

Houlton's Other Historic Fountain

1908



If you were to ask a resident of Houlton, Maine to name a historic, Houlton fountain, almost all would answer "[The Boy and the Boot](#)" or "The Boy and the Leaking Boot". I'd be surprised if anyone answered anything else. The Boy and the Boot has been a part of

Houlton history for a century since it was purchased and placed in Monument Park in 1916. However, what many residents don't realize is that Houlton has another historic fountain that is even older and probably just as, if not more, rare. A fountain that currently sits on the corner of Water Street and Court Street on the North side of Market Square, yet many people don't realize it is a fountain, since it hasn't had water running through it in many years. Instead, it sits in front of the Mansur Block and is surrounded by flowers in a raised planter. This granite fountain is commonly referred to as an [Ensign Animal Fountain or Ensign Animal Trough](#). It stands as a symbol of the animal welfare movement of the late 19th-early 20th century. It also has ties to a former Governor of Maine and one of the leading American actresses of that era.

To explain how this fountain ended up in Houlton, we need to go back to the late 19th century, to a man by the name of Hermon Lee Ensign. Hermon Lee Ensign was a New York journalist, salesman, inventor, author and philanthropist who made

a vast fortune in newspaper advertising and as an inventor. As a child, he also developed a love for animals. In 1897, Ensign founded the National Humane Alliance (NHA), a precursor to the Humane Society (NHS). According to NHA literature, "To him (Ensign), animals were not



merely inferiors or slaves, they were companions and friends, devoting themselves to man and dependent on him for their lives and happiness," The purpose of the Alliance was to "spread about humanitarian efforts around people" (sic). Ensign hoped that this alliance would instill in people, "especially the young, ideas of humanity both to the lower animals and to each other." Following his death, he left a large portion of his estate to the NHA. It was at this time, under the direction of [Harrison Grey Fiske](#) and his wife, leading stage actress and activist, [Minnie Maddern Fiske](#), that the Alliance decided to shift its focus from education to a more active approach and started offering animal drinking fountains, or troughs, to communities all over the country. At least one community in each of the states of the Union received an Ensign animal fountain and at least two in Mexico. Fountains were placed in Denver, Albuquerque, Des Moines, Pasadena, San Francisco, Dallas and even in small towns such as Houlton. The fountains all had plaques, designating the donation from the National Humane Alliance, Mr. Ensign as founder, and the year they were made. Unfortunately, the plaque on the Houlton fountain is missing. It's hard saying what ever became of it.

These fountains were not intended just for horses, though plenty of horses frequented them. There was also bowls around the base of the fountain that offered a place for dogs and cats to get a drink. There was an area on the top of



the statue for any birds that may want to take a bath. Even humans, if they had a cup, could grab a sip from the stream of fresh water coming from the brass, lion head founts. The National Human Alliance had requirements for the communities that were accepting these fountains. The NHA required the location to be initially approved by the Alliance. They also required them to be placed in high traffic areas and be accessible from all sides. Finally, the municipalities were required to provide a good foundation, guarantee ample and continuous water supply, and provide permanent care.

[Houlton accepted their Ensign Animal](#)

[Fountain in 1908](#) and immediately placed it

in the center of Market Square. It replaced the old horse fountain that was moved to the intersection of "Main, Military and Franklin Sts", according to the HPT Centennial edition of 1957.

Houltons' Ensign Animal Fountain was quarried and made by [Bodwell Granite Company of Vinalhaven, Maine](#). Bodwell Granite Company was founded by [Joseph R. Bodwell](#), 40th Governor of the State of Maine, who was elected in 1887. Most of the fountains given to communities were approximately six feet in diameter across the trough, six feet tall, weighed five tons and some had a light fixture on the top.

NEW FOUNTAIN

The old horse fountain was moved from Market Square this week to make room for a new one. It will be placed at the intersection of Main, Military and Franklin streets, giving an additional chance to water horses coming into town. The new fountain was presented to the town by the National Humane Society.

The Houlton Ensign fountain isn't this large. Bodwell Granite Company also produced a smaller sized fountain, identical to the one in Houlton. These smaller fountains were not as common. Sources estimate the total number of fountains produced at about 125. Other sources indicate there are an estimated 70 fountains still standing, many of which are the larger fountain. It is unknown how many of those 70 fountains are of the smaller variety, but it likely isn't much more than a handful.

So the next time you are walking through Historic Market Square in Downtown Houlton, go take a closer look at the fountain that has been sitting in the heart of our community for over a century. It's a remarkable piece of Houlton history. It truly is a symbol of animal welfare from another era, and it is one that is meant to remind us that we should always treat animals, and one another, with respect and kindness.

For more information on the history behind the Ensign animal fountains, including other fountain locations and photos, [click here](#).

