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HI Mailbag: Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne Stevenson (Part I)

Written by [Sharon Butsch Freeland](#) on December 3, 2013 in [Features](#), [Mailbag](#) - [3 Comments](#)

Reader's Question:

What can you tell me about the homes in which Fanny Stevenson lived during the years she was in Indianapolis? ~ Christy Scofield, Meridian Hills

HI's Answer:

For HI readers who may not be aware, the wife of Scottish novelist, poet, and essayist Robert Louis Stevenson was from Indianapolis. It is difficult to find either street addresses or images of residences in the early decades of Indianapolis' existence, as city directories did not yet exist and as photography was in its infancy. Nonetheless, I've attempted to piece together bits of information from various resources to identify the locations in which Fanny Stevenson once resided.

Frances Matilda Vandegrift was the oldest child of Pennsylvania-born parents Jacob Vandegrift (1816-1876) and Esther Thomas Keen Vandegrift (1811-1894). The newly-wed Vandegrifts had migrated to Indianapolis shortly after their 1838 marriage in Philadelphia. Upon their arrival in the Hoosier capital, Jacob Vandegrift quickly established himself as a successful lumber dealer and respected citizen of the community.

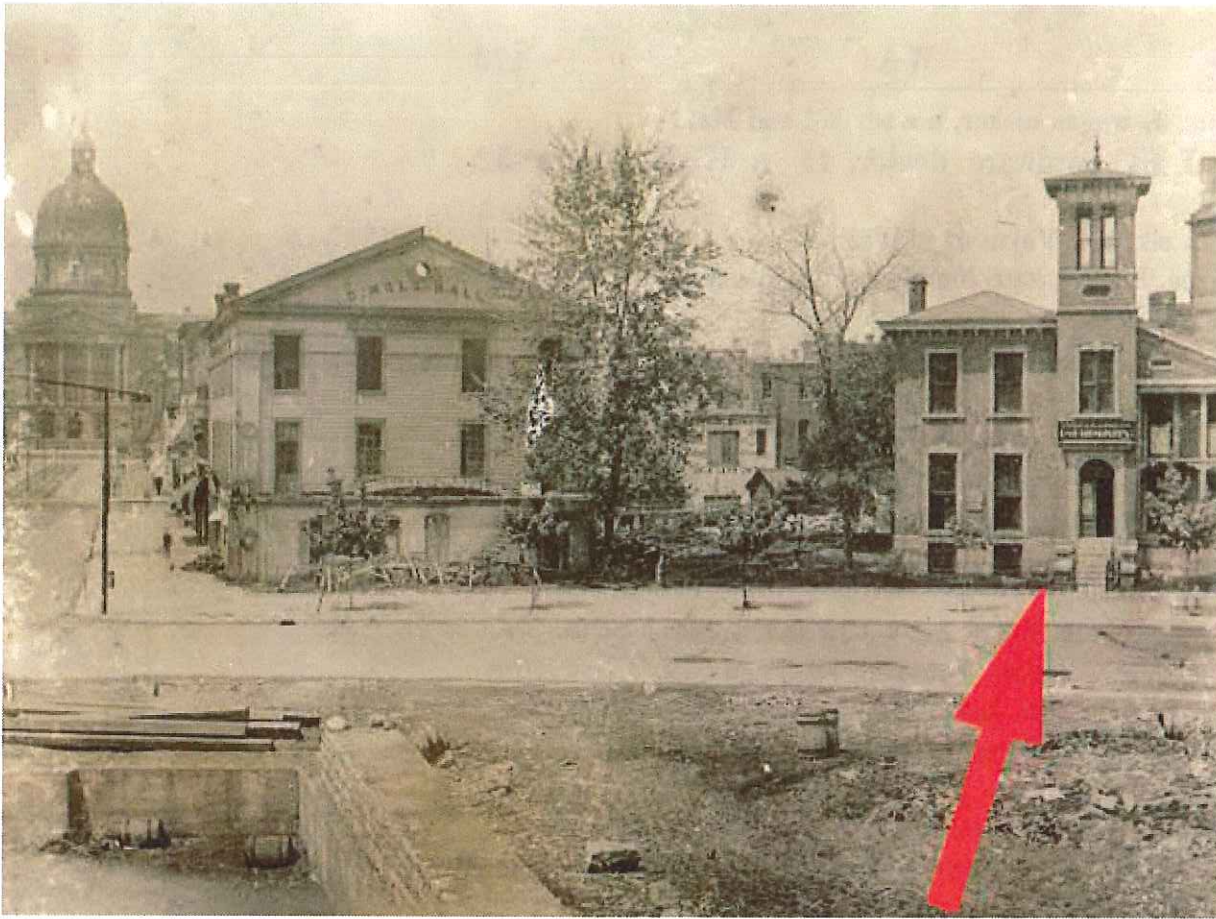
In preparation for starting a family, the Vandegrifts built a two-story Italianate brick home across the street from what was referred to in the city's early years as Governor's Circle and Circle Park. Their residence was in the northwest quadrant of what we today know as Monument Circle. The house was adjacent to Second Presbyterian Church, whose congregation had just erected its first permanent building on the corner of Market and Circle Streets. The church had also just hired a charismatic preacher who would become a well-known figure in American history. Fanny's father and the clergyman, [Henry Ward Beecher](#), became lifelong friends.



1867 photo of home built on the Circle in 1839 and 1840 by the Vandegrift family, next door to Second Presbyterian Church (photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society)

Fanny Vandegrift was born on March 10, 1840, in the family's newly built home. At the age of two, Fanny was baptized in the nearby White River by Henry Ward Beecher.

Sometime after 1842 and before 1855, the Vandegrifts left their home on the Circle. It was bought by a William S. Hubbard, who owned a nearby store that sold groceries and other provisions. In 1864, the property was acquired by William Hayden English (1822-1896). During the time that English lived there, he built an addition to the side of the original home, which included a three-story tower and rooms that opened onto covered porches. After English erected the English Hotel and Opera House adjacent to the residential property, he moved into a suite in the hotel. The former Vandegrift house subsequently housed business entities until it was razed for the expansion of the hotel, which ultimately occupied the entire northwest quadrant of the Circle. The English Hotel and Opera House was the subject of a 2011 Historic Indianapolis "Then and Now" article, which you can read [here](#). In 1948, the English Hotel was demolished, and in 1950, a J. C. Penney Co. store was built on the site. Today, the remodeled building at 120 Monument Circle houses the health care provider, WellPoint.



1887 photo of the home in which Fanny Vandegrift Stevenson was born in 1840 shows the wing added by William H. English (photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society)

I'll reprint some of Fanny's own words about Indianapolis, from writings her sister Nellie included in her 1920 biography of Fanny. "Through the little hamlet where I was born ran, like a great artery, the National Road. Starting in the far East, it crossed the continent, looked in on us rustics, and finally lost itself in the wilds of Illinois. Though we lay on the banks of a romantic river, and a canal, a branch of the Erie, languidly crawled beside us, breathing fever and ague as it passed, the Road was our only real means of communication with the outside world. The river, though of a good breadth, had too many shoals and rapids to be navigable; and though now and then boats crept along by the tow-path of the canal, I never heard that they landed or received any produce. The streets of Indianapolis had no names then; it was too lost a place for that, and we just said the 'main street.' This was afterwards called Washington Street, and was really a part of the National Road. Oh but that was romantic to me, leading as it did straight out into the wide, wide world!"

The Vandegrift family's second residence was on the south side of West Michigan Street, between Illinois Street and Tennessee Street (later renamed Capitol Avenue). If the property still existed, it would have an address of approximately 111 West Michigan Street, but today that is the site of the newly constructed mixed-use project called Block 400.

Vanblaricum, J, wagon maker, n e cor Md and Mer.

Vajan, J H. hardware dealer, 41 e Wash, house 52 Merrill.

Vajan, Chas. clk, at J Vajan 41 e Wash.

Vaile, Rawson, Ed Ind State Journal, off opp Branch Bank, house bet North and Mich.

Vandegrift, M, printer, Ind Journal office.

Vandegrift, H. City Treasurer, off n w cor Mer and Wash.

Vandegrift, Jacob, lumber dealer, house Mich, bet Ill and Tenn.

Vawn, Jacob, carpenter, house cor Miss and Mo.

Vaugh, Henry, clk, at 26 w Wash, house Vt, bet Mo and W, s side.

Vanbuskirk, Lucia, R R, bds La, bet Ill and Tenn.

Vater, Thos S, brick mason, house cor Mich and N J.

Vandegrift, Ben, printer, Journal off, house cor Miss and O.

Vanbergen, Nicholas, printer, house Mich, bet Ill and Tenn.

Vetter, John, cabinet maker, West M and I Depot.

Vincent, S, on R R, house Ala, bet La and S.

Vinton, A E. (Hasselman & V,) founder, house cor Pa and Mark.

Vinnedge, J J. (M Vinnedge & Co,) grocer, 37 e Wash.

Vincent, Wm, carpenter, house Noble, bet O and N Y.

Vorhees, Abram L, house n e cor Ill and N Y.

Vorhees, Wm, blacksmith, at 150 e Wash.

Voss, Henry, tobacconist, at 35 w Wash.

Vonnegut, Clement, (Volmer & V,) hardware, 71 w Wash, house Del, bet Md and Ga.

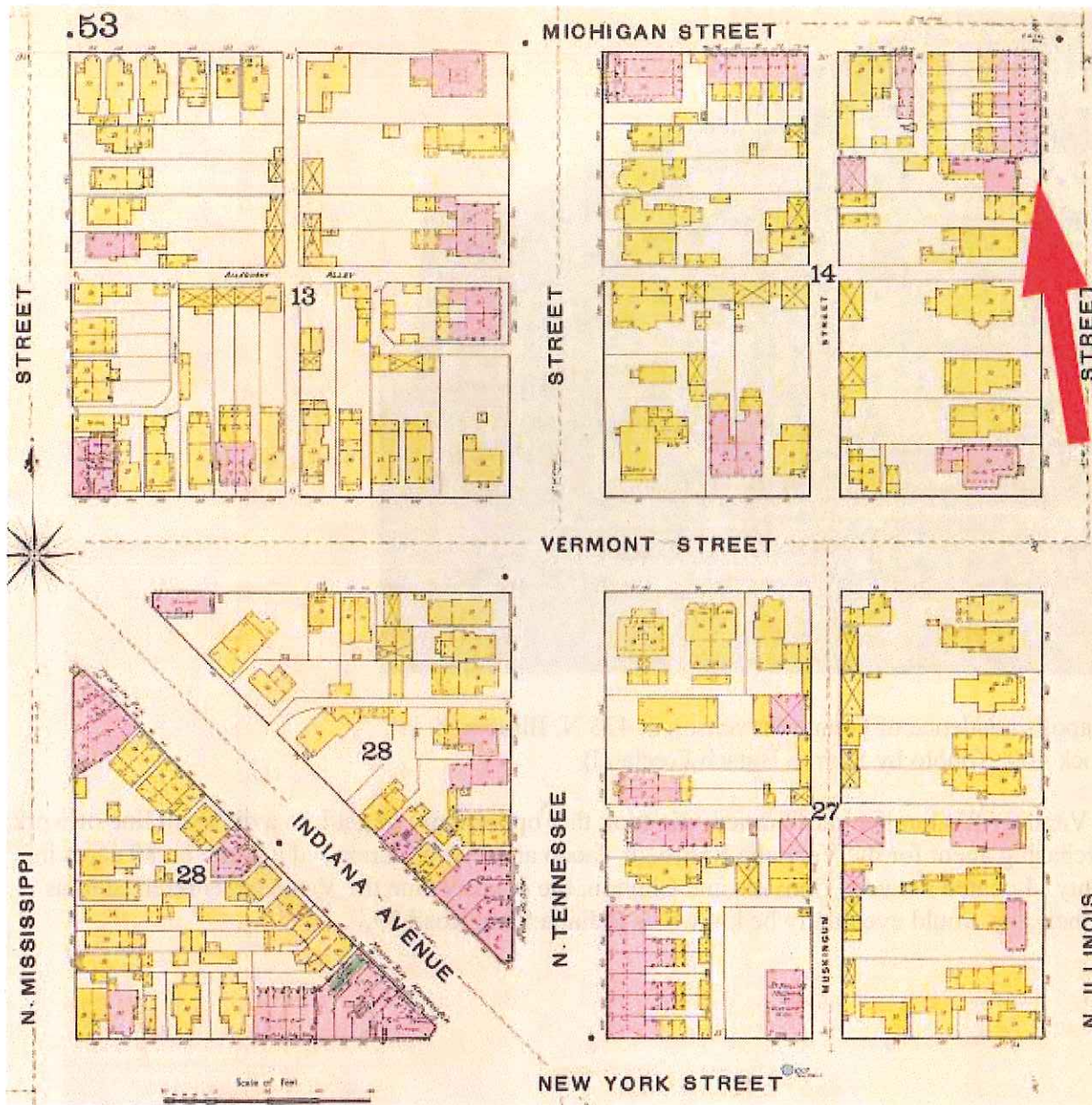
Volmer, Chas. (V & Vonnegut,) hardware and leather dealer, 71 w Wash, house on Md, bet Mo and W.

Voght, Chas, (Sevier & V,) N J and St. Joseph.

1855 city directory listed Jacob Vandegrift on Michigan between Illinois and Tennessee (Capitol) (scan courtesy IUPUI Digital Archives)

On December 12, 1857, when Fanny was just seventeen-and-a-half years old, she married Samuel Osbourne, the twenty-year-old secretary to the Governor of Indiana, [Ashbel Parsons Willard](#). Initially, the couple moved into a place prepared for them adjacent to her parents' home on West Michigan Street. That address, if it still existed, would be about 117 W. Michigan Street, but today it too is part of the newly constructed mixed-use project called Block 400.

In the 1858-59 city directory, the couple was listed at 16 California Street, which today would be about where the Indiana State Museum is located. In the 1860-61 city directory, the Osbournes were again listed at the West Michigan Street address. In the 1863 city directory, the Osbournes lived at 236 N. Illinois Street, which after address renumbering in later years became 436 N. Illinois Street.



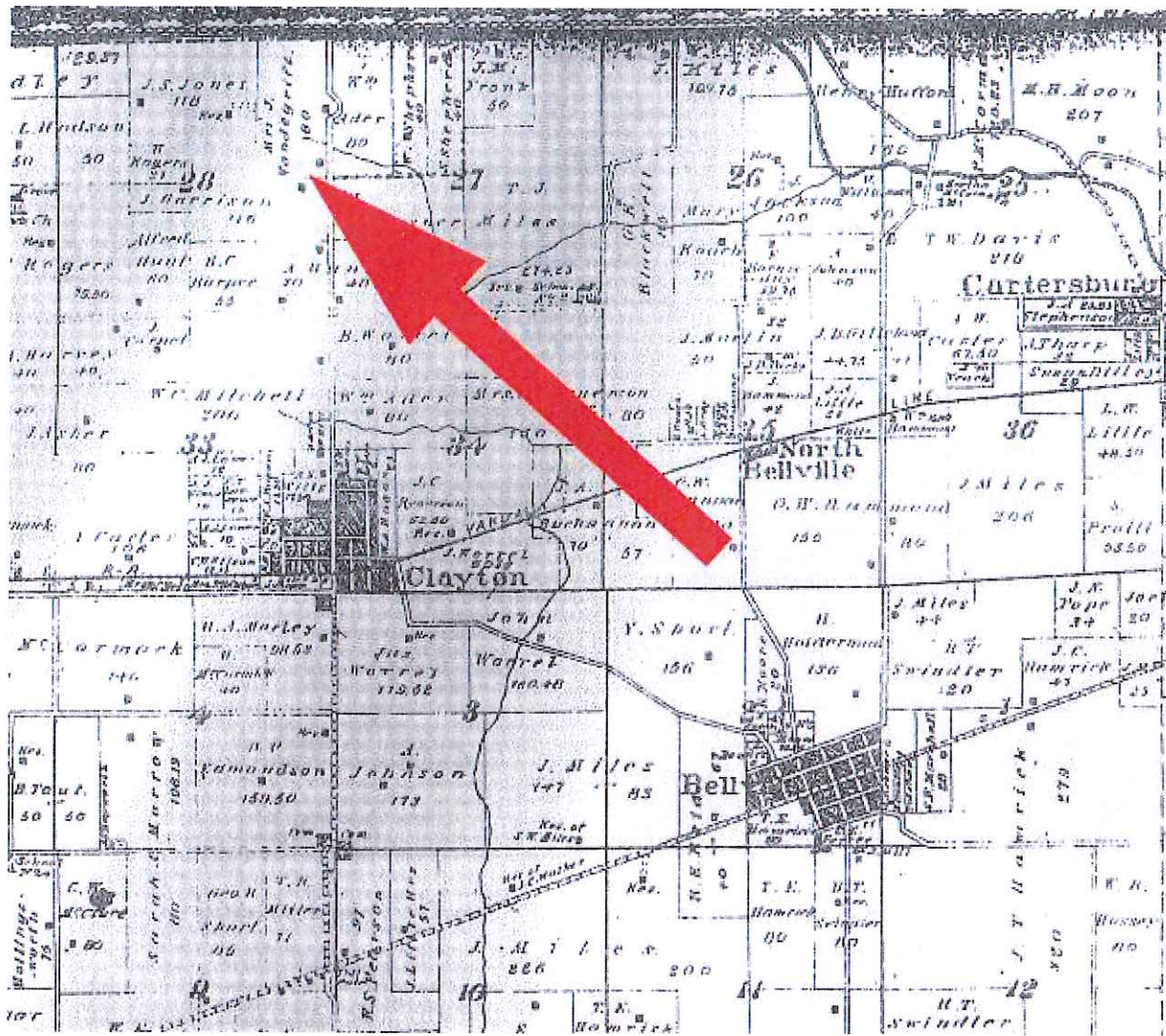
The last home in Indianapolis in which Samuel and Fanny Osbourne lived was at 236 (later renumbered to 436) N. Illinois St. (1887 Sanborn map courtesy of IUPUI Digital Archives) [CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)

The last home in Indianapolis in which Samuel and Fanny Osbourne lived was just around the corner from the first home in which they lived when they were married. As the home on W. Michigan Street and the home on N. Illinois Street were within the same city block, both locations are now part of the recently constructed Block 400 project.



The last Indianapolis residence of Fanny Stevenson at 436 N. Illinois St. is now part of Block 400 (photo by Sharon Butsch Freeland)

In 1861, Jacob Vandegrift's lumber yard burned. He took that opportunity to get into a different line of work, becoming a purchasing agent for the Vandalia Railroad. Jacob and Esther purchased a home on 80 acres in Hendricks County. Located between Danville and Clayton, the country lane the Vandegrifts referred to as "Hill Road" in their day would eventually be known as Indiana State Road 39.



1878 Selby Co. Atlas shows the Hendricks County location of the Vandegrift farm north of Clayton and south of Danville (map courtesy of Indianapolis Public Library) [CLICK TO ENLARGE](#)

The 1863 city directory was the last Indianapolis record of the Osbournes. After serving in the Civil War as a captain in the Union Army, Samuel Osbourne set out for California with Fanny's brother-in-law, George S. Marshall, who was hoping to find a cure for his tuberculosis. George died en route to California, but Samuel continued on to their intended destination alone. Osbourne ended up in the silver mines and sent for Fanny and their daughter Isobel to join him.

Fanny and "Belle" left Indianapolis in 1864. They never officially resided in Indianapolis again, although they visited the area on many occasions. Fanny, Samuel, and Belle settled in Virginia City, Nevada. Unfortunately, Samuel began spending his time running around with other women. The marriage faltered, and Fanny returned to Indiana. She stayed with her parents at their Hendricks County farm for a number of months. Fanny returned to California in one last attempt to save the marriage, but ultimately it failed. By the time Fanny divorced Samuel Osbourne, daughter Belle was joined by two siblings, brothers Samuel Lloyd Osbourne and Hervey Osbourne.

Fanny visited her family any time she crossed the country in her travels. The original portion of the Vandegrift farmhouse was built circa 1845. It is still standing today, 178 years later! I am pleased to report that a young couple has recently bought the property and is restoring it. They have completed a substantial number of projects on the interior of the home and have plans for the exterior, as well.

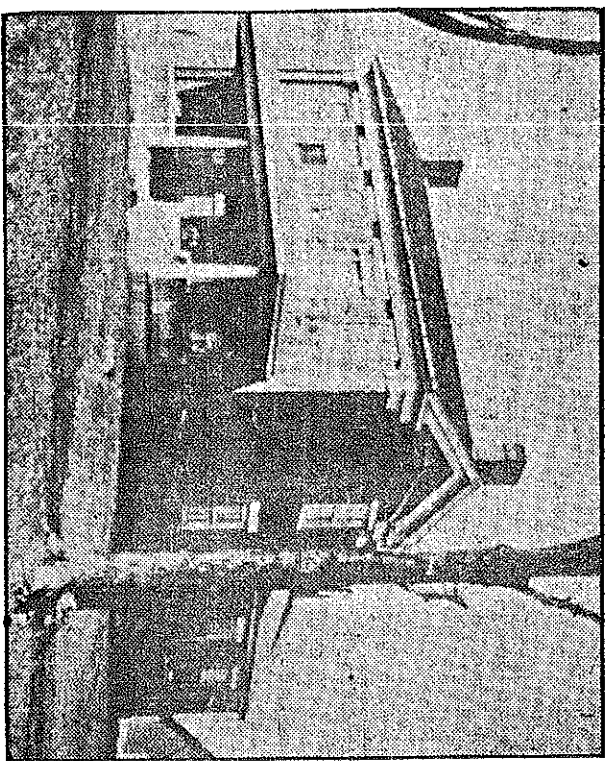


Fanny Vandegrift Stevenson spent time at her family's Hendricks County farm home on many occasions over the years (photo by Sharon Butsch Freeland)

As the remainder of Fanny's life was a fascinating one, I feel she deserves to have some of it shared with those who value the history of Indianapolis and the people who were products of our unique city. Due to the interesting subject matter and the length of the current article, I have decided to devote two columns to Fanny Vandegrift Osbourne Stevenson. Part II will discuss Fanny's life after she divorced Samuel Osbourne, moved to Europe, and met the man whose life she would share from that point forward, Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson.

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Old Van de Grift Farm Homestead Recalls Romance of Famous Author



Home of the Vandegrift family in Hendricks county.

BY AGNES McULLOCH HANNA.

Frances Van de Grift, the partner-
cash wife of Robert Louis Stevenson,
was born in Indianapolis in 1840. Her
father Jacob and mother Esther had
come four years earlier from Phil-
adelphia. They built a small red
brick cottage on the northwest quad-
rant of the Circle, next to the church
where Henry Ward Beecher
preached. It was he who baptized
Frances in White river when she
was two years old. Later the fam-
ily lived on Illinois street near Mich-
igan street.

When Frances was 17, she was
married to Samuel Osbourne, secre-
tary to Governor Willard. John C.
New was the clerk who issued the
license, and state officials attended
the wedding, which was very gay.

Within a year or two after the
marriage, Samuel Osbourne and his
father-in-law jointly bought 180
acres in Liberty township, Hendricks
county, between Danville and Clay-
ton. They paid \$9,000 for the land
with its woods, dales and hill and
this fine house, newly built by Rich-
ard and Sarah Martin.

House on Hillside.

The house stands on a hillside with
a quarter section road curving about

cut from walnut timber on the place.
The floors are yellow poplar.

The house is built from red brick,
mellowed to a lovely shade. The ar-
rangement of windows and door is
most unusual. There are three win-
dows to the left of the door with its
old "lights;" and one window to the
right. In the second story is a mod-
ified "palladian" window now bearded
up. The facade has good propor-
tions, but lacks the symmetry of an
evenly balanced treatment.

The small panes of glass, six to
each sash, are in place, but probably
are not the original ones. The porch
was not part of the original design.

Bought Daughter's Interest.

Jacob Van de Grift, Frances or
Fannie Osbourne's father, liked his
purchase and bought the interest of
his daughter and her husband for

\$4,000. While Osbourne was away in
the civil war Fannie and their chil-
dren, Lloyd and Isobel, lived here
with her parents, her four sisters
and their one brother, Jacob junior.
The activities of the country place
were congenial to Fannie, who seems
to have been a "born manager." She
planned the crops and made gardens
—vegetables and flowers, including
the tiger lilies she loved. They are
associated with her in this place. In

The Weather.

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The regular
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discussed being
time, a sailor sl
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and your uncles and
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Sid Hunt, Sam Cross,
Judge and Glasses Magee
started a secret club lawking
and dum to each other on their
ers and acting as if they knew wh
each other was saying.

BRIEF SAYINGS OF PARENTS.

My father was going to a ban-
kewl, and my mother sed, Albit, will
Danville school.

Takes Charge of Farm.

When Mr. Van de Grift found that
he could make more money by han-
dling supplies for the new Vandalia
railroad than by farming he allowed
Fannie to take charge of the home
place. In addition to such work, she
found time to write for magazines
and to draw and paint, for which
she had real talent.

After the war she and her children
welcomed Samuel Osbourne home
and set out with him across the

the foot of the slope. The forest from which timber for the house was cut is gone and little remains of the orchard that was part of the planting of the Van de Grift family. The interior woodwork was made from walnut, unfinished, but now polished by age and much dusting. The door and window casings, the sashes, the stairs and their rail, high cupboards, low closets under the windows and those beside the fireplaces were all

South Sea Island. Josephine, the sister next in age to Fannie, was the principal at the Clayton school, with Elizabeth-Ellen as assistant. Josephine married Benjamin F. Thomas of Danville. There she was the founder of the public library and its secretary. Fannie Stevenson visited her sister in Danville in 1897 for a brief time. Mrs. Nell Lancher, another sister, wrote several books, including a life



Don't neglect that SORE THROAT

Authorities are warning the public that sore throat is prevalent, and not to neglect the condition. At the first sign of any soreness, take immediate steps to ease the throat and to reduce the infection. Bayer Aspirin will do both! Use it as a gargle. Three tablets crushed in $\frac{1}{8}$ tumblerful of water. Relief is immediate, but repeat until all trace of soreness and inflammation is gone. Take these tablets freely to ward off colds; and for prompt relief of headaches and body aches from colds, exposure, or other causes. Bayer Aspirin can't harm you, and it does prevent all sorts of needless suffering! Get the genuine tablets, stamped thus:

BAYER  **ASPIRIN**

of I. ... for ...
and his gold fields. The gold rush had subsided so they went on to Virginia City, hoping to find silver. In 1866 the son Lloyd was left with his father, and Fannie and Isabel returned to the Hendricks county farm and its happy home circle. Two weddings took place while she was there. One of them was a rainbow wedding, according to Lannes McPhetridge, who has written a sketch of this house and its most famous owner, the Van de Grifts. The occasion made gaiety for the countryside, 25 eight girls were in the party, all wearing tulle frocks of rainbow colors.

A brief reconciliation with Osbourne was followed by the departure of Fannie and Isabel for Europe to study art. In Graz, an art colony near Paris, they made the acquaintance of Robert Louis Stevenson and their warm friendship followed, though it was much interrupted.

Divorces First Husband.

In 1878 Fannie and her daughter were at the farm again; her father was dead and the farm was sad for all of them. In the year following she divorced Osbourne while living in San Francisco. Much of the time she supported herself by writing for magazines.

Robert Louis Stevenson came to San Francisco to marry her in 1881, and they went to Edinburgh to visit his family. In spite of the fact that he says explicitly that he owed to her care and constant attention his opportunity to write and his strength to perform his writing and tales, among his connections and biographers in Edinburgh, a continuing prejudice exists against Fannie Van de Grift Stevenson. The couple returned to California, where they lived and worked for some time; then, in search of health and new stimulus, the voyage to the South Seas was undertaken. The purchase of the ship and its equipment and all arrangements were in her careful hands. Buying an island estate at Apia, in Samoa, clearing part of its jungle and directing the untrained native labor, was her self-imposed task. Stevenson died in 1894 and was buried on the summit of a hill in the tropical forest. A Scottish thistle and a native hibiscus were carved on his tomb; on hers when the time came in 1914 were placed the same hibiscus, but with it was the Indiana tiger lily she had loved. Indianapolis, Hendricks county and the islands of the Pacific are linked through her, and probably the most carefree and gay time of all her life was passed on this hillside farm in Liberty township.