

A piece of history is saved as Buckland Mill Road house is renovated

By GAIL WILLIAMS
Observer staff

Patrick Cowne, a Manassas realtor and property owner, bought an old home on Buckland Mill Road in Gainesville a dozen years ago; the tenant remained. About a year ago, Cowne was checking on the house and realized it was in need of repairs. He didn't realize the extent of the long-term damage until he removed siding. In the process, he learned a lot about how the 19th century house was built and repaired.

"When I started the repairs, it dawned on me that this was an old house. I had a sense of responsibility, I guess. I knew it was an old house but didn't know anything about it. David Blake, the owner of Buckland Farm, shared the history with me," Cowne said.

The house's front door was below the road level, which is a few feet away. Cowne said the road initially wasn't that high, but as the Virginia Department of Transportation added more gravel, the road ended up "18 inches higher than the front door." As a result, rain water flowed into the house.

Previous occupants added flooring to stay above the flooding. In addition, the house was sinking, and it had rotting and termite-damaged wood. "Prior owners leveled off the floor because the house was sinking in one corner," Cowne said. "From the outside, you couldn't tell, but as you peeled away the [five layers of] siding, you could see the house was sinking at an angle. I knew I needed to do something with it."

Because the old house is in the Buckland Historic District, Cowne needed Prince William County's permission to renovate. He got it and contacted his friend Tom Basham, a Nokesville engineer. "We knew we needed to raise the house in order to save it," Cowne said.

They discovered about 70 percent of the structure suffered from termite and water damage; therefore, lifting the house could present even more challenges than normal. Both men compared the process to lifting a wet cardboard box.

"Patrick asked me to look at the house because he was afraid it had structural problems," Basham said. "The first clue was that it was sinking like an old boat, listing to one side. It was clear that the floors and part of the walls were rotting because they were too close to the dirt. The wood part of the house was sitting on the ground; the foundation was totally buried. Because the road was higher than the yard, we needed to address the drainage and get the wood framing above the foundation."



When Patrick Cowne started renovations on the 19th century house he owns in Gainesville, he didn't realize how deep the problems went. Cowne left as much of the original material as possible.

Courtesy photo

continued on page 54

Basham considered different options; raising the house was the most logical but couldn't be done the normal way by putting two beams under the house and jacking it up.

Basham explained other difficulties. The house was built with rough-hewn trees, not cut lumber, so spacing and alignment were not uniform. The chimney was in the center of the house.

Basham decided to jack up the house in late August, but it took five men five days to carry out the process, four of which were preparations. The main floor was strapped to the ceiling to make sure it came up with the rest of the house. The crew created a donut

hole around the chimney and braced it so that it wouldn't fall. Crew members bolted beams to the front and back walls, placed three 20-ton bottle jacks in the front and three in back and raised the house an inch and a half at a time on each side until the house was 54 inches off the ground. They used blocks to keep it there.

"At first, everyone was wondering, how are you going to do this? Including me. Even the helpers were skeptical because of these little jacks. The house weighed about 30,000 pounds," Basham recalled.

The crew then removed the old rock foundation, poured new footing and laid cinderblock. "The house was never level," Basham said. "The old rubble foundation was plus or minus four inches out of level."

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They're saving a piece of Buckland Mill history

continued from page 52

They used wedges to help make the new foundation level when they set the house back down, in inch-and-a-half increments over six hours. They rebuilt the unstable chimney, using the same bricks.

Basham said, "It was exhilarating to lift the house. But it was more exhilarating to think that you could." He was also impressed by the 150-year-old wood that wasn't damaged by rot and insects.

He praised Cowne for his efforts to keep the home. Basham said Cowne made "a tremendous tribute to that historic area and made a tremendous investment to restore this house. He was committed. He did what most people wouldn't do." He said he meets with Cowne about once weekly to offer advice.

Cowne said he didn't realize how old the house was and how much repair it needed until he started renovating. Based on the siding, flooring and wiring, he estimated renovations were done in the 1920s and 1930s, plus a 1970s addition.

"When the original house was built, they used timbers that

straight up to the roof; then, flooring was notched into the timber," said Cowne. "When we came to the attic, we found original rafters and a metal roof." The men found at least three floors, five layers of siding with three or four different types of wood.

Cowne said a surprise find was "a 1925 women's magazine in the attic. That was interesting. My daughter noticed there were drawings rather than photos in the ads."

To retain the house's historic properties, Cowne is reusing as much material as possible, ordering comparable material and keeping the floor plan. He is using as

much of the oldest siding they could salvage and complementing it with milled yellow pine from a mill in Fredericksburg. He put on a new stainless steel roof like the new one on the state capitol building, Cowne said, to replace the metal roof. Stone from the original foundation will be used as a wall and walkway in the front yard.

Updates include heating and air with concealed ductwork, the addition of two bathrooms upstairs and new windows with wood trim, rather than vinyl. The '70's addition with a full bath and laundry room will be replaced with a powder room and expanded laundry

room. Cowne said the biggest hurdle has been acquiring appropriate materials, especially metal for the roof, but the house should be completed by the end of January.

Cowne has renovating experience but still learned a lot. "I have done a little of this in the past, so I wasn't blind. The biggest challenge was the architectural review board, but we're both learning together. They've been very good

about the process. I can say the same about the Virginia Department of Historic Preservation, but I deal mostly with Prince William County."

Cowne agreed with Basham's assessment that the most exciting part was watching the house get jacked up. "It's been fun watching. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for Tom Basham. It's always nice to learn something you didn't know the day before."