

THE HOMESTEAD FAMILY

GAZETTE

JAMES MILLIKIN HOMESTEAD, INC., DECATUR, ILLINOIS

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A Note From Your President... History – The Rail Splitter and the Cattle Drover

As I sit here writing this, it is a cold dreary day February day. Hopefully, by the time you are reading this, it is relatively warm and sunny. With winter (and a few frozen pipes) behind us, your board is moving into a new fiscal year.

The first item on our agenda is the Annual Meeting which will be held on April 25, 1996. We will start with a 6:30 social half hour, the program at 7:00 and the meeting itself at 7:30. Lucien Kapp, following his wonderful (and educational) program last year, will present "Ceiling Restoration Part II and Into the Future". Please join us.

Next up is Mr. and Mrs. Millikin Days the last week of April - first week of May. Lou Snelson and Jim Williams are our co-chairs this year. If you can help out, please call them.

We follow that program with the Victorian Doll Tea. Details are still in the planning stages. This was a rousing success last year, so call in your reservations as soon as you receive your information. We hope to have another full house!

Abraham Lincoln does not ordinarily figure in the lives of James and Anna Millikin, but he is in the background nonetheless. Millikin and Lincoln crossed paths in Decatur in the late 1850's, prior to the Civil War.

The degree of their acquaintanceship came up for scrutiny after preparations for the Millikin Homestead's 1995 Doll Tea, during which the question was suddenly asked, "Is the glass display case of Millikin memorabilia still in the attic?"

The question caught our immediate attention because no one now knew of such a case or contents in the attic. The inquiry was made by Judy Barner, president of the Illini Doll and Toy Collectors Club, who assisted in the tea. Judy's subsequent story was quite interesting.

In the wartime days of the 1940's, Judy and several friends from Mt. Pulaski were working in Decatur and sharing an apartment. There was a housing shortage, and people were doubling up in existing quarters. Another former classmate of theirs, John, was a student at Millikin University and renting a room in the Millikin Homestead, then the Art

In relation to Abraham Lincoln, James might well have had memorabilia to keep. The two men were "intimately acquainted," according to the late O. T. Banton, Decatur historian. Banton wrote of Millikin and Lincoln in both his comprehensive *History of Decatur and Macon County* 1976 and an earlier history of the Millikin Bank and its founder. Both men, said Banton, started out as Whigs in politics but became Republicans when that party was organized in the 1850's. Both exhibited "many of the same fine qualities."

Although a businessman, Millikin was

known of the political relationship of the two men, we are left to wonder how much more historian Banton might have been able to tell us of their acquaintanceship. Banton's daughter, Mary Bertram of Decatur, who helped her father in the publication of his Macon County history, recently said that she is, unfortunately, not aware of any papers her father left that would shed more light on the subject.

We do know that the Millikins, in their first years in Decatur, easily had the opportunity to become acquainted with Lincoln, often here from Springfield at the time to practice law in this area's Eighth Judicial District. Records show he was frequently in Decatur from 1850-59.

James Millikin came to Decatur in 1856 and married Anna Aston of Mt. Zion on New Year's Day, 1857. The newlyweds took up residence for a year or more in a hotel, the Macon House, later known as the Revere House. It was Decatur's first, and, later, best hostelry. Lincoln had for some time been a frequenter of this establishment when in town. By the time of the Millikins, the Macon House had been enlarged to 60 rooms and advertised that



soon as you receive your information. We hope to have another full house!

One of my goals this year was to develop a restoration plan for now into the future. Brigitta and Lucian Kapp are preparing a complete list of what remains to be done at the Homestead. This list will cover the esoteric (repairing frames and paintings in the dining room) to the mundane (fixing the upstairs commode). It will include visible and non-visible items and the refurbishing, restoring and repairing of other items. Once the list is complete, the board will prioritize each project, batching some together for fundraising purposes. We have come a long way in 25 years, but still have a ways to go.

We always welcome comments and questions from our members. Please drop us a line or give a board member a call. We'll get back to you promptly.

Anne Hostetler
President

P.S. If you should see Dorothy Smethers, congratulate her. She was voted Volunteer of the Year and her name has been engraved on the plaque in the history room.

Bequest from Helen Russell

The James Millikin Homestead gratefully acknowledges the generous bequest received from Helen Russell's estate. Mrs. Russell was a loyal and active supporter of the Homestead and helped with the expenses of recreating the decorative embellishments of the North parlor ceiling.

The scarlet oak tree planted in the front of the Homestead is a memorial to Helen Russell.

Millikin University and renting a room in the Millikin Homestead, then the Art Institute, from the Institute director who himself lived there with his wife.

Judy and one or more of her roommates would occasionally stop at the Institute to see their friend John. John would come down from upstairs and they would be ushered into the Breakfast Room (now History Room) to visit. On one such visit, Judy was asked if she would like to see something "interesting." She then recalls going up the back stairs to the attic where a glass display case, as might have come from an old store, was a principal item of interest among the miscellany of old furnishings stored there.

She thought the case held a lot of pictures and papers, some, she felt strongly, pertaining to Abraham Lincoln. She remembers probably a photograph of him, documents of unknown character, and a kind of feather fan, but nothing else specifically. "I was young and not so interested in antiques or history then," she said.

Now she wonders what all might have been in that display case, and so do we. Did it contain Lincoln memorabilia? Did it hold any of James Millikin's own papers? Or relics from Anna's mother's old home in Ohio?

If the case held Lincoln items, we can only speculate why they would have been at the Homestead. They might have been part of an old display by Daughters of the American Revolution, which had an office in the home when it first opened as the Art Institute. On the other hand, the exhibit might have belonged to the Millikins themselves. It may have been moved into storage elsewhere when the Art Institute closed.

In any event, we know from the biographer of Millikin, Dr. Albert Taylor, that James kept a scrapbook of family clippings, with at least one or more political items in it. The scrapbook disappeared, but its existence suggests that James had a propensity to keep memorabilia.



This likeness of Abraham Lincoln is from a collection of miscellaneous old photographs at the James Millikin Homestead.

"interested in a thousand other things besides money," and it became clear that one of his quiet but definite interests was politics. Not particularly desirous of public office himself, he did actually hold two offices briefly, as a Decatur alderman and Macon County supervisor. He once consented to run for State Senator, Banton wrote, but the prejudice against bankers was such that his opponent was able to use his occupation against him to defeat him. Millikin's disappointment was "keen, but he was as good a sport in politics as in banking."

Millikin stayed involved behind the scenes and became prominent in Republican circles. Knowing Lincoln from their mutual political activities in Macon County, he was long the lawyer's admirer and supporter. When the train bearing Lincoln to his Presidency in Washington, D.C., stopped in Decatur on February 11, 1861, Banton reported that James was one of Lincoln's active Decatur supporters who were at the station to greet the President-elect.

With this all too brief glimpse at what is

the Millikins, the Macon House had been enlarged to 60 rooms and advertised that its service was as fine "as in the big cities." Located at the southeast corner of Franklin and Prairie, the hotel changed its name to the Rever House in 1859.

The dining room of the hotel was renowned for its cookery, and it was here, particularly, that James and Lincoln could have met. For some years, the circuit-riding lawyers of the district had been known to stop often at the Macon House to dine and even to prolong their legal work here for that opportunity; they would frequently linger on into the evenings visiting there.

Arriving as a bachelor in Macon County, James Millikin might well have put up at the popular Macon House and joined the lawyers, including Lincoln, in their evening socializing, or the Millikins together could similarly have met Lincoln there after their marriage. Another Decatur lady, Janes Martin Johns, became a personal friend of Lincoln after meeting him at the Macon House while she was in residence there awaiting the completion of her home on John's Hill. When her piano was hauled by oxen from Ohio, Lincoln volunteered to help move it to this new home.

Whatever the circumstances of Millikin's meeting with Lincoln, the informal camaraderie of the Macon House would likely have appealed to James. Banton noted that James liked going to the Decatur Club in the afternoons. There he "would spend two or three hours in card games and chatting with friends and acquaintances. No one on those occasions ever gathered...that he was troubled with a sense of his importance because he succeeded in making money. He joshed with his old acquaintances, sometimes in vigorous style; they are described as acting 'very much like a set of hale fellows starting life on even terms.'" These sessions surely were very much like the early gatherings at the Macon House.

Millikin and Lincoln both grew up as farmers. Lincoln, the rail splitter, remained forever homespun and possessed of a sense

History – The Rail Splitter and The Cattle Drover (Continued)

of humility. Millikin, the down-to-earth Scotsman, was always unpretentious in his own right. Both were adventurous as young men. From his home in Pennsylvania, Millikin, riding horseback, had driven sheep and cattle to market, both east to New York and west to Indiana and Illinois. Lincoln, of course, traveled the Illinois countryside by horseback as a circuit-riding lawyer and also, earlier, had sailed by flat-boat all the way to New Orleans to deliver Illinois produce there. Between them, they surely had some yarns to tell. Lincoln, as we know, loved laughter and a good story; he saw humor in virtually every situation and had a story to fit.

With all they had in common – from humor to rural background to respect for education and a similar political outlook – we can imagine the two men sharing a jovial evening with other acquaintances around a Macon House dining room.

By extension, we can imagine, too, that James Millikin might have had mementos of the acquaintance he so admired who became President of the United States.

Marilyn Loofbourrow
Historian

Everyone Knows She's Second Hand Rose From a Purist Point of View

There are red and yellow roses bloom within our parlors and nary a one in vase or bowl. They dart past plastered coves and thence into the simulated sky of each ceiling. The North parlor features a subtle blend of backlit clouds and delicately tinted yellow roses. The South opts for bolder cadmium-crimson blossoms on a simpler blue expanse. Since their debut at last December's Victorian Tea, each room has received sparkling gilded touches to ornamental medallions and moldings. Wall brackets of the North parlor's statuary alcove have also been detailed in gold.

A complete research run-up involving microscopic paint analysis of 40 plaster core samples preceded and guided each phase of replication. Robert A. Furhoff (Restoration of Interiors) and the Thomas Melvin Painting Studio, Chicago, who collaborated so successfully on the dining room project of 1994 have now recaptured the floral garnish of these reception areas. They are once again environments for formal and familial events with a restrained elegance to be perceived and savored. Both rooms are chromatically similar and yet color in the North parlor seems warmer by contrast. More than Victorian happenstance could be involved. The Homestead's earlier artisans may have calibrated their hues to influence perceived temperature in various spaces. By winter the in-house heating system would assure an even comfort, but in an Illinois summer the South parlor, though shuttered, would be exposed from East to West, the need for a breeze of cooling color was obvious, or so a theory goes.

Back in July of '76 I received a letter

from Susan Karr, assistant to Homestead restoration consultant Dr. Paul Sprague. They were seeking artistic help with the repair and partial repaint of decoration in the North parlor. Initial restoration was to begin with the parlors and by example eventually involved the entire mansion. After the intervention of twenty years we can now celebrate the full return of authentic period ambience to their interiors.

We've bought some red and yellow roses for a blue lady - or the total project cost for time and materials was \$18,300 - a rose by any other name could be as much, for a rose is a rose is a rose isn't cheap!

A comprehensive inventory of restoration needs for each room of the Homestead is being taken and will be prioritized by the board. Some ceiling canvas remains with the Melvin Studio in Chicago that may yield further pattern and color to act upon. Partial photo documentation exists for the entrance hall and an essentially complete photographic record of the master bedroom is at hand. There is no shortage of exciting possibilities nor enthusiasm to proceed. Progress has always been quickened and indeed made possible by the enabling support of our members and patrons. We hope that each of you will be pleasantly diverted by the genteel spirit of James' and Anna's parlors. While you're there, give them a wink - I always do.

Lucien Kapp
Restoration Committee

Thank You

Our sincere thanks to Nancy Paul for making a much appreciated contribution towards the North parlor ceiling project. Mrs. Paul's generosity, together with the proceeds from last summer's Doll Tea and the bequest from Mrs. Russell's estate, helped cover the major portion of the work done in the North parlor. Financial support such as this has enabled us to do the work thus far. Thank You!!!



Mr. and Mrs. Millikin Days

Mr. and Mrs. Millikin Days at the Homestead will be during the week of April 29-May 3 for local area schools third grade students.

This event has been well received in the past largely as the result of wonderful cooperation of our members who fill the rolls of occupants of the house. Volunteers take note!