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Pr. William to Preserve Oldest House on Potomac

County Agrees to Buy Rippon Lodge for \$1.4 Million

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Wednesday, April 19, 2000; Page B02

Rippon Lodge, the oldest Colonial house still standing along the Potomac River, will be purchased by Prince William County and opened permanently to the public for the first time in its 275-year history, officials announced yesterday.

The county supervisors said they have agreed to pay \$1.4 million for the property, which has been on the market since last fall. They plan to repair the 1725 house, on 40 acres high on a bluff in Woodbridge, and open it as a museum and site for receptions and concerts.

The purchase represents a triumph for preservationists and for a county known more for building strip malls than saving historic homes. Lacking an organized preservation community that could raise money to buy the home when its owner put it up for sale, the county was faced with trying to swing the purchase itself. The owner, Debra Black Decko, turned down the county's first offer, which was substantially less than her \$1.6 million asking price.

But this week, the county's offer was accepted by Decko, the last descendant of architect Richard Blackburn, who built the lodge on his 21,000-acre cotton and tobacco plantation.

Decko, who lives in the District and grew up at Rippon Lodge, said she was burdened by taxes and upkeep costs.

Board of County Supervisors Chairman Sean T. Connaughton (R-At Large) said, "We're extremely happy we've had the opportunity to preserve the most historic house in Prince William County."

An existing easement protects the property from bulldozers, but the impending sale raised the likelihood that Rippon would continue to be held in private hands--and remain inaccessible to the public.

"As long as the pressure for development in this area as a place to live and work continues, we're going to see pressure on these historic homes to take them out of the public eye" and make them private residences, said Nan Netherton, a historian of Northern Virginia.

Public access to historic properties recently has become something of a regional cause. After preservationists protested, an Alexandria couple who had paid \$2.5 million for Robert E. Lee's boyhood home in Old Town agreed last week to sell the property back to its former owner, a nonprofit foundation that had operated it as a museum.

Rippon Lodge, set in suburban sprawl a stone's throw from Route 1 and the Potomac Mills Mall, has a rich history. The 17-room wooden house eluded damage from three wars and escaped the fires that destroyed all but a handful of other plantations on the James and Potomac rivers. George and Martha Washington were frequent guests of Blackburn's son, Col. Thomas Blackburn, who served as Washington's aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War. The sale includes dozens of 18th-century antiques in mint condition. Colonial Williamsburg once tried to buy the rare ruby-red pine paneling in the dining room and parlor.

The county's first attempt to buy the home with a \$440,000 historic preservation grant failed last fall after Virginia officials turned the application down, saying the property was not threatened by development. The county now plans to use bonds to fund the purchase, repaying them partially with revenue from a hotel room tax earmarked for tourism.

The house and outbuildings need up to \$300,000 worth of structural work before they can be opened to the public, officials said. Supervisors have not settled on the details of how a museum would operate, but Supervisor Hilda M. Barg (D-Woodbridge) said she envisions concerts on the property's majestic lawn, where "folks could bring blankets" for picnics under its lofty oak trees.

Decko could not be reached for comment yesterday.

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