

Historic Amherst

Town Benefactor And His Generous Daughter

BY KATRINA HOLMAN

The bell for the Brick School (1855), the land for the Chapel (1858), the new fire engine (1859), the Congregational Church's organ (1866), and the Soldiers' Monument (erected in 1871) – were all donated or substantially funded by one man. 'Tis the season of giving, so who better to feature than this benefactor of Amherst.

Aaron Lawrence (1804-1867) was one of twelve children. "His father, a poor but good man, could do very little for his education, but permitted him, in his early youth, to clear a piece of woodland and have the first crop. With this, he paid the tuition for six months at Hancock academy. Leaving the parental roof in Vermont to work his own way in life, his father gave him \$3.00, one half of which he invested in a copy of the Bible and a Hymn Book." Aaron got his start in Amherst working as a clerk in his uncle Eber Lawrence's store in the Village; became a storekeeper at age 21 when he formed a partnership with Charles L. Stewart, also 21; and went on to become a successful trader and business man – the richest man in Amherst when he died.

"Mr. Lawrence was always an invalid but managed in spite of his infirmities to accomplish a vast amount of business. By good management he acquired a handsome property, which he distributed freely for what he considered good objects – the churches, schools, town and individuals," noted local historian Secomb.

How he got rich

"Mr. Lawrence was a very industrious man. He felt the value of time and aimed to turn every moment to some useful purpose. This, together with great personal economy, was one of the secrets of his success in business."

By 1836 Aaron was in business for himself as storekeeper. He offered: medicines; farm supplies such as ploughs, shovels, rakes, hoes, clover seed, buck and India wheat by the bushel; burlap, gunny bags and twine for hops bagging; dry goods such as broad cloths, cassimeres, fancy silks & laces; goose feathers; tobacco; hardware such as nails, Chelmsford window glass, window sashes, paper hangings, oak staves & shingles; paints, oil & dye stuffs; hollow ware, brass kettles; groceries such as smoked and dried fish varieties, salt pork, hogs lard, Claremont cheese, maple sugar; palm leaf hats in May; seal and otter fur caps in December; fire frames, oven mouths and ash doors. An amazing variety for a store that had to be considerably smaller than today's super stores. He was also postmaster 1841- 49, the post office being in his store.



The final residence of philanthropist Aaron Lawrence and his daughter Lue

He then moved on to other business ventures. He was director and president of the Hillsborough Mutual Fire Insurance Co. (beginning 1841); a director of the Souhegan Railroad; partner in the foundry on Foundry St. in its early years (1848-'52); and Milford bank director (1855). By the time of his death, Boston had been his place of business for years. He also was a landlord, and owned the inn across the street from the bank among other properties, when he died.

Suffered losses

His first wife died in 1838 at age 32 just 8 years after their marriage, of consumption, leaving him with two very young daughters. In 1860 a fire destroyed the family's home at 15 Church St. In 1863, the old Curtis-Hardy Hotel-Tavern and adjacent store, both of which he owned, were destroyed by fire. His second wife, whom he had married when she was nearly 40, predeceased him by two years.

Gave time, talent & treasure

While still in his twenties, Aaron served as treasurer of the local foreign mission society, kept bibles for the NH Bible Society in his store, and played the organ for the choir and served as clerk in the Congregational Church. In later years he was agent and treasurer of the Hillsborough Education Society, auditor of the Auxilliary Home Mission Society, member of building committee for new school, and deacon. He became a Justice of the Peace in 1856 and served in the State legislature 1865-'66.

His generous will is remarkable for its long list of bequests: He left \$20,000 to each of his daughters, a sizable sum in those days, but the balance of the estate went to benevolent causes. Clearly he valued edu-

cation for he had established a scholarship at Dartmouth College while still alive and with his will endowed a scholarship at Andover Academy and a professorship each at Chicago and at Dartmouth College; and established a fund for the common schools in Amherst. He left a sum to the Town Library and monies to the Congregational Church for the pastor's library, repairs to church and singing galleries, Sabbath School library, and a new musical instrument for the vestry.

Daughter Lue

Miss "Lue" Lawrence (1844-1870), christened Sarah Lucretia, the third of four daughters, followed in her father's philanthropic footsteps. Illness had prevented her planned wedding. At the close of her funeral service, "the pastor descended from the pulpit and took the engagement ring from her hand, and with a few affecting, tender words, returned it to the giver."

Lue had prepared for her untimely death at age 26. With her will, she too endowed a scholarship at Dartmouth College and left bequests to benevolent projects in town, including \$50 for a supper to the Lawrence Engine Company (Amherst's firemen, so named in honor of her father). She left money to two churches in town. The Baptist Church never did acquire a bell as she wished, but used her bequest for much-needed remodeling in 1879. That same year, when the Sabbath School of the Congregational Church had their annual Christmas festival, the Christmas tree was once again bedecked with presents for the children, thanks to the fund left by Lue.

Sources: Quotations are from the obituaries in the *Farmers' Cabinet*.

Amherst Tree Lighting Festival



Jack and Lizzie Benner visit with Santa Claus.



Korina Hahn, Brennan McCarthy, Mark Laflamme and James Hammond give rides through the Village.



Boy Scout Troop 22 roast chestnuts over an open fire.



Kathy Earley, Theresa Grella and Dave Albert serve hot cocoa.

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forward and pulled together Team Earley to keep the tradition alive. Along with their four children, Erin, Matt, Shannon and Garrett, the Grella family, Dave Albert and Nick and Kate Geskos and donations from Walmart, the Cookie and Cocoa Warm-Up was a big success. The Earleys participate in fundraising for the Melanoma Foundation of New England. Kathy said, "This is a chance for us to give back the community which has been supportive in our fundraising efforts. Thank you to Kathy and Ray.



Morgan and Alison Daniel with Santa.



The Amherst Tree Lighting Festival began with a blanket of snow, and soon changed to rain. That did not dampen the cheery spirit for those attending.

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