

## Rockledge REFERENCE

owner: It had  
to be arson

By NANCY SHARP

Arson Investigator James H. Jessup from the Virginia State Police in Culpeper spent all day yesterday probing the charred remains of Rockledge in Occoquan.

Until Thursday night, the 1758 mansion had stood on cliffs overlooking the town of Occoquan and the Occoquan River.

Between 11 p.m. Thursday and 5 a.m. Friday, about 60 firefighters fought to extinguish the fire that engulfed the interior and destroyed, in owner Donald Sonner's estimate, two-thirds of the roof.

The stone walls of Rockledge stand but some of the exterior remains blackened by the fire. Plaster, broken glass, boards and other debris litter the wooden floors. Curtains and antique chandeliers hang askew.

Jessup will not comment on the possibility of arson. "I'd rather not say right now," Jessup said. "It is being actively investigated and we have put in a good day digging in it. We know where the fire started," he said, refusing to say where.

When asked if Rockledge could again be restored, Jessup looked up at the massive front and said, "I say that the house can be fixed. I've been from one end to the other. The walls are sound."

Jessup said he will assign an arson investigator from his Culpeper office to investigate the fire and although he intimated the investigation would be a

thorough one, he would not comment further on arson as the cause.

Donald Sonner said yesterday that he bought Rockledge at Christmastime 1972. Sonner said he had since invested from \$250,000 to \$275,000 in restoring the historic mansion.

Although Sonner said he bought the five-acre property as a "good property investment," it became much more than that. Rockledge became a challenge, and eventually, an emotional investment.

"It was in ruins," Sonner said. "Everyone laughed at me. They said the house was falling down. I came up with a way to rebuild it. I designed a way to save the house."

Sonner said he couldn't get a loan for the reconstruction at first. "There were trees growing through the center of the house," he said. Sonner seemed frustrated that many people who had admired Rockledge after renovation had no concept of the dilapidated condition of the house when he bought it.

Sonner met the challenge which Rockledge presented him. Over several years he restored the mansion. "I even turned down a confirmed offer for \$400,000 on the house." He said he had intended to move into the house on the cliffs but never did. It remained vacant.

Sonner said the house, which his insurance would not come close to adequately covering, was partially furnished with antiques.

"Some of the stuff can never be replaced," Sonner said. He seemed especially distraught that the roof trusses were destroyed by the fire. According to Sonner, each truss carried a Roman numeral and was hand-made with wooden pegs.

Rockledge, with nine fireplaces, was "a concrete house inside a stone house," said Sonner. "The electric was embedded in concrete," he said — which brought him to surmise that the fire was no accident.

"It had to be arson. There is no way the house would catch on fire. I don't know who would do this to me. I didn't think anybody — no matter how sick they were — how much they didn't like me — would do that," Sonner said.

Sonner was undergoing tests at Potomac Hospital when he learned of the Rockledge fire. "My mother came to the hospital and told me. She was very upset," Sonner said.

As Sonner climbed the slopes toward the closed-off mansion where fire investigators were working, he looked up at the house and said, "There was

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nothing in the way of quality that could have been done that I didn't do to that house."

He passed to the left of the house front, toward the steep stone walls behind the mansion, where he pointed out an old spring which still brings water through the rocks. "That spring originally supplied water to the town," he said.

Three farm animals which grazed on the honeysuckle, which is overtaking the stone walls, were removed from the property about a month ago. Sonner said the goats and calf were taken to an Orange County country home for the winter months.

Sonner said he could give no estimate of the damages to Rockledge and didn't know if he would be able to restore it. Although he never moved into the house, he never had any intentions of selling it.

Twice Sonner referred to Rockledge as "my pet."

The pet is badly singed.