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Kokomo, Indiana 50¢

tries to preserve history

■ Dunham House was once owned by ancestors of Barack Obama.

BY DANIEL HUMAN
KOKOMO TRIBUNE

TIPTON - A house once owned by a U.S. president's ancestors belongs to society, not one person, the house's owner said Wednesday.

Shawn Clements, who owns the Dunham House in the rural Tipton County town of Kempton, told the Tipton County Chamber of Commerce Wednesday that he would like to turn the property into a nonprofit organization. He said he would be willing to move out if needed.

"It belongs to history. It doesn't belong to me," he said.

Clements, a professional historical preservationist, bought the house in

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House ...

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2004. Soon after moving in, he began researching the house's history.

A Google search yielded a Chicago Sun-Times family tree for the Dunham family, which listed a member he did not expect to see.

"I'm scrolling through this massive family tree, and I go to the top and see 'The Complete Family History of Barack Obama,'" Clements told the chamber in his account of the house's history. "Needless to say, that was a little breath-taking."

The house had once belonged to Jacob and Catherine Dunham, Obama's great-great-great-grandparents on his mother's side of the family.

The discovery led into a whirlwind that eventually brought Obama and his family to the house in May 2008 while the then-Illinois senator was campaigning.

Preparations for the visit began several months in advance with a phone call Clements originally thought was a joke.

"When I moved up from Noblesville, my intent was to have a nice, quiet life," he said. "But that kind of changed when a man showed up on my door step who turned out to be the president of the United States."

During the visit, photos and news stories about the day received national attention.

The magnitude of coverage the visit received indicates the property's historical value, Clements said.

"The question is, 'What do you guys want to do with it, if anything at all?' he asked the chamber of commerce. "I encourage you to plant your flag - soon. Because if you don't someone else will."

Clements said he has been working with attorneys in Indianapolis to obtain 501(c)(3) status - the IRS classification for a tax-exempt nonprofit - for the house.

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The effort to preserve the house is historically driven, not politically, Clements said, adding he would have done the same if Richard Nixon's family owned the house.

"I do know this: He's the president of the United States," Clements said. "And when I'm working on that house, I'm constantly reminded it is an awesome responsibility."

The house is open to tour groups. Clements said he frequently has classes come through on field trips.

"Hopefully, somewhere down the line, these young people will understand history's importance, understand there's more out there than video games..."

"I have no political agenda. I'm too busy. I have an old house to take care of."

Clements' speech was the final presentation for the chamber of commerce this year.

Jennifer Servies, the chamber's director, said the next chamber luncheon will be in February.

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