

## Long-abandoned Carleton Island Villa under contract to sell

By ALEC JOHNSON

aej@wdt.net

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1 of 2



The Carleton Island Villa, which has been on the market for more than a decade, is under contract to sell to a Florida man who hopes to restore the building. Alec Johnson/Watertown Daily Times

CAPE VINCENT — One of the most well-known landmarks on the St. Lawrence River, the Carleton Island Villa, may soon have a new owner.

The long-abandoned mansion on the southwestern head of Carleton Island, a hammerhead known as Government Point, has been on the market for years as its owners have been willing to sell to the right buyer.

Charles and William Millar, brothers whose family has summered on Carleton Island since 1900, purchased the historic villa in 1987. It's been vacant for more than 70 years.

Charles Millar said they have signed a purchase contract with a buyer for the villa and its seven acres. Mr. Millar said they signed the offer paperwork Friday afternoon and it is undergoing a legal review with a deadline of this Friday.

The buyer is Ronald Clapp, of Florida.

Mr. Clapp is a real estate investor who said he has worked on projects as far away as Hawaii from his home in Florida. Last fall he got an email from realtor.com that turned him on to the villa.

“They had an article in regards to haunted houses and spooky houses leading up to Halloween,” he said. “I saw the article and really was in love with the house.”

William O. Wyckoff bought the head of Carleton Island known as Government Point on May 6, 1893, according to the book “Cape Vincent and Its History.” The property includes land between north and south bays, and is near the ruins of Fort Haldimand, which is owned by the Thousand Islands Land Trust.

Mr. Wyckoff, who started out as a court stenographer in Ithaca, made his fortune as president of Wyckoff, Seamans & Benedict Co., New York City, early marketers of Remington typewriters. As was common for many wealthy upstaters in those days, he built a summer mansion in the Thousand Islands.

His Carleton Villa, as he called the palatial 64-room, five-story stone-and-wood structure built to be a fishing camp, was completed in 1895.

Mr. Wyckoff died in 1895, the first night he slept in the villa. His sons Clarence F. and Edward inherited the rambling river estate.

Five to 10 families summered in the Government Point community that grew up around the Carleton Villa: Crosses from Rome, Chases and Millars from Utica (William G. and Charles Millar bought from Patten Corp. the lot that included the remains of the Carleton Villa in 1987).

The Shick family, connected to Bethlehem Steel Co., maintained a summer home on the island in that period. The Shick property, sold to a group of Watertown businessmen as a hunting camp, was struck by lightning and burned down on June 14, 1974.

The Watertown Daily Times files note: “With Castle Rest and Greystone Villa, it formed the most pretentious of the earlier summer residences, ... A brilliant gas light, long illuminated in the tower, became a range beacon for navigators passing down the American channel before the government protected the shoal of the head of the island by a light buoy.”

Castle Rest was Pullman-car promotor George Pullman’s place on Pullman Island.

The prospectus put together in the 1920s when the villa was auctioned off after the Wyckoff family had fallen on bad times described this as a “gabled structure built of Gouverneur marble and wood” with “a large central two-story hall ... library, music room and dining room with, large kitchen pantries and servants’ sitting room in one wing.”

“There are four fireplaces, lavatory, ample closets and a children’s playroom on the main floor. A broad porch extends across the front of the building,” the listing stated. “On the upper floors there are 21 sleeping rooms and a billiard room. The house is equipped with water and gas plants.”

By 1930, General Electric had bought the island as a retreat for its executives.

A title map of the head of Carleton Island for General Electric Realty Corp. in August 1930 shows new roads planned as the company hoped to move its summer camp from Association Island in Henderson to the larger island after two years of high water disrupted and damaged the Henderson property. The map shows the cottage of Charles Millar, Millar's grandfather, just feet from the Wyckoff property line.

That map also shows the original Wyckoff farm house near the water on north bay, at the base of a cliff that leads up to Fort Haldimand. Barnum and Bay streets are noted.

The Great Depression ultimately scuttled their plans, which called for adding 27 holes of golf, nine of which would be illuminated for night rounds, and an airstrip to the island.

In the 1940s, General Electric sold the island to the late Merle L. Youngs, owner of Zenda Farms in Clayton and president of Youngs Rubber Corp., maker of Trojan condoms. Mr. Youngs' heir, John McFarlane, sold the island in 1986 to Patten Corp. Northeast for \$823,000, which promoted the development of the island into a community of summer homes.

Charlie and Bill Millar had the property listed for \$495,000 for more than a decade. That listing made lists online, and in newspapers such as the New York Post, as a haunted house for cheap. Well, for New York City prices, that is. The listing was recently reduced to \$375,000. When considering inflation from 1987 when the Millars bought Lot No. 1 from the Patten Corp., which developed most of the 1,350-acre island, it is still a bit more than the brothers paid. The sale price has not yet been disclosed. Tax records and past Watertown Daily Times reports show they paid \$140,000. They were the only of 19 initial buyers of land from Patten Corp. associated with the island. An inflation calculator shows \$140,000 in 1987 would be \$360,223 in 2022.

"The fun is gone," Bill said. "The worst part is people coming onto the rocks and just wanting to wander around."

"We're just tired," Charlie said. "It was fun for 30 years," Bill added finishing his sentence. "It's been nice to talk about it."

The brothers said they never had any intention of doing anything with the villa, but owning it has helped them stay in touch with Wyckoff descendants who have visited over the years staying at their cottage.

And for the past 35 years, the Millar brothers have enjoyed their nearby cottage as the villa continued to deteriorate as the western gales blow off Lake Ontario taking off shingles one by one.

The villa has been open to the elements for longer than it was enjoyed as a home, its roof a patchwork of shingles through which it is easy to see a blue sky. Tall stone chimneys are spreading apart at the top, and each year more floors drop into the basement.

The Millars have kept the lawn mowed and have been good neighbors on the island, allowing descendants of the first owner William O. Wyckoff to visit, and others who took keen interests in the property.

Elizabeth Wyckoff Balderson, who went by Betty, was born in the villa in 1905 and visited often.

Charlie Millar said Betty was born early, while her father, Edward Wyckoff, and the family doctor were out fishing. They had brought a doctor and nurse to the island, and when her father and the doctor returned from a day on the water she had been born and was warmed in a basket near the oven. On one of their visits, Betty Wyckoff told Charlie that because she was born on the island she was never issued a birth certificate, something she learned only when applying for a passport as an adult.

If all goes to plan, Ronald Clapp will own the property within a few weeks beginning the next era.

He said he recently sold one of his properties and had money to invest.

“My plans are to bring it back to life,” he said. “I know that it is in serious distress.”

Mr. Clapp viewed the property in May and crawled around inside. “It certainly is going to be a challenge, but I am looking for a challenge,” he said.

He does not plan to live there personally but may make it into some sort of bed and breakfast.

Mr. Clapp said he'd like to begin work before winter so the roof, largely open to the elements, can be covered to prevent further deterioration.

“The plan is to clean it up inside and see what structure is still good and see what we can reenforce to seal in the roof area at least and then go gangbusters next season,” he said, noting that he does not yet have a contractor, but hopes to use local workers on the project.

“I would hate to see it snow again inside,” he said.

Mr. Clapp said he has been in the real estate business for 21 years and has done many renovations.

“I haven't done anything to this magnitude, but I am all about unique properties,” he said.

“I am planning on reaching out to GE to see if they want to make things right in any form or fashion, because they led to the deterioration of this beautiful home,” he said. “I am all about fundraising to get it renovated. If we can get some money out of GE that would be spectacular. It is a shame what GE did and we will see what happens from here.”

Barry Kukowski, of Howard Hanna Real Estate, has represented the Millars for the past dozen years. Using Precision Marine at Peos Bay and other water taxis, he has ferried numerous potential buyers to the island, which is between Cape Vincent and Wolfe Island.

Mr. Kukowski said he has a good feeling about the buyer.

“This guy, I really like him,” he said. “He has got a vision. Overall, I don’t know the whole big picture of his plans, but he is not going to hurt anybody that is for sure.”

Mr. Kukowski has brought potential buyers out in all types of weather from states as far as California and Texas.

“I have met an awful lot of great people,” he said. “I have never gotten discouraged with it.”

With a listing a dozen years out, he said people would often ask him why he bothered, but with real estate his vocation, he said you do the best for everybody. “You show it,” he said. “This is your job, it is what you do.”

Mr. Kukowski said there have been several offers over the years, including one in 2020 from a group that restores churches in New York City that gave the building an hourslong inspection, from the basement to the third floor.

Wearing hard hats, they crawled through on a cold April day.

“They claimed that the basic bones, the big beams, they said there is nothing wrong,” he said. “That was the most positive thing I have found from the villa so far.”

Mr. Clapp said he is eager to get to work.

“It is not going to be a sit around and wait for it to be something,” he said. I am going to go full on.”

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**Alec Johnson**

Editor and Publisher