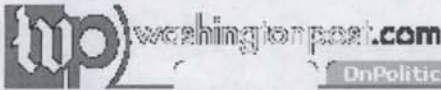


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## County Drops Bid to Save Mount Atlas

By Lisa Rein

Washington Post Staff Writer  
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After spending \$1.4 million to acquire Rippon Lodge in an effort to jumpstart its historic preservation efforts, Prince William County has decided against saving Mount Atlas, a Colonial house north of Haymarket.

Instead, county planners will conduct an archaeological dig at the 10-acre site this summer, inviting volunteers to help unearth what could be historically significant artifacts.

"We want to get in and document what's there and study the grounds to see what they tell us," said Debrae Karnes, a county planner who oversees historic preservation efforts. The first of eight Saturday digs is scheduled for this weekend.

Mount Atlas, built in 1795 on 20,000 acres, had remained in the same family from 1835 until this year, when the last of its six owners, Barton Padgett, died.

The 2 1/2-story frame house, set back 100 feet on a gravel road, has a three-story stone chimney. A distinctive, hand-painted mural in the living room was sold at auction last year. Padgett and his family had not lived in the house since the 1970s, when they built another one next to it.

As Padgett's health was failing last year, the conservator of his estate offered to donate the house to the county to restore it, provided it did not remain on the property on Mount Atlas Lane, Karnes said. The estate plans to put the property up for sale for development and thinks the land is worth more as an empty lot, she said.

The county's historical commission and local planners had high hopes to move the house, perhaps adding it to the complex of buildings, including the historic courthouse, the county is restoring in Brentsville. But Karnes said the move's cost was estimated at \$240,000. And that's before any repair work, a potentially expensive project. The house needs considerable work and its floors are collapsing, she said.

By contrast, the county bought Rippon Lodge, the former Woodbridge estate believed to be the oldest Potomac River plantation from Colonial

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times still standing, from a private owner last month in almost mint condition.

"The county originally saw [the opportunity to take over Mount Atlas] as a great opportunity because the house is very significant," Karnes said. "But it doesn't look like the county will pay to move it."

Before losing Mount Atlas to history, preservationists have decided to search for history in the soil around it. They've hired a professional archaeologist for \$10,000 to oversee dozens of volunteers who will be trained in excavation work. Among the artifacts they hope to find are a grave rumored to be that of a Native American and a kitchen and servants' quarters on the grounds.

Excavations have become more common in Prince William in recent years as the county asks developers building on property with potential historic value to conduct digs before bulldozing. Some surprising finds have resulted.

Archaeologists digging several years ago at the site of Kingsbrooke, a housing development on Linton Hall Road, discovered one of only two known sites for prehistoric horn fells, a mineral that could be made into weapons. And a developer clearing land for houses on the Cherry Hill Peninsula in Woodbridge recently uncovered the remains of a Colonial-era road.

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