



# By The River's Edge

Skowhegan History House Society Newsletter

Fall 2011 Edition

[skowheganhistoryhouse.org](http://skowheganhistoryhouse.org)

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Louise Helen Coburn  
(1856 – 1949)  
Founder of  
Skowhegan History  
House

## Celebrating the Coburn Legacy

Lee Granville, et al



Lee Granville  
Curator

Today's phone book provides not a single listing of the Coburn name in Skowhegan. A map of our community, however, shows Coburn Park, Coburn Avenue, and maybe a few other place names. A Maine map indicates the influence and vision of the Coburn family as well. That influence and vision, though not as widely recognized today, have benefitted our town as well as our state and nation. Skowhegan citizens continue to enjoy the Coburn family's philanthropic generosity more than a century later.

The influence of the Coburn family in our community reaches back to 1792 when Eleazer Coburn Sr. came from Tyngsboro, Massachusetts, to what was then a part of Canaan. A veteran of the Revolutionary War and the March on Lexington, Eleazer with his wife and some of his ten children settled on fifty acres of land on what is now the Back Road here in Skowhegan. They built a log cabin and set about clearing the fields and adding other farm buildings. Eleazer Sr. was a man without a great deal of formal education but had the ability to learn and excel in the main businesses of the day—farming, lumbering and land management. His energy and business acumen became the foundation for the success of the next two generations of the Coburn family.

Eleazer Jr. was fifteen when his family moved to Canaan in 1792. While still a young man he went to work for Samuel Weston, a son of the town's original settling family and at that time the principal surveyor of the region and a leading man in the community. Samuel passed along his expertise to Eleazer Jr., who became much in demand for his surveying skill. In 1801 he married Mary Weston, Samuel's daughter; Mary was an extraordinarily capable person, and the couple continued to develop the farm and built a large frame house beside the original cabin. Though Squire Coburn, as he was known, had little early education, he made the most of his

opportunities and was considered one of the most informed men of his day. He studied the law books of his father-in-law and was active as a selectman for many years, represented his district in the General Court of Massachusetts, and in 1820 was a member of the Constitutional Convention in Portland, and later served in the Maine House. Also known for his kind and generous spirit, the Squire was also an active civic leader; he served on the Board of Trustees of Bloomfield Academy and of Waterville College as well as being the first president of the first agricultural society in the county.

The Squire's opportunity for financial advancement came in 1820, the year of Maine's statehood. The virgin forests of the state were just beginning to find a market, and, as a preliminary to sale, needed to be surveyed. As one of the most prominent surveyors available, Eleazer Jr. had a hand in many of these surveys and used his knowledge to purchase prime forest land at very low prices. In 1830 he formed a partnership with two of his sons, Abner & Philander, under the name E. Coburn & Sons. This company became the foundation for the enormous wealth of the next generation. Surely it was from him that his children learned not only financial insight but also the values of generosity, civic duty, education, and public service.

After their father's death in 1845, Abner & Philander continued their business under the name A&P Coburn. The firm was acknowledged to be one of the most successful in Maine, and the brothers were lauded by their workers as one of its best employers. Adding to the energy and shrewdness of the earlier Coburns, this generation embraced education. Several of the sibling group graduated from Waterville College, now Colby College, and others were teachers at Bloomfield Academy. The combination of wealth, education and social status made this family the largest landowner and among the most politically active in Maine.



Philander Coburn

In 1863 during the middle and critical period of the Civil War, Abner Coburn was elected Governor of Maine for a two-year term. In response to President Lincoln's call for soldiers, he wrote,



Governor Coburn

“Thus far in our great civil contest Maine has borne a proud part. Her sons have upheld the national banner on the fiercest battlefields, and have earned a fame which we cannot too proudly cherish and which we should try to emulate.” His contemporaries have verified that he too exhibited those same patriotic virtues as he led the state during those difficult years of war and financial stress. Perhaps the wealthiest man in Maine, Governor Coburn generously focused on commercial and philanthropic projects. The Coburn brothers first became interested in railroads in 1854 and were influential in

bringing the railroad to Skowhegan in 1856; they supported Central Maine's rail development both financially and administratively through its transitions to the development of the Maine Central in 1875 with Abner serving as its president and deemed responsible for its success.

In the 1870's and 1880's Coburn money poured into Skowhegan projects, both commercial and cultural. In 1872, with the Coburn's political clout, Skowhegan became the shire town of Somerset County, and Abner independently financed the construction of the Somerset County Superior Court House. During the opening ceremonies Governor Coburn related, “I have been wanting for some time to do something for



Somerset Court House ca. 1873

the citizens of the county.” And a speaker shared, “He proposes and then sets about to carry out the purpose. As long as this beautiful court house stands, it shall stand as a monument to an honest and noble-hearted man.” Other money supported the Bethany Baptist Church, Coburn Hotel, Coburn Woolen Mill, and the Kennebec Log Driving Company. Coburn Hall on Water Street became the new Skowhegan Town Office with an auditorium similar in size to our present Opera House; for thirty-six years it was the center of the town’s civic, intellectual, musical, and recreational activities. Governor Coburn also served as the president of both the Skowhegan and First National Banks for thirty years. Indeed scarcely a business in town lacked Coburn backing, and he was a leader of education, serving as president of the trustees of Waterville [Colby] College and of the present University of Maine. In 1848 the brothers built an imposing home with a Greek-columned front on “Baptist Hill” now Main Street, and it has been a long-cherished landmark in Skowhegan.

Several major assets from the days of the Coburns still serve their purpose in Skowhegan. Coburn Park, founded upon land left by both Governor Abner Coburn and his brother and business



Coburn Park Entrance ca.1914

partner, Philander, is one example. The parcel of twelve or more acres is situated at the lower end of the river gorge facing the Great Eddy. Later, in the early 1900’s it was Governor Coburn’s niece, Louise Helen Coburn, who would provide the leadership of the family’s legacy of civic commitment and philanthropy. A knowledgeable botanist, Miss Coburn, as park committee chair, supervised extensive plantings of trees, shrubs and flowers originating from across the world. Her work resulted in earning several national awards for small community parks. In Miss Coburn’s book, Trees of Coburn Park, she provided a complete overview of each tree, location, and origin. Coburn Park is a busy spot throughout the summer months providing a safe haven for walkers, family picnics and free “Concerts in the Park,” which draw large crowds on summer Sunday afternoons.

The Skowhegan Free Public Library was built in 1889 with money left in the Governor’s will, and the town, with a population of around 4000, contributed \$5,000 to the construction of the Memorial Room in honor of the community’s veterans. That same contribution today would equal nearly \$125,000. The library continues to be supported with annual appropriations by the citizens of Skowhegan. After 120 years of service, this historic building is now undergoing a much needed renovation including upgrades which address the American Disabilities Act and safety-- all with private funding and grants. When the library was completed Louise Helen Coburn led the effort of cataloging the collection, a gift from numerous libraries of private families.



Skowhegan Free Public Library

Another icon is the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center, founded by Louise Helen Coburn. Miss Coburn devoted her life to service within our community and education around the nation. She was a gifted poet, writer and historian, publishing her two volume history, Skowhegan on the Kennebec, in 1941. She founded Skowhegan History House in 1936, at the age of eighty years. Its purpose was to accumulate, preserve, and display documents and artifacts related to Skowhegan’s history. Open in the summer season only, hundreds of visitors from Maine, across the

United States, and from around the world visit each year. Special events and educational programs continue throughout the year and are chronicled online and on Facebook.

The Somerset Woods Trust was formed in 1927 and is likely the oldest land trust in Maine. Miss Louise Coburn initiated the Somerset Woods Trust and served as its first president. The trust encompasses over 620 acres in Somerset County, and the trustees maintain conservation easements on 500 additional acres. Its mission is to protect lands which have significant natural and cultural resources and manage them for the public benefit. Perhaps the most visible of these properties is the picnic area and historic site a mile below the Great Eddy. This beautiful stretch of the Kennebec River, not far from where the first settlers started our community, also has a boat launching area for river access.

The Coburn influence unquestionably helped to give Skowhegan the character that we enjoy today, a century later. Skowhegan became the county seat with a beautiful court house on High Street. Remnants of the railroad signify the influence Abner and Philander had on the area. Both brothers realized the importance of rail service to a community: goods moving in and out of the county, five trains a day to and from Portland and Boston, and they used their clout to make it happen.

The family valued the environment and they were willing to provide for a beautiful park and woods. And they valued education and culture and supported both with a free public library and historic museum. Each icon came with a limited trust to help ensure the continuance of operation and to minimize the need for public funding. Finally, the financial success of the Coburn family grew as they supported others in their business growth. They realized that the success of others brings great benefit for the common good.

The cultural icons left in our community--Coburn Park, the Skowhegan Free Public Library, the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center, and the Somerset Woods Trust-- all symbolize that not only financial insight but also the values of generosity, civic duty, education, and public service made the Coburns noble citizens within a community they dearly loved.

It is now up to us, the present generation, to carry on where the Coburns left off by supporting and cherishing these cultural icons. Their early vision and generosity deserves nothing less.



Skowhegan Railroad Station

## ***Visit the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center Online!***



### [www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org](http://www.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/ Links, 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.

## *Summer Internship Program*

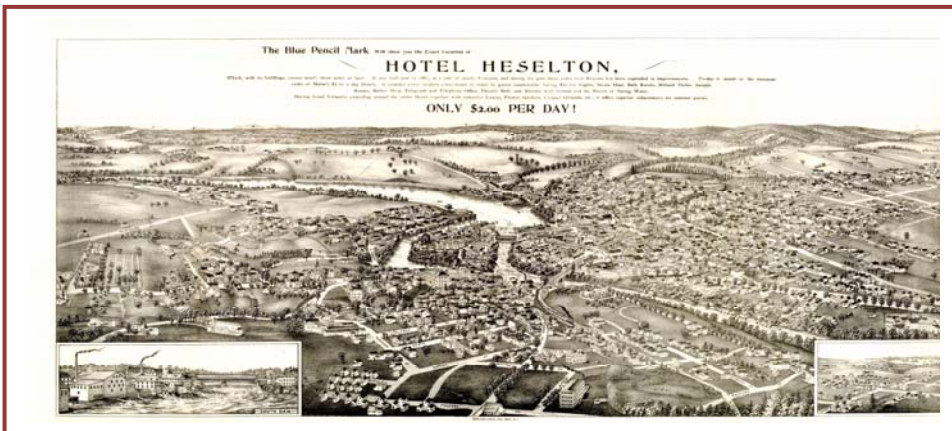
With generous donations from Mrs. Dorothy Cleaver and Mr. Chuck Carpenter, the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center was able to establish a summer internship program. Under this program an area student entering sophomore, junior or senior high school or college can be employed for twenty hours per week for eight weeks. Interns need be interested in local history, have experience and training with computer technology, be able to communicate well with the public, follow directions, be a dependable self-starter needing minimal supervision, and present her/himself in a professional manner.



Summer Intern Sam Wheeler

Sam Wheeler, a young man entering his junior year at Skowhegan Area High School, was selected for the 2011 intern position. Sam volunteered during the 2010 season and had acquired the skills necessary to catalog materials with limited direction. During his internship Sam finished cataloging the entire book collection in the museum as well as starting to catalog the McClellan Collection. He also assisted on special projects, helped with tours and with maintaining the museum. Sam is a wonderful young man who demonstrated the skills necessary to work with the public and in a museum setting.

The History House Trustees wish to thank the Redington-Fairview General Hospital for agreeing to join Mrs. Cleaver and Mr. Carpenter in sponsoring the internship program next year.



## *Bird's-Eye View Historic Maps*

The decades from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to early 20<sup>th</sup> century were the golden era of bird's-eye view maps in the United States. As towns and cities grew and became prosperous thanks to industrialization, it became fashionable and a matter of civic pride to advertise this new economic vitality in the form of oblique panoramic maps. Itinerant panoramists traveled from town to town primarily in the Northeast and northern Midwest mapping furiously as they went. The panoramists did not go up in hot air balloons or strap miniature cameras to pigeons or kites to gather information for their panoramas. Instead, they stayed firmly on the ground drafting a street map in perspective based on a grid they had fashioned. Next they walked through the town sketching the facades of buildings that would appear from the viewing direction that they had chosen. Finally they drafted the panorama, filling in detail from the building sketches they made in the field.

Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center is taking orders for 20" X 30" or 16" X 24" prints of this panoramic map of Skowhegan (1892) with Hotel Heselton advertisements. This beautiful, professional print is crisp, clean and ready for framing. It would look wonderful in any place of prominence. Select the Heritage Shop tab on our website, [www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org](http://www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org) for more information about this detailed panorama and one other historic map ca. 1883. Both would make perfect gifts.

## Meeting & Exceeding Goals- 2011 Season!

The Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center closed on October 8<sup>th</sup> after successfully meeting and exceeding goals set for fiscal year 2011. Patron visits doubled last season's total. Over 194 Skowhegan residents, 179 residents from other Maine towns, and 111 visitors from 27 other states visited the History House. We even enjoyed visitors from India and Indonesia.

The Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center expanded its season from 60 to 90 days (May 31<sup>st</sup> – October 8<sup>th</sup>) and was open Tuesday – Saturday from 10 AM - 4PM. The Trustees won a Maine Community Foundation Capacity Building Grant that supported hiring a part time Museum Director while retaining a part time Curator. Thanks to generous community support an 8 week summer Student Intern position was created and staffed. Space in the History House was reconfigured to allow for a small office with separate access to a public bathroom.



**Volunteer Nathan Cook**

The Volunteer Program expanded to include a Volunteer Coordinator and 14 members who assisted with tours, office support, cleaning, collection protection measures, special events, cataloging, and data entry. Additional seasonal volunteers assisted with interior renovations, painting, garden maintenance, lawn care, and snow removal.

Essential technology upgrades were made, the website was refined, and the History House joined Facebook.

An extensive new Civil War exhibit was created offering insights into our connections with the Civil War.

Museum & Research Center staff collaborated with the Skowhegan Free Public Library to present "Our Connections to the Civil War" and partnered with 'Miss Rose and Other Living Historians' to present a program entitled "On the Home Front". Both community-based programs were well attended and both received great reviews. History House hosted a Heritage Tea Party, a Chamber of Commerce "After Hours" event, a Main Street Skowhegan Volunteer Recognition celebration, the Concerts in the Park, and a Lawn Party to celebrate Louise Coburn's 155<sup>th</sup> birthday.



**Volunteer Joan Farnsworth**



**Civil War Exhibit**



**Volunteer Verna Lister**

Our goals for fiscal year 2012 are to maintain current staffing levels, increase children's programming, develop cemetery and historic buildings tours, and build on our Civil War theme by presenting additional programs - one of which will celebrate the impressive Coburn legacy. Additionally, we intend to explore a multitude of grant opportunities including one available through the Conservation Assessment Program (CAP). It provides funds for small to mid-sized museums to hire professional conservators, approved by Heritage Preservation, for a two-day site visit. During the visit the CAP assessors examine the museum's collections, environmental conditions, physical structure and provide a report

recommending priorities to improve collections care. The assessment reports will assist us with developing strategies for improved collections care, long-range planning, and fund-raising for collections care.

The Board of Trustees appreciates and thanks the community and the Society for their generous support. We know that we could not have reached this point without your participation and financial generosity. Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center is scheduled to re-open on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2012.



**Volunteer Colleen Jones**

# 2011 Events- Photo Review

## On The Home Front- Fashions, Artisans & Displays



September 17, 2011  
Miss Rose & friends



*In Appreciation  
Of Louise H. Coburn's  
Legacy  
on her 155<sup>th</sup> Birthday  
September 1, 2011*



Foxwell & Company Band at  
Bloomfield Garden Club Tea



Bloomfield Garden Club Tea  
on the Riverside Lawns



Heritage Plant Sale



Volunteer Welcome  
Open House

### Board of Trustees

Melvin Burnham, President  
Patricia Horine, Treasurer  
Ron La Fratta, Financial Clerk  
Bonnie Chamberlain, Secretary  
Ruth Blood  
Ronda Ducret  
Joyce Foley  
Lee Granville  
James Hastings  
Reg Strout

### *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 Museum  
& Research Center Online.**

*By The River's Edge*, Skowhegan History House Society Newsletter- Published twice annually  
Editor & Graphics Designer- Melvin Burnham, President Board of Trustees  
Assistant Editor/Researcher- Ruth Blood, Trustee

## Giving Opportunities

The History House Association, Inc. - Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center 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 Museum & Research Center, P.O. Box 832, Skowhegan, Maine 04976, the Curator at [LeeGranville@skowheganhistoryhouse.org](mailto:LeeGranville@skowheganhistoryhouse.org), or any member of the Board of Trustees.

**Society Membership** In 2006, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Skowhegan History House, 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 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 Museum & Research Center in honor of their loved one. Memorial donations will be respectfully recorded in the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center 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 Museum & Research Center, P.O. 832, Skowhegan, Maine 04976.

**Annual Appeal** Society members and friends of the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center 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 Museum & Research Center. If you are interested in making a donation of this type, please contact your broker and ask them 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 Museum & Research Center 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 Museum & Research Center 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 Museum & Research Center should contact the Curator to discuss the proposed donation and its relevance to the existing collections at the History House. Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center cannot appraise donated items. Donors should consult an independent appraiser.

### **Wanted! We Need Your Help!**

We need additional computers at the Skowhegan History House & Research Center for digitally cataloging the collections. We are looking for new or gently used laptop PC computers capable of supporting our Past Perfect cataloging program so that several volunteers will be able to work on this gigantic task at the same time.

Contact Melvin Burnham, 474-2162 or [MelvinBurnham@skowheganhistoryhouse.org](mailto:MelvinBurnham@skowheganhistoryhouse.org).



# Historic Home Registry Program

Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center is now offering an opportunity for residents of Skowhegan with homes at least 100 years old to participate in its Historic Home Registry Program. The program provides an opportunity for the owner of a home that is at least one hundred years old to document the



Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center Historic Home Marker

home's age, register it in the Historic Home Registry, and to display an approved house marker indicating the original homesteader, the year of construction, and the owner's affiliation with the Skowhegan History House Historic Home Registry Program.

The process includes providing evidence of the deeds of the various owners of the property dating back to the original construction date and original homesteader. Participants may do the research themselves, or a representative of History House will conduct the research for a minimal fee. Once the "Chain of Deeds" is certified, a copy of the original deed, the "Chain of Deeds," and all other related photos and documents provided by

the participant will be filed at the Museum & Research Center.

Certified owners will be offered the opportunity to order an approved house marker to affix to the historic property. The markers are hand painted by a Farmington artisan who works with similar programs across New England.

Skowhegan has numerous old homes dating well before 1900 that have interesting histories and are of importance and significance to our community's history. It is the hope of the Trustees of the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center that owners of properties dating back 100 years or more will share their historic record with other community members so we all will have a better sense of our town's architectural heritage.

Further information can be found under "Programs" on our website: [www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org](http://www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org).

## Skowhegan History House Membership Benefits

- ❖ Recognition as an interested supporter of the preservation and promotion of our heritage.
- ❖ Spring & Fall Newsletters
- ❖ Access to historical research
- ❖ Opportunity to submit articles for publication in the Society Newsletter
- ❖ Invitation to upcoming events
- ❖ Consultation with the Curator and/or Master Gardener

## Skowhegan History House Society Membership Form

Please Print

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/Town: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address (Optional): \_\_\_\_\_

Circle relevant Annual Membership Category or Lifetime:

Student/Senior (65+) \$15

Individual (1 Person) \$25

Family \$50

Business \$100

Benefactor \$150

Lifetime (2 Individuals) \$300

Checks payable to: **Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center, P. O. Box 832, Skowhegan, Maine 04976** Credit cards may be used online at [skowheganhistoryhouse.org](http://skowheganhistoryhouse.org). Use donate button and include explanation.



## **Cemetery Monument Cleaning Project**

As we begin to “Celebrate the Coburn Legacy,” Curator Lee Granville and Trustee Ruth Blood are working with the Skowhegan Cemetery Committee to clean the monuments in the Coburn and Miller lots in the Southside Cemetery. The Coburn lot contains three generations-- Gov. Abner Coburn, his parents and grandparents. The individual tablets and the tall spire monument rise above the other grave sites with dignity and grace clearly signifying that those that rest beneath were prominent citizens in this fair community. They were designed and carved by Edwin W. Marble at the Marble Shop at the corner of Madison and High Streets around 1881 for \$4200. Today’s pricing would be well over

\$100,000. Elaborate granite curbing surrounds the Coburn lot.

A small but dedicated group has started the process of cleaning these stones. In an effort to continue the process of cleaning all of the monuments in both lots, the Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center will sponsor several demonstration sessions on how to properly clean monument stones next spring. Fund raising for professional cleaning of the spire monument and the granite curbing is underway. For further information contact Ruth Blood at [rfb@usa.net](mailto:rfb@usa.net) or Lee Granville at [leegranville@skowheganhistoryhouse.org](mailto:leegranville@skowheganhistoryhouse.org). Donations for this project may be sent to Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center-- Cemetery Project, P. O. Box 832, Skowhegan, Maine 04976 or electronically through PayPal on our website: [www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org](http://www.skowheganhistoryhouse.org).



**Skowhegan History House Museum & Research Center**

**P. O. Box 832**

**Skowhegan, Maine 04976**