

# Potomac News

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## 'It's right sad to watch history go up in smoke'

**By Nanci Sharp**

"It's right sad to watch history go up in smoke," Mayor Charles Pugh of the town of Occoquan was speaking this morning of last night's fire that almost totally destroyed Rockledge, one of the town's historical landmarks.

Four Prince William County fire departments and one from Fairfax County responded to the fire at 400 Commerce St. at 11:10 p.m. and were unable to get the fire under control until about 1:30 this morning, according to Mike Johnson, president of the OWL Fire Department, Woodbridge.

Johnson said that the last truck did not leave the scene until about 5 a.m., after the mansion had been gutted, leaving only the stone exterior intact.

No one resided in Rockledge, but the owner, Occoquan resident Donald Sonner, had had the impressive three-story home under extensive renovation since he purchased it in 1974.

"It was unusual that a fire of this magnitude, we received only one call," said Johnson.

The call had come from Richard C. Eldreth, who received injuries to his hand as he tried to open the door of the house to see if anyone was inside of the burning building.

He said he realized the fire was a severe problem before the fire trucks

ever reached the scene.

"As soon as we hit the town of Occoquan we called for a second alarm," Johnson said. Over 50 firefighters fought the blaze, which Johnson said was difficult to control because of the old structure.

"The biggest problem in old structures like that is that you have false ceilings. That was the difficulty we ran into. You would think the fire was under control but it was traveling somewhere else," Johnson said. "It is very unpredictable what's going to happen when you're dealing with a structure like that," said Johnson.

Deputy Fire Marshal Ed Lowe said that when firefighters reached the scene, fire was coming from two secondary windows and the front door. Lowe said that Chief Billy Spicer of the OWL fire department has requested that a state fire investigator and state police conduct an investigation into the fire.

Lowe said that the county fire marshal's office does not have any jurisdiction in Occoquan as the town has never adopted the fire prevention code. He called the town a "separate entity."

However, when the Virginia Fire Marshal's office in Richmond was contacted this morning, a spokesman from that office said that he was unaware that the fire had even occurred and that the responsibility for an investigation into the Occoquan fire was

"moved out of our jurisdiction, too."

There were no arson investigators in the Virginia State Police barracks in Culpeper this morning. Arson investigator James H. Jessup, who would be investigating the fire, was out of town. A spokesman from that office said they were "not aware of it."

Sonner, who has been in Potomac Hospital since early yesterday, was unable to be reached this morning for comment. An employee at Blackbeard's Seafood in Occoquan, which is owned and operated by Sonner, said that Sonner called the seafood packing plant last night to find out the extent of the damage at Rockledge.

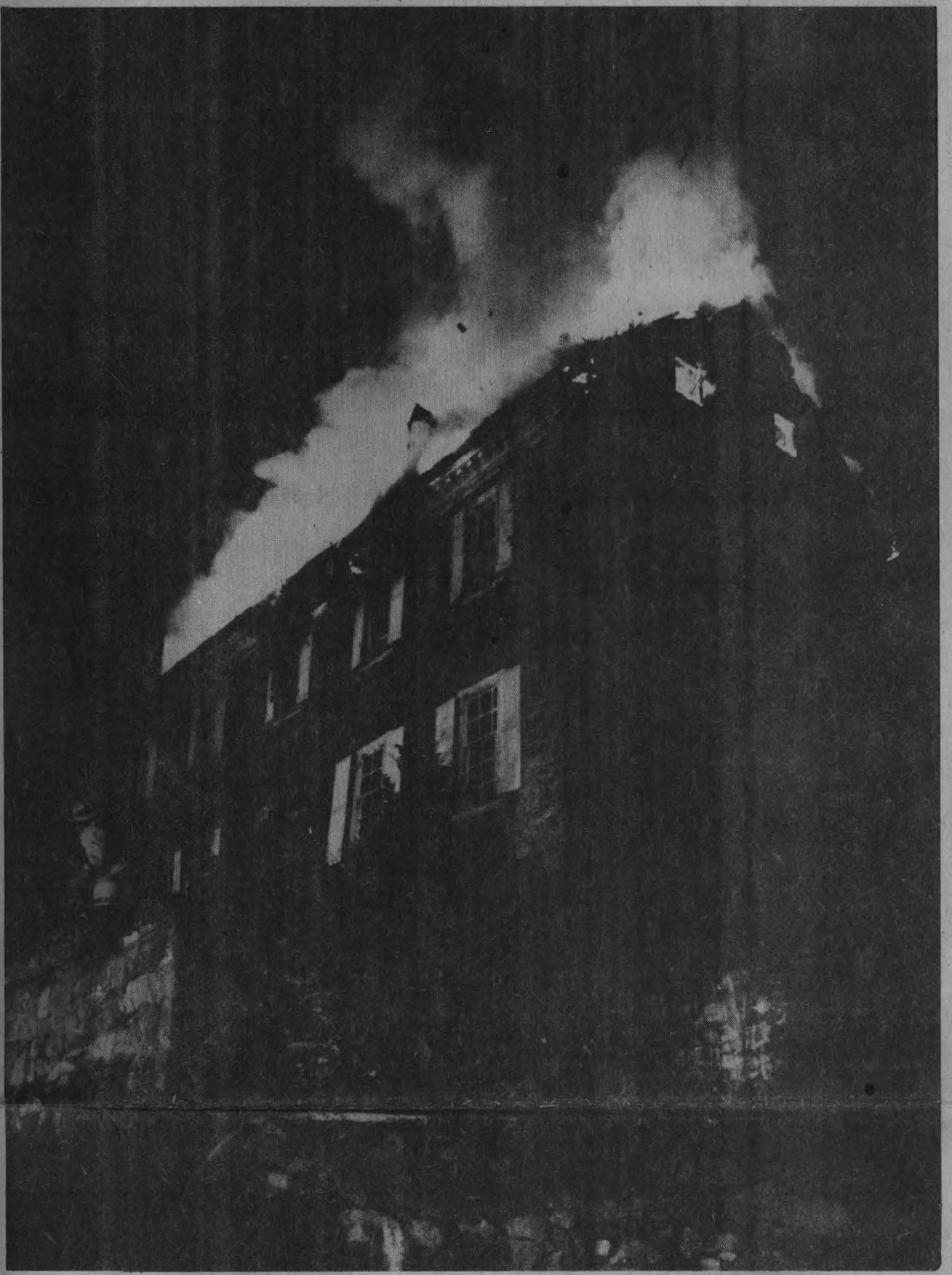
The employee, who said he wished to be unnamed, said that people work all night at the seafood packing plant and that he went out of the building frequently last night to look at the fire which he said was "billowing out of all three chimney stacks."

According to the employee, Sonner had restored the building to just about its original state, which dates back to 1758.

When asked about the three animals which have been seen grazing on the terraces surrounding the old home, the employee said Sonner "had the animals trucked out of there about four weeks ago."

Johnson said that he felt sure the

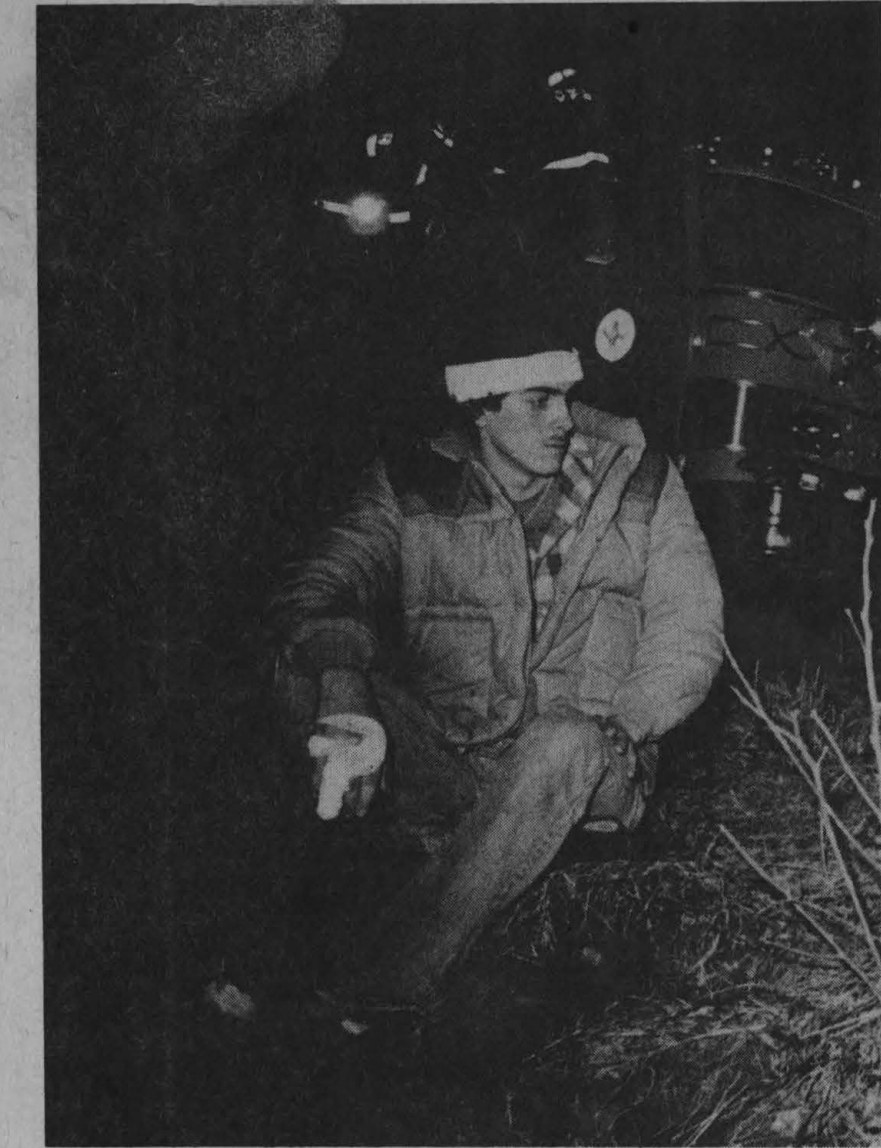
- See SMOKE, Page A-2



Flames, smoke leap from roof of historic Rockledge Mansion in Occoquan



Willie Schoemaker comforts the mother of Don Sonner



Richard Eldreth notified the fire department

Potomac News  
photos by  
Clifford Owen  
and Mark Milligan

## Rockledge built in 1758

**By BECKY BURCHER**

Historic Rockledge, built of rock and lodged in rock cliffs, has stood high above the town of Occoquan overlooking the river for more than 200 years.

"I think everyone is going to miss it," said Fredericksburg store owner Harvey M. Janney Jr. this morning. Janney, his parents and grandparents all have lived in the house. Janney believes himself to be the last child born there.

"It's a landmark," he said. "Even though no one lived in it, everyone looked up there."

The 11-room Rockledge has known a number of owners since John Ballendine, the founder of Occoquan, built it in 1758. Ballendine came to Occoquan to operate a grist mill, later building a saw mill and an iron mill.

Before leaving his Rockledge in 1765 Ballendine started several industries in the waterside town. He owned various warehouses, a bolting mill and a baking mill in Occoquan before his financial troubles began in 1765.

William Buckland, architect for nearby Gunston Hall, designed Rockledge. Ballendine liked the site, say historians, because of its favorable location near the river's falls. He thought the location would be ideal for a town and his home.

The rock for the house was quarried locally, said Peg Williams, president of Historic Occoquan, Inc. The whole area around the house is solid rock, she said.

In 1829 the Janney family acquired the house, and they lived and worked in Occoquan until selling the house in 1929.

Harvey Janney proudly tells that his father, Tyson Janney, brought his bride, a city girl, back to the rock house complete with its outdoor plumbing. Janney was born there in 1925 and lived there for only a few years before his family moved to Alexandria.

As a child, Janney helped Rockledge's

next owner, the F. A. Barnes family with maintenance of the yard. Thinking back he remembers the yard being rocky and having a number of snakes.

Janney said his grandfather sold the house to the Barnes for about \$2,000 in the 30s. "I guess that was a lot of money then," he said.

F. A. Barnes' son, Lawrence Barnes, visited his parents at Rockledge until he and his wife moved there in 1948 to care for his father.

The younger Barnes, now retired and vacationing in Florida, said today that he and his wife finally moved out in 1959 because "the quarry blasted us out."

Barnes said that his family sometimes used the large cooking fireplace in the house's kitchen, one of eight fireplaces in the house, although the kitchen is equipped with more modern appliances. The Barnes also used a spring on the

property for their supply of water. At one time, he said, the spring supplied water for all of Occoquan.

"It had an excellent view," he said. "It was a lovely spot."

After the Barnes left in 1959, the house was owned for a short time by John Woodward and purchased in the early 70s by Don Sonner. When Sonner acquired the house it was in bad repair and had been vandalized.

Sonner worked hard to return the house to its original condition. He had the walls pressure blasted with funnite to protect them and help them withstand nearby blasting from the rock quarry.

Although Sonner completed the renovation, no one has lived in the house since he bought it. Four years ago, Occoquan had a Christmas candle lighting service and Sonner opened his

- See BUILT, Page A-2

### Inside today:

- The popular Newcomers Guide, boasting a full 64 pages, is included with today's Potomac News.
- The opening of Horner Road ramps to vanpools and carpools is scheduled Monday. See story on Page A-2.
- The State Corporation Commission is investigating the legality of CARTS operations. Sara Moriarty reports on it on Page A-2.
- Battered women are being helped through the newly-formed Prince William Women's Aid. See Mike Pomper's column on Page 3.
- Three important county road projects - the Va. 234 bypass, widening of Va. 234 from Manassas to Dumfries, and the Horner Road project. Sen. Colgan's report on Page A-5.
- The county Industrial Development Authority will be asked to authorize the issuance of nearly \$23 million in industrial revenue bonds. Nancy Breeden's story is on Page A-5.
- More federal funds are asked for county mentally handicapped persons. The article is on Page A-5.
- The county Soil and Water Conservation District will soon take orders for free spring plant materials. The coupon is on Page A-10.



Fireman scale ladder while trying to control the rampant fire