



Old adobe

The Allandale House of rural Cass County, a marvel of 'earnest efforts' and ingenuity

By Lorene Martin

[Editor's note: In eastern Cass County, about a mile west of Philadelphia, travelers on Illinois Highway 125 might notice a small brown sign denoting the turnoff to the "Historic Allandale House." I have wondered about this mystery dwelling for years but never took time to wander beyond my appointed destinations—until last month... at night... and in a snowstorm. Feeling adventurous after dinner in Virginia, Paula and I took the turnoff and drove north down the single-lane road, passing cow pastures and haybales and gullies that seemed to materialize in the whirling snow and headlights. But that night, the house and its secrets stayed hidden from us. The following day after church, undaunted and emboldened by the sunlight, we returned to the place

and found the Allandale House, down a steep hill above Job's Creek in what was once known as Sugar Grove. Two days later I found the following history of the Allandale House and the family that built it published in the July 1935 issue of the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society. I love my job.]

Three miles northeast of Virginia, Illinois, at the edge of Sugar Grove, there stands a beautiful and spacious house built of adobe. So far as is known this house — "Allandale," home of the Cunningham family for several generations — is the only adobe house in Illinois; nor is it probable that there is anywhere in the central states another house constructed of this material so commonly used in Mexico and the dry southwest.



In 1834, Andrew Cunningham, a young Scotchman, left his native land to try his fortunes in America. His plan was to establish a tannery, and upon coming to what is now Cass County, Illinois, during the following summer, he sought a location affording a con-

venient supply of water and oak timber.

These two essentials to the process of tanning were found in abundance where Job's Creek (named for Archibald Job, the first settler in the Virginia neighborhood, who soon was elected to the legislature and was one of the three commissioners who supervised the building of the first state house at Springfield) flows through Sugar Grove; and here Mr. Cunningham erected the tannery that is still remembered by old timers as one of the most important institutions of the early days in this country — a center to which men came from as far as Beardstown, Jacksonville, Petersburg and Springfield to buy harness, saddles and footwear. Not until sometime after the Civil War, when its usefulness had plainly been served, was the tanyard abandoned. No trace of it remains.

Mr. Cunningham also acquired many acres of land nearby, and after living for several years in a small house on this land, decided to build a larger one. Here he was confronted with one of the common problems of the pioneer — the transportation of suitable build-

ing material; and being a man of great industry and practical information, he solved this problem in a very individual manner.

Taking common mud and mixing it with ground tan-bark, using hair scraped from hides before tanning as a binder, he molded large blocks (6 by 12 by 18 inches), and baked them in the sun. The result was satisfactory, and from these adobe bricks a substantial and well-proportioned, two-story house, having nine large rooms, besides two broad halls, was built. Upon completion the exterior was given a coating of cement plaster for protection against a possibly unfavorable effect of the Illinois climate. Overhanging eaves — supported by braces of ironwork beautifully designed by Mr. Cunningham himself, who had a strong artistic sense — were added for further protection against the weather, and gave as well a pleasing balance to the architectural lines.

In this distinctive house, completed in 1852 and named in honor of his wife, who had been Miss Helen Allan, Mr. Cunningham lived, with his family, for many years, widely known for his upright character and untiring enterprise — truly one of those worthy pioneers whose “...earnest efforts still command Our veneration.” As he grew older, with the busy tanyard a thing of the past, he continued to superintend his large estate, but spent more and more of his time in the library — often carving, in choice specimens of wood, excellent little images of the mythological or other characters about which he read in his books. In 1895, at the ripe old age of 88 years, he passed on, and was buried in a little country graveyard a mile away.

A son, Mr. James A. Cunningham, next lived out a long and useful life in the old house, engaged in farming and stock raising, and beloved of the entire countryside; and here he, too, died, in 1927, and was laid to rest beside his father. James A. Cunningham was an interested member of the Illinois State Historical Society.

The present occupant of the house is Miss Hilma Jones, a granddaughter of the builder. As far as possible the original furnishings have been retained,

and the old rooms, quaint with low ceilings and many-paned windows deepset in the thick walls, are everywhere pervaded with an atmosphere of simple, homelike comfort. On every hand are objects of unusual interest — hardly outside of a museum would one find more such objects — yet no one of them but has some family association.

Over the living-room mantel, for example, flanking an old-fashioned clock, are two exquisite miniatures — a lady and a gentleman of an earlier generation — done by Janet Cunningham Shaen, a sister of Andrew Cunningham; and the mistress of the house will tell you about this artist great-aunt, who lived in England, and about her friendship with the Charles Darwins and their daughter, who were her neighbors there. And on the shelf below is a curious figurine — some ancient warrior clad in chain armor — carved with exceeding delicacy in gold and carnelian, which was given to a Cunningham great uncle while serving as a British consul in Turkey more than a hundred years ago, by a Russian ambassador whom he met there at that time.

And there is one of a brace of “carriage pistols,” a common accessory in traveling overland from borough to borough in Scotland in former times; and a very old sea-chest, which accompanied some ancestor to America long ago.

But best of all are the books — rows and rows of them in cases about the wall, and in one adorable cabinet fashioned by Miss Jones herself — who had inherited full measure of the Cunningham artistic skill — from the old grandfather clock. Many of these volumes were part of the original library of the house — books current in Andrew Cunningham’s day, as Herndon’s *Life of Lincoln* in three volumes, and Ford’s *History of Illinois*; and books much older — a Scottish dictionary, published in Edinburgh in 1808; a little old Swedish hymnal, Gothenborg, 1807; a book called *The Beauties of Washington Irving*, Glasgow, 1825, most quaintly illustrated by William Heath; and a copy of *The Tattler*, published in London as long ago as 1728.

But even more cherished than any of these is a small book whose yellowed pages are filled with fine and neat but faded script — the diary that Andrew Cunningham kept during his voyage from Scotland in 1834, and across the states and in Illinois during the summer of that year and the next. The story of the eight weeks at sea, the landing at New York and journey up into Canada by way of the Erie Canal (then newly completed), and the traveling about by stage coach or on foot, visiting many small towns that are now well known cities of Ontario and the states — this story, after the lapse of a hundred years, is fascinating to read.

It is interesting to note his pleasure when first he saw the wide prairies of Illinois, where waving grass was starred with myriad wildflowers. The settlements, too, interested and pleased him — Alton, for example, with aspirations of becoming the state capital, there being already “a good many stores in the village”; Peoria, “a very young but thriving town”; and Chicago, which, he said, “promises well”!

One wishes that Mr. Cunningham had left some written record of his early years at Sugar Grove and the building of his home — this interesting old house of sun-dried brick, which is just now, after more than eighty years, beginning to crumble slightly. But one thing he did leave — a memento of pioneer days that is perhaps unique. On the front lawn of “Allendale,” where a flower bed might be, is a circular space six or eight feet in diameter from which the original prairie grass — that tall, coarse grass which so impeded the progress of the ox-wagons in which many of the earliest settlers arrived, and which offered such stubborn resistance to the plow — has never been uprooted.

As though he sensed that some time this bit of primitive Illinois would hold an almost pathetic interest, Mr. Cunningham never allowed scythe to touch it. His descendants have likewise preserved it, and there it is growing now — literally a living link between the present times and the days that are gone forever.

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