



Obama's 2008 visit to the Dunham House in Kempton, Ind.

Photo by Bob Nichols, courtesy Dunham House

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The Hoosier White House: Barack Obama's Ancestral Indiana Home

The 44th U.S. president's diverse lineage is well-known. But few are aware of his family ties to the Dunham House, a Victorian-era farmstead tucked among the rolling fields of rural Indiana.

October 2008 Beth Clayton-George

1/11/17 Editor's Note: This article appeared in the October 2008 issue. Since then, the Dunham House has seen a complete [restoration](#), the production of a [documentary](#) film, and the establishment of a nonprofit educational [foundation](#) that awarded its first student scholarships in 2016.



The bomb-sniffing dogs had been out that morning, roaming the empty rooms, and had now been replaced by a dozen or so slick young publicity people who busied themselves with keeping the press in their appointed area and preparing for the candidate's arrival. The flat, grassy field surrounding the white Victorian-era farmhouse with a broad Indiana-limestone porch had been transformed into a political stage, roped off with yellow hazard tape and dotted with Secret Service agents scanning the property behind wide sunglasses and speaking quietly into hidden headsets. About two dozen onlookers milled around or huddled together in clumps against the chilly May morning, patiently waiting.

Shawn Clements could see the caravan approaching his house from nearly half a mile away. Clements had been waiting for this day for a while. Several months before, he had discovered that his home had been built by one

The Dunham House mid-restoration in 2008

Photo by Tony Valainis

of Barack Obama's ancestors and occupied by the senator's relatives for nearly a century. And now he watched Obama's bus, trailed by news vans and trucks, amble down the narrow lanes of State Road 28 across the flat Tipton County landscape.

In the days leading up to the Democratic primary in Indiana, the Illinois senator had been busy, shuttling back and forth between the Hoosier state; Washington, D.C.; Illinois; and Pennsylvania. He had attended a picnic in Noblesville; spoken before packed audiences at Indiana and Ball State universities; and even played a pick-up basketball game in Union Mills, Indiana. But he would not be addressing roaring crowds this morning, nor would he be fielding questions from a frantic press corps. Today, Obama was coming home.

Clements purchased the house in Kempton, Indiana—a town of fewer than 400 residents west of Tipton—in the fall of 2004, when much of the nation had never heard of Barack Obama. That July, the politician had made what could be considered his national debut, as the keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. Clements had watched the event from his den, and had idly changed the channel without giving the rising star much more thought. Originally from Lebanon, Indiana, then 36-year-old Clements had lived in Noblesville for several years but wanted to escape the rising taxes and increased traffic that were creeping north from Indianapolis. An Internet search of nearby yet still mostly rural properties yielded a handful of choices, but as a historic preservationist who makes his living coaxing a building's past into the present, he was drawn to the older homes on the list. The beauty of the Kempton home's craftsmanship was buried under thick layers of dust and years of neglect, but one look at the original tiger-oak staircase with beveled-mirror inlay sold him on the fixer-upper. He purchased the worn-down 5,000-square-foot Victorian- and Colonial-style house and set about making himself at home.

During the next three years, Clements devoted his spare time to replacing the home's 40 windows, restoring the crown molding around the 10-foot ceilings, pulling down drop ceilings, painting over illconsidered dark-green walls, ripping up orange shag carpeting, and repairing the original pocket doors. Hired workers spent six months just removing junk from all the rooms, and his brother, a plumber, assisted in updating the pipes, while a carpenter down the street lent a hand in replacing deteriorated woodwork. Clements' mother crafted stained-glass windows to insert in the doors off the kitchen. All the while, he was also piecing together a history of what he came to know as the Dunham house— that surname being the label on the corresponding manila file folder in the archives of the tiny Tipton County Heritage Society.

The land the home had been built on was homesteaded in 1848 by Jacob Dunham and his wife, Catharine Goodnight, who journeyed there from what is now West Virginia. Jacob and Catharine raised five children on the land, including Jacob Mackey Dunham, to whom they transferred 15 acres in 1856. When Jacob and his wife moved west for Oklahoma, he passed the land to his brother Samuel Goodnight Dunham. Samuel and his wife, Eliza, in turn passed the land to their son, William Riley Dunham, the man who built the house in the late 1800s.

This Clements knew from the Heritage Society files. And one day in October 2007, on a whim, Clements typed the name "Jacob Dunham" in the search window of Google. One of the first hits was the website for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, linked to a page depicting Barack Obama's family tree. There, radiating out from a photograph of the smiling senator, were branches that connected Obama's mother—Stanley Ann Dunham—to the Tipton County Dunhams. "Who would have ever guessed?" Clements muttered aloud.

Clements tracked down the 1856 deed to the Dunham land, signed by Jacob Mackey Dunham himself, and took his findings to Carolyn Etchison, director of the Tipton County Heritage Society, who was equally surprised. Etchison followed the family's movement through Oklahoma and eventually to Kansas, where Obama's mother was born in 1942, and confirmed that the Dunham families were one and the same. Homesteader Jacob Dunham, who was buried in 1865 in the Kempton Cemetery, is Barack Obama's great-great-great-great-grandfather. Jacob's grandson, William Riley Dunham, built the home that stands today.

His interest piqued by the newfound knowledge of his home's history, Clements dropped off photocopies of newspaper clippings documenting Obama's connection to the house at the senator's office during a visit to Washington, D.C. When Obama came to speak in Kokomo in April, Clements drove up to get a ticket and relayed his story to a campaign staffer. A few evenings later, a member of Obama's team phoned to say they were interested in seeing the house. Within a week, Obama had reconnected with his Indiana roots.



Jacob Mackey Dunham and wife Eliza, Obama's third-great-grandparents Photo courtesy Dunham House

Pillars of Kempton society, the Dunham family had its births, deaths, weddings, and anniversaries appear in dozens of yellowed newspaper clippings dating back to the mid-1860s. They were doctors and teachers, principals and hard-working farmers. William Riley Dunham, "the man known by name by more men, women and children than any other one man in Tipton County," according to a 1912 issue of

the *Kempton Courier*, represented both Hamilton and Tipton counties in the Indiana General Assembly. He was a Democrat.

Local lore has it that William Riley Dunham was close friends with president Grover Cleveland, in office 1885-1889 and 1893-1897, and named one of his sons after him. Many neighbors and relatives recall hearing that Cleveland came to visit William Riley around the turn of the century, and some even claim to have seen a picture of the president sitting on the front porch of the Dunham home, but the photographic evidence is nowhere to be found. Inexplicably, the Dunham file at the Heritage Society contains an obscure article from the *Old News* newspaper about a secret medical procedure President Cleveland underwent while in office, though the article makes no mention of an Indiana connection.

William Riley Dunham died in 1921, and the house changed hands to his son, Grover Cleveland Dunham, and Grover's wife, Hazel. One of their daughters, Phyllis, fell in love with Jack E. Waggoner, who got a job milking cows on the farm in the 1940s. The couple married and settled in Westfield, and they often took their children 25 minutes up the road to the Dunham house. Their daughter Tammy Waggoner-Schafer, 49, a resident of Hopkins, Michigan, and granddaughter of Grover Cleveland Dunham and Hazel, is probably one of the last members of the Dunham family to harbor memories of the home. Though she grew up in Westfield, Waggoner-Schafer says she vividly remembers visiting her "Granny" in the house in the years before Hazel's death. She remembers the property as a bustling, working farm, with a large barn full of livestock and hired help to maintain the sprawling grounds. "It was quite the place," she says.

Waggoner-Schafer recalls roller-skating with her sisters around the cavernous third floor—which has since been partitioned into smaller rooms—while the grownups visited downstairs. "My grandmother was a very elegant woman, and she liked to have lavish parties," she says. "Of course, I never got to go because I was just a kid."

Grover Cleveland Dunham died before Waggoner-Schafer was born, so she has no recollection of her grandfather, but she remembers the stories. Like his father, William Riley, Grover Cleveland Dunham was no community slouch. He and his brother, Wilbur, graduated from Purdue University—then called Indiana Medical College—in 1906 and were physicians and surgeons in the area for 50 years. "He was a pretty interesting guy," says Waggoner-Schafer. "I remember the family used to joke about him because he didn't want to buy a car. He made his house calls with a horse and buggy."

By the time Waggoner-Schafer was 10, her grandmother was unable to care for the grounds herself, and after a century of Dunham family comings and goings the house and the land were sold, piecemeal, to several family members, a church, and county residents. (Waggoner-Schafer owns the parcel of land that holds the grave of an elephant that disappeared into a sinkhole after a circus-train wreck in 1905.)

The house became the McMullan Funeral Home in the late 1960s. As such, it has become a measuring stick in the community against which age is determined. To the young, the building is still called “McMullan’s,” but to the aging grandmas and grandpas, it will always be “the ol’ Dunham house.” Hazel Dunham’s funeral was handled by McMullan’s, and her viewing was held in the same living room that had been the setting of her beloved parties during her life. “I remember going to the funeral and running up the stairs and getting in trouble because it wasn’t our house anymore,” says WaggonerSchafer.

By 2000, the funeral home ceased to operate out of the house, and the property became cluttered inside and out with broken furniture, tarnished Christmas ornaments, and other forgotten items. When Waggoner-Schafer’s mother, Phyllis, fell ill a few years ago, Waggoner-Schafer considered purchasing a house in the area and moving back from the small Michigan town she now calls home. The family home was on the market at the time, but when she called the real-estate agent, she found that Clements had bought the house two days earlier.

These days, the house is still mostly empty while it awaits its next incarnation. Clements has done most of the aesthetic work on the first two floors, but there is still the partitioned third floor to be dealt with, not to mention the basement and the home’s exterior. He confines most of his day-to-day living space to an addition on the back of the house that was built during the funeral-home days. The only decorations in the house are two Obama campaign magnets squared off in the upper right-hand corner of the refrigerator door and a framed black-and-white photo of Clements’ great-grandfather, barefoot in the tobacco fields of rural Kentucky. Clements says he currently has no definite plans for the home beyond finishing the restoration. He says he might offer tours when the restoration is complete, but for now he is content showing the place to any curious passersby who stop in while he is around. Regardless of the home’s destiny, he is determined to keep it out of harm’s way for as long as he can, as he feels certain it was just a few abandoned years away from being torn down.

It’s tempting to think that Clements alerted the world to his discovery in hopes that the story might translate into big dollar signs, or that his support of Obama stems from a sense of kinship, not an alliance with his politics. But sitting in a sun-drenched kitchen he never cooks in, Clements scoffs at those notions. It’s about family, he says.

“If I found out that someone down in Kentucky had my great-grandfather’s log cabin, I’d want them to take care of it,” says Clements. “That’s all I’m doing. This is not my history. It’s Obama’s history. But I understand it. I am just the caretaker.”

Obama’s Hoosier roots don’t seem to have had a noticeable effect on his popularity with those in Tipton County, part of a state that hasn’t voted blue in a presidential election in more than 40 years. In the May primary—just days after Obama’s visit—Hillary Clinton carried Tipton County with 58 percent of the vote.

More than 150 years after Jacob Dunham’s wagon rolled to a halt on what was then unexplored territory, the buses and vans crunched over the rocky driveway, listing to the right and then the left as they crossed the uneven terrain. Clements rubbed his hands together, partly for warmth on the chilly May morning, but also because he was suddenly a little nervous.

Emerging from the tour bus, the suave young senator held out a hand for his wife, rounded up his two little girls, clad in puffy parkas over their spring clothes, and slowly made his way up Clements’ front yard against the wind, his usual neat-as-a-pin sport coat replaced by a navy-blue fleece pullover. “Hey, man, how’s it goin’?” he asked jovially, extending his hand to Clements. “Call me Barack.”

For a little more than an hour, Obama walked the grounds of the house, listening intently as Clements recounted the fragments of history he knows and autographing copies of his books for a handful of invited guests, including a silver-haired older woman, a distant relative he referred to as “Cuz.” Soon it was time to go, off to shake more hands and deliver more speeches. Obama corralled the girls, who, trailed by Secret Service agents, had been playing quietly on the lawn, and headed back toward the bus. The doors slid closed and the caravan pulled away, headed west, taking the Obama family to the next stop on their journey.

For more information on the Dunham House, visit TheDunhamHouse.com.



Painting of the Dunham farm circa 1900 Image courtesy Dunham House