

Onstine History Revisited

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This preamble is documentation regarding Jacob Shupe's (Amherst's first settler) house pre-dating Frederick Onstine's house (there has been a story that has long been told that Onstine's was the oldest house in Amherst; actually it was also mentioned it was the oldest in Lorain County). Researching through the Lorain and Huron County tax records, it is clear that Shupe's is older than Onstine's. Additionally, it is noted in Williams Brother's "History of Lorain County," that "...Shupe undoubtedly built the first frame house..." in Amherst. Anyway, Shupe's house first is noted on the Black River tax records (before Amherst was detached) in 1826 on the "list of houses in the Township of Black River." On the 1830 records for Amherst, none of the Onstines had houses, but Jacob Shupe's is listed again. Finally in 1832 the records show Shupe's house still there, of course, but we do see Fred Onstine had his house finally taxed and listed on Lot 3. The Shupe house is listed on the 1819 Huron County tax list in Norwalk (before Lorain County existed), and no Onstine house is listed here. It would be safe to say that the Onstine house was built c. 1832 and was not the first in Amherst and certainly not Lorain County. As a side note, additionally, on June 22, 2006, I met Cora Godfrey, Parker Miller's sister, who stated in conversation that she thought the Onstine house was built in 1836. [Numerous dates have been associated with the Frederick Onstine house, ranging anywhere from the early 1820s-early 1830s. From this research, the 1832 date seems to be the most reliable.] She also mentioned that there is a cooking fireplace in the house, which she had restored.

In our files: copy of the 1826 tax record showing Shupe's house (and Eliphalet Reddington's) being the houses existing and taxed in the township of Black River. Also, are copies of the 1830 tax records showing Shupe's house (and mills) and Onstine's property but no houses on their lands as of yet. Fred Onstine's house does appear in 1832. Also note that the Shupe house appears on the 1819 Huron County tax records.

The story is that Johan Jurg Anstine was born about 1730 in Wuerttemberg, Germany and died in 1799 in York Co., PA. He married Catharina Burger on October 8, 1753 in Montgomery Co., PA. She was born about 1733 in Wuerttemberg, Germany and died in 1807 in Shrewsbury, York Co., PA. Records of passenger and immigration lists indicate they arrived at Port in Philadelphia, PA. in 1751.

Johan Jurg and Catharina Anstine had ten children. We will focus on Jurg Friederich (Anstine) Onstine, born December 21, 1760 in Tioga, York Co., PA. who died April 7, 1837 in Amherst, Lorain Co., OH. Jurg Friederich married Elizabeth Walker (b. March 1, 1762 in Chumung, N.Y. and d. January 6, 1842 in Amherst, Lorain Co., OH.) in 1782 in Chumung, N.Y. (daughter of Henry Walker).

It is noted that the family originally settled in the hills of Pennsylvania. Several of the family had fought in the American Revolutionary War. Frederick and his wife moved to Lancaster Co., PA. where he was involved in the brewing business. The family, comprising of five sons at this time, then migrated to near Long Point (Ontario Province), Canada in 1793. His sons were: Daniel (b. 1784 in PA., d. 1865 in Lorain Co., OH.), Frederick (b. 1786 in PA., d. 1857 in Amherst, Lorain Co., OH.), George (b. 1788 in PA., d. 1858 in Amherst, Lorain, Co., OH.), Michael (b. 1790 in PA., d. 1859 in MN.), Henry, (interestingly, Henry is said to have been born on a boat on Lake Erie, Sept. 15, 1793 as they were heading to Canada, d. 1873 in MN.), John (b. 1795 Long Point, ONT., CAN., d. 1854 WI.), Phillip (b. 1804 in Canada, d. 1877 in MN.), and daughters Elizabeth (b. 1789, d. 1835) and Christina (b. 1798, d. 1823 in Amherst, Lorain Co., OH.).

In 1812, the Onstines walked across the ice of Lake Erie, in order to fight on the U. S. side during the War of 1812. For their patriotism to America, the British government confiscated the Onstine lands in Canada. The family moved back to America, this time settling in New York State. The U. S. government gave the Onstines a great tract of land in the Black Swamp area, in the northwestern Ohio area. This land was found to be poor for farming. The Onstines then traded this land for several hundred acres (approximately 900) in the Amherst/Lorain County area. This became the Onstine family homestead, and they settled here in 1817 [the Onstines do not appear on the 1816 Huron County records, but the Onstine name is listed on an 1817 handwritten voting ballot at the Amherst Historical Society].

Documents from the U. S. House of Representatives Private Claims provide interesting insight into the land Frederick Onstine received as “Indemnity for confiscation of his property by the British” which was passed May 24, 1828. The Onstines are however noted on property tax records previous to this date, as early as 1817 (at that time being Huron County before Lorain County was formed), and then in 1824 (Lorain County) it clearly notes they owned property in Original Lot #3. Also, the earliest date on a gravestone in the Onstine Family burying ground is of Christina Onstine who died in February 1823.

The story goes that the Onstine family raised flax, made paint and linseed oil, and even their own silk cloth from silk worms. The farmstead included pioneering efforts in fruit tree grafting, and the farm was long known for its fine fruit production. The main farmstead was located on original Lot #3, the location of the house built by Frederick Onstine, c. 1832. The house was long reportedly the oldest house in Lorain County (purportedly built between 1816-1818), but this tale grew out of a long passed down story over the years, with several inaccuracies. Many early dates have been erroneously attached to the Onstine house. The Jacob Shupe house in Amherst (c. 1812) is in fact the first frame house in Amherst and most probably the oldest in Lorain County. The story also went on that the wood for use in the Onstine house was brought in from the east because there was no cut lumber locally available (but there *was no need* to do this, as Jacob Shupe already had a well-established water-powered up-and down sash style saw mill in the immediate area, dating to 1811 (certainly in operation by the time the Onstines arrived in 1817). Some of these are simply nice stories surrounding the Onstines, not based on fact and are most likely just a tale.

Following the death of Frederick Onstine in 1837, the old homestead was taken over by the Warner family, who operated a large quarry nearby. Joseph Richardson Miller, of England was born in New Castle on Tyne, England, January 14, 1843 and came to America in 1844. In 1854 he settled in Amherst. Mr. Miller married a Warner daughter (April 3, 1863), Della Warner, but she soon passed away (July 14, 1877). Mr. Miller acquired the Warner farm in the early 1860s, as the Warners then moved to Lorain. J. R. Miller married Helen A. Munger, and they raised a family of six children in the Onstine house (Bill, Joe, Norman, Gameliel, Mary, and Jane). Miller is responsible for the small blacksmith shop building, which still stands on the Onstine Homestead grounds today. He was a blacksmith by trade. The Miller family then owned the land for many years, and several generations grew up and lived there. (A 1982 article notes that Norman, noted above, married Edna Standen in 1923, and they raised Cora (Godfrey), Parker, and Norman Jr. It is most interesting to speak with Joel and Norman Miller, brothers who later grew up in the Onstine house before it was sold out of the Miller family. Photographs reveal that a number of outbuildings and barns occupied the area near the house and alongside the railroad tracks. One of these outbuildings was of sandstone blocks and cleared out before demolition by Bob Gordon.

Photographs also show that a small a one-story wing once was attached to the house’s west side. It had a door, flanked by a window on both sides. A 1964 article that appeared in “The Chronicle-Telegram” states that, “A small wing, added to the house years ago, was later removed and is now used as a storage building.”

Today the house still stands on the ancient beach ridge, overlooking the former old apple orchards and farm fields which once were all part of this Homestead. That property is now filled with a large housing development coincidentally known as “Apple Orchards.” This housing development began in the late 1980s into the 1990s, which occupies about 120 acres. The majority of the northern part of the farm sloped down, off of the ancient ridge into lower lying ground, which, at one time, when the early settlers arrived in this area, was originally a swampy land – a remnant of an ancient lake that once occupied this area, before it receded to its present location (Lake Erie), about 4,000 years ago.

Most likely a Native American Indian village was located atop the ridge, near where the Onstines decided to build and where the KTM warehouse building is today. The native people hunted in the rich lower land (an area mostly comprised of clay) and occupied the higher well-drained ground, with its good visibility, as a campsite. Numerous artifacts were found over the years on this farmstead and in the vicinity of N. Quarry Road, indicating this. The rainwater and groundwater from this entire area slowly drains north through the last farmed land in this area (George Small farm, directly opposite the current Amherst Police Station, east of Apple Orchards) and under present day Route 2, then under the present day Cleveland Clinic parking lot. The watercourse is day-lit again in a stream that makes its way through the edge of the Lorain/Amherst line, ultimately emptying into Beaver Creek.

The original Onstine house sits atop the ancient lake beach ridge, originally accessed by a gravel lane several hundred feet long. This is the North Ridge or Milan Ave. as we know it today. When the railroad originally came into this area in the 1850s, the tracks were laid almost directly on the front steps of the old Onstine house. Later the long driveway was abandoned, and a new one erected for the residents of the house, at the railroad’s expense, which currently allows one to access the house from the rear of the lot. This new driveway was necessary because trains were known to stop for long periods of time in front of the house (and continue to do so). The original front of the house is now treated as the back. Much remodeling has been done to the old place, and it is re-sided, having new windows as well. It was noted that a termite infestation required a great deal of wood to be replaced in the structure.

There were reportedly two Onstine family burying grounds – one located one mile west of the intersection of Oak Point Road and Cooper Foster Park Road (Rocky ridge), on the northwest side of Cooper Foster. The other was located on the northwest side of N. Quarry Road, directly opposite 1016 N. Quarry Road. Both cemeteries were abandoned and the graves moved to the present Kendeigh Cemetery about 1960. We have not found any verification of the Cooper Foster location. A visit to the original burying ground is described in another document.

Much misinformation and several good stories have been woven into the true stories of the old Onstine homestead. We must try to get to the bottom of these stories and reveal the facts once more, so this is what I have endeavored to do in this piece. It is hoped that the record might be set straight at this time and as further research continues.

On January 3, 2020, I saw a posting on Facebook by Cynthia Gilles McGuire regarding the house at 976 W. Martin being available for rent at \$900/month, not including utilities. I quickly inquired and soon was in contact with Bill Gilles, who owns the Onstine Homestead and has rented it out for a number of years. On January 5, 2020 after church, we drove up the long concrete driveway, finally able to exit the Jeep and step foot on the historic property – a property I’ve been researching for about fourteen years. Bill Gilles greeted us and provided history regarding the property. Before entering, I walked to the original front of the house, with the railroad tracks literally on the front steps of the house. A large, hand-cut sandstone step is before the front doorway. Exterior window and door openings look to generally be in their original locations. We toured all levels of the house, including the basement, which is flagged in sandstone. It is a bit damp down there, and the hand-cut sandstone block walls are in a state of good preservation, along with some brick on top. However, many of the tree-trunk rounded

floor joists are quite rotted, and most of the area has been re-joisted with modern floor joists and metal jacks. Severe rot and termite devastation has occurred. Under the main fireplace, in the basement is a foundation of sandstone blocks, atop which is a very unique platform of many square wooden pieces, lined up horizontally, then the fireplaces are constructed atop this, with additional sandstone foundation. Underneath the wooden platform, an adequate space for storage is evidenced. Two access-points are provided for the basement. On the first floor, we entered through the rear portion, through a more modern-day kitchen, then a longer, one-story section, then into the story-and-a-half portion. We finally made it to the original front entryway, and if one would once again properly enter through this location, they would be greeted by an unusually small alcove and the option to either go left or right. (The large fireplace structure is before you upon entry, but no hearth faces the front door.) In the room to the left is the large, restored (new brick), open-hearth fireplace (the one presumably restored by Cora Godfrey, as she noted in 2006). This evidently was a multi-purpose room but mainly set up as a kitchen. The room to the right of the main entry is another room of the same size as the one to the left but has a much smaller fireplace hearth, also restored. This space was most likely intended as the formal parlor. Unfortunately, no overt examples of original moldings are evidenced in the house, which would have aided in further understanding intended uses of each room. All windows and doors have been replaced. Only one small section of original, wide-board, beadboard wainscoting, persists in an area between the room with the large open-hearth fireplace and one story rear portion. All floors are carpeted, so it is difficult to determine the state of preservation of the original wood floors; however, from an underside view in the basement, some original flooring does seem to persist. The original, steep staircase looks to remain in its original location, in the rear. Part of the original wooden structure of the stairs is also uncovered. Upstairs is arbitrarily subdivided, and it is difficult to understand its original layout just by walking through. Overall, restoration would be a daunting task, with much of the material having to be completely fabricated.



Historic view of the Onstine Homestead, with former side wing.