

HISTORIC BUILDINGS OF McLEAN COUNTY 1830-1914

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NAME OF SITE, Duncan Manor (ML-126)

NOTE ON NOMENCLATURES Duncan Manor has for many years been the local name for this house and this is the name used by John Drury "in his Old Illinois Houses (p.66). Duncan dated at least some of his letters at "Towanda Meadows," but it is uncertain if the name applied to the house or to the entire farm.

LOCATION, SE1/4 of Section 7, T24N, R3E; Towanda Township.

OWNER: Helen Kraft
1508 E. Olive, Bloomington
Phone: 662-1196

OCCUPANTS: Mary Peterson, Greg Erickson, Sharon Rerkey.

POINTS OF INTERESTS A large Italianate farmhouse unique in design in central Illinois and the home of an early breeder of blooded livestock.

DATE: 1866-1870

BUILDER: William R. Duncan was born in Clark County, Kentucky, December 15, 1818. He was first married in Clark County to Nannie Readman, but she died before any children were born. Later he married Mrs. Mary Quisenbury (Formerly Mary Chorn). His second wife's background is uncertain; she owned land in Clark County Kentucky, but at the time of her death, about 1864, she had a sister living in Clinton and her father resided in Normal. On November 14, 1864 Duncan married for the third time. His wife was Sarah Bean of Clark County.

While in Kentucky Duncan established a reputation as a breeder of short horn cattle. His obituary, which

has been poppied by most later writers, explains Duncan's move to McLean County in 1863 was the direct result of financial ruin brought about because of his pro-Federal politics, but there is every reason to believe that he was far from destitute at the time of his arrival in the county.

The transaction by which Duncan bought the land on which the house is located is most interesting. Mary, William's second wife, owned land in Clark County. Upon her death the land passed to her four children Nannie, Henry, James, and Mary E. The Clark County Curcuit Court ordered the land sold and the money reinvested by William R. Duncan for the children. He took the money, \$ 13,500, and purchased 300 acres from Nathaniel Sunderland. The price, 45 dollars an acre, for land along the Chicago and Alton Railway and quite close to the station at Towanda, it is about what one would expect and makes it doubtful if an eight to twelve thousand house could have been included in the bargain.

That Duncan felt it was important to keep the land in his children's name is shown by events in the spring of 1868. Henry Duncan, age 15, either went for a swim or mistakenly wandered into a large water filled slough on the farm. Unknown to the youth at the center of the slough

was an open well; usually the well was surrounded by a wooden fence, but recent rains had carried the rails away. Henry drowned. Accounts written long after the event have Duncan summoned home by telegraph and spending days of grief stricken silence on the second floor balcony of the house. William Duncan then became heir to part of his son's share of the land but promptly sold his claim to the remaining children for the sum of one dollar.

In 1932 Annabel C. Cary wrote an account of the funeral which has passed into local legend.

"The boy's mother, who had died some years previous, had been buried in the yard under trees to the right of the front doors. The son was buried beside her, and at the father's request, the first grave was opened at the boy's funeral, for a last look at both." (Pant. Aug., 13, 1932, p.).

She continues by writing that after William Duncan died his widdow had the graves opened and the bodies sent to Kentucky for final internment. As Duncan did not own the land at the time of his second wife's death, poor Mary must have been buried three separate times and dug up twice. Aside from adding a goulish note to the stories that cling to Duncan Manor these tales suggest the existance of the house by the spring of 1868. There is other and stronger evidence to support this contention.

The 1870 census lists the value of William

Duncan's real estate at \$25,000. The difference between this price and the amount of \$13,500 for which he bought the property in 1865 is of about the right magnitude to suggest the construction of an expensive house at sometime between the two dates. As Duncan purchased the land late in December of 1865 it is unlikely began building before the following spring. Duncan's large household, mentioned below, might also suggest a large dwelling in existence by 1870.

Dark faces peering from behind the barred basement windows are an important part of the local Duncan Manor mythology. Sometimes they passengers on the underground railroad slipping north toward Canada and freedom. Alternately they are Duncan's slaves, thinly disguised as servants, but chained at night to the iron fastenings in the east room of the basement. Both Cary and Drury repeat these stories and find architectural evidence to support them. Aside from the obvious problems of date and the difficulty a prominent nineteenth century gentleman, with six children, keeping anyone chained in his celler in secret, there is is the evidence of the 1870 census which shows that everyone living in the Duncan house was Caucasian. In addition to William Duncan's immediate family his household included an English born herdsman

with his wife and farmhand son, a nineteen year old maid and a gardner, both born in England, and two Swedish farmhands.

The presence of the English bom herdsman suggests Duncan's chief interest, the raising of short horn cattle. The 1879 history sums up his contribution as follows:

"W.R, Duncan and the Ryburn Brothers, of this county, have been prominent in introducing and cultivating the finest breeds of foreign animals, especially of cattle, and the best crosses. Their stock is spread all over the country, and the influence has been incalculable." (p. 262),

It seems likely that Duncan was able to transfer a good deal of his stock from Kentucky to McLean County. The September 15, 1866 issue of Prairie Farmer recounts the recently concluded McLean County Fair by saying in parts

"The short horn stock of McLean County is fast increasing in number and quality, owing, generally to the enterprise of W.R. Duncan, Esq, a former well known Kentucky breeder, now located at Towanda. Indeed we doubt if the state can show a better bull than "Minister" bred by Mr. Alexander and owned by Mr. D. Though carrying off many prizes the herd of Mr. Duncan is far from containing all the fine short horns of the county. The competition was strong and some of the rings will hardly be surpassed at any county fair, perhaps even at the State fair." (p. 168).

This was less than a year after Duncan bought his McLean County farm. His stock continued to win prizes for the next ten years, Toward the end of his life Duncan was asked to prepare a history of

livestock raising in McLean County in connection with an as yet unidentified and perhaps never finished local history project•

Duncan's only known venture into public life came in 1869 when he ran unsuccessfully for the Illinois Constitutional Convention. His letter to the Pantagraph after his defeat reveals something of the spirit of the man:

"I am also thankful for those who cast their votes for my opponents, having as they did a perfect right to do so, thereby manifesting a willingness to relieve me of so much responsibility, and allow me to remain at home, with my family giving my whole time to private business.. .." (Nov. 11, 1869, p.4).

William R. Duncan became ill while attending a fair at Ottawa, Illinois, in September, 1876. He attempted to reach home, but only made it as far as Normal where he died at the home of his father-in-law on the nineteenth. His widdow and the younger children returned to Kentucky.

Many have suggested that Duncan's death narked the end of the activities he set in motion, but this is far from true. His eldest daughter had married Franklin Barnes and they continued to live at Duncan Manor while Franklin carried on his father-in-law's tradition of breeding fine short horn cattle. Duncan's eldest son James became a stock

raiser and grain dealer in Towanda; in 1882 he built his own \$12,000 brick house (now demolished) north of town. Lizzie Duncan frequently visited her relatives and in December of 1883 Duncan Manor was the scene of one of the year's great social events when she married Ellis Dillon, a member of McLean County's famous bourse breeding and importing family.

STRUCTURE: The house rests near the crest of a low hill over two miles from the nearest timber but overlooking the Chicago and Alton Railroad and the old state road which Jesse Fell had helped establish between Bloomington and Towanda. The main facade faces the northwest and is dominated by two massive towers each capped with a bracketed roof. The towers are three stories high with double light round capped windows on the lower two floors and smaller tripple light windows on the upper floor. The main entrence , no longer in use, is located between the two towers; above it is another tripple window lighting the monumental staircase inside.

The rear facade is only two stories high. Here the space between towers is spanned, on both floors by porchs; the upper porch is the one William

Duncan is said to have refused to leave for several days while mourning his drowned son. From the lower porch entrance is gained to the kitchen which projects toward the southeast beyond the main body of the house.

The first floor contains four rooms and a large central hallway. The hall contains the main staircase which is perhaps the most impressive feature of the interior of the home; it extends upwards for three stories and very similar to the stairway in the Ham Home. A temporary wall has now been built around the staircase to help conserve heat. The second floor is similar in design to the first. Three bedrooms are accessible from the hall, but the south room may only be reached from the kitchen stairs or the attic above. On the third floor only the tower rooms have been finished, behind is an open storage space in which the remains of disused chimney stacks may be seen.

Perhaps the most commented upon feature of the interior is described by Drury as follows:

"Another feature of the house which might be connected with the maintenance of negro servants is a mysterious trap door in one of the second-floor bedrooms which lets down into a bare, dark room. Although numerous old Illinois houses,

especially in the southern part of the state, have these trap doors, leading leading to secret rooms, the use of this somewhat bizarre arrangement has never been satisfactorily explained." (p.66).

A less remantic person might offer an explanation which dismissed the chamber as the location for the cistern to serve the bathtub located directly below.

Although long used as a tenant house, Duncan Manor is still in fairly good condition. The next few years, however, may be critical to its preservation.

REFERENCES

There is no nineteenth century biographical article dealing with William R. Duncan. The preceeding account has been gathered from scattered sources.

C.C.C. , 121-122

Deed Record, McLean County, Book 58, p.217 (Duncan buys the farm for his children); Book 60, p. 344 (Transfers after Henry Duncan dies); Book 114, p. 343 and Book 119, p. 267 (Disputes and morgages after the death of William R. Duncan).

John Drury, Old Illinois Houses (Occasional Publications of the Illinois State Historical Society; Springfield: Chicago Daily News, 1948), 65-66.

Hist. 1879, p. 262, p. 990 (Franklin Barnes biography).

Pant., Nov. 11, 1869, p. 4 (Constitutional Convention defeat); Oct. 3, 1876, p.4 (Obituary); March 1, p. 3, March 2, p. 4, May 25, p.4 (James Duncan's new home); March 10, 1882, p. 4 (Sarah Duncan sells land); April 28, 1882, p.3 (Lizzie Duncan's summer visit); Dec. 27, 1883, p.4 (Lizzie Duncan weds); Aug. 13, 1932, p. 9, Annabel C. Gary, "Builder of Old Mansion Along C.& A. Wanted All to Ask Who Lived in it." (Many Duncan Manor Stories).

Prairie Farmer, New Series XVIII, 11 (September 15, 1866) p. 168.

Michael D. Sublett and William D. Walters, Jr, "A New Geography of McLean County," Outdoor Illinois, XV, 5 (May 1976) p. 46 (The cover of this issue features a watercolor of the southeast facade of this house by Matthew Daub).



weekly Pantagraph
Feb 27 1874

"I have moved the Family into
the House that I Lived in
Before I built..."
W. R. Duncan