

Indianapolis Star

New hope for Indiana's 'Obama house'

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The Dunham House in Kempton, IN is the ancestral home of President Barack Obama.

After the Obama visit, which was the first public indication the house was connected to Obama, Clements said he came in for some rough treatment — 'the beer bottles and the garbage.'

KEMPTON, Ind. — Here in this off-the-beaten-path Indiana farm town in the heart of Trump country is an unexpected thing: the ancestral home of Barack Obama.

It's known as the Dunham house for the family that built it and lived in it for 120 years. Obama's mother was a Dunham, though she didn't live there.

Since 2011, the Dunham house has been open to the public, one of Tipton County's few tourist destinations. But so far few tourists, or locals, have embraced it. Vandals once lobbed beer bottles at the house and dumped garbage in the yard. In six years, only two classes of gradeschoolers have come through on field trips.



(Photo: Sam Riche)

That's just politics, in the opinion of Shawn Clements, the house's owner — as well as its promoter, its tour guide, its carpenter, its caretaker and its inhabitant.

But today things are looking up for the fledgling historic site. For one thing, Clements notes, Kempton recently became easier to reach. The road that connects the town with the larger world, U.S. 31, has been improved with on- and off-ramps replacing cumbersome stoplights, including at the intersection of Ind. 28, the turnoff to Kempton.

And the house itself is increasingly inviting. Clements is nearly finished renovating. The green shag carpet is gone, and the original red pine floors have been redone. The dropped ceiling has been removed to reveal handsome crown molding. The pocket doors are working again. The wallpaper, six layers deep in some rooms, has been scraped away, and the walls painted their original colors.

On a more profound level, Obama is about to leave office. As he departs the stage, or at least center stage, say Clements and others, he may become more palatable to the residents in this rural, strongly Republican region in the same way Jimmy Carter gained wider currency when he went from being president to ex-president.

"The further away they get from office, they become less political, and the emotions of the political arena sort of fade from view," said Brent Cardin, a board member of the Dunham House Educational Foundation. The foundation, which Clements founded and runs in conjunction with the house, raises scholarship money for college-bound Hoosiers interested in studying history. Last year, two students received \$3,500.



An official Presidential portrait of President Barack Obama is seen at The Dunham House in Kempton, IN, Wednesday, January 11, 2017. President Barack Obama comes from the Dunham family line and visited the home with his family in 2008 when he was running for president. Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar

Obama's departure from the White House may play particularly well in Tipton County because, if the state of Indiana is red, Tipton County is scarlet. Here Donald Trump won 74 percent of the vote.

In the spring of 2008, presidential candidate Obama had no knowledge he was, in a distant sense, a child of this place. His mother's branch of the family had left Tipton County a century earlier, ended up in Kansas and had not talked about Indiana. A Chicago newspaper charted Obama's ancestry and found his Hoosier roots.

With the Indiana primary just days away, Obama, whose status as an American was just then being questioned, embraced his newfound Hoosier heritage with vigor by visiting the Dunham house — and bringing along a busload of reporters. Local notables gathered there to greet him, including a long-lost fourth cousin who, at age 67, couldn't recall ever having met a black person before. (Tipton County is 0.5 percent black, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.)

She voted for her cousin, but most of her neighbors did not. Tipton County went for John McCain in 2008 and for Mitt Romney four years later.

After the Obama visit, which was the first public indication the house was connected to the ground-breaking candidate, Clements said he sustained some rough treatment — "the beer bottles and the garbage."

As a public service, he had planted a large vegetable garden with the idea of giving the produce away to the needy but was stymied. A soup kitchen told him, "No thanks for the Obama food," Clements said. He ended up hauling the food to the Julian Center, a shelter for domestic abuse victims in Indianapolis.

The vandalism stopped, but at parties Clements, "the guy with the Obama house," still finds himself fielding complaints about the president. "I think some people think I have a red phone on my desk I pick up and have a conversation (with Obama)," he said. "I don't."

Clements happened into his role as the keeper of Obama's Hoosier heritage by accident. When he bought the old farmhouse in 2003, he had never heard of the Dunhams or of Barack Obama, who was then a state senator from Illinois. He just liked the house, which is a bit larger and fancier than the typical Hoosier farmhouse. He thought it might make a good bed-and-breakfast inn.

It was in terrible shape. The Dunhams sold it in 1969, and it may not have been lived in since. The house had been used for storage, and by the time Clements took possession, junk filled most of its 12 rooms: old tires and other car parts, clothing, old furniture stacked floor to ceiling, boxes of Look magazines and so on.

Clements, 49, a contractor specializing in historic preservation, did almost all the rehabilitation work himself in his spare time. He ripped up carpeting, ripped down drop ceilings, redid wiring, redid plumbing, modernized the kitchen.

He also set about learning the history of the people who built this imposing house on this out-of-the-way prairie. They were the Dunhams, and they were solid. They were farmers, prosperous ones, and doctors and teachers. One served in the Indiana General Assembly. They built the house in the 1880s and lived in it for more than eight decades.

"You can see the history of America through the Dunhams," said Ian Dunham, of California, who has visited his forebears' homestead and is on the board of Clements' foundation.

Late in 2007, Clements sat down at his computer to learn more about the lives of the Dunhams.

He came upon the family tree of Barack Obama that had been published in the Chicago SunTimes. Obama's great-great-grandfather was William Riley Dunham, who built the house.

That piece of information "changed my life," Clements said. He came to see the Dunham house not as a business venture but a grave responsibility. He dropped his bed-and-breakfast strategy in favor of creating a museum and meeting place.

Framed photographs of the president and the first lady are the first things you see when you enter the house, their relaxed smiles contrasting with the stiff bearings of various 19th century Dunhams, whose photos are on display also. Clements hosts an annual Easter egg hunt for children, like they do on the White House lawn. He gives tours from April through November, charging \$5 a head. He has hosted a meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution. A group of Democratic women from Kokomo had a fundraiser there. He helped make a documentary about the house; DVDs are available for sale.

"Shawn has done so much out there, it's remarkable," said Jackie Henry, the editor of the Tipton County Tribune. "It's a neat museum." But when the Tribune runs a story about the place, like when the paper covers the egg hunt, there is sometimes blow-back. "People say, 'Well *he* (Obama) never lived there, so it's not his family home.'"

Greg Goodnight, who is related to the Dunhams and is mayor of Kokomo, the nearest city, agreed that ex-presidents are often more popular than presidents, but he observed also that while Obama lost Tipton County twice, he did respectably. In 2012 he got 33 percent of the votes, and in 2008 he got 42 percent. "Obama clearly does have some support in Tipton County," Goodnight said. Clements speculated that some of the antipathy toward the Dunham house may have been directed not at Obama but at him, Clements, because he is an outsider. He is from several counties away in Lebanon.



Shawn Clements shows The Dunham House in Kempton, IN, Wednesday, January 11, 2017. Clements bought this home several years ago and while fixing it up he discovered it was owned by ancestors of President Barack Obama. Obama and his family visited the home in 2008 when he was running for president. (Photo: Kelly Wilkinson/IndyStar)

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