

PWC HISTORIC BUILDINGS
(Rockledge)



4 SECTIONS 30 PAGES

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The Journal Messenger

STATE ARSON OFFICIALS CALLED IN

Fire Destroys Historic Rockledge

By JIMMY PETERS
JM Staff Writer

A historic Occoquan landmark that has weathered the Revolutionary War, the War Between the States, vandals, blasting from a nearby quarry and a savage hurricane succumbed to an apparent arsonist Thursday night as Rockledge was gutted by fire.

Although Prince William County Fire Marshal Tom Hajduk has not officially listed the cause of the blaze as arson, he has requested the State Arson Squad to investigate the incident.

Hajduk said the fire was first discovered by Richard C. Eldreth of Flagship Lane in the nearby Riverview Overlook Townhouses about 11 p.m.

Eldreth told fire officials at the scene he saw fire coming from the front door and second floor windows of the three-story stone house. Eldreth said he had been walking through the town when he noticed the flames. Eldreth suffered a cut to his left hand when he slipped while running to notify the county's fire alarm. He was

able to awaken a neighbor who called in the alarm.

Units from OWL-Botts and Friends stations, Dale City, Hillendale, Dumfries-Triangle and Lorton responded to the scene. When the first firefighting units arrived on the scene, the north end of the second floor and attic were engulfed in flames. Flames, shooting through the roof of the hilltop estate overlooking the Occoquan River, could be seen about a mile away.

Firefighters were unable to unlock the iron gate on Mill Street that led to the house. The only entrance was by a narrow driveway from the intersection of Commerce and Ellicott Streets. A pumper truck and a ladder truck were pulled up to the front of the house.

Other fire trucks were stationed at fire hydrants in the town, pumping water to the scene.

Two firefighters were slightly injured while battling the blaze from inside the house after it had been brought under control. Firefighters remained at the site un-

til about 6:30 this morning.

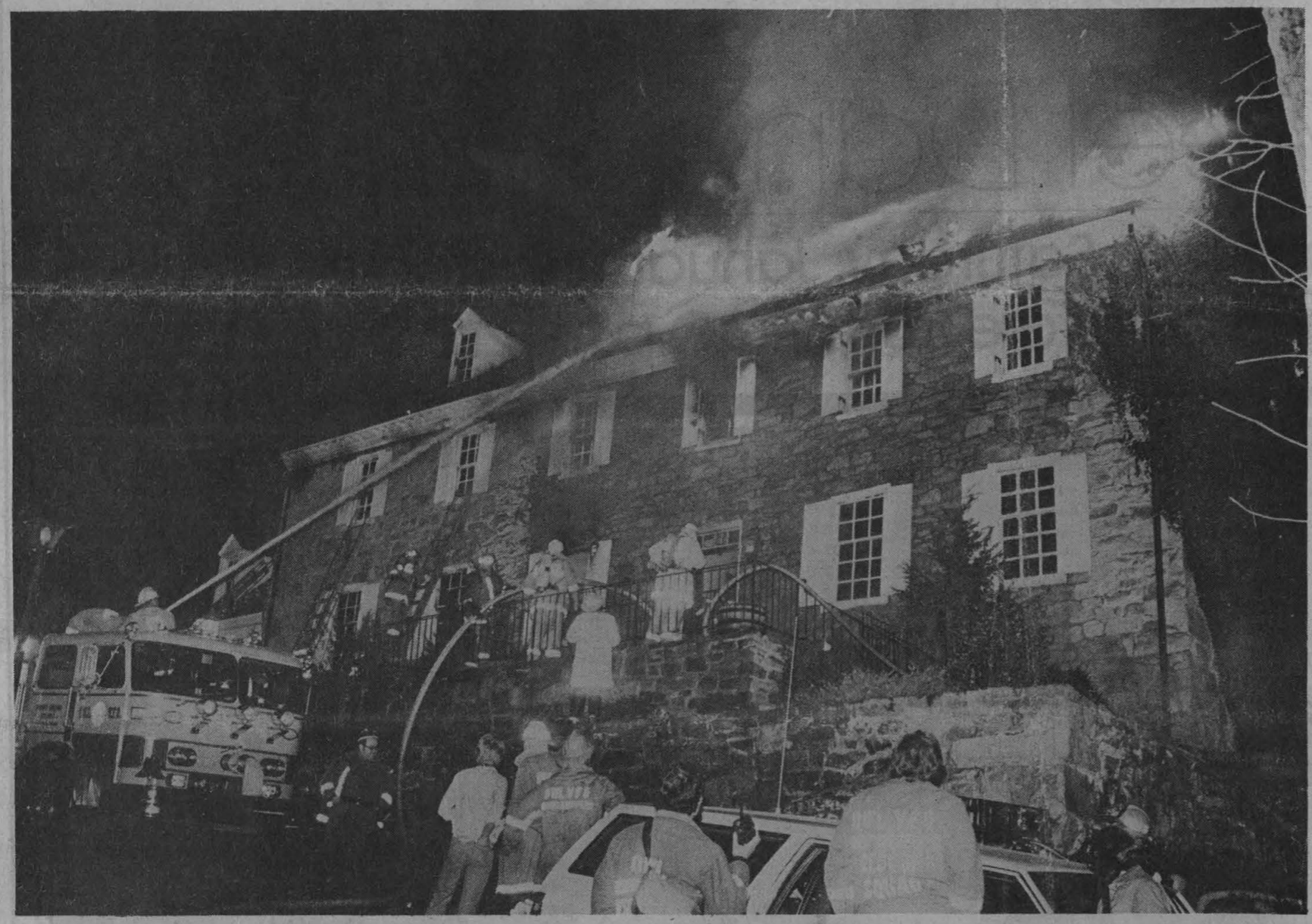
A quorum of the town council granted permission late Thursday night to allow the county's fire marshal office to investigate the fire.

Mayor Charles Pugh said this morning at his home that the county does not automatically have jurisdiction of investigate fires in the Town of Occoquan.

Pugh said he met with council members Joan Herndon, Bill Lipscomb and Jim Donlin to pass the emergency permission. Pugh said OWL Volunteer Chief Billy Spicer had asked for assistance from the county fire marshal to investigate the cause of the fire.

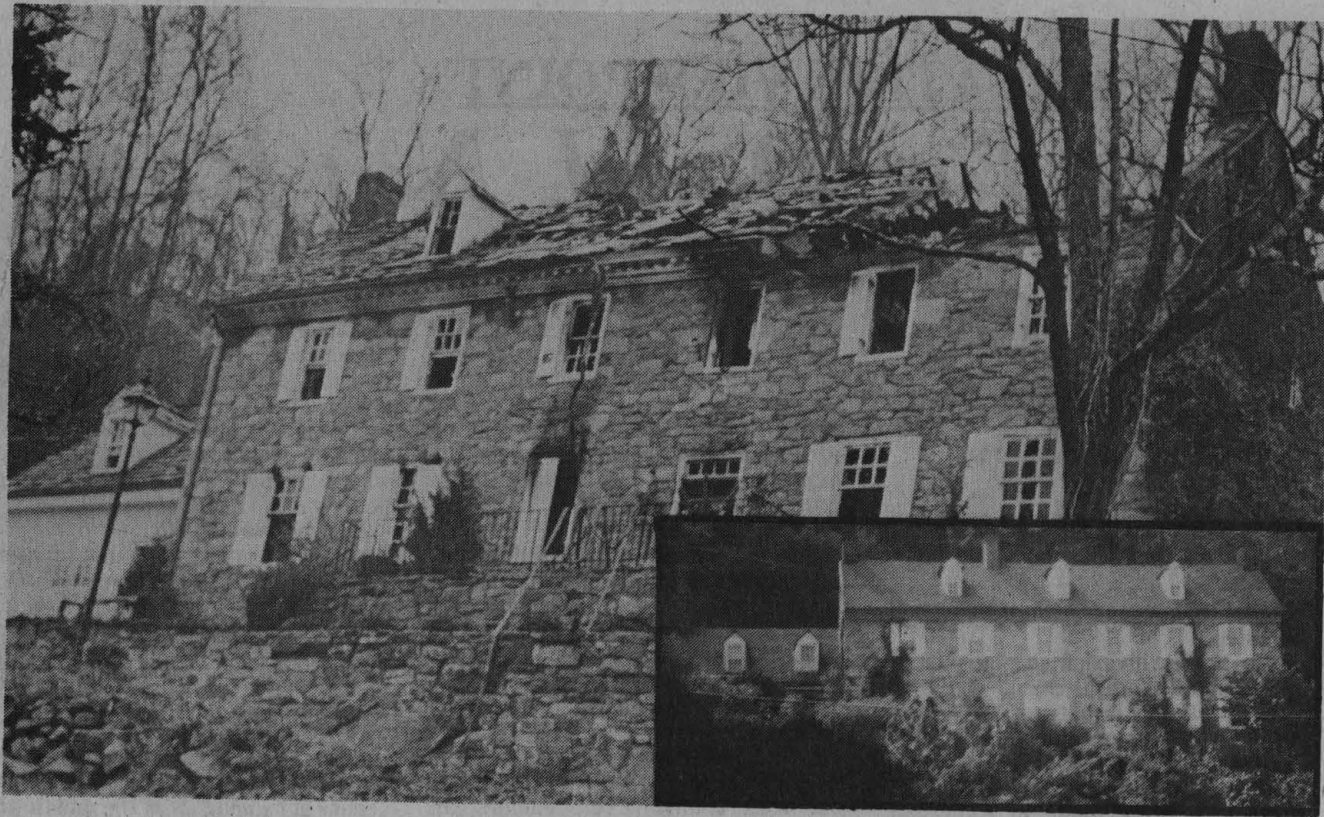
Hajduk said today the only towns in which his office has jurisdiction are Dumfries and Quantico. He said the two towns have adopted a fire code similar to the county's and appointed the county's fire marshal at their fire marshal.

Pugh said when an ordinance giving jurisdiction to the county to investigate fires See "FIRE" on A-3



Jimmy Peters—The Journal Messenger

Firefighters battle blaze that gutted Rockledge in Occoquan Thursday night.



Jimmy Peters-The Journal Messenger

Rockledge as it looked 20 years ago (inset) and today as it stood in the rain gutted by fire.



Jimmy Peters-The Journal Messenger

Officers from the Occoquan-Woodbridge-Lorton Volunteer Fire Department map out strategy to fight fire that destroyed Rockledge.

Fire

Continued from A-1

in the Town of Occoquan is written up, he expects it to become permanent.

The owner of the historic house, Donald L. Sonner, owner of Blackbear's Seafood Restaurant in Occoquan, had not even been notified of the destruction to the structure as of this morning.

Sonner has been a patient at Potomac Hospital for "some time", according to a hospital spokesman. The spokesman said Sonner's doctors believe he is not in good enough physical condition to take the news of the disaster.

Sonner is only the fifth owner of Rockledge. He reportedly purchased the house for his wife for a Christmas gift about five years ago. He spent two years having it restored. The house was furnished, but the family had never moved in.

The house is an historic landmark because it was the home of the man considered to be the founder of Occoquan, John Ballendine. It was built in 1758 under the supervision of William Buckland, who was also the architect for Gunston Hall, home of George Mason. The house was built with stone from the Occoquan area.

Ballendine is credited with establishing industries along the Occoquan River. They included grist and flour mills and an iron mill which turned out weapons for the Revolutionary War.

The stone house that is now the Historic Occoquan Inc. Museum was once a storage shed for the grist mill.

Another owner of Rockledge, Nathaniel Ellicott, was brother of the man who is credited with laying out the City of Washington.

The Janney family took over Rockledge and its mills in the 1800's and it remained in the family for over 100 years.

In the 1950's, when it was owned by Larry and Nancy Barnes, the house was surveyed and designated an historic building by the advisory committee of the Historic American Buildings Survey. A detailed record of its appearance and condition was made and deposited in the Library of Congress. It was certified as having exceptional historic or architectural interest and was worthy of careful preservation for the future generations.

Such was not the case.

Rockledge began suffering structural damage as a result of dynamite blasting at a rock quarry across the river from Occoquan. The house was vacated and it fell victim to vandals.

In 1975 Sonner purchased the house and began restoration.

According to Hajduk, it does not appear the structure can be saved.



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A firefighter from OWL assists a fellow firefighter through a second floor window of Rockledge.