canal ran on the west side of the river and headed upstream along the Tulpehocken. Much of it was filled in and now lies under the West Shore Bypass around Reading. As much as I was shocked by the changes with the dam removal, I think that it's all for the best. There's now a stream flowing freely for the first time in over 250 years. This should have a positive impact on the Tulpehocken creek ecosystem. Mother nature will fill in the bare exposed banks with new growth. The natural inhabitants will all thrive.

RICHARD STRAUSE MEMORIAL HISTORY AWARD

Abigayle Witinski

Knowing and preserving local history gives us a roadmap to our roots within the community. Stories and memories get passed down through generations for others to continue sharing creating this web of history. Leesport isn't just a zipcode, it's home to so many amazing people, Schuylkill Valley students and alumni. Knowing local history can help us move forward through difficult times or challenges going forward as a community. We really tested that and came together as a community during the COVID-19 pandemic. I always loved going to events at the Leesport Lock House and the historical society as you are literally stepping back in time. The preservation of local history hits close to heart for me. My grandmother, Anna Mae (Moyer) Beitler grew up here in her mom's house which is right next to my grandparents former house, 500 Main Street. Her house was built on her mom's land, so she spent her whole entire life in the little town of Leesport. She went to school in the one room school house grades 1-7 I believe, that is now the Leesport Historical Society, as her high school yearbook is in the classroom there. She also went to school at Ontelaunee High School which now serves as the Schoolside Plaza. Their school mascot was an Indian; their colors were red and yellow. Schuylkill Valley School District was later formed in 1955. Her graduating class picked the name, mascot and colors of what is now Schuylkill Valley School District as she graduated from there in 1957. She was involved in Vallette, Y-Teens, Glee Club, F.H.A. & Dramatics throughout her high school career along with studying Commercial according to her senior yearbook. She used to always tell me stories about how the town was back then and how much things have changed over the years. Unfortunately, she passed away four years ago; yet she lives on through me retelling her stories to everyone who personally knew her. Other Schuylkill Valley alumni in my family include: Brian Beitler class of 1984, Micheal Beitler class of 1986, Lori Witinski, class of 1994, and Austin Witinski class of 2020. My mom, Lori, went to first grade at Ontelanunee as well. In a way, it's my family's living legacy as a 3rd generation SV student; soon to be alumni. I am proud that my family has been a part of this community for multiple decades; will continue to share my stories I heard growing up



**Fireworks
Saturday 9pm!**



Keep Informed!

18th ANNUAL SHOWCASING LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND BUSINESSES

**FOOD - GAMES - MUSIC
Friday Sep. 11th, 2026**

Car Cruise In 5 - 8pm

Ole 97 - Johnny Cash Tribute 7-10pm

Sat. Sep 12th, 2026

Music Saturday from 2 - 9pm

SVHS Band - Die Tired - Agent 99

FOOD - DJ - GAMES - BINGO

FOOD TRUCKS - RAFFLES

Leesport Playground by Pool & Library

Rain Date Sun Sep. 13 th

ALL ABOARD THE MAGICAL HISTORY BUS TOUR

Approximately ninety guests were greeted by George Washington prior to boarding the bus to visit colonial properties, churches, and businesses in celebration of our country's 250th Birthday. The tour lasted two hours in the capable hands of board member, Leandra Karasack, our bus driver. David Rey and Dexter Mengel shared stories of life during that time as well as information on prominent families such as Parvin, Epler and Hiester. Did you know that Rieser's Mill in Bern Township supplied grain for the soldiers in Valley Forge? Local historian, David Rey, asked for moments of silence, prior to reciting the names of the soldiers buried at Bern, Gernant's and Salem Belleman's churches. Thank you to the church historians for providing us with those lists. A special thank you to Scott Arndt for coordinating our rest stop at Epler's Church. Dan Gassert shared church history while the guests were wowed by patriotic musical selections played by Brian Gibson. Many visited the labyrinth as well as soldier's graves. Thank you to all who participated, the committee and Ryan Strause for creating the beautiful program as well as James Freeman and Tracy Schott for providing pictures. As we continue to celebrate the anniversary of our freedom, please visit the West Leesport School House on Sunday, July 5th, 1pm - 4pm. There will be a special appearance by one of our Founding Fathers.



HISTORY COMMITTEE

Jim Freeman

We've had some great additions to our collections recently. One of particular interest is a complete set of all 25 editions of George Meiser's "Passing Scene" series.. Along with them were some additional Berks history books. All of them are incredible additions to our research library. It's commendable that someone would reach out to LAHS to donate such a valuable collection instead of selling it. Some of the other donations are part of the "Mystery in the Museum" section in this issue so details on those will be forthcoming in the next newsletter. The painting in our stairwell has been completed and looks terrific. Some upgrades are underway in our archive room to accomodate and network our computer systems. Meanwhile, feel free to email history@leesporthistory.org about any possible donations.