



Staff photo by Caron McConnon
Donald Sonner and wife, Ruby, beside newly purchased Rockledge

New owners for historic home

By CARON McCONNON
On Christmas Eve Donald Sonner bought his wife, Ruby, a unique present — historic Rockledge, the abandoned fieldstone mansion jutting from a crag above the shores of the Occoquan River in Occoquan.

In 30 days, Sonner plans to have 95 percent of the work on the house complete, with crewmen working 12 hours a day, seven days a week. A fork lift will remove the plaster and wood debris allowing a crew in tomorrow to brick the floor of the kitchen and repair all the fireplaces. Restoration began eight days ago on the handsome 1760 home which had fallen into disrepair and prey to vandals since last lived in by Lawrence and Nancy Barnes in the early 1960's.

A bonus came yesterday when Sonner discovered a roll of mill documents tied with a piece of straw and dated 1831 and 1834. Although the writing is clearly legible, Sonner will not unroll them until today when he takes them to the experts at Smithsonian Institute for examination.

The Barnes rented a home

in Woodbridge after blasting from Graham Quarries, which began in November, 1959, brought plaster down on their heads. Sadly, they left Rockledge considering it no longer safe. In a resulting \$150,000 damage suit, the Barnes were only awarded \$4,000 for living expenses while the case was brought to trial.

SONNER HAS a solution to problems caused by blasting called gunnite. Used in swimming pools and reservoirs, the concrete goes on with high pressure force, packing the two and one-half foot thick fieldstone walls to resist an impact of 4,500 pounds. Workman this first week have been tearing out all the interior plaster and decayed cement in preparation. Beams will be jacked up and all floors leveled.

Sonner is working on the project everyday while his foreman Danny Wolfrey oversees a handful of laborers, including five or six from the Lorton reformatory. A former clothing manufacturer, Sonner has done construction work in the past, most recently renovating an old general store in Occoquan which is now Blackbeard's Inn. The family lives behind and above the restored building.

L.R. Hodges, Jr., an Alexandria architect and close friend of the Sonners, is advising them on each step of the Rockledge project. The Sonners have also armed themselves with every piece of information on Rockledge and its history for their guidelines.

"We plan to preserve everything we can," said Sonner of the structure. What he cannot preserve, he plans to duplicate as much as possible.

Traveling to Savannah, Ga., over the holidays, the Sonners found several

mansions being torn down. Armed with pictures of the period Sonner will later search there for mantelpieces for the eight Rockledge fireplaces, as well as stair posts and banister and possibly some molding or trim. A single post remains in the entry hallway leading to the second floor which Sonner plans to use as his model.

"I'VE LEARNED that everybody's work has certain characteristics, so I'll simply look for their work," Sonner explained of his mission.

Interior decorating will be overseen by Mrs. Sonner who is thrilled with the prospect. She plans to use slate for the entrance foyer opening into the formal living room or "blue room" on the right. The remaining original plank floor will be sanded and revarnished.

A formal sitting room to the left of the foyer opens onto the formal dining room.

Mrs. Sonner plans to wallpaper everything with antique paper or reproductions of it. The only exception will be the wainscoting in the dining room.

A small pantry which doubled as a serving area joins the dining room to the large kitchen complete with open brick fireplace and baking ovens. The trademark on the piece of pig iron over the kitchen fireplace is a handprint.

"The craftman would make his mark in a big box of sand—in this case the hand print—then pour the hot ore into the mold until it cooled," Sonner explained. He has the original hook for suspending iron pots in the fireplace; it is over three feet long and at-

taches to the rear wall of the fireplace.

Sonner has a set of plans on the kitchen done by the government with details completely worked out. The couple intends to keep modern kitchen equipment at a bare minimum.

The house was designed with no hallways which Sonner expects will make it easy to heat with the fireplaces, although he will install electric heat and air conditioning for modern comfort.

FOUR BEDROOMS are on the second floor, each with a breathtaking view down the Occoquan River into the bay. A bathroom added in the 1940's on that floor will be updated. Three bedrooms on the third floor do not have fireplaces like those below, but will be equipped with Franklin stoves for warmth and charm, Mrs. Sonner said.

With insulation stripped away, the roof supports show the wooden pegs which joined them. Roman numerals still remain where the pairs were carved on the ground then matched and assembled on the top floor. Irregular handmade nails also show through. Sonner plans to add a new roof of cedar shakes to top the renovation project.

As Rockledge was built by William Buckland, the same architect that did Gunston Hall, Sonner is having those

windows specially reproduced now.

Rockledge was originally designed by Buckland for John Ballentine, owner of the mill at Occoquan and ironmaster. Stone for the mansion came from the quarry on the Occoquan; it was named Rockledge because it sits atop solid rock.

The Sonners came to Occoquan in 1966 nearly 200 years after Ballentine, but grew to love the area as the original owner did. They plan to clear the terraces and landscape as it was in the 1760's. Even the spring house, and grape arbor with benches under it will be renewed.

"We like old houses and hated to see someone come to town and turn it into something commercial," said the Sonners. They plan to live in it when complete with their 14-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son, "at least until the novelty wears off."

The sale of the off historic landmark handled by The American Realty Company.