The Prince

By LYDIA MATTHEWS

On Saturday, the third of February Historic Occoquan will begin their annual fund raising events with their popular wine-cheese tasting party accompanied by delectable bits of roast beef. The festivities beginning at eight will be held at the local VFW Hall.

Historic Occoquan, Inc. was found four years ago by a handful of interested citizens. Today there are approximately seventy members meeting on the fourth Tuesday of each month at the Merchants Mill House. The stone cottage had been one of the initial goals of the Society and at present is leased from the Fairfax County Water Authority. It serves as a small museum operated on Sunday afternoons during the warm months. Another goal which may never materialize is the preservation of Rockledge.

High above the quaint town of Occoquan overlooking their main street stands a deserted colonial edifice known to area residents as Rockledge. Ironically, the house which had been built from rocks from the nearby quarry is now threatened by daily blastings originating at the quarry. The continous blastings which began in 1959 caused much severe structural damage that the last residents, Laurence and Nancy Barnes, were forced to move.

Over the years Rockledge has suffered the indignities of vandelism. Debris covers the wide pine floorboards and in an upper floor a plank has been removed and set aside. The fireplaces have been torn apart, steps are missing from the main hallway as well as the back stairway. The decorative balustrades and paneling which were prevalent during this period are gone and only a few chair rails remain. Underneath the fallen plaster can be seen the irregular hewn laths placed by craftsmen of bygone centuries. The gaping holes which serve as dormer windows still provide a placid view of Occoquan as well as the murky waters of the nearby river.

Outside, the iron railings are uprooted and a few shutters have been removed and tossed aside. The once terraced gardens outlined with native stone walls cut into the hillside are barely visible. The springhouse and several outbuildings which were added in a subsequent century remain as mere shells. The overgrown vines and gnarled trees are the only living survivors of Rockledge.

William Buckland who came from England as an indenture servant to complete Gunston Hall is believed to have drawn the plans and supplied the workmen for Rockledge. The house built of native stones was constructed in two parts. The main portion is a three-story structure, one room in depth with a gable roof. The smaller part which was added at a later date contains a large kitchen with a room over it. This room was joined to the main part of the house by a hall with a staircase leading to the kitchen. A long pantry joined the kitchen to the dining room. The house contained simple woodwork, including six conventional mantels, chair rails, baseboards and cornices in the principal rooms.

The brick kitchen fireplace is six feet and has sustained very little damage. It is topped by a long iron piece bearing the imprint of a large hand with outspread fingers. The graceful exterior cornice which was a standard of Buckland still remains. The Barnes were able to save several of the mantels which had fallen away from their seatings. The principal mantel containing seventeen ridges which was common during the colonial period has been added to their present home.

The house was built for John Ballandine the industrial founder of Occoquan. Prior to coming to the area he operated a packet boat on the Potomac. In the 1750's he turned from waterways and concentrated on manufacturing. In 1755 he acquired the public warehouse site which was used for storing tobacco and in 1757 proceeded to build his home. Unhappily, Ballandine was considered a failure and in 1765, through foreclosure, he lost the iron foundry, sawmills, the water grist mills, the bake houses and several other enterprises. He now turned his interests towards building a canal along the James River and records indicate that in 1776, "he constructed an air furnace at Westham to which was added the cannon foundry which performed valuable service during the Revolution and was eventually destroyed in Benedict Arnold's James River raid in 1781."

John Ballandine died the following year leaving behind a spinster sister and a son. Both of them resided in Dumfries and with the death of his son in 1797, the Ballandine chronicle came to an end.

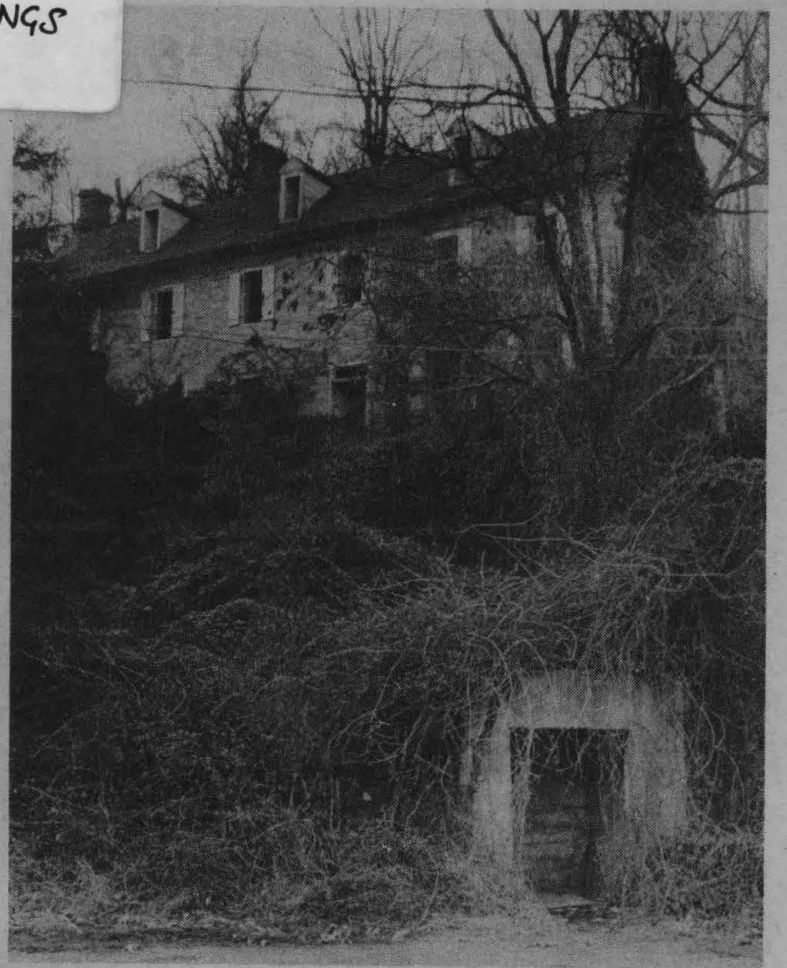The new owner of Rockledge had been John Semple who we know acquired it through foreclosure. He died in 1773 leaving no children and at the turn of the century Nathaniel Ellicott was the new owner of the mills as well as the mansion.

This Quaker gentlemen changed the name of his dwelling to the Stone House. Ellicott hired a young tutor to teach his children and so introduced John Davis, the English writer to Occoquan. It was through his efforts that we are fortunate in having a glimpse of the past.

John Davis was a young Englishman traveling in America along the eastern seaboard as far as South Carolina. He kept a journal recording his impressions of the new nation. While residing in New York he translated Bonaparte's Italian Campaign and its mild success brought him into contact with several prominent men. He was present at Jefferson's inauguration and was admired by Aaron Burr. His extensive knowledge enabled him to work as a tutor educating the young minds of the leading southern families. He was only twenty-five when he arrived at Occoquan in 1801. While residing at the Stone House, he wrote to Jefferson requesting permission to dedicate his book of travels to him. The honor was humbly accepted by the President.

From Davis' writings we learned that a small brick structure situated at the foot of the terraced hill served as the schoolhouse. Further readings show that an underground passage existed between the schoolhouse and the kitchen in the main house.

As a careful observer of America, the young tutor recorded the anguish suffered by the widowed slave Rachel. At one time, Rachel, her husband, who was the head coachman of Robert Carter of Nomini Hall, and their eleven children belonged to the Carter family. Rachel's family was separated when her children were sold. Her husband died

insane and often Rachel would tell the new schoolmaster how much he had admired Parson Weems of Pohick Church. This admiration for the eloquent preacher was also shared by the Englishman.

After having been in Occoquan for three months, the young tutor left to continue his travels. He returned to England and in 1805 his first novel, "First Settlers of Virginia" was published.

In 1829 the Stone House was purchased by another Quaker, John Janney. The house remained in the Janney family for one hundred years and was known as the Janney's Mansion.

In 1929 the house was purchased by Fred Almon Barnes who restored its original name and was responsible for many renovations. The house was inherited by Laurence and Nancy Barnes. During their tenure Rockledge was inspected and designated as an historic building by the advisory committee of the Historic American Buildings Survey.
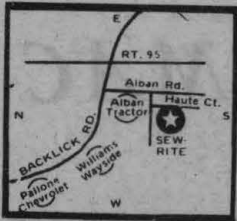
At one time the present owner John Woodall had planned to live in one wing while slowly restoring the rest of the mansion. Perhaps the task was too monumental for it doesn't appear he ever lived at Rockledge.

Today nothing remains but the sagging floors with slanted doors and windows. The graffiti on the cracked walls carry one message, "Please help us to restore it as it once was." To all outward appearances this seems to be an impossible feat.