

The Dunne House in Hastings: Home of an Immigrant Champion



Figure 1. The Dunne House at 5 Pine Street in Hastings.

The Dunne House (5 Pine Street) in Hastings-on-Hudson is one of the best-preserved early homes in the village and in the Uniontown neighborhood to which it belongs. It is a pristine, sophisticated example of folk architecture of a sort very common in the United States in the nineteenth century developed and refined over many decades by legions of semi-skilled craftsmen. Although heavily renovated on the interior, it is largely unaltered on the outside and preserves the look and feeling of the original Uniontown development perhaps better than any other early structure still standing in the area.

Its original owner was an Irish immigrant named Richard Dunne, who purchased the lots at an auction held in 1874 by the estate of Sidney Blackwell, an early real estate mogul in the area, for \$450. It is located near the top of the hill in Uniontown, which was one of the last parts

of the neighborhood to be settled due to a lack of accessibility. The auction was aimed specifically at immigrants like Dunne, who by 1874 were making up an increasingly large part of the village's population because of growing industrial operations in the village such as the marble quarry on the aqueduct to the Hudson River Steam Sugar Refinery on the riverfront.

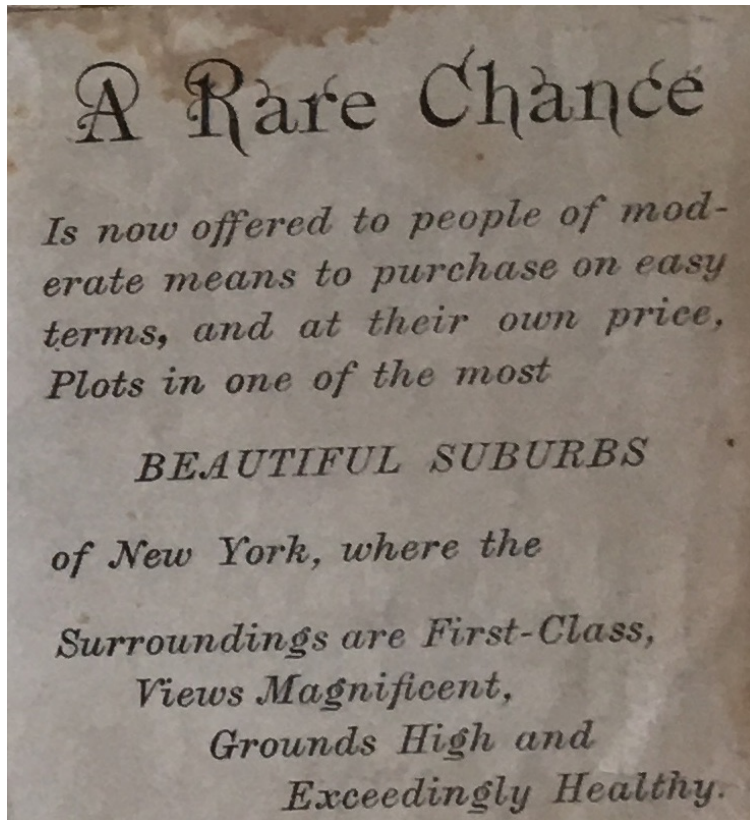


Figure 2. Detail from a pamphlet produced by the Estate of Sidney Blackwell for an auction to sell the remaining plots in Uniontown on June 10, 1874.

Though Dunne purchased the lots in 1875, the house itself does not seem to have been built until around 1900. This was probably accomplished Richard's brother Maurice, to whom the property was sold in 1891. Little is known about Richard and Maurice, other than that they were Irish immigrants that had four and three children respectively. In early censuses, Maurice is

listed as a carpenter, and Richard as a gardener (probably one of the many Irishmen in the employ of the area's wealthy estate owners around this time).

Descendants of the two still live in the village and parts of Yonkers. Maurice had a son that was also named Richard (perhaps after his uncle), who we know lived in the house into early adulthood thanks to an interview with his granddaughter Janet Murphy, a longtime employee of the Hastings Public Library and volunteer at the Hastings Historical Society. From Janet we learn that Richard "Dick" Dunne was a high-ranking police officer in the village, a volunteer fireman in the Uniontown house for many years, and a devout member of St. Matthew's parish. After retiring from the force, he worked tirelessly to improve the lots of Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants in what in his lifetime had definitively become an industrial town largely populated by uneducated foreign workers. A literacy volunteer before such a thing existed, he spent his nights going door to door teaching English to primarily Italian immigrants. Once he felt they were competent speakers, he coached them on the citizenship exam, and even drove them to White Plains to take it (which he was able to do as one of the first people in the village to own a car).

Dick Dunne's work is especially significant in the context of Hastings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was a time of discrimination against immigrants on the part of the local gentry, who often looked down on them as uncultured and even dangerous intruders. Village records reveal attempts to segregate the immigrant population through the establishment of separate educational facilities and other means. By educating and ensuring the citizenship of immigrant workers, Dunne did much to integrate struggling immigrants into the fabric of "respectable" Hastings and American life in general.

In addition to his literacy work, Richard and his wife Nora also opened an extremely successful bar and restaurant on Spring Street in the village after his retirement. The business operated in the building now occupied by Food For Thought (7 Spring Street). Called “Dunne’s Restaurant” during Prohibition, it became Dunne’s Bar and Grill once the law was repealed. The Dunne’s catered primarily to factory workers who trudged up the hill to the tavern after their shift ended seeking a meal and a libation or two. Interestingly, the office of the house’s current owner Ron Cohen—Rivertown Rose Real Estate—is today located directly across the street at 10 Pine!



Figure 3. Interior of Dunne's Bar and Grill circa 1940 after Richard Dunne II's death. His widow Nora is behind the bar, flanked by barman Louis Audevard and Ceil Dunne Hill.

Unfortunately, Richard (much like his namesake uncle before him), died quite young of kidney disease. This occurred not long after the restaurant opened, leaving it up to Nora to run it. She accomplished this with a lot of help from the extended family and few hired hands. An Irish immigrant herself who had experienced constant hunger as a child, she cherished the idea of

being able to make and sell food all day. Among other things she gave free lunches to local immigrant schoolkids whose parents couldn't afford to provide them.

The House



Figures 4 and 5. Southwest and southeast elevations.

Structures like the Dunne House were typically built by the owners themselves and a coterie of semi- or unskilled friends or associates working for free (or perhaps a meal and a beer or two), and this was no doubt the case at 5 Pine Street. The traditional balloon-frame armature (i.e., consisting of a simple wooden matrix of 2 by 4's supported by two thick load-bearing exterior walls), the simple field-stone foundation, the deep front porch, the saltbox extensions off the rear, and other features are all trademark features of the earliest homes in Uniontown, although the Dunne house was somewhat grander in scale than most, spanning three of the original lots as it does. In this respect it must have seemed like a palace to those who built it and others in the neighborhood.

Today the home is a two-family affair, with a very similar arrangement of features doubled laterally (a type of modular extension very common in nineteenth century American

folk architecture). Early maps suggest that it was originally a one-family home consisting of the northern half only, with the southern half added sometime between 1902 and 1912.



Figure 3. Detail from a 1901 Atlas of Westchester County by G.W. Bromley showing a square-shaped structure on Pine Street.

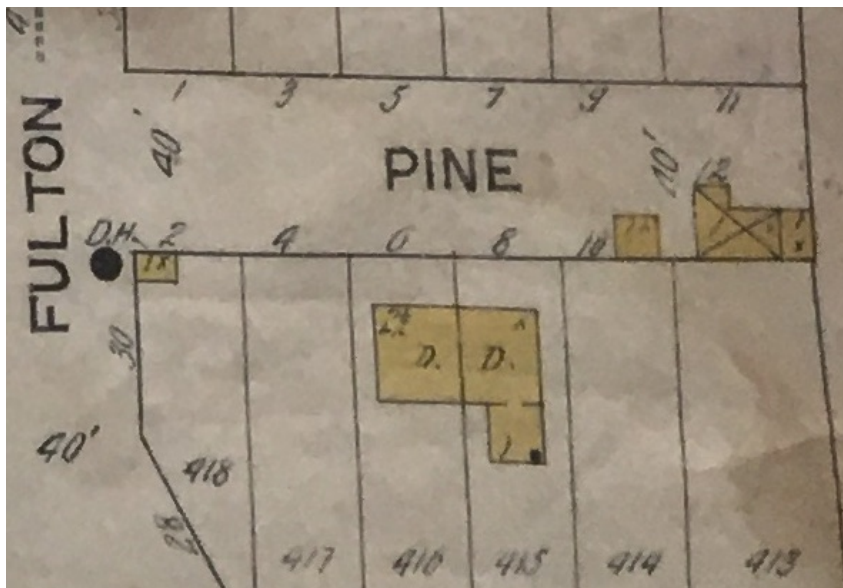


Figure 5. Detail of a 1912 Sanborn Fire Insurance map from 1912 showing an expanded structure on Pine Street that is rectangular in plan with a rear extension off the southern half.

That the two halves were completed relatively close together in time is supported by the similarity of materials and construction techniques on both sides. The original property would have been heated by a coal stove (with coal delivered to the basement via the hatches still extant on either side of the house), and water no doubt drawn from a well.

During recent maintenance on the home, current owner Ron Cohen discovered two fully intact beer bottles in the soil just to the rear of the kitchen and dining area. One of these bears the logo “Chas. Bevers Brewery, Hastings, NY”. This brewery operated out of the so-called International Hotel, an establishment located in Hastings on the riverfront from 1877 to about 1910 that catered to itinerant factory workers. The dating suggests that the bottle was left in the ground during the initial construction or extension of the home, perhaps by Maurice Dunne or one of his co-builders. A great many other, less well-preserved objects from around this time have also been discovered by Ron on the southern perimeter of the property.



Figure 6. Beer bottle discovered on the property bearing the logo of the Charles Bevers Brewery in Hastings.

Internally, the home was gutted and heavily renovated in the 1950's. The changes were significant, making it difficult to guess exactly it may have felt like inside originally. To be sure, there would have been more partition walls and smaller rooms, and bedrooms would have had no closets. Ceilings, too, may have been lower (these were typically no more than 7-8 feet high in early Uniontown homes to conserve heat). Certain features, however observed in the southern portion of the house betray the early date of the house. These include the extremely steep incline

of the staircases, especially that leading to the basement, and the remnants of another now lodged inside a closet in an upstairs bathroom. The doorway leading to the basement off the kitchen also has a curiously low lintel, suggesting a once lower ceiling.

Taken together, these elements bespeak a home that is a veritable time capsule of local history; a metaphor in wood and stone for the immigrant experience in Hastings during its period of rapid industrial growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Architecturally, it is a pristine example of folk building practice that for all its apparent lack of refinement and professionalism has a stoic beauty all its own.