

# Rockledge 1757 Occoquan Rockledge Virginia

By Mrs. Laurence Almon Barnes

John Ballandine, builder of Rockledge, was a controversial figure. By Thomas Jefferson he was considered "a sham and pretense." George Washington is said to have once summonsed him to court for a careless error. Washington, however, at times thought well of him as evidenced by the enterprises which he encouraged, and even shared with him.

Ballandine was a gentleman of good family. He descended from the Ewells, who built Bel Air and had large holdings in the Occoquan area, and from the owner of a Liverpool tobacco ship that plied the Rappahannock River in 1720. He and his sister were more than once entertained at Mount Vernon. His only son was a member of Phi Beta Kappa at the College of William and Mary in 1779.

Records of his early life are limited but it seems he operated a packet boat on the Potomac for some fifteen years. His enterprises were many; his imagination active. It was said by some "his reach outstretches his grasp." At any rate most of his ventures, soon or late, proved to be misadventures.

In the 1750's he turned from waterways to manufacturing. He acquired an interest in land on Occoquan Creek and organized a settlement near the falls, where he built several mills and an iron forge. The iron ingots were brought from a furnace at Neabsco, in which he was a partner. At one time he was operating sawmill, bolting mill, bake house and various storehouses at Occoquan. His holdings increased, but failure stalked his path. To meet financial obligations he borrowed from John Semple of Maryland. By 1765 he lost his entire property through foreclosure. His interest turned back to waterways. This was the period when many minds were considering canals and locks as ways of circumventing the falls, especially in the James and Potomac Rivers. Ballandine, with encouragement from Washington, Mason and others conceived the plan of a canal and locks along the Potomac which he actually started at Seneca Falls. But this, too, failed, as did his other projects. Perhaps it should be said of him that he was "ahead of his time."

Sometime during the 1750's he built an eleven-room house near the falls of Occoquan Creek, overlooking the picturesque gorge below. The site on which the house stands was cut out of a rock ledge. A nearby quarry supplied the stone for the mansion. William Buckland, who designed and built Gunston Hall, supplied plans and workmen. The finished product was called Rockledge.

**John E. Woodall**  
owner

It is a simple house with great dignity. Stone houses are not usual in Tidewater, Virginia. This one is built in two parts. The main portion is a three-story structure, one room in depth with gable roof. The smaller part was added later. It contains a large kitchen with a room over it which was perhaps used for servants. This room was joined to the main part of the house by a hall with a staircase leading to the kitchen. A long pantry joined the kitchen to the dining room. The house contained simple but very good woodwork, including six conventional mantels, chair rails, baseboards and cornices in the principal rooms. There is a handsome cornice on the outside. The brick kitchen fireplace is six feet wide. It contains an iron crane, two kettles, and a brick oven on the right. This oven is topped with a long piece of iron which has imprint of an enormous hand with fingers outstretched, in the middle of it. The original H and L hinges remain on doors and cabinets throughout the house. The floors are dark wood of random widths. The widest board (on the third floor) is eighteen inches wide. The floors have settled and therefore are not even. The doors and the twelve-inch window sills slant and are also uneven. Outside of the kitchen is a spring-house where containers of milk were kept in a cement trough. The spring which flowed down the rocks at the rear of the spring house furnished drinking water for many people. A chicken house, outhouse and another building that was used as a tool house, remain on the property.

Below Rockledge, as Ballandine called it, small terraces outlined with native stone walls are cut into the hillside. Here boxwood and sweet william grew.

Buckland, who built Gunston Hall, is believed to have built Rockledge, probably in 1758. There have been only four owners. (1) John Ballandine who called it Rockledge and lost it to satisfy a loan. (2) Nathaniel Ellicott, who called it the Stone House. (3) The John Janney family who owned it from 1829 to 1929 (one hundred years) and called it Janney's Mansion. (4) My father-in-law, Fred Almon Barnes, a sentimental gentleman who purchased it from the Janney family in 1929. He called it by its original name, Rockledge. He was attracted to it when he cruised down the Potomac in his yacht and anchored in the Occoquan Creek, just opposite the unoccupied Janney Mansion. It reminded him of his grandmother's home in Lanesboro, Pennsylvania, which set on a hillside overlooking the Susquehanna River. He renovated it, putting on a new roof, putting in heat, tapping the spring water into the house, building two cisterns, adding two bathrooms and some closets. After my father-in-law died, my mother-in-law would not part with it. Due to her failing health my husband and I sold our home in Chevy Chase and moved, bag and baggage, to take care of her for the rest of her life. After her death my husband inherited Rockledge, the buildings and enough land to protect it. His brother Wilbur J. A. Barnes inherited the rest of the property.

The house was unique in many ways but one amusing way was the traffic jams that would occur during a party. We had many large ones and, due to the house being one room in depth, I would say "hello" to some guests and when they were ready to leave they would go upstairs and down the back stairs leaving by another entrance where my husband would be stationed to say "good-bye."—when all the time they were there he had not known they had come. We had merry and gay times, also some sad ones. Out of all the gracious living we learned many things. An old house has great charm and comforting atmosphere.