

Historic Rockledge Is Coming Alive Again With Careful Plastic Surgery

Va. Sta. Wm / Occoquan
By JOAN MOWER
JM Staff Writer

One of Occoquan's most impressive historical showpieces, the 18th century house, Rockledge, is having plastic surgery.

The three-story house built in 1758 was purchased in December by Donald Sonners owner of Blackbeard's Inn in Occoquan. Sonners and his wife are authentically restoring the Rockledge and plan to live in the house. It has been vacant since 1959.

Perched atop steep Rock terraces, Rockledge commands a picturesque view of the Occoquan river and neighboring Fairfax county. According to Sonners, the house's foundations stand in a rock base.

Rockledge has a long gabled roof with narrow dormers. There are over a dozen rooms in the house, most of which have fireplaces. It was constructed under the architectural supervision of Matthew Buckland, the architect responsible for designing Gunston Hall.

"We plan to restore Rockledge just as it was in the past," said Sonners, as he supervised several workers one rainy afternoon last week. Both the Sonners have carefully researched the history of the house and houses of the same period.

Although Rockledge requires few structural changes, the entire house has been insulated, electrically wired. The walls must be plastered with gunnite, and the floors reboarded, Sonners said.

Sonners is impressed with

the original construction of the house. "They just don't make houses the way they did in those days," he said, pointing to the thick heavy roof beams.

The roof beams were lodged in place by connecting wood pegs. Handmade nails were used when needed, Sonners explained. While the house is over 200 years old, the wood is almost completely intact. Sonners attributes the lack of leakage to the excellent construction.

A mixture of lime and mud was used to cement the stone walls together. Sonners said that the mixture has crumbled over the years, necessitating a replastering job.

The Sonners intend to use the fireplaces during the winter. While they might install air conditioning, the house will remain cool in the summer months, because of the thick walls, and the breezy location, Sonners thinks.

Mrs. Sonners is in charge of the interior decorating. She does not have an exact idea of the layout at this time, but she has already been buying period antiques.

The three downstairs rooms will be formal sitting rooms, and a dining room, according to Mrs. Sonners. The kitchen is being

completely renovated, and encased in brick.

The second floor is slated for the bedrooms. The third floor will also be made into bedrooms, perhaps for the Sonners' children, Brenda, 14 and Steven, 8.

One third story room will remain untouched, said Sonners. The family wants to give visitors the opportunity to view the original beams of Rockledge.

Many of the history books recount the existence of a small brick schoolhouse, sitting at the foot of Rockledge. The first owner, John Ballentine had his children tutored in the schoolhouse around 1800. If the Sonners can determine the exact site of the structure they will reconstruct the school house, Sonners said.

Box hedges will be planted around the house and, where possible, formal gardens, Sonners explained. He plans to keep the dirt road leading up to the house.

Rockledge was bought on the "spur of the moment," according to Sonners, for a sum of "under \$50,000." "I was on my way to Florida, and someone called and asked if I wanted to buy the house. I said "yes," but only if I can finalize the transaction within a few

hours," he recounted.

The house should be ready for occupancy in a few months. The bad weather has slightly snagged the schedule, Sonners said. He admitted that renovation was costing "an awful lot."

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