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## House ties Obama to Kempton

### HOUSE FULL OF HISTORY:

Shawn Clements is restoring this historic Kempton home. The home originally belonged to William Riley Dunham a distant relative of presidential hopeful Barack Obama.



KT photo | Shawn Knapp

### Democratic front-runner pays visit to his ancestral property

By JOHN DEMPSEY  
Tribune business writer

While Kempton may be the smallest Indiana town Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama has visited, the Tipton County hamlet is the only one he could possibly call home.

Saturday, the Illinois senator, along with his wife Michelle and

their two daughters, visited his ancestral home in Kempton. Now owned by Shawn Clements, the house was built on property owned by Obama's great-great-great-grandparents on his mother's side, Jacob and Catherine Dunham.

When he climbed off his campaign bus, Obama approached and introduced himself to Clements.

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### Presidential hopeful's relatives lived in Tipton County

By MEGHAN DURBAK  
Tribune staff writer

It's a large, white farmhouse, built more than 100 years ago.

Inside is a tiger oak staircase, a tribute to the first owners, while uneven floorboards, rustic plumbing and old pieces of furniture gathering dust attest to years of neglect and abandonment.

Shawn Clements calls it home. For four years, the historical preservationist has worked on updating the home, removing unwanted junk and shag carpeting to transform the house in a way it may have been when it was built in the 1880s.

While he's been a regular fixture in the small town of Kempton since he purchased the house at 709 S. West St., he's only recently gained the attention of Tipton County residents and even some passers-by heading across the state on Ind. 28.

They have learned what Clements has known for about six months. His house used to belong to ancestors of Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama. The Illinois senator is in a contest with New York Sen. Hillary Clinton for the party's spot on



AP photo

**FAMILY TIES:** Democratic presidential hopeful, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and his wife, Michelle, brave the wind Saturday as they leave after visiting the house in Kempton on land his mother's ancestors owned.

the November ballot.

"I've had people stopping," Clements said. "They'll ask 'Do you mind if we walk though your house? If I'm not doing anything, I take them around.'"

While Clements knew there was

some historical relevance to the house when he purchased it, he never imagined how great of significance his home may have.

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## Clements ...

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"We walked around the house [with his family] and talked about the house and his family. He was interested in its square footage and some of the dates when it's thought it was built," the independent contractor related. "He wanted to know about his ancestors who lived here before they went to Kansas.

"He wanted to know about the land. We stood and over-looked the land they owned. He wanted to know if the house had any additions. He was pretty curious about how the house looked in its original state."

If Obama would win the Democratic nomination and the general election, he would be the second U.S. president to visit the house.

"Apparently, Grover Cleveland spent the night here," Clements explained. William Riley Dunham, who built the house, served in the Indiana legislature as a Democrat and had a son named after the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms.

"We talked about the family, how they were farmers, principals, teachers, doctors. They went to Indiana University, Purdue. They were a genuine Indiana family," Clements said.

Clements realized Obama's connection to his house late last year after learning of research into Obama's family tree and reading a story in the Chicago Sun-Times.

"The paper printed the family tree with pictures of the Dunhams, and then I started looking at the deeds," he said.

Clements spoke with someone in Obama's office here about the connection and attended the senator's speech in Kokomo April 25.

"I thought I might have a chance to meet him when he was in Kokomo, but that didn't work out," he said. "But, then they called this week and said they were considering doing something and that he wanted to come [to Kempton]."

Representatives from his



KT photo | Shawn Knapp

**FIX IT UP:** Shawn Clements shows the progress he has made in restoring a historic home that originally belonged to William Riley Dunham, a relative of presidential hopeful Barack Obama.

campaign came early in the week to look at the house and Secret Service agents also visited to check the logistics of the situation.

"There were 20 or 25 people here and it was very small, very intimate," Clements said. "My parents and some friends were here, some people who have worked on the house and they invited some people.

"People were in the backyard waiting on him, Michelle and the kids. People huddled together and he took pictures with them, signed things. He was very cordial.

"I find him to be a fine gentleman. He was very personal, had a great sense of humor and took the time to speak one-on-one with people. They seemed to be a very genuine, down-to-earth couple."

Obama's visit will be one thing Clements said he'll never forget.

"I wish him well. I can't imagine the life he has to live and go through. It seemed exhausting to me," he said, "but he handled it well.

"Him coming to Kempton, Indiana, who would have thought it?"

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## Obama ...

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"There's people that may not like it, might not be a Democrat. That stuff is irrelevant to me. It's history. This guy might be the next president of the United States," he said.

The land Clements purchased once belonged to Jacob and Catherine Goodnight Dunham, Obama's great-great-great-grandparents on his mother's side. The Dunhams were one of the first pioneer families in Tipton in 1847 or '48, according to Carolyn Etchison, director of the Tipton County heritage center.

They erected a homestead on 1150 West, also known as West Street. Later their grandson, William Riley Dunham, built the house where Clements lives. He was the nephew of Obama's great-great-great-grandfather, Jacob Mackey Dunham, a farmer in Tipton County.

William Riley Dunham was a faithful member of the Democratic Party and a member of the Indiana General Assembly, Etchison said.

Etchison had known about the Dunham family heritage, but hadn't realized it would have any relation to a presidential hopeful. Jacob Mackey Dunham and his family later left Kempton for Kansas where Obama's mother was born in 1942.

"In order to be a genealogist you have to be a detective," Etchison said. "(Clements) came to me with what he had found. He had the idea this was the same family, and asked if I had anything that would verify it."

She did, finding an original deed belonging to Jacob Mackey Dunham, and later tracked his family to Kansas.

"I think it's very interesting that he has ancestry here, that he has Tipton County roots," Etchison said.

Nick Kimball, the Obama campaign spokesman for Indiana, was surprised to learn of Obama's Indiana roots.

"We have no reason to think that it's not true," he said. "We do accept what has been written about him in a couple places (such as the family tree in the Chicago Sun Times).

"It shows a little bit about how Barack has a unique story which is only really possible in this country. He has a broad background; family on his mother's side were working class in Kansas and apparently in Indiana as well, and then also family on his father's side, living in Kenya to this day."

Clements himself is fascinated with the idea. Since learning the family connection, he's paid attention to Obama's political career.

"Any time I've seen him speak, I've been pretty impressed by him," he said. "Like him or not, he's changed the face of politics."

And it's changed the way local residents view Clements' home. When Clements went to purchase the house in 2004, the realtor didn't even bring a purchase agreement assuming that he'd be like the other buyers.

The realtor said all the other customers said the same thing: "What a great house. It's too much work for me."

Clements saw a project he'd love to undertake. A historical preservationist, he's spent 20 years revamping historical buildings. He wanted nothing less for the home he planned to live in.

"History gives people a better sense of where they came from, a better sense of who they are," he said. "That is our heritage and our culture. If we lose places like this I don't know where we go from there."

While the house has great potential, nearly 6,000 square feet not including the full basement or attic, five bedrooms and 2.5 baths, Clements said he loves the house for other reasons.

"What makes it a great house is the people who lived here, what they did, who they were related to and just what they were," he said.