

Jenny

Potomac wins again

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Town, businessman vie to buy Rockledge

By PETER OVERBY

For Robert Wilcox, Rockledge is getting close to an obsession.

"I couldn't sleep that first night," he says. "I had it torn down and rebuilt."

With a bit of luck, and healthy doses of local financing and enthusiasm, the mansion brooding over Occoquan will become headquarters for Wilcox's Calvert Co., a firm that has won awards for energy-efficient homes in Montclair and Lake Ridge.

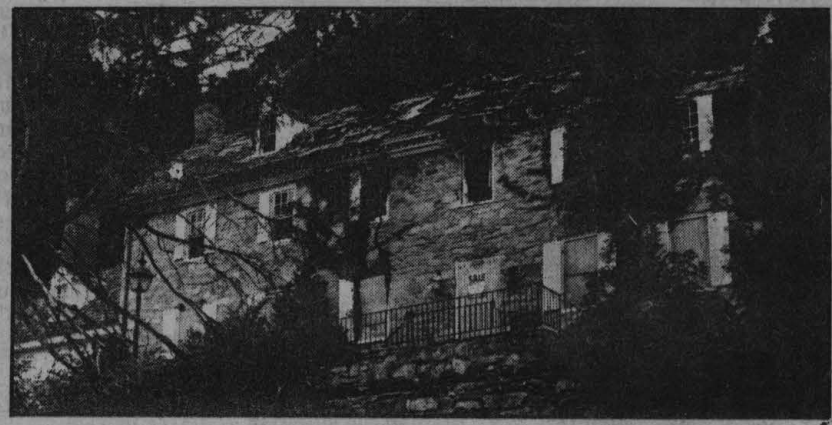
Don Sonner, current owner of the 200-year-old structure, put it on the market in July. He had bought and restored the abandoned house in the mid 1970s, only to watch it burn in a set fire in January 1980.

Despite its listing on the National Register of Historic Places and Virginia Register of Historic Landmarks, Sonner said, "If I can't sell it I'm going to bulldoze it and build apartments — condominiums."

The mayor of Occoquan, Don Lynn, said this morning he's not convinced Wilcox's Calvert firm will purchase the historic mansion and Lynn is holding out hope the town can garner local, state and federal funds to buy Rockledge.

Lynn said he should know "today or tomorrow" whether the funding is expected from government agencies.

Lynn and other town council members met with Sonner Thursday night. Sonner did not mention Wilcox's offer, Lynn said.



Historic Rockledge Mansion

Settlement for Wilcox is not expected for two weeks. The selling price is undisclosed.

Wilcox doesn't yet have the deal closed, but he has plans galore: First, restore the first floor with period furnishings, and use both floors for offices. "Maybe on weekends we would open that first floor" for tourists.

He wants to restore Elizabeth Street, the brick roadway across the front of Rockledge, widening it enough to allow parallel parking and one lane of traffic.

Rockledge itself is not large enough to house Calvert's 25 employees, Wilcox says. He wants to build a row of townhouses along Elizabeth Street south of the main building, but without obstructing the view of Rockledge from Occoquan's main avenue, Mill Street.

The townhouses would have shops below and offices upstairs.

Wilcox also hopes to make the two-terrace front yard of Rockledge a gravel parking lot for the shops.

Calvert isn't into the project to make money, Wilcox says: "We can go out and build new office space for half the price. It's got to be balanced between our serious, honest civic interest and what makes sense economically. We're willing to really stretch to make it work."

Here's some of the stretching that Wilcox expects he and others will have to do:

"I think all the estimates of restoring that house have been grossly understated," he says. His target is about \$200,000 and six months' work.

One end of the roof came down in the fire, and remains open. Wilcox expects crews will have to gut the center of the building. An engineer will examine the house before the

deal is closed.

Wilcox has doubts that the new tax law encourages restoration, although he does not think it will stop him.

But the biggest question marks are money and outside help. He asked the people "with Merrill Lynch accounts" and "money drawing 18-percent interest in New York" to put some of it in local institutions.

Wilcox also has to check into zoning and other matters with the Occoquan town government. Rockledge is zoned

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'Interest rates are devastating'

By PETER OVERBY

WASHINGTON—Representatives of the Prince William County Builders' Association this morning held a genial but inconclusive meeting with Sen. Harry F. Byrd, Jr. (R-Va.) on a painful subject: interest rates.

"I don't know if you've been hearing the howls and screams," began Association Executive Vice President Karel Dutton.

Byrd broke in, "I think you can't help but hear them."

The consensus was, as Byrd said several times, "Interest rates are devastating."

Although Prince William County is in a lucrative housing market, the builders said speculative construction

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TOWN

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for single-family homes, and Wilcox doesn't know what obstacles might block the conversion to commercial use, restoration and improvement of Elizabeth Street and construction of another building. A requirement to make Rockledge barrier-free, for example, would make the project impractical, says Wilcox.

But while Wilcox and his associates wait for the financing to come through, they are chomping at the bit. For several weeks, said one, everyone in the Montclair-based firm was lunching at Occoquan restaurants, just to be near Rockledge.

As Wilcox talked about his plans Friday, he gazed wistfully at a greeting card bearing a print of the mansion.

Rockledge gets its name from the shelf it sits on, cut from solid rock overlooking the Occoquan River. John Ballandine, who built it in 1757, '58, '60 or '61, depending on whom you ask, lost it in a foreclosure in 1765. It passed through two owners to John Janney, whose family owned it from 1829 to 1929. Fred Barnes and then his son lived there until 1959, when blasting at the quarry across the river drove out the younger Barnes. Ironically, the quarry supplied stone to build Rockledge.

The house was vacant and vandalized until Sonner bought it in 1973.

Wilcox and the Calvert Co. still have a long road to travel from Montclair to Occoquan. And besides the big problems, there are little ones: A few days after Wilcox posted no-trespassing signs, someone stole the iron gate at the north end of Elizabeth Street.

But Wilcox says he and his colleagues are optimistic — and pleased. "We build nice, new, modern projects," he laughs. "But it really is exciting."

He continued, "This should be the first time this house goes through a renovation like that."

Manassas area houses, ransacking rooms and stealing stereos, jewelry and a handgun.

"Even though these are his first felonies as an adult, the court has to look at his entire criminal history, which in his case is very extensive," said Assistant Commonwealth Attorney Michael Dixon. "He has been through the system previously on

seven similar charges as well as two more serious charges, that being the arson.

"On the other hand, Mr. Fair was before the court on his first felonies," Dixon continued. "He didn't break into someone's home, and I think the courts do look differently between residential burglaries and business burglaries. And I think the court

looked at the circumstances that Fair was in during the time he committed the burglaries. As you heard, he was eating out of trash cans when he broke into a grocery store."

A man's spirit must be broken for him to search through the garbage for his meals. Sitting in the witness chair before Judge Thornton, Fair looked smaller than 6 feet 4 and 200 pounds.