

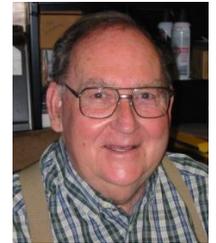


By The River's Edge

Skowhegan History House Society Newsletter

Fall 2010 Edition

skowheganhistoryhouse.org



Lee Granville
Curator

A Tale of Two Bridges

By Lee Granville, Curator

The place in Maine which was to become Skowhegan was formed at the end of an ice age, perhaps fifty thousand years ago. As the glaciers melted, enormous geologic forces were unleashed. Torrents of melt-water mixed with sand, gravel and boulders fell away from the receding ice faces, grinding their way inexorably towards the sea. Along the upper Kennebec River, huge eskers of sand and gravel were deposited at places which would later be known as Bingham, Embden, Solon and Madison.

Somewhere, perhaps near the present town of Norridgewock, the deluge became totally blocked by detritus, and the river left its original course to take a gigantic side step. For a distance of perhaps five miles, the waters flowed nearly due east until they reached Skowhegan, where they became bottlenecked by the hard ledges. The waters parted around the sturdy plug of rock which would become known as Skowhegan Island. Continuing east, they ground out a mile long, seventy-five foot deep gorge until they reached what is now called the Great Eddy. This place was part of another ancient watershed which included the Wesserunsett River. Here the two rivers combined and assumed a gentle southeasterly path to the sea.

The forces which created Skowhegan left in their wake two channels around the island. Both of these channels contained waterfalls, described by early European explorers as being 22-1/2 feet in height. These falls slowed the progress of migrating fish as they moved upriver to spawn. At the foot of the falls were pools, which at some seasons of the year were filled with fish. For several thousand years, various Native American peoples gathered here to fish at the falls and to grow corn on the river banks as well as on large islands several miles downstream. There is archeological evidence of the ancient Red Paint People having been here and much later the Abnakis. It was this latter group who provided the place with its name.

There is still some controversy over the exact meaning of Skowhegan. The Abnakis, unfortunately, left no written language. Louise Helen Coburn, in *Skowhegan on the Kennebec*, her landmark two-volume work published in 1942, explores the earlier references quite thoroughly. She quotes a source named Gannett who authored the book *The Origin of Certain Place Names*. Miss Coburn concluded, "Skowhegan is an Indian word said to mean spearing or a

**Skowhegan
History House on
the Web
Page 5**

**Tour History House
on DVD with Lee
Granville, Curator
Now On Sale!**



Louise Helen Coburn
Founder- Skowhegan
History House

**Hobos Move
into History
House Page 4**

**History House
Volunteers
Page 7**

place to watch."

This still seems to be the generally accepted definition and it certainly conjures up pleasant images of the Abnaki's way of life. One thing seems obvious: Skowhegan was the name of the place long before there was any permanent settlement there and certainly well before the arrival of the first settlers from Massachusetts.

The first of those early farmers were the Weston and Heywood families. In 1782, they settled several miles downstream from Skowhegan Island to take advantage of the cleared land which the Abnakis had been farming for generations. Within the next few years, members of these two founding families and newcomers



The busy intersection of Island Ave., Water St., and Madison Ave. with the North Channel Bridge in the middle, ca. 1900. Lettering over the bridge entrance reads: \$3.00 fine for riding or driving on this bridge faster than a walk.

moved up the river to Skowhegan Falls, as the island area was called, to harness the water power available there. Mills and stores were built on the island itself and on both riverbanks. As these communities developed and grew, so did the necessity for people to be able to cross the river at will. No doubt canoes and small boats filled this need at first, along with the seasonal shallow water fords which were available downstream from the falls, but all of these methods were both inconvenient and downright dangerous. Crossing the river ice in winter was also hazardous, and people seemed to attempt it too early or late in the season, sometimes with deadly results. The early histories are filled with references to people who were swept away or fell through the ice to drown.

The first public means of crossing the river was a ferry licensed to Benjamin Moor in 1785. Moor's Ferry, as it was known, was located just a few hundred feet upriver from the falls. Moor sold his enterprise to one Edward Hartwell in 1793. Hartwell's

Ferry continued to operate until sometime after the bridges were finally built which eventually made it unnecessary. The ferry ride was apparently quite a routine event except when the river was in flood. However, it was never entirely safe. One tragedy was described in an early book. "Joseph W. Stevens was drowned at the Skowhegan Ferry, Oct. 29, 1831, aged 24. He was thrown out of the ferry boat by the unshipping of an oar."

Another tragic event occurred during a spring flood. A teamster and his team of horses, attempting to use the ferry to cross as the river crested, were swept off the boat by the huge waves. All were carried downstream and over the falls. Miraculously, the horses, still harnessed and hitched to a wagon, survived the experience. The driver was not so fortunate. His body was found several days later at the great eddy, a mile downstream.

Although some mention was made of an effort to build a bridge at Skowhegan as early as 1795, apparently the first serious attempt to bridge the two channels was made in 1808. In his wonderfully entertaining volume *History of the Old Towns of Norridgewock and Canaan*, published in 1849, J. D. Hanson describes this early effort. "The first bridge in Old Canaan (later to become Skowhegan) across the Kennebec, was chartered in 1808 for Isaac Beale and Wm. B. Shaw. It was to be of 'merchantable boards,' nailed one upon the other so as to break joints, with wrought nails. When about eight courses of planks had been laid, the whole affair fell of its own weight and the enterprise was abandoned."

This must have been a financial disaster for the backers of the bridge, but Hanson doesn't dwell upon the failure. Seemingly, the next bridge project at this same location was a resounding success. Hanson says, "The Skowhegan bridge" (The original bridges were still in operation at the time his book was written.) "is built upon an island in the Kennebec from each shore, and thus connects Bloomfield and Skowhegan. It was first built by



This is the original North Channel Covered Bridge seen from downriver. Built some seventy feet above the water, it was an engineering marvel in its day. This bridge was replaced by a steel span in 1903.

William Weston, Esq. of Norridgewock at a cost of \$5,500.00 in the year 1809. With a few slight interruptions it has been kept open for tolls since."

Thus, thirty-seven years after the town was settled, the first completely reliable and safe method of crossing the river was finally established. From that time on, Skowhegan became established as the crossroads of Central Maine with both the major east-west and north-south highways crossing the Kennebec over these bridges.

The bridges were of the covered type with a roof to protect them from the weather and avoid their rotting out. These structures were quite picturesque with a great deal of individual character. Miss Coburn says, "Doves nested in their arches and sparrows clustered among their timbers."

It is interesting to note that in contrast to today's practice of using federal, state or community financing for major engineering projects, private capital and expertise were called upon to tackle the job. The name of the company formed by prominent local citizens for the purpose was "The Proprietors of the Skowhegan Bridge." Miss Coburn states, "While there were obviously two bridges, they were always officially spoken of as one. The proprietors purchased land for short roads leading from these to established roads on either side of the river, and also for a road across the Island." In return for their entrepreneurial involvement, the proprietors of the bridge were awarded a charter for a period of seventy-five years in which to collect tolls from bridge users.

Schedule of Tolls

Each foot passenger- 2 cents
One person & horse- 6 ¼ cents
Single horse & cart, sled or sleigh- 12 ½ cents
Each wheelbarrow, hand cart, or other vehicle capable of carrying a like weight- 4 cents
Each team including cart, sled, sleigh, etc. drawn by more than one beast and not exceeding four- 25 cents
and for each additional beast above four- 2 cents
Each single horse and chaise, chair or sulky- 20 cents
Each coach, chariot, phaeton, and curricule- 37-1/2 cents
Neat cattle and horses, exclusive of those rode on, or in carriages, or in teams, each- 2 cents
Sheep and swine, each dozen- 6-1/4 cents

One can just visualize the harried toll keeper trying to figure the charges while the other bridge users waited, perhaps not too patiently. "H'mmm, let's see now, 17 sheep at 6-1/4 cents a dozen, three swine and one goat, one neat cow and one curricule at 37-1/2 cents, that will be.....!!"

Perhaps that's why the proprietors hired as the third toll keeper, one Noah Burrill. This Revolutionary War veteran was also a former school-teacher who had the reputation of being something of a town character. He was referred to as "Master Burrill" and he had, it was said, the "Gift of words." On the occasion of the nation's fiftieth anniversary on Independence Day, he was the townsman who delivered the traditional oration, using the flowery language of the day. He served as toll keeper from 1820 to 1833.

It seems likely that the toll keeper would have been one of the most important officials in town. The bridges were absolutely vital to travel and commerce, located as they were, between the communities on both sides of the river, as well as providing accommodation for the traveling public. The nearest bridges up or downriver were miles away. Much of the community's manufacturing facilities were located on Skowhegan Island between the two bridges. Raw materials for the mills had to come across the bridges, and finished goods had to go back across to market. The toll house, home of the toll keeper and his family, was located on the Island, near the end of the North Channel Bridge.

During Master Burrill's reign, a picket fence was built, stretching across the road from the toll house with a large gate in the middle. Master



This is the old Toll House ca. 1880. In Master Burrill's day, the 1820's, a fence stretched across Island Avenue to stop traffic while he was sleeping.

Burrill didn't much like the fact that people would sometimes attempt to sneak across his bridges while he was asleep. This was especially irritating because he was allowed to keep for his personal use any tolls which he collected after nine o'clock at night. This subterfuge was particularly employed by sheep herders and farmers who liked to drive large herds and flocks across the river at night to avoid the traffic. If they could avoid paying tolls, they weren't averse to that either.



This 1894 photo shows the original South Channel Bridge just after it was reinforced to accommodate a new trolley line. This span was severely damaged by the December freshet of 1901 and was replaced by a new steel bridge in 1904.

Before the days of railroads, farmers used to drive their animals to Brighton, Massachusetts, to the stockyards there. Flocks of five hundred sheep crossing the bridges were not unusual during Master Burrill's day, and, at 6-1/4 cents a dozen, represented quite a bit of cash. No doubt he needed this extra income because his salary, for thirteen years, was just one hundred dollars a year. It was said that Master Burrill was frequently wakened from his sleep by the bleating of sheep and a herdsman pounding on his door during the wee hours of the morning. Then he would have to rise and count the animals to determine the toll. One wonders if he had trouble falling back to sleep after having counted sheep for an hour.

Aside from his toll collecting duties, Master Burrill was responsible for maintaining safety and order on the bridges. On the entrance to the North Channel Bridge, there was a sign stating, "Three dollars fine for riding or driving on this bridge

faster than a walk!" If, in his opinion, travelers were crossing at an excessive rate of speed, Master Burrill would stop them and demand payment for their transgression.

On one summer evening, the Skowhegan mounted militia company had come north across the bridges on horseback to relieve their thirst at the Red Dragon Tavern. They had just attended a drill on the Old Bloomfield Common. Military companies were exempt from paying tolls, which, no doubt, irked Master Burrill. After several hours they made their way back across the North Channel Bridge, coming at a tipsy trot. Master Burrill closed his gate and stopped the men to demand payment of a fine for speeding. The commander ordered his horsemen to face about and return to the north side from which they had come. When they were safely over the bridge, Master Burrill heard the command..... "**About face, Charge!!**" The inebriated troopers came thundering back across the bridge at a dead gallop and flattened the gate and picket fence. As Miss Coburn said with droll understatement, "Master Burrill was left to stare after them open mouthed!"

The original covered bridges served the community very well indeed for nearly a hundred years. The charter expired as scheduled after seventy-five years. In 1884 ownership came into possession of the town. In 1903 and 1904, both structures were replaced with the new steel bridges available at that time. After another seventy years, these were replaced in their turn by the modern Margaret Chase Smith Bridges, built in exactly the same location as the originals.

Skowhegan today is still the crossroads of Maine and the new bridges handle up to twenty thousand vehicles a day. The spot where the toll house once stood is now an empty parking lot. Sometimes, late on a warm summer's evening, pedestrians crossing the North Channel Bridge may report that they have heard the faint bleating of sheep and an insistent pounding on the toll house door. Somewhere perhaps, Master Burrill is still collecting his tolls for posterity.



This photo shows high water on the Kennebec, in 1923. Just beyond the buggies is a pipe fence defining the river's edge. The steel bridge is the replacement for the original South Channel Covered Bridge erected in 1904.

Visit the Skowhegan History House Online!



skowheganhistoryhouse.org

Skowhegan History House is now online thanks to Web designer Nancy Jervey owner of Jervey Design and Melvin Burnham, President of the History House Association, Inc.

The new website offers visitors extensive information concerning: **Association, Photo Gallery, Heirloom Gardens, Research, Exhibits, Heritage Shop, Giving Opportunities, Hours/Location, Volunteer Information, Contact Us, Newsletters/Articles**, as well as information under **Before You Visit**.

Visitors are also offered the choice of making donations using the "Donate" button which uses a secure credit card service and Paypal.

The website also offers visitors an introduction to the DVD entitled History House Tour with Lee Granville.

Giving Opportunities

History House Association, Inc.

The History House Association, Inc. - Skowhegan History House welcomes financial support to further its goals and mission, programming, general operations, and endowment activities. ***History House is a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization, and your donation is tax deductible within the limits of the Internal Revenue Code.***

For information on any of the following giving opportunities, please contact the Skowhegan History House, P.O. Box 832, Skowhegan, Maine 04976, the Curator at leegranville@skowheganhistoryhouse.org, or any member of the Board of Trustees.

Society Membership

In 2006, the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Skowhegan History House Museum, the Board of Trustees of the History House Association, Inc. created a society to assist in the further advancement of the organization. Members of the Skowhegan History House Society represent patrons, families, and friends of the History House who wish to support financially the Association's efforts in preserving Skowhegan's legacy and promoting its heritage. Annual and lifetime memberships are offered. In addition to supporting the History House, membership benefits include subscriptions to the Society's Newsletters, access to the research center, invitations to events, and the opportunity to submit articles for publication in the newsletter.

Major Partner

History House Association, Inc. welcomes patrons, families, and friends of History House who wish to support financially the Association's efforts at a higher level. This level of support allows the Association to fast track projects that dramatically affect programming



Blooming Delphiniums in the Heirloom Gardens

that preserves, protects, and promotes our heritage. Partnership benefits may include Partnership Plaque-honoring the donor; Preferred Partner Brochure Rack; Recognition on all Donor Lists; subscriptions to History House Society Newsletter; and an opportunity for a private tour with the Curator and/or Master Gardener.

In Memoriam

Families, family members, or friends may make memorial donations to the Skowhegan History House in honor of their loved one. Memorial donations will be respectfully recorded in the Skowhegan History House Memorial Giving Registry and maintained for public review at the History House as well as published on all Donor listings.

Remembrance

Remembrance donations may be arranged through the deceased's obituary notice. Donations may be sent in the deceased's memory to the Skowhegan History House, P.O. 832, Skowhegan, Maine 04976.

Annual Appeal

Society members and friends of the Skowhegan History House can make tax deductible contributions to the Annual Appeal. Donations advance the goals and mission, programming, general operations, and endowment activities.

Although Annual Appeal gifts are usually made within a few weeks of the appeal event, gifts in any amount may be made throughout the year. Such gifts may honor loved ones on birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc. Acknowledgments will be promptly mailed to donors and listed in all donor listings.

Stocks, Bonds, or Tangible Property

Donation of stocks, bonds, or securities is an important and useful way of supporting the History House Association Inc. -

Skowhegan History House. If you are interested in making a donation of this type, please contact your broker and ask him/her to arrange the transaction. Donations of real estate or other personal property are also welcome.

Bequests and Trusts

Donors are encouraged to make charitable donations to the History House Association Inc. -Skowhegan History House in the form of a bequest in a will, the establishment of a trust, or other financial arrangements. Such gifts are structured to support the goals and mission of the Skowhegan History House while assuring the security of the donor or the donor's family. Those interested in arranging a bequest or trust should make such arrangements through their attorney.

Historic Items

Those interested in donating items to the Skowhegan History House should contact the Curator to discuss the proposed donation and its relevance to the existing collections at the History House. Skowhegan History House cannot appraise donated items. Donors should consult an independent appraiser.

Board of Trustees

Melvin Burnham, President
Patricia Horine, Treasurer
Margaret Reid, Secretary
Ruth Blood
Bonnie Chamberlain
Steve Govoni
Lee Granville
James Hastings
Ron La Fratta

Our Mission

***“Preserving an increasingly valuable historic collection
representing Skowhegan’s legacy and promoting
Skowhegan’s cultural heritage.”***

We invite you to visit the Skowhegan History House Online.

A \$250 Donation in Honor of Ruth Ford Blood, A Dedicated Trustee of the Skowhegan History House

“In honor and thanks to my mother, Ruth Ford Blood, who, for decades, educated generations of Skowhegan high-school students as a formidable English teacher, and today continues to educate the community through her passion for and expertise in genealogy and through her intellectual curiosity of the history of my home town. She makes history come alive for all who have the honor and pleasure to know and learn from her.”

Kyle Timothy Blood



Ruth Ford Blood

History House Volunteers



Veteran Volunteer
Delores Mowat



New Volunteer
Barbara Giggey



New Volunteer
Ronda Ducret



New Volunteer
Ellen Govoni



New Volunteer
Sam Wheeler

Volunteers perform a variety of essential tasks that help the History House Trustees achieve their goals. Delores Mowat has been volunteering at History House for some fifteen years and drives from Mexico, Maine, twice a month to do so. She found History House as an avid genealogist serving for her relatives and has been volunteering ever since.

Four new volunteers joined the History House this summer. Barbara Giggey lives in Cornville and volunteered weekly. She devoted a great deal of time organizing the Betty Withee Photo Collection. Ronda Ducret of Smithfield volunteered two days a month. She enjoys cleaning the valuable glass and ceramic displays as well as assisting in the Heirloom Gardens. Ellen Govoni also of Smithfield volunteered weekly is learning to greet visitors and is interested in conducting tours of History House. She has also cleaned, rearranged and assisted in creating and preserving museum exhibits. Sam Wheeler, a Skowhegan High School sophomore, volunteered weekly and applied his volunteer hours towards his school's Community Service Learning Project. Sam catalogued museum materials using a computerized program.

For information on volunteering at the Skowhegan History House visit our website, skowheganhistoryhouse.org or contact Lee Granville at leegranville@skowheganhistoryhouse.org or Melvin Burnham at melvinburnham@skowheganhistoryhouse.org.

Discussion Topics at the History House for 2011

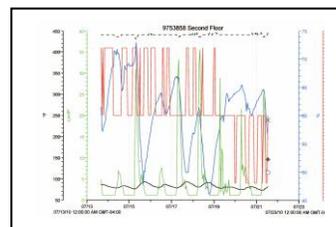
- ✓ Increasing the season to at least 90 days per year.
- ✓ Increasing the number of days the History House is open per week to include Saturdays and evenings.
- ✓ Developing programs for children and improving the connection with area schools.
- ✓ Increasing the number of volunteers as well as providing volunteer training.
- ✓ Increasing financial support including the number of Society Memberships and Major Partners.
- ✓ Tweaking the website to better connect with the global public.
- ✓ Continuing to make planned improvements to the facility including a new storm door, restoration of window systems, improving environmental controls, painting, lighting, etc.

Hobos Move into History House



Preserving the collections in History House and History House itself are ongoing tasks for the Trustees of the Skowhegan History House. Serious spikes in temperature and relative humidity have been problems for years. However, until now we have not had a way of monitoring these elements in a comprehensive manner over time.

This summer the Trustees purchased three Hobos, data-loggers, to do the job with funds from our allocation from the Bloomfield Fund. Our Hobos can fit into the palm of your hand and can record relative humidity, temperature, and light levels every minute for up to one year without changing batteries or other human intervention. The Hobos are periodically connected to a computer and the information is downloaded into files for analyzing and graphing over time.



This new reliable data will allow us to get a professional picture of what is happening to our collections and the building. The information will also provide documented data we can use in creating a facility's improvement plan and in writing grants to make such improvements.

Conserving & Preserving- On-going at History House

Funding from the small Coburn Trust, which is managed by the Bloomfield Academy Trustees, has allowed the Skowhegan History House Trustees to complete several essential maintenance projects this year. Steve Dionne of Dionne & Son has restored the original 1839 front entryway. The side-lights were repointed and glazed; the broken glass was replaced with panes from that period, painted, and new protective side-light panels will be installed to match the original design. The door was removed, restored, fitted with new weather stripping, repainted and the original hardware reused. The screen door will be replaced in the future with a wooden all-season door reflecting the period to protect the main door. The upstairs bedrooms received some plaster repair and paint to correct water-damaged walls and ceilings. The Trustees will be conducting an experiment this winter by temporarily installing two vented sashes in the bedroom windows in an effort to increase ventilation and decrease condensation in the building.



There is much more work to do to bring the building up to a level where the collections and the structure will be well protected for future generations.

Volunteers play an important role in collection organization, maintenance and accessibility. Mrs.

Mowat has recently been devoting her time to organizing photos, newspaper articles, written documents and other vital information into binders with finding-aids. She has assembled numerous binders which researchers have marveled and found most useful.



Just a few of the binders in the research library organized and assembled by Mrs. Mowat.

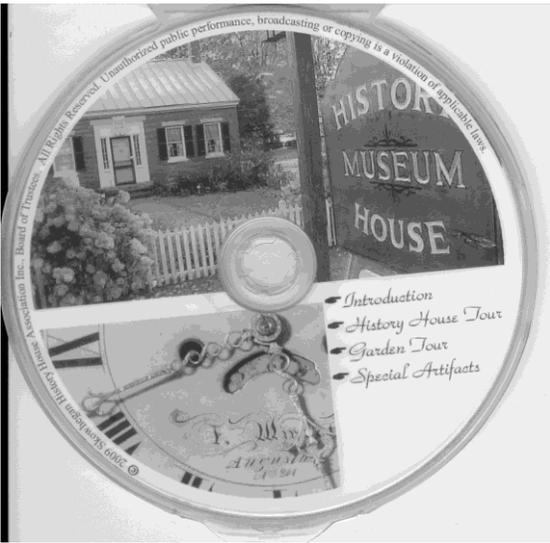
Other volunteers have restored and cleaned objects like silver and brass pieces including beautiful candlesticks, and valuable glass and ceramic displays. Another volunteer has worked on cataloging the collections into electronic data files that will be used for cross referencing for research, location identification, and inventory



purposes. These activities are all part of conserving and preserving the collections.

The silver goblet at right was awarded to C. D. Miller in 1875. It is the Albert Noyes Special Award "For the Best Trio of White Leghorn Chickens Raised in Maine." Undoubtedly this award was connected to the Skowhegan State Fair. Just one of the artifacts recently cleaned and more appreciated.

Tour History House on DVD



A professional film documenting the Skowhegan History House and featuring Curator Lee Granville has been completed. Mr. Allen Baldwin of Catama Film and Video of South Portland and a native of Norridgewock, was the cinematographer/director of the film. This archive-quality documentary film, funded by the Maine Community Foundation, features the Skowhegan History House collection and Curator Lee Granville as he conducts a guided tour. The film, which is in DVD format, also includes a tour of the Heirloom Gardens with Master Gardener, Patricia Horine.

Although an in-person tour of this nineteenth century icon is always best, the new DVD allows those who live away or who are not able to access the History House to see the valuable historic collections representing Skowhegan's legacy. Copies are now on sale at the following Skowhegan retailers: Wish on Madison Ave.; Blueberry Cupboard; and The Bankery on Water Street.

“Mr. Granville possesses an in-depth knowledge of the collection and its relevancy to our community’s history. We want to preserve his unique knowledge, which currently exists only as an oral history.”

Skowhegan History House
P. O. Box 832
Skowhegan, Maine 04976