

# KOKOMO TRIBUNE

## Dunham House receives national award

- [By Cody Neuenschwander Kokomo Tribune](#)
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**AWARD WINNER:** Shawn Clements accepts the Daughters of the American Revolution National Historic Preservation Medal. Photo provided.

**KEMPTON** – History abounds in every town and in every structure – it has to, whether it resonates or not.

But that doesn't lessen people's shock when Shawn Clements explains the legacy of the Dunham House that sits just south of Kempton, and how it was home to ancestors of former President Barack Obama.

The local landmark now has another title under its belt. It's been granted the Daughters of the American Revolution National Historic Preservation Medal – the national organization's most prestigious award for historic preservation. Clements, the owner and preservationist of the house, was presented with the award May 19 during a ceremony at the Indianapolis Marriott Hotel.

“It was a real shock when I got the call,” said Clements, who explained that a previous statewide award had put him in the running for the national award. The first time he learned he was being considered for the preservation medal was during the phone call informing him he had won.



■ Dunham House located at 709 S West St, Kempton, Indiana, was built in the 1880s, and is significant because of a relation the Dunham family has to former President Barack Obama. Tim Bath | Kokomo Tribune

Clements, an independent contractor and preservationist, has owned the home since 2003, but didn't learn the full scope of its significance until 2007. That was the year he learned the innocuous house originally served as the homestead of Jacob and Catherine Goodnight Dunham, the great-great-great-great grandparents of Obama.

The years that followed that discovery would be filled with restoration and maintenance. Ironically, while the house may well represent one of Clements' most significant historical finds, it was also one that had been left in the most ragged shape. The décor was like something out of the '60s or '70s, and might not have received any attention since then. The walls were adorned with dark paneling; the floors with orange and green shag carpet. A massive overhaul was needed for the house to resemble something from the 1880s, and ongoing maintenance after that. "That's the thing about preservation work. You go through it, and by the time you get through a house that size, you're going back and doing maintenance," said Clements.

And while the preservationist work may have put his name in the running for the award, it was the formation of the Dunham House Educational Foundation that Clements believed gave him the edge. The foundation provides scholarships to graduating high schoolers planning to study history. "The house has become something other than a place people could tour ... it's actually doing something to perpetuate future generations to take a liking to this type of work and history in general," he said.

And the house's history runs deep – deeper than its obvious presidential connection. It was built on a Miami Indian reservation and has deep roots with Irish immigrants. Its history was the topic of a comprehensive documentary filmed over the past few years.

In 2008, it played host to a stop on Obama's first presidential campaign – a stop that would undoubtedly be considered out of place if not for the historical context. Obama, a staunch Democratic, visiting a region once described in an Indianapolis Star article as not just red but scarlet, was enough to raise more than a couple eyebrows. "No matter what type of president he was, or what he did and didn't do, he would still always be the first African-American president. And that in itself is huge. It's an incredible turning point in our history, period," said Clements.

Anytime he speaks of the house, young people in particular that tend to gravitate toward him for questions. Consistently, he said, it's with questions about history. A number of times during an interview with the Tribune, Clements referenced the importance of getting students incorporated with the house, the foundation and history in general.

A 16-year-old student from Tipton joined the house's board recently – a first. She's been helpful in informing other students about scholarship opportunities, said Clements. "What a great bumper crop for us to be able to lean on them when I'm not able to do this anymore," he said.

He added later: "It's not very often that you get an award, period, but a national award from such a historic organization is really humbling. It's very flattering. We were just very shocked by it, and can't thank them enough." Cody Neuenschwander can be reached at 765-454-8570 or by email at [cody@kokomotribune.com](mailto:cody@kokomotribune.com)