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4th hour

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Duncan Manor: Behind the Myths

When you drive to work, you see this three story house in the middle of a field. You don’t know what it is, or who owns it, but it interests you. You drive by it every day wondering what stories lay hidden within those walls, but never knowing. You find yourself asking what was the life like of whoever owned this mysterious house, and what was the history behind it? But, your main question is, what do they do with it now?

The name of the house is the Duncan Manor, but the locals around McLean County have named the house “Tor” (*1997 Detailed History...*), and the owner was named William R. Duncan. He was born on December 15, 1818 to John and Margaret Redmon Duncan. He had one brother, Thomas W. Duncan, and two sisters, Elizabeth Duncan Bowren and Sally Duncan (Miller).

William’s first wife was Nannie Readman (date of death unknown) (*1977 Detailed History…*). William married his second wife, Mary A. Chorn Quisenberry, in Clarke County, Kentucky on January 4, 1849. The first child of Mary and William was Nancy, also known as Nannie, born on October 5, 1853. The second child born to Mary and William was Henry, born on April 1, 1856. The third child that Mary and William conceived, James, was born on July 3, 1858. Mary Elizabeth was child number four to William and Mary, and was born on June 11,1861 (Miller).

In 1863, William, Mary, and their four kids moved to McLean County, near Clark County where Mary owned land. The move was due to “financial ruin,” but they still had some money when they moved. That money was used to buy 300 acres of land along the Chicago and Alton Railway near Towanda from Nathaniel Sutherland for $13,500. Mary Duncan, William’s second wife, died on Tuesday, February 23, 1864. After the death of Mary, William had her buried on the property (*1997 Detailed History...*). When William bought the property, the house was not included. William had built the house by the spring of 1886. *(1997 Detailed History…)* The family was renting a house from the time between the move to McLean County and building the house. Later that year, on November 24, 1864, William married his third wife, Sarah Ann Bean (age 29). William B. was born to William and Sarah on May 18, 1866. Asa Lewis was born on April 23, 1868. (Miller).

Only two months later, on June 16, at the age of 14, William’s second son, Henry, drowned in a well on the property. “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,” says William D. Walters Jr. (*1977 Detailed History…*). Two years later, Eli B. was born to be the third son on October 3, 1870. After another two years, on October 27, 1872, Harrison was born. John O. was born four years later on August 23, 1876 (Miller). Almost exactly one month later, while William was at a fair in Ottawa, Illinois, he became ill. When William arrived at his father-in-law’s house in Normal, Illinois, he died. Once William’s body was back to the McLean County, he, his son Henry, and his second wife Mary were sent to Kentucky for their last burial (*Historic Buildings of…*).

The layout of the house is quite unique. The large farmhouse sits on a hill facing the northwest. There is one tower on each corner of the house. Around the main entrance, which is no longer in use, are two towers, each three stories high. The other two towers, both two stories high, are on either side of the first and second story porches. From the lower porch, there is a kitchen which projects into the main body of the house. The first floor has a large hallway containing a three-story staircase, and four rooms, excluding the kitchen: a dining room, study, living room, and a powder room (*1997 Detailed History…*). The second floor is similar to the first floor. Three bedrooms are accessible from main staircase hallway. The south room can only be reached by a staircase from the attic and the kitchen. The third floor is composed of a storage space and a chimney in the attic (*1997 Detailed History…*).

William has an interesting history, but the tale of his home is even more fascinating. In 1870, a census showed that the house had only caucasians, including William’s immediate family, an English-born herdsman and his family, a maid, and two Swedish farmhands lived in the house. Yet, there has been architectural evidence to support that slaves did live in the house (*1997 Detailed History…*). The dark faces of his slaves made it look like William was a part of the underground railroad. “Aside from the obvious problems of date, and the difficulty of prominent nineteenth century gentlemen, with six children, keeping anyone chained in his cellar in secret [was a hard task].”    (Mary Ann Ford). When not working, these slaves were supposedly chained to iron fastenings in the east room of the basement during the night (*1997 Detailed History…*).

Duncan Manor is used quite often. The house was purchased in 2008 by Bud and Diane Sulivan. It had been vandalized multiple times and was in poor condition. Bud and Diane are trying to make repairs and restore the house to its original style and look of “one of the finest farmhouses ever built in Illinois” (Ford). The restoration is coming along, but it does take money. To make money, there have been open houses, a steampunk photoshoot, and concerts. The concerts here consisted  of musicians such as Dan Hubbard, the Songwriter Series, and Rebecca Rega and the Trainmen (Duncanmanor).

So, the next time you drive to work, you will look at the house with a different perspective. Instead of asking who the owner is, you will think about William Duncan with his wife and kids enjoying a meal at the dinner table. You will picture the layout of the house instead of wondering why it is there. You will look at your schedule to see if you can go to the next open house a few weeks from now. This is the house you have been wondering about for a long time, and now you know all you need to to stop that wondering.

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