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Rockledge mansion owner wants to sell or raze it

By LUCIA ANDERSON

Rockledge has stood on its granite shelf overlooking the town of Occoquan for more than 200 years. It was built to stand for a thousand more, according to one architect, but it may not have much longer if its current owner can't find a buyer.

When asked if rumors that Rockledge was for sale were true, owner Don Sonner responded, "Very true. And if I can't sell it I'm going to bulldoze it and build apartments — condominiums."

Sonner is asking \$325,000 for the historic house which he spent six years and close to a quarter of a million dollars restoring, only to have his dreams go up in flames set by an arsonist in January 1980.

Rockledge was built by John Ballandine in 1757, 1758, 1760 or 1761, depending on the source of information. Its site is a shelf hacked out of solid rock above the Occoquan River, overlooking what was then a picturesque gorge below the falls.

William Buckland, a master carpenter and joiner responsible for much of Gunston Hall, is variously

credited with supervising the building under contract to Ballandine or with supplying the plans and the workers to build the 11-room house, constructed of stone from the quarry across the river. Ballandine, to meet financial obligations, borrowed from John Semple of Maryland. By 1765 he lost his entire property to foreclosure.

The house passed from John Semple to Nathaniel Ellicott, who called it the Stone House. In 1829 Rockledge was purchased by John Janney and stayed in the Janney family for 100 years. In 1929 Fred Barnes, who had seen the house from his yacht as he cruised down the Potomac, bought it because it reminded him of his grandmother's home set on a hillside above the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania.

Barnes' son Lawrence and his wife lived in the house after the elder Barnes' death. They finally moved out in 1959 because "the quarry blasted us out," Barnes said.

From then until the early 1970s the house remained deserted and forlorn. Ravished by vandals and

weakened by blasting from the quarry across the river, the house was nevertheless placed on the National Register of Historic Places of the National Park Service and the Virginia Register of Historic Landmarks in 1973.

Sonner purchased the abandoned house for his wife as a Christmas present. Restoration work began in January 1974.

Extensive renovation, including strengthening the exterior walls with gunnite and replastering the ceilings with reproductions of the original decorative motifs, had been completed and the house was fully furnished, although unoccupied, when it was set on fire January 18, 1980.

However, nothing happened until this week when Blue Ridge Realty For Sale signs went up on the plywood nailed over the doorway.

O.E. "Matt" Dillon Jr., Sonner's real estate agent, said that they were trying to interest historical societies or historical preservation groups in buying the house.

"It's one of the 20 oldest homes in the state of Virginia," Dillon said. "And

while it was pretty well damaged it wasn't completely destroyed by any means. I think that it could be fixed up for \$75,000 to \$100,000." Sonner said he thought \$75,000 would be needed to restore the house.

"Of course I wouldn't rule out a private individual buying the house for a residence and it would make a fine exclusive restaurant — maybe serving French cuisine," Dillon said.

Whether any local or area historical groups could raise \$325,000 to purchase Rockledge seems to be in doubt.

"Historic Occoquan would love to have that piece of property," said Bonnie Reiss, president of the organization. "But we've only got \$1,500 in the treasury. It would be a shame to bulldoze anything with that much historical value. There's nothing like it in the entire state of Virginia."

"I don't think anybody has that kind of money," said Frances Jones of the Northern Virginia Planning District Commission. "The National Park Service does administer historic sites, but they're usually nationally

significant places. And with the current budget cuts..."

Prince William County doesn't have that kind of money either, according to Kathleen Seefeldt, chairman of the County Board of Supervisors and representative of Occoquan District.

"It's certainly the most

historic thing in Occoquan," Mrs. Seefeldt said, "but the county doesn't have \$325,000. Perhaps the county historical commission could search for a source of funds. There might be some state or federal money.

"It's tragic the way the restoration project was

stymied by the arson and fire. People in the town and in the county are generally interested in historic sites. There would be strong, serious concern about losing such a place."

Occoquan Mayor Donald Lynn wasn't convinced that Sonner could carry out his

threat to build apartments on the site.

"I don't know where he'd build. It's all either downhill or uphill. He may have been mad when he made that statement," Lynn said.

He also said that the land Rockledge is on is zoned for single family residences.



For sale

Historic Rockledge mansion in Occoquan is being offered for sale by owner Don Sonner. See story on Page A-8. (Potomac News photo by Lucia Anderson)