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REAL ESTATE

House • gossip

An Old-Fashioned Makeover

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It's been a long road back for the oldest house in Washington, but it was worth the trip, according to its newest owners.

The Rosedale estate in Cleveland Park started out as a two-room dirt-floor cottage in 1740. Though the Old Stone House in Georgetown has traditionally been considered the District's oldest house and oldest building, city historians say Cleveland Park's little cottage actually has the record by 25 years.

The cottage, however, hasn't been easy to spot for about 200 years. In 1793, it was bought by Revolutionary War hero Uriah Forrest, who incorporated it into a clapboard farmhouse. Forrest served as mayor of Georgetown, a member of Congress and a founder of the new "Federal City," entertaining presidents Washington and Adams as well as Pierre L'Enfant, the city's planner.

In recent years, the building has been a girls' boarding school, the headquarters of a nonprofit international student exchange group and, in 2000, the temporary home of young Cuban shipwreck survivor Elian Gonzalez. In

See GOSSIP, *F12, Col. 1*

BOWA BUILDERS

The first part of Rosedale was built in 1740, and it has been renovated by its new owner in a way that stays true to its past.

Owner Kept History in Mind in Renovations

GOSSIP, *From F1*

the late 1950s, the National Cathedral, which had bought it for a girls' boarding school, added several brick buildings as dorms.

In 2001 and 2002, when the exchange group faced financial hard times and needed to sell, Rosedale was part of a tug-of-war among several interested developer bidders and neighbors in the tony area whose goal was to protect the surrounding grounds, which had been used for years as a beloved neighborhood park and dog-walking spot.

After the dust settled in October 2002, a $12 million deal had been struck that kept about half the 6.2 acres of land in the hands of a nonprofit group of about 80 neighborhood families called the Rosedale Conservancy; sold three acres to a developer, who has since built seven luxury homes and updated an existing 1930s home; and sold the old farmhouse to neighbor Jonathan Abram for about $1.5 million.

Now, after a two-year restoration and update by BOWA Builders Inc. of McLean, Rosedale is back to being a family home again.

The owners — Abram and his wife, Eleni Constantine — still can't quite grasp how they ended up with the house, even though Abram, a lawyer at Hogan & Hartson LLP, was one of the masterminds behind the Rosedale Conservancy. But Abram says the family — they have two children — "loves" how it all turned out.

"It never occurred to us that this would happen," Abram said recently. "We had no thought about moving" from a house two blocks away "until the need to purchase the property came up."

The need arose because several parties vied for Rosedale in September 2000 when the Youth for Understanding group quietly put it on the market. The group had held it since 1978. Because the chance to grab a large parcel in one of the District's most upscale neighborhoods doesn't come up every day, its availability caused quite a buzz.

See GOSSIP, *F13, Col. 1*

BOWA

Rosedale has 10 fireplaces, including this one, which is shown before Jonathan Adams and his family undertook the renovation.

After Many Owners, District's Oldest House Gets Fixed Up

GOSSIP, *From F12*

Rosedale had just been in the news in May because of the month-long visit by Cuban castaway Gonzalez. The media barrage and street barricades that accompanied the 6-year-old's visit triggered community protests. Those protests presaged the community opposition that later met developers' proposals for building new houses on the property, bringing more traffic and parking headaches to the narrow streets.

The Washington Post chronicled the subsequent bids and neighborhood objections, including an early $8 million offer from a developer to build eight new homes, a matching offer from Special Olympics to use the estate and grounds as a new headquarters, and a later $12 million bid from the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital.

While the school thought it had secured the property for a new campus in June 2002, the neighbors exercised a right that they gained when Youth for Understanding bought Rosedale and made a matching bid, which was approved by a bankruptcy judge in September, according to The Post's coverage.

Though Abram didn't intend to buy the house, he wound up doing so when the neighbors needed that piece of the puzzle filled in, he says. His goal since, he said, has been to try to follow through on preserving the house while making it livable for a 21st-century family.

It took longer than anticipated, because "the house was not in the shape that we'd expected," Abram said. "It was structurally sound, but there was a lot of deferred maintenance that needed to be done."

The permitting process also "was fairly lengthy," he said, since the house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. But he credits the District's architectural historians and the builders with making the results meet his expectations.

The 6,000-square-foot amalgamation is a brighter and more livable version of its former selves.

Outside it's once again a sunny yellow frame and stone house. Inside it has a more open feel, with four bedrooms and baths, a library, office, study and a state-of-the-art kitchen. The kitchen now sports 20 running feet of countertops, a food preparation island and a Lacanche range from France.

A brick walk and patio off the kitchen lead to a new 14-by-60-foot swimming pool with an adjacent pavilion.

BOWA BUILDERS

Builders kept the original beams for the flooring of the old, stone cottage portion of the house. The house has been through many owners and housed Elian Gonzalez for a while.

But the best part, Abram said, is that it remains true to its past.

"My mantra during the whole project was, 'It was an old house to begin with and it's going to be an old house when we're done,'" Abram said. "And BOWA understood what I was looking for."

Inside the stone cottage portion of the house, for example, the builders kept the original hand-hewn timber beams but secured them to new steel beams. A new concrete mat and subfloor were laid over the original dirt floor and topped with white oak flooring planks.

"When you're in the old stone part of the house, you're in a place that still looks for all the world like it must have looked in the 1730s and 1740s," Abram said.

The builder also "spent a lot of time fixing the 40 windows in th house and the 10 fireplaces," he said

While Abram praises the Dis trict's historians, including preserva tion planner Stephen Callcott, th D.C. planner returns the favor.

"The city is fortunate that such a important property came into th hands of owners who understoo and appreciated the qualities of th house and were so careful in pre serving it," Callcott said in a recent e-mail.

Abram would not say how much the renovation cost, other than that it was "an extremely expensive venture" because of the unexpected problems from deferred maintenance. "My advice to anybody renovating is to at least triple what you think it will cost and to at least triple the time," he said.