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Photo by John Dwyer for The Washington Post

Rockledge, after the fire, and owner Donald L. Sonner.

Fire at Historic Home: Like Losing a Friend ^{1/24}

By Frank Green

Special to The Washington Post

As state arson investigators sift through the rubble of Rockledge Mansion in Occoquan, residents of this small river town in Prince William County are mourning the loss of the historic home as they would an old friend.

Owner Donald L. Sonner, who had never lived in the house, says he is determined to rebuild the 18th century mansion that he so painstakingly restored in the mid-1970s.

Sonner, who planned to move into the mansion this summer, said he believed the fire was deliberately set. "Somebody had a lot of nerve, the old place was beautiful. It was kind of my pride and joy. I guess they told me it couldn't be done, and I did it (the restoration)

The fire last Thursday, which gutted the house but left the stone walls standing, is being investigated by state arson officials. The fire was reported about 11

p.m. and more than 60 fire-fighters responded.

Sonner said he bought Rockledge in the early 1970s for \$50,000 and spent more than \$250,000 to restore the 11-room, three-story mansion. When last assessed by Prince William County in 1974, before the restoration was completed, the building and property were valued at \$103,500.

In Occoquan, residents say, Rockledge represented the heart and spirit of the town.

Twice, residents say, the town was almost destroyed by fire, and once was nearly swept off the map by Hurricane Agnes. But Rockledge always survived.

"It was a landmark," says Mayor Charles Pugh. "It's just part of the community. When you get into a little historical town like Occoquan and talk about something erected in 1758, you're really talking about something."

In addition, says Robert Porter, an Occoquan businessman, the res-



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Fire at Rockledge Home

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Restoration of Rockledge has played an important part in the town's commercial renaissance over the past decade. "You could say Rockledge is the nucleus of everything that's happened here."

Perched on a cliff overlooking Occoquan, Rockledge is a national and state landmark built by architect William Buckland, who designed George Mason's home, Gunston Hall. Rockledge originally was built for John Bull, lendine, the founder of Occoquan.

The fire last week has renewed rumors and fears that have run through this town for years—from tales of ghosts at the mansion to memories of the fires in the early 1900s that nearly destroyed Occoquan. Residents point out the town is still made up of the same type of wood-frame buildings when those two fires swept through Occoquan.

But one resident dismissed most of the rumors, and said the reason for them is simple: "Occoquan is a small town . . . and Rockledge is Occoquan—that's what most people don't want to admit, now that it's gone."

The fire has focused the town's attention on the man who owns the house and is one of the town's most controversial figures.

Sonner owns a restaurant, which is temporarily closed, in Occoquan's business district of craft, gift and antique shops. He also owns an apartment building and a wholesale and retail seafood company called Blackbeards.

"Many looked at (Rockledge before its restoration) and said there was no way it could be done," said fellow businessman Porter. "But Don Sonner had the vision and the money to do something with it."

"Don Sonner is probably the major reason behind the restoration of the town. He came in with a vision and he invested a lot of money with no guaranty of a return."

Although Porter's admiration of Sonner is shared by many townspeople, others have had complaints about Sonner.

"Rockledge is beautiful, but nobody got to see it," said one resident. "But we could see his seafood plant and that was trashy."

Mayor Pugh says that he gets "a fair number of complaints, especially in the summer," about the odors at Blackbeards and the business's appearance.

Residents also are concerned about incidents of vandalism that seemed to have plagued Sonner recently.

Last summer, according to police, a goat that Sonner kept at Rockledge had its throat cut. Mayor Pugh, however, dismisses that as an isolated incident.

"He did have an animal killed," Pugh said, "but I don't think he was singled out."

"He has had his share of incidents," says the town's only policeman, Sgt. Richard Bull, who noted that the windows on a truck owned by Sonner had been smashed. "But all types of crime are on the uprise slightly."

Sonner, who was in the hospital when the fire occurred, refused to discuss any of the vandalism or any conflicts he might have with the townspeople.

"I don't want anything bad said about the town or the people," he said.

Four years ago, Sonner was praised for the restoration, although it was still incomplete, when he opened Rockledge to the public during a Christmas candle lighting service in Occoquan.

Sonner said he is determined to restore the mansion once again, even though he admits it may be difficult to find some of the craftsmen and old-timers who helped him with the original restoration.

Businessman Porter, like many Occoquan residents, hopes to see the mansion rebuilt.

"The reaction (to the fire) has been funny," Porter said, "there's almost a feeling of reverence, like a funeral. It's an unusual emotion for a building (to evoke). I think it's wonderful, maybe people are starting to care more."