

Skowhegan History House

History House Association, Inc.

Archive Article

Historic Skowhegan Building to Be Restored



Leavitt Block ca.1880 Corner of Madison Ave. and Commercial Street in Skowhegan- Building in the center is the Leavitt Block and the large brick building to the left is Coburn Hall (1868-1904). Photo courtesy of Skowhegan History House

Lower Madison Avenue in Skowhegan played a significant role in Skowhegan's early history. It was a vibrant business district, the place to be at the time. Edward Dillingham, a Skowhegan native, will soon begin the process of restoring one of the oldest buildings in the downtown historic district, the Leavitt Block on the corner of Madison Avenue and what is now Commercial Street.

Historical records of this block can be traced back to the early 1800's when large tracks of land were purchased and then resold as smaller lots over time. James

Tufton Leavitt purchased the property and erected a building sometime around 1840. Mr. Leavitt was born in Lee, New Hampshire in 1804, grew up in Bangor and graduated from Bowdoin College in 1827. He was admitted to practice law in the court of Common Pleas and the Supreme Judicial Court in Somerset County, and began a practice in Skowhegan, which was then Milburn. In 1837 he married Hannah B. Morse of Bloomfield, which was the area on the south side of the mighty Kennebec River. He and his family lived on Leavitt Street in town. Mr. Leavitt represented his district in the Maine House of Representatives (1848, 1855) and his county in the Maine Senate (1851, 1852) before his death in 1857. During his life he purchased numerous pieces of property in the Skowhegan area, one of them being what is now the Leavitt Block where he located his law practice for a while.

The Leavitt Block has housed a variety of business establishments as well as residences in its 170 year history. A bicycle repair shop, a dentist office, one of the first photography studios in the area, and the Somerset Traction Company, which ran the trolleys in Skowhegan, to name a few. The building was also the home of the Lydia Dean Candy Company. Russell Dean and his wife, Lydia, purchased the building in 1951 from the estate of Walter Ordway. They made and sold their confections on the second floor and resided on the third floor. The only entrance to their residence was a stairway between the two first floor establishments on then Madison Street.

A grocery store was a common establishment on the first floor at this location. Grocers doing business at this site included a Mr. Stred, Carl Croce, Alta Corson, and later Lucien Gallant. Locals relied on these and other grocers in town to purchase their staples such as flour, sugar and spices.

William "Wally" and Leitha Wallace started a radio and record shop in 1943 in rented space on the first floor-right. Wallace's Radio Shop was a busy place. Leitha ran the record department and the showroom. She related that her husband purchased and repaired used electrical items and sold

them in their shop because new merchandise was not available due to the war. Wally installed a speaker on the outside of the building so passersby would be able to hear the top ten records or the radio broadcasts. Teenagers would go in the store, select a record and listen to it outside. When the war ended traffic stopped to listen to the announcement.

In February 1953, Wallace's had thirty-five signed contracts for televisions and all waited anxiously for the first shipment to arrive. WABI out of Bangor was the first to broadcast programs in this area. Initially, the broadcasts only lasted 2-3 hours and the rest of the time viewers could watch the test pattern.

Mrs. Wallace remembered that the building was always yellow because it was Lydia Dean's favorite color. Shortly after purchasing the building in 1964 the Wallace store occupied the whole first floor for the service and record department. The left side that had housed a grocer was redesigned for their showroom. They added the build-out and display windows along the Commercial Street side to better display their televisions and stereos. Other than some use of the second for merchandise displays, the second and third floors were vacant and used for storage.

More recently, ownership of the Leavitt Block has changed several times and it has fallen to extensive disrepair. Mr. Edward Dillingham purchased the block in 2008 and has begun to make it ready for restoration. The building has been cleaned out, secured, and the display window glass on Commercial Street has been removed. His plans are to restore the structure to resemble its 1880



2009 Photo by Melvin Burnham

character with a covering over the sidewalk. Foundation work will begin this summer along with some possible paint scraping. Mr. Dillingham views this project as a long term effort and we extend our appreciation to him for being willing to bring back a beautiful old historic structure to Skowhegan.

*(This article was written by Melvin Burnham in support of **Skowhegan History House**. Information abstracted from Skowhegan on the Kennebec- Louise Coburn, Voice on the Kennebec-SCAG, Somerset Registry of Deeds, and through personal interviews with Leitha Wallace, Skowhegan Resident.)*