

Rest-stop slayer given life sentence

CHRISTIANSBURG (AP) — A jury recommended Friday that an unemployed laborer be sentenced to life in prison for robbing and killing retired salesman Estel Singleton Sr. at an Interstate 81 rest area.

The jury, after listening to witnesses in a sentencing hearing, deliberated for an hour Thursday and three hours Friday before recommending the maximum punishment for the murder and five years for the robbery.

The panel had deliberated for about 11 hours over two days before finding Livingston "Bud" Pritchett, 35, guilty of first-degree murder, robbery and firearms violations. Prosecutors sought a capital murder conviction and planned to seek the death penalty.

"I think the jury took their time and obviously looked at every possible angle," the victim's son, Estel Singleton Jr. of Roanoke, said. "And to be honest with you, as long as he is put away the family is satisfied."

Singleton said the trial was difficult for him because he had to drive past the Ironto rest area every day to and from Christiansburg and "seeing the place where it happened."

His 57-year-old father was shot in the head at close range and robbed in the dark picnic area of the rest area in April 1997. Pritchett's relatives said they believe the trial was unfair because Montgomery County Circuit Judge Ray Grubbs refused to allow jurors to hear the testimony of two mental health experts who diagnosed Pritchett as mildly mentally retarded.

Defense attorney Jimmy Turk said he plans to appeal Pritchett's conviction on the grounds that Grubbs should have allowed the testimony.

Singleton said he's confident the judge made the right decision.

"The Pritchett family now has to go on, and so do we," he said. "The case is closed, but we still have the loss of my father."

Marine pilot faces penalty

Jury suggests dismissal from Corps

By ESTES THOMPSON
Associated Press Writer

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. — A military jury on Friday recommended dismissal from the Marine Corps for a navigator who admitted destroying a personal videotape he made before his jet cut an Italian ski gondola cable, killing 20 people.

The nine-man panel of Marine officers deliberated 3½ hours Friday before recommending the punishment for Capt. Joseph Schweitzer, 31, Westbury, N.Y.

Schweitzer sat stoically and the courtroom was silent as the judge, Col. Alvin Keller, proposed the recommended sentence. But after court adjourned, Schweitzer smiled at his lawyers and nodded his head.

Schweitzer pleaded guilty Monday to obstruction of justice and conspiracy for destroying the tape after his A-6B Prowler hit the cable

over Cavalese, Italy, on Feb. 3, 1998. The ski gondola plunged 370 feet into a valley.

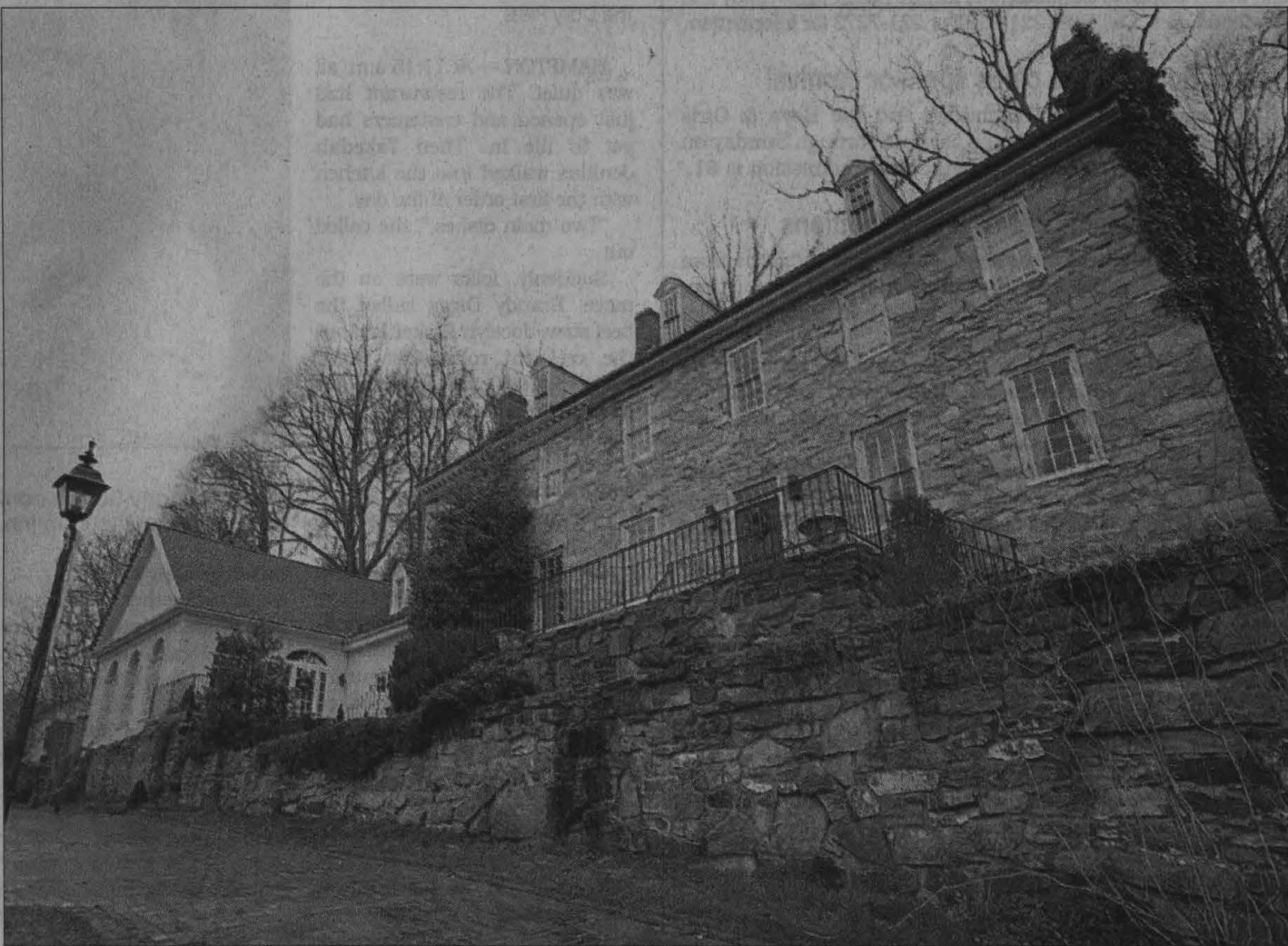
The judge had the option of sentencing Schweitzer to a previously undisclosed punishment recommended as part of Schweitzer's guilty plea, or to accept the jury's recommendation — whichever is more lenient.

He chose the jury's recommendation.

The sentence proposed in the plea agreement, divulged after the jury made its recommendation, called for forfeiture of pay and allowance and dismissal from the Marine Corps.

The sentence doesn't take effect until it is approved by the plea agreement, divulged after the jury made its recommendation, called for forfeiture of pay and allowance and dismissal from the Marine Corps.

Schweitzer then could choose



Photos by Staff Photographer Stephen M. Katz

Rockledge Mansion, built in 1758, features a new addition that is open for weddings and special occasions. The home, at the end of Mill Street in Occoquan, is now owned by Ron and Joy Houghton.

HOME IMPROVEMENT

Rockledge Mansion makes comeback with expansion

By ALFRED M. BIDDLECOMB
Staff Writer

The decision to add on to a house usually faces homeowners at least once.

For Joy and Ron Houghton, no mail order plans for cookie cutter designs of their home would suffice when the couple broke ground to expand the Rockledge Mansion in 1996.

The home had been used as a bed and breakfast since the early 90s, and beginning in 1993 it became the site of wedding receptions and other gatherings. But it was less than perfect.

Although the rooms of the mansion accommodated a large number of people, the house lacked a central gathering point.

"That's when people began to tell me that it was too small," Joy Houghton said. "What they meant was that we had no large meeting area for groups of up to 100 or more."

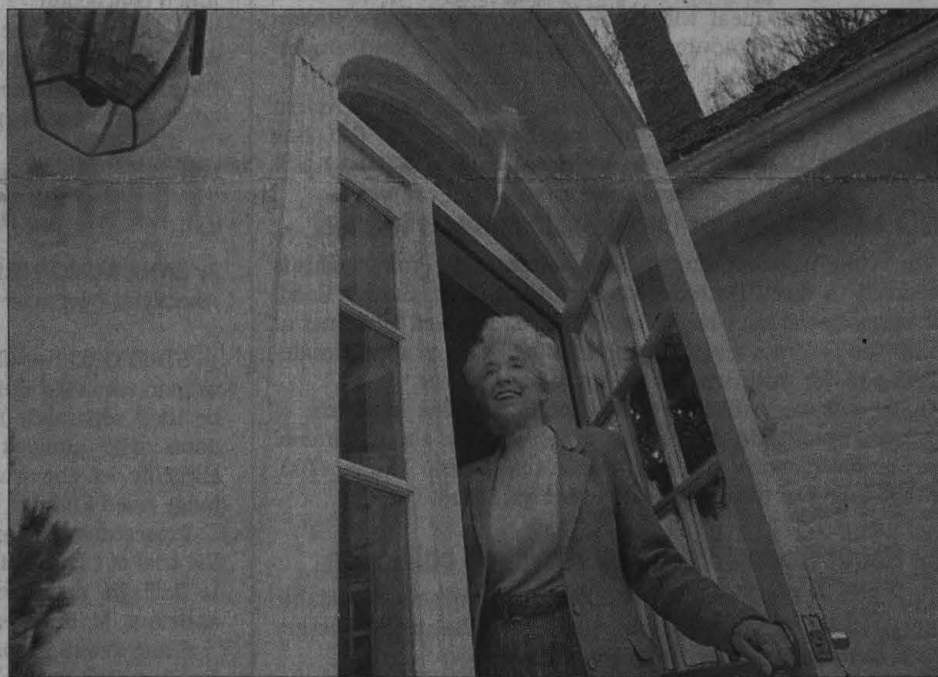
What the Houghtons built was a 1,000 square-foot addition, including a ballroom featuring Georgian architecture and an elliptical dome ceiling.

"This was no simple task," Joy Houghton said while giving a tour of the home. "It took a lot of thought, study and advice from historical architects."

John Ballendine built the Colonial style home on the rocky slope overlooking his iron works and grist mill operations along the Occoquan River in 1758.

The Houghtons bought Rockledge in 1983, a couple of years after fire gutted the original structure. Major damage had been done to the roof and floors, but after buying the mansion at a bargain price of \$175,000, the couple could immediately consider restoration.

Joy Houghton said it took two years of work on a shoestring budget to complete initial renovations. A skilled contractor, her



Joy Houghton stands at the door of the added wing at Rockledge.

husband said he was able to organize most of the work himself.

"Our first year was very interesting to say the least," Joy Houghton said. "It had been vacant for so long that we were sharing the house with animals that had moved in, and one [homeless] person who had previously stayed here attempted to kick the door in thinking no one was home."

Reconstruction meant major restoration of the wooden shingle roof and the first and second floors while preserving as much of the original structure as possible.

Similarly, nothing from the original home was altered or destroyed during recent construction.

The new portion of the home was built around a small, masonry spring house, and instead of blasting away some of the larger

granite rocks poking through the surface of the hill, the Houghtons built the new ballroom around the boulders. The waist-high rocks are visible at the back of the ballroom's stage.

"Kids just love it," Houghton said. "Whenever we have children here during events they go straight to the rocks and begin climbing on them."

Although the Houghtons' neoclassical style addition does not match the original stone mansion, it complements the Colonial architecture, said C. Scott Brook-Miller, an architectural historian with the Virginia Department of Historical Resources who assisted the Houghtons with the project.

"It's important that the addition not mimic nor try to recreate a false sense of history," he said.