

Carleton Island Villa's new owner maps out early plans for historic home

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The Carleton Island Villa has a new owner. Ronald Clapp of Florida purchased the historic building last week. Alec Johnson/Watertown Daily Times

CAPE VINCENT — There's a renaissance in the works for the Carleton Island Villa, spearheaded by the historic home's new owner.

During a meeting of the Cape Vincent Local Development Committee on Thursday, the villa's new owner Ronald Clapp and his girlfriend and business partner Janaina Leite laid out their plans.

Mr. Clapp, a property developer with a history of flipping houses and building vacation rental units in Florida and Hawaii, said he and Ms. Leite, a real estate agent, want to see the building brought back to its former glory, "or something even beyond that."

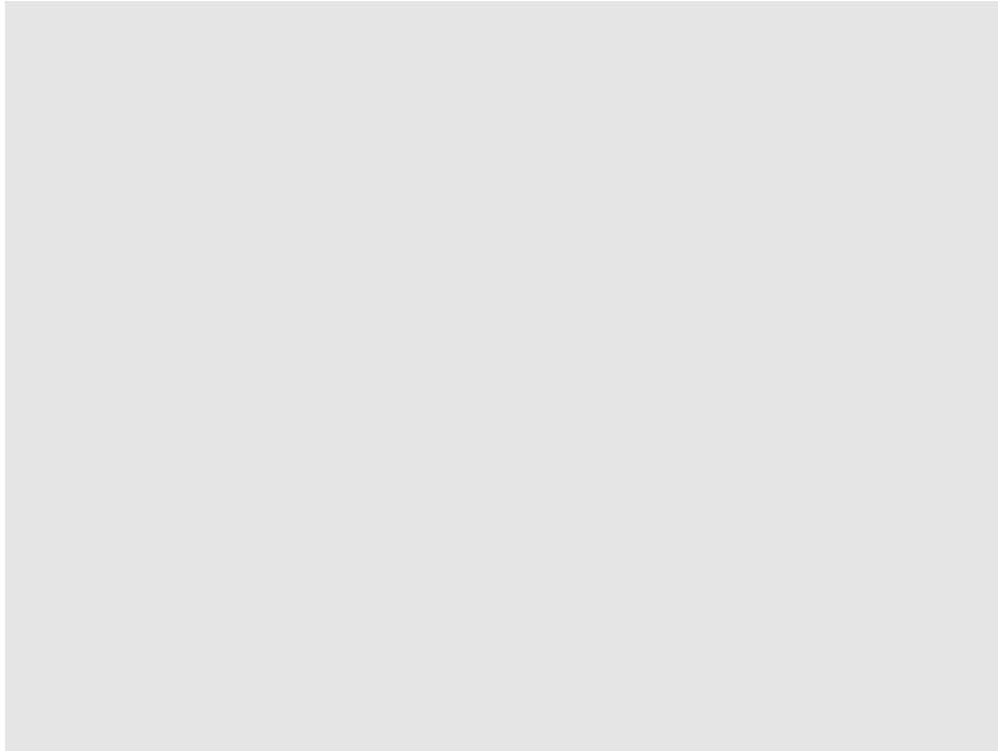
Their plans, while not set in stone, call for a restaurant on the first floor of the home, with accommodations on the upper floors in the style of a bed-and-breakfast.

"I saw it as, we don't need 15,000 square feet as a getaway home," Mr. Clapp said. "We see it more as a vacation rental/bed-and-breakfast. It's too big of a house for us alone."

Mr. Clapp said his experience running vacation rental units in other popular destinations, like Hawaii, have given him a foundation on which to build a sustainable business in Cape Vincent.

The two spoke reverently of the home, which is one of the most historic and significant properties in the Thousand Islands. Built by William O. Wyckoff, a man who made his fortune in marketing at a New York City firm, construction finished in 1895 on the 64-room, five-story home. The building has dominated Carleton Island's Government Point and the imaginations of onlookers for generations.

Mr. Clapp closed on the sale July 26. Documents filed with the Jefferson County Clerk's Office show the price was \$300,000. It was sold to him by Charles and William Millar, brothers and Carleton Island property owners who had owned the home and its land since 1987.



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Ms. Leite described the home as a "sleeping beauty," and both she and Mr. Clapp said they want to preserve and respect the history of the home more than anything.

"It demands respect, it demands attention," Ms. Leite said.

They have their work cut out for them, something they both acknowledged during Thursday's LDC meeting. The home has been abandoned for more than 70 years. Window panes and doors are missing and it has serious structural issues on the upper floors. Mr. Clapp said he still has not seen the upper floors of the building, as they are not structurally sound.

The building has garnered attention in recent years. Mr. Clapp said a quasi-retired architect from California had recently visited the building and did a complete draw-up of its first floor. A local architectural firm is known to have completed a structural analysis of the building in the last decade or so, and Mr. Clapp said he's looking for a team to take on the first steps of restoring the villa.

"This is not a one-year project," he said.

There was talk of displaying features of local history, like recovered artifacts from nearby Fort Haldimand, a derelict British fort from the Revolutionary War on Carleton Island now maintained by the Thousand Islands Land Trust.

While reopening the villa to the public is years away, Mr. Clapp said he wants to start familiarizing the community with his plans and the property as soon as he can. He suggested he may host a Halloween event on the property, outside the house, to capitalize on the "spooky" feeling the abandoned structure evokes.

“It has a little spooky aspect to the house, so I’d love to throw that out there,” he said. “I don’t know the logistics in regards to that, but I tend to work fast.”

Any of these plans to open the property to guests would require a ferry to bring visitors from the mainland to the island, which LDC officials said should be possible with the installation of the new public docks by the village green.

Redeveloping the building will likely require zoning and planning board approval from the town of Cape Vincent, a process that will start once Mr. Clapp and Ms. Leite finalize their plans.

Mr. Clapp is maintaining a website, carletonVilla.com, to keep people updated on the project.

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