



ROCKLEDGE: An Occoquan Survivor

By Carla Christiano, Contributing Writer

few who walk up Mill Street in Occoquan can avoid pausing to look at the old house on the hill: a quiet, sand-colored stone mansion on a cobblestone driveway, nestled in the trees on a rocky terrace. Even fewer would ever guess its history or even how old it is.

At 254 years, Rockledge is the oldest building in Occoquan and one of just a handful of buildings in Prince William County from an era that long ago passed into the history books. Tasha Fuller, whose company YourGo2Girls now manages events at Rockledge, said, "People see the house on the hill and are curious about it. They wonder what it is."

One of the current owners, Lance Houghton, said, "It's unexpected—not what you think should be there. It has the air of something very old. It has presence."

Yet Rockledge is more than a silent sentinel above Mill Street. Not only has it endured blasting from a nearby quarry, but hurricanes, fires, vandals, and even last year's earthquake. Like the town it is a part of, Rockledge has adapted through the decades, and has survived.

Early History

Rockledge was built by an early entrepreneur in Prince William County, John Ballendine, as his family home in 1758, more than

45 years before Occoquan officially became a town in 1804. It was Ballendine who first named the house Rockledge because it is literally built on a rock ledge on the side of a hill.

According to Occoquan mayor Earnie Porta, who has published a book on Occoquan, Rockledge is important because it is associated with the town's first major industry—iron manufacturing. In the 1750s, Ballendine "started an iron manufacturing operation at the falls of the Occoquan with financing from the Tayloe family," said Porta. "While there were previously public tobacco warehouses and other structures in the area, it was Ballendine's Rockledge and his iron manufacturing operation that really contributed to putting Occoquan on a path to increased settlement and growth."

Unfortunately for John Ballendine, his fortunes were short-lived. In 1765, he lost Rockledge and his businesses to satisfy a loan to Marylander John Semple. Though Rockledge and Ballendine's businesses had passed through several owners, by the end of the 18th century, they belonged to Quaker Nathaniel Ellicott. Ellicott, along with his business partners, James Campbell and Luke Wheeler, laid out the town of Occoquan on 31 acres that they owned. Ellicott also established a toll bridge, where a foot-bridge now spans the river, and, recognizing the business opportunities of the surrounding farmland, established an automated grist mill only yards away from Rockledge.

Although Ellicott referred to his home as the “stone house” and not Rockledge, he bowed to the fashion at the time and covered the stone structure with wood, according to local historian Dolores Elder. That wood covering is documented in early photographs and would remain on the house until the end of the 19th century.

After the Ellicotts left Occoquan for Alexandria in 1816, Rockledge and the mill businesses were eventually purchased by the Janney family. By this time Occoquan had become a thriving community of about 50 homes; various stores; flour, plaster and saw mills; and thanks to the Janneys, one of Virginia’s few cotton mills. Rockledge—or as the Janneys referred to it, Janney’s mansion—remained in the family for about 100 years, from 1829 to 1929.

The Civil War

As the Civil War approached and tensions grew between Union and secessionist sympathizers, Joseph T. Janney ran into trouble when he allowed local men to erect a flagpole from which they flew a pennant bearing the names of presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln and his running mate, Hannibal Hamlin, on the grounds of his home at Rockledge. Janney, who was a prominent Occoquan businessman, protested when the Prince William militia arrived at his home on July 4, 1860 to chop down the flagpole. Despite Janney’s protests and jeers from Union sympathizers in the crowd that gathered to watch, the pole came down anyway. Less than a year later, the country was at war.

The Twentieth Century

Although Janney managed to get his home through the Civil War, his widow Edith had another problem to contend with in 1902. The blasting from a quarry, run by Consolidated Stone Co., located across the river from Rockledge, spewed large stones that damaged the home and crushed roofs and battered walls of the other houses in town. The next family also contended with the quarry operations ; in fact, Laurence Barnes and his family were even driven out of their home in 1960 from the blasting which caused cracks in the stone walls and plaster to fall. They sued the owners, Graham Virginia Quarries, Inc., but never returned to the house again.

In 1960, the house was purchased by John E. Woodall but remained vacant for the next 10 years. In a 1969 account written by Martha Lynn and H.H. Douglas, Rockledge was described as a forlorn and badly damaged building. They noted that although the roof and walls were still intact, the glass had all been knocked out and the doors barely hung on their hinges. Vandals had broken in and had carried off all the mantels from the fireplaces and some of the paneling.

Occoquan residents must have been relieved when Donald Sonner bought Rockledge in the early 1970s. While others in town were trying to save their homes and businesses from Hurricane Agnes, which devastated the town in 1972, Sonner was trying to save Rockledge from years of neglect. He took years and spent



Photos courtesy Sean Floars

A ballroom was added onto Rockledge in 1996 in order to accommodate larger functions, including weddings.

\$250,000 to restore the house because, as he told a Washington Post reporter, it was a Christmas present for his wife.

In January 1980, the Sonners were on the verge of moving in when a 19-year-old man broke into the house and set it on fire to cover up his burglary. Although 60 firefighters responded to the blaze, the house sustained an estimated \$250,000 in damage. Because Sonner was not living in the house at the time, his insurance claim was denied, according to one of the current owners, Lance Houghton. And because he had sunk most of his money into the home, there was no money left to repair the extensive damage.

Enter the Houghtons

After the fire, Rockledge’s yard became overgrown with weeds and littered with junk and the town wanted it cleaned up, according to Houghton. Ronald Houghton, Lance Houghton’s father, was on the town council and offered his Boy Scout troop to spend a day cleaning up the property to help Sonner. So, according to Lance, when negotiations with the town fell through to purchase Rockledge, Sonner offered the property to his mother.

“My parents had shown a kindness to Mr. Sonner...and he came up to my mom in the street one day and told her that ‘he had an offer you can’t refuse,’” said Lance.

In 1982, Sonner asked for \$185,000 for the damaged 11-room house and approximately two acres of land that it sits on. Because the bid was sealed, no one in town knew who had bought the property. Lance noted that his mother, Joy, who died in 2009, had

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Photos courtesy Sean Floors

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been an entrepreneur but not a “political person.” He added, “Lots of people at the time did not appreciate that she had bought the house.”

To ensure the house was occupied and avoid the insurance problems encountered by Sonner, Lance moved into the house by himself when he was about 20 years old. In the room above the kitchen, he had a “functioning bathroom, a/c unit in the window, a bed, a light bulb. The rest of the house was filled with debris,” he said.

It took a couple of years but the family cleaned and renovated the house. When they were finished, they used it as their home as well as a modest bed-and-breakfast. Lance said that business venture resulted in “lots of headaches” and was not generating enough income for the hassles, so the family decided to try wedding receptions there instead.

Realizing the building was too small to handle any sizable weddings, the family added a ballroom to Rockledge in 1996. Ronald and Lance even built and plastered the curved elliptical ceiling of the ballroom themselves. Lance noted they built the ballroom as big as they could and literally built it into the side of the hill. (Stone from the hill is even incorporated into the north side of the ballroom as part of the stage.) He said if the ballroom was bigger and could handle more than 150 guests, they would be swamped with business, but “we can’t accommodate that number.”

Rockledge Today

Because of Rockledge’s historic past, it has become a destination for those looking for a unique place to hold a wedding. According to Tasha Fuller, they are extremely busy on weekends from May through October, just hosting weddings. And though they are a great wedding venue, “Don’t think about it for just a wedding.”

she said. In fact, Lance and Fuller are looking to expand the events at Rockledge beyond weddings. In the coming year, they are planning on hosting a variety of events such as charity fundraisers, holiday mixers, a mother-daughter tea (around Mother’s Day), bridal open houses with workshops on wedding planning, and even dance classes. They are also marketing to corporations to host meetings, Fuller said.

Currently, just the first floor is available to rent but that includes the ballroom with crystal chandelier (which Lance said takes 16 hours to clean), stage, and excellent sound system, as well as the old kitchen and living room which still have their original working fireplaces and some of their original heart pine flooring (with black scars from the 1980 fire). Even the outside space is available including a small stone patio and a covered seating area with two benches near the ballroom. Fuller said that they are hoping to change the landscaping in the coming year.

“The exciting part about this,” Fuller said, “is next year we are hoping to have it be a retreat facility that can accommodate overnight guests.” They have begun renovations on the sitting room, three bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs and are hoping to complete them in 2012. However, between the 2011 earthquake and hurricane, the house has sustained some damage that needs to be repaired as well. “It’s a work in progress,” she said.

What the Future Holds

Although Rockledge has been a residence for most of its history, Lance would like to continue making it more of an event space. However, that may be a challenge since the house is not handicap-accessible. Still he is considering his options and may turn Rockledge into a sort of tavern decorated with antiques that would be for sale. He explained that bars are profitable, but restaurants are problematic. Yet in Virginia you cannot serve liquor without having a restaurant attached, he said.

As the Houghtons contemplate Rockledge’s future, they cherish its storied past. Still, the transition into the 21st century hasn’t always been an easy one.

“You don’t see the gifts of the house. You only see the maintenance. There’s always something that has to be painted, repaired,” Lance said. But both he and Fuller recognize what a unique place Rockledge is.

“We want to make your experience memorable because the house is memorable... We want people to have a really good experience,” Fuller said.

Rockledge is located at 440 Mill Street in Occoquan. For appointments, call (703) 220-9594 or (703) 220-3937, or email rockledgemansion@gmail.com. For more information, visit the website at <http://rockledgemansion.com>. **PW**

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