

The site of the Middlebrook Sisters' "haunted house" is now Middlebrook Place.

Evidence Regarding the History of the "Haunted House" at Middlebrook Place

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The Stevens farmhouse was located at modern Middlebrook Place. However, the evidence for this is entirely indirect and the records now contain irreconcilable contradictions. In the following, this statement shall be examined in detail.

The evidence is universal in locating the residence of the Stevens family, from about 1871 to 1888, in the vicinity of the modern Stevens Park Golf Course. The oldest evidence, found in newspaper accounts of that bygone era and the 1880 *County Directory*, locate the Stevens home “three” to “five” miles “west” or “southwest” of Dallas. So, we can be confident that we are looking in the correct general area.

I can find no direct record stating that the Stevens house was in the William Myers Section. Dr. John H. Stevens owned hundreds acres through dozens of real estate purchases during the 1870’s, mostly in this western region of the County. But there is reasonable indirect evidence that the 120 acres he owned in the William Myers Section (the southern $\frac{3}{4}$ of the northwest $\frac{1}{4}$ section) was the site of his farmhouse. And to this I find no contradiction.

The first proof is a unidentified copy of a newspaper clipping, found in the files of the Dallas Public Library (shown on page 27 of Volume 2 of *The History of the William Myers Section*), It has a photograph of the Stevens old home with a caption that locates it “on the adjoining tract” to the new Stevens Park Golf Course and still in “a good state of preservation”. While it is possible that one of the Stevens/ Armstrong tracts west of Hampton, or north of the Coombs Creek was being referred to, it is certainly easiest to take this as a reference to the 120 acre farm inside the William Myers Section.

Also, there are the newspaper obituaries for the Stevens children, Walter and Annie, indicating that the land for the golf course, and the Stevens Park Estates, had been their childhood homestead. Excerpts are reprinted in this volume (page 28 of Volume 2 of *The History of the William Myers Section*).

And finally, there is court record. When Dr. John H. Stevens died, his 120 farm in the William Myers Section was half-owned by his father-in-law (probably collateral for a family loan). Mary Stevens’ mother, father, brother, and husband all died *in testate* (without leaving written Wills). Mary was their only surviving child, sibling, and wife; and she believed that she and her children should now inherit all of these intertwined estates. But her mother had borne children in a prior marriage. And there were surviving grandchildren from that prior union. When the guardian of the grandchildren claimed shares, Mary Armstrong Stevens refused, went to court, argued, and lost. It is significant to note, for our purposes here, that the 120 acres in the William Myers Section was awarded to Mary Stevens first out of all the lands that her husband, parents, and brother had owned. I take this to be indirect evidence that this tract had been her home. (The court decision is summarized in the *Embry Abstract*, Volume 6 of *The History of the William Myers Section*.)

So far, based on these sources, and the absence of contradictory evidence, I think we may conclude with a high degree of confidence that the farmhouse was on the 120 acre parcel that the Stevens owned in the northwest quarter of the William Myers Section.



From the Stevens family archives: Photograph of the Stevens' farmhouse in Dallas

But proof that *Middlebrook Place* was the site of the Stevens home is difficult.

First, I can remember that by the 1950's, the only surviving old farmhouse on this 120 acre parcel was the Middlebrook sisters' home. The simplest explanation is that it had been the Stevens' house. Secondly, that mysterious, undated clipping in the Library (on page 27 of Volume 2 of *The History of the William Myers Section*) states that the Stevens home was still standing in 1924, in good condition, adjacent to the new Stevens Park Golf Course. By this alone, it dawned on me that the Middlebrook "Haunted House" must have been the Stevens home. But the evidence isn't watertight, as I shall now show.

The 1932 *Dallas Morning News* obituary of Walter Stevens, (page 28 of Volume 2 of *The History of the William Myers Section*) states that he:

"... was born in the old stone house that stood for many years on his father's farm near the site now of the field office of the Stevens Park Estates. The land was bought by his father in 1863."

This quotation cannot possibly be totally accurate. For sure, the 1863 date is totally false. John Stevens served as a surgeon in the Confederate Army until its end in 1865. The notion that the Stevens' house was built of stone is quite difficult to swallow as well. And the implication that

the house no longer stood in 1932 matches to neither the Middlebrook house, nor any other record. But at least one point is agreeable; the site of the Stevens home being near the Stevens Park Estates “field office” is plausible. The first “field office” was on the northeast corner of the intersection of *Colorado* and *Plymouth*, right next door to the Middlebrook house.

To press the contradictions further, if we try to merge the notion that the house had been standing in 1924, with the implication that it had been a stone house no longer extant in 1932, we would then be forced to locate the Stevens house somewhere on the Stevens farm, but at a site different than the Middlebrook’s. It is theoretically possible that a house could have been erected anywhere else on the farm. None of the obituary articles state that the Stevens home still stood when Walter and Annie died. In the 1930 aerial photo (c. Dallas Public Library) of the Stevens area, no old farmhouse can be seen, (certainly not on the bare fields west of Hampton). But, Cecilia Middlebrook reported a second farmhouse on the 120 acre Stevens farm.

During the 1960’s, Cecilia Middlebrook told teenager Cheryl Weinberg that there had been a “ranch house” on the southwest corner of *Plymouth* and *Colorado* prior to the construction of the Spanish style *Davis* home (which was subsequently remodeled during the early 1950’s by the Weinberg family into their modern one story home). Would Annie and Walter Stevens have torn down their own childhood home? It doesn’t seem likely. Perhaps it burned down. But if either were true, why would the Sam Street Map of 1900 (on page 26 of Volume 2 of *The History of the William Myers Section*) not have shown such a house, so near the home of J.T. Duncan? It is far easier to believe that this “ranch house” had been a small frame tenant farmers’ shack set up on the farm after the Duncans left, (the Middlebrooks were never known to be farmers). Such a low-budget wooden shack would have been torn down or moved away at the time the Stevens Park Estates was established.

Alternatively in the 1903 City Directory, *Plymouth Road* was named *Rush Chapel Road*. We know that S.A. Rush established a small Methodist Church somewhere in the area. S.A. Rush, J.T. Duncan, and Mary Stevens were all Methodists. Could this little church have become the tenant house that Cecilia Middlebrook mentioned? I simply have no further information.

So, while there are alternative locations for the Stevens home, all technically feasible, none is quite as believable as the simple explanation that the Middlebrook house, the only ‘old house’ surviving by the time of the 1930 aerial photo, had been the Stevens’ original farmhouse.

At this point, I want to back up and point out that there is no explicit statement that the Stevens were the original owners of their Dallas farmhouse. So it remains a logical possibility that the Stevens had purchased a pre-existing house. But examination of the land title records and of the lives of the previous landowners, William Myers and John “Anderson” Penn and his family, leave little doubt in my mind that no house stood on the Stevens’ 120 acre farm in the William Myers Section prior to their ownership (page 32). Furthermore, the photograph of the Stevens farmhouse (page 22) shows features of Louisiana influence, such as the tall shuttered “french doors” opening onto the veranda. Since the Stevens had moved to Dallas from Jackson Parish Louisiana, it is easy to see their background stamped on the design of their home.

The hypothesis that *Middlebrook Place* was the site of the Stevens house may also be confirmed by the names that Annie and Walter left on the landscape of the area. Their mother was Mary Stevens; their father died on Thanksgiving Day. The intersection of *Plymouth Road*

(father namesake street) and *Marydale Drive* (mother namesake street) marks the front door of their childhood home, the Plymouth Rock onto which Walter and Annie each stepped into the new world, the bedrock foundation of their childhood. Their great green gift, the Stevens Memorial Park, named in honor of their parents, wraps the opposite side of this 3 acre site.

Besides the 1932 newspaper obituary of Walter Stevens, a second anomaly in the data is found in the biography of John T. Duncan published in the 1892 *Memorial and Biographical History of Dallas County* (page 39-40), which states that:

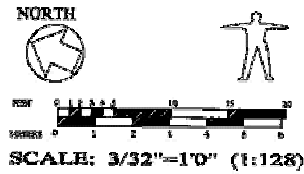
“In 1889 he sold his home and purchased three acres, where he now resides. His residence, a commodious two-story one, 30 x 38 feet, with 92 feet of gallery, he erected in 1889. It is built in modern style and contains ten rooms.”

First of all, the courthouse records show that the property was purchased on the 28th of November 1888, but this isn't a big discrepancy. Secondly, the dimensions and description of the Duncan's house can fairly easily be matched to the photograph that comes down to us from the Stevens family of their family farmhouse, (the same image seen in the odd newspaper clipping about the new Stevens golf course found at the Dallas Public Library). But the statement that Duncan himself had erected this house is quite surprising and contradictory.

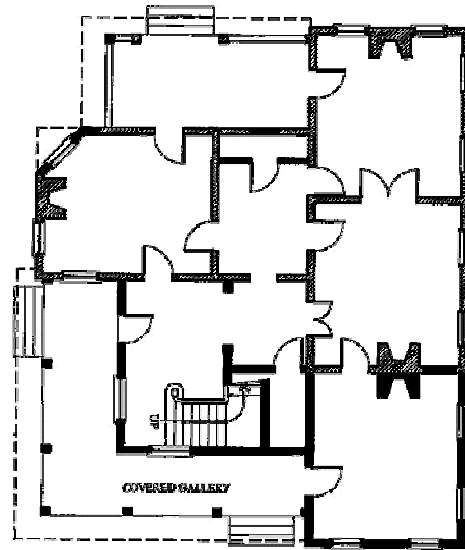
The strongest evidence that the three acres Duncan bought in 1888 already had a house standing upon it is in the recorded deed. Buildings are typically not listed on real estate deeds because they are considered to be a fixed and permanent part of any real property. So, it is not unusual that the farmhouse would not be cited. But the telltale evidence is in the price. Duncan paid \$600 for his three acre site. Numerous appraisals and records of sales in the *Embry Abstract* of the Stevens Park Estates area cite an average value of around \$15 per acre for land at that period of time. The *Historical and Biographical History* quotes general values of \$10 to \$50 per acre for land in Dallas County in 1892. So, why did Duncan pay \$200 per acre? The most plausible explanation is that the land already had a house built on it. Current land-to-house values are similar to the ratio of land appraisal-to-price that Duncan paid for his new property.

But yet another contradiction in the evidence that the Middlebrook house had originally been the Stevens farmhouse is that the form viewed in the Stevens family photograph of the farmhouse doesn't match the shape shown in the 1940 Sanborn Insurance map's plan of the Middlebrook Sister's home (pages 29-30). That Sanborn map's outline closely matches the actual aerial photographs taken in 1930, 1940 and 1970. But the arrangement of forms, the outline of the walls, roofs, and porches cannot possibly fit to the view seen in the Stevens' photograph. Therefore, the only way that the Stevens house could be the Middlebrook Sisters' "Haunted House" would be that it had been significantly remodeled with additions.

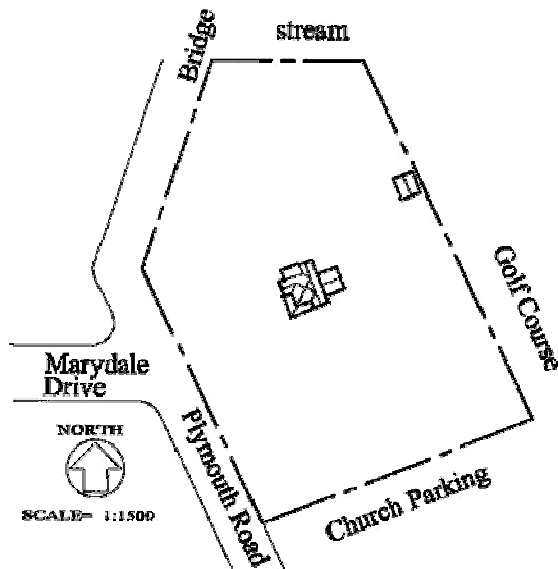
And that works. I can establish the scale of the Sanborn Insurance map; and I can then nest the outline of the old Stevens farmhouse inside of it. The house that is described in the Duncan biography of 1892 matches the form seen in the Stevens photograph of about 1882, but can not be construed to match the form shown on the 1940 Sanborn map. So my personal guess is that Duncan is the owner who altered the house. That would also explain why he "just happened to know" the exact dimensions of his home at the time he was interviewed for the 1892 anthology. He was already drawing up his plans. He was already planning to remodel.



A conjectural reconstruction of J.T. Duncan's remodeling of the Stevens' farmhouse, based on the photograph of the Stevens' family farmhouse, the description of J.T. Duncan's house, plus aerial photographs and eyewitness recollections of the Middlebrook sister's home. A single level addition to the East, visible in aerial photos, is shown only on the site plan. It is considered to be a later, second, addition.



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



Site plan of the remodeling and expanded house. The road to the farmhouse was renamed Plymouth Road when the surrounding Stevens' farm was converted into the Golf Course and Stevens Park Estates. Marydale Drive was not built before 1930. After the Middlebrook house burned down in 1972, the site was redeveloped into the townhouse condominiums there today.

31 October 2001

If this simplest explanation doesn't work, if the original Stevens house had not been added to and remodeled, then the history becomes too elaborate and difficult. Like, perhaps the house burned down and a new one constructed at the site. Theories become more ornate, but they have no supporting evidence, and create more contradictions. So they have been rejected.

A couple of comments about the house: Jane McDaniel confirms that the Middlebrook house was elevated on a "crawl space", supported on a grid of brick foundation piers, (each about 24" square) typical construction of the 1870's. The photographs of the 1972 fire show brick fireplaces, and I myself can clearly recall elaborately flared brick chimneys raising high above the roof. The 1972 fire photos also suggest that it may be possible that the house was a true "balloon frame" construction, the structural wood studs extending up two stories in height. (In the newer, and more common "Western Platform" framing procedure, the wood framing studs

only rose to one story in height, the upper level walls then rising off of a platform formed by the second floor level.)

Yet another anomaly in the evidence about the pedigree of the house comes down to us from Cecilia Middlebrook. Cheryl Weinberg tells me that Cecilia told her in the 1960's that the house had been built by J.T. Duncan, not the Stevens, whose property was "over there" (wave of Cecilia's arm). Cecilia's word turns out to be a very reliable source, but in this unique case they are not. I can only explain the reason for this by pointing out that Cecilia Middlebrook was an avid reader; she must have read the biography of J.T. Duncan in the *Memorial and Biographical History of Dallas County (1892)*. Or, she may have heard the story from neighbors. At any rate, Cecilia was 22 years old when she moved into the house in 1910. The Stevens house would have already been approximately 28 year old at that point.

It is interesting at how little contact there must have been between the Middlebrooks and the Stevens. It must have been a source of great consternation to Walter and Annie that they were unable to return to their childhood home, even as they planned and built around it. In some ways the Stevens Park area, before the construction of the Church in the 1950's at the corner of *Colorado* and *Plymouth* was laid out to accent the prominent location of the home of Mary and John Stevens.

When the last surviving heir of the Stevens/Armstrong clan, Laura Stevens Chadwick, was asked in the mid-1990's by her estate attorney, Stevens Park resident Ralph Churchill, if the Stevens house had been in the Stevens Park Estates subdivision, she had replied that, "No, it had been outside", and "it burned down". Both characteristics match the Middlebrook Sisters' "Haunted House". Their three acre site was the only parcel of the 120 acre Stevens farm that was neither part of the Stevens' Park Estates subdivision, nor the City's park land.



detail from an aerial photograph, circa 1950, showing the Middlebrook mansion

At this point, after long and time consuming search, with the exception of the tiny, barely focused views in the city-wide aerial photographs found at the Public Library, I can find not one single photograph of the famous home of the Middlebrook sisters. It is frustrating. The house was famous throughout North Texas as “the Haunted House”, yet no one kept a single photograph of it. It was too overgrown to photograph easily; but I hope one turns up someday.

So, in conclusion, the evidence that the Middlebrook house had originally been the Stevens’ farmhouse is indirect. It requires the belief that a substantial addition was made onto the house for which we have no written record. It requires rejecting several written accounts, and Cecilia Middlebrook’s verbal history. But, still in all, this is the easiest explanation. After considering all other possible locations in the region of the Stevens Park Golf Course, I can still find nothing that is nearly as plausible. Though the evidence is indirect, and not perfectly consistent, it always points me back to this same conclusion, that the Middlebrook “haunted house” which burned in 1972 had originally been the farmhouse that the Stevens built one hundred years before.

I hope that the future will reveal new evidence. It’s an interesting puzzle.



The charred ruins of an old Oak Cliff mansion, which burned to the ground early Tuesday and claimed the life of 83-year-old Cecilia Middlebrook, probably will sadden children in the area. The wooden mansion at 1232 Plymouth was well known among neighborhood youths as a “haunted house.”

from The Dallas Times Herald, 25th January 1972