

Residence of the Netherlands Ambassador

International Team Renovates Embassy Row Landmark

The residence of the Netherlands Ambassador anchors a quiet, tree-lined street in the heart of Washington, D.C.'s Embassy Row, just off Massachusetts Avenue. The 2300 block of S Street, N.W., hosts stately private residences and small museums, including the Textile Museum and the Woodrow Wilson House, where the 28th president retired after leaving the White House in 1921—and which is now a National Trust property.

Designed by Washington architect Ward Brown and built by Mrs. Wilson's brother Wilmar Bolling in 1929, the neoclassical-revival mansion located at 2347 S Street and owned by the Netherlands is both a single-family home and a private museum.

As the official home of the Netherlands Ambassador to the United States since 1944, the residence has long held a collection of Dutch and Netherlandish paintings. About the same time the Dutch government launched an extensive renovation of the fading struc-



This neoclassical-revival mansion owned by the Netherlands is both the ambassador's home and a private museum. Renovating the mansion's exterior and interior was a complex five-year international project. Wagner replaced all roofing above the gutter line.

ture in the mid-1990s, the government also began upgrading the art collection with museum-quality paintings, sculpture and tapestries.

From the start, the five-year renovation project was a complex international effort—and an ongoing competition between Old- and New-World skills. Assembling the right

international team became a three-year endeavor. Then, architectural and engineering design took another 10 months. Actual construction was completed in just one year, under the guidance of Renovations Unlimited, the U.S.-based general contractor.

Because of the nature of the project, both Dutch and

American firms collaborated on the architectural and engineering work. At The Hague, architects Brassier, Teeuwisse and Willems and their consultants worked closely with the client, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which owns the residence. "They married us up with Brassier, Teeuwisse and Willems," says Cy Merkezias of

Archetype, U.S. architect for the project, “then we divided the duties: They did the front-end work and we developed the design, produced construction documents and administered the project.”

Dutch architects flew to Washington to measure the building and to retrieve Ward Brown’s original architectural drawings. Back in the Netherlands, they studied existing conditions, programmed the functional requirements for the renovation and prepared the preliminary design.

That’s when things got interesting, says Merkezas. When the Dutch architects’ design arrived by e-mail in Archetype’s offices, the drawings were in metric measurements, captioned in Dutch and created in a computer-assisted design (CAD) program used only in Europe. “We had to ‘translate’ three aspects of the drawings before we could go to work!”

Throughout the project, the two firms—working in two languages with two measuring systems and two computer platforms—continued to bounce designs electronically across the Atlantic until they resolved all issues.

In assembling its local team of contractors, Archetype wanted to be sure it had the best companies in certain key areas like roofing, plasterwork and mechanical systems. From the outset, Wagner Roofing was among the “preferred” roofing subcontractors, and eventually Wagner was selected. “We felt we were in good shape with Wagner,” says Merkezas. “Their people really do know their metals ... their slate ... and they



The L-shaped residence is surrounded on all sides by a slate-covered mansard roof, with dormers punched through around the entire perimeter.

have a very high level of technical expertise.”

From the beginning, the Dutch insisted on the highest possible quality in every aspect of the project. They were clearly dubious, however, that local tradespeople could deliver. (Some years earlier, a Dutch roofing company had been imported to reline the building’s gutters in zinc, a metal that’s common in Northern Europe but not often used in this country.) The American workers set out to prove that their skills and craftsmanship could match the Europeans’, producing outstanding results.

The L-shaped residence is

surrounded on all sides by a slate-covered mansard roof, with dormers punched through around the entire perimeter. The upper part of the roof is virtually flat, with only a slight pitch.

Wagner was asked to replace “everything above the gutter line,” says Merkezas. The relatively new zinc-lined gutters appeared to be the one area of the roof system that could be salvaged. Plus, Merkezas adds with a smile, “the Dutch workmanship *is* impressive.” To protect the gutters, Wagner workers needed to take extra precautions while working in those areas,

adding to the difficulty of the project.

The original metal that covered the flat roof had been replaced earlier with asphalt. To meet the client’s performance criteria, including low maintenance and long life, Wagner removed the asphalt and laid a soldered-seam stainless steel roof. Visiting Dutch architects and consultants frequently climbed to the roof to watch Wagner workers install the mirror-like stainless steel pans—not only to monitor the project, but also to learn about an unfamiliar technology.

But most guests and passersby will never see the stainless steel: Any part of the flat roof visible from the ground is copper, matching the original trim. The restoration of one of these elements particularly challenged the architect and Wagner’s people.

“Where the flat roof meets the sloping mansard, there was this beautiful accent strip—just a little bull-nose,” recalls Merkezas. “It was gone, with

no evidence it had ever been there, except for the original drawings. We guessed a dimension, and the Wagner people mocked it up. We modified it a bit, then tried again. We clipped a length to the roof and then looked at it from the ground until we found the right proportion.” The copper trim is “pre-patinated,” using a new technology to create the look of seasoned copper, which is consistent with the building’s age and which matches older copperwork that was saved.

Wagner also replaced the slate on the mansard. Merkezas had asked various

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sources to identify the original slate, which was still on the house and had turned gray-black with a hint of green. “Finally, Wagner Roofing President Chuck Wagner looked at it and said he thought it was from Vermont, and offered to get samples. In the meantime, the general contractor was opening closets during the interior renovation and found samples submitted to the first owner—ranging from bathroom tiles to wall-coverings. One box held slate samples, and on the back of one piece was a sticker with the architect’s approval and signature, and it said, ‘Vermont.’ When we compared it with the Wagner sample, we had a perfect match.”

In addition to replacing the flat upper roof, mansard and trim, exterior work on the building included repointing and cleaning the limestone walls.

Inside the residence, the major rooms were restored to their original design. Workers cleaned and repaired the limestone-lined entry hall with marble staircase, stripped layers of paint from plaster and wood details and restored the library and its ornamental plaster ceiling. Third-floor apartments were created for the ambassador’s family and for the Queen’s visits to Washington.

New systems now control the environmental conditions within the residence—temperature, humidity and lighting—in order to protect its valuable art collection and its new status as a private gallery.

This renovation ensures that the mansion will continue to be a hospitable setting for both official entertaining and the ambassador’s private life for years to come. ●

Where Are They Now?

Jeff Wooldridge estimates slate, tile and shingles for Wagner Roofing. But almost five years ago, as a 21-year-old Penn State student and part-time roofer for Wagner, Jeff had a brush with fame when he was interviewed for a *Wall Street Journal* article, “A Good Craftsman Is Hard to Find.”

At the time, he and his dad, Bob Wooldridge, both slate roof specialists, were driving daily from McConnellsburg, Pa., to work on Wagner roofing jobs in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. Asked to explain the decline of craftsmanship in the field, Jeff told the *Journal* that his own generation was more interested in making money than in the hard work required to install a quality roof—and that many owners wouldn’t invest in a slate roof that could last 100 years.

Today, Jeff lives in Bethesda, Md., but his father, who’s been roofing for 45 years, still commutes from Pennsylvania. Jeff has observed slightly greater demand in recent years for top-notch features like slate roofs, reflecting the strong economy and customers’ ability to afford “luxury” amenities.

But prosperity and the lure of high-tech jobs make it harder to recruit young people into the roofing business. “In the past, we could hire fully skilled workers,” he explains. “These days, we work harder than ever to retain our experienced people and hire helpers or apprentices that we train on the job. We’re confident that this strategy will enable us to maintain Wagner’s reputation for quality craftsmanship for many years to come.” ●

Back When...



Jack Wagner, Sr. (right) with roofing crew in front of the “Flying Enterprise” ’47 Dodge. The photo probably was taken around 1948.

In the Works

These Wagner jobs are in progress or recently completed. To discuss or to visit any of them, call Chuck Wagner or Sheila Wagner at 301/927/9030. Go to our Web site at www.wagnerroofing.com for profiles of other major projects. (Unless otherwise noted, jobs are in Washington, D.C.)

Bolling Air Force Base, Facility 3

(Jowett, Inc.): Eternit shingles
Starwood Urban Investors, 1827 M St., NW (former Gusti’s restaurant)
(Gordon & Maizel Construction Co.): Buckingham slate, modified bitumen roof

2901 Q Street Condo Association: New copper roof and skylight, restore slate mansard

Hotel Harrington, 11th & E Sts., NW: Modified bitumen roofing

St. Alban’s School, Mt. St. Alban, Massachusetts & Wisconsin Aves., NW: Lead coated copper roofing

Cosmos Club, 2121 Massachusetts Ave., NW: Copper roofing

Gallaudet University, Merrill Learning Center & Chapel Hall, 800 Florida Ave., NE: Ongoing roofing and maintenance

Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacramento, 6001 Western Ave., NW: Modified bitumen roofing

St. Columba’s Church, 4201 Albemarle St., NW: Copper roofing and stone repairs

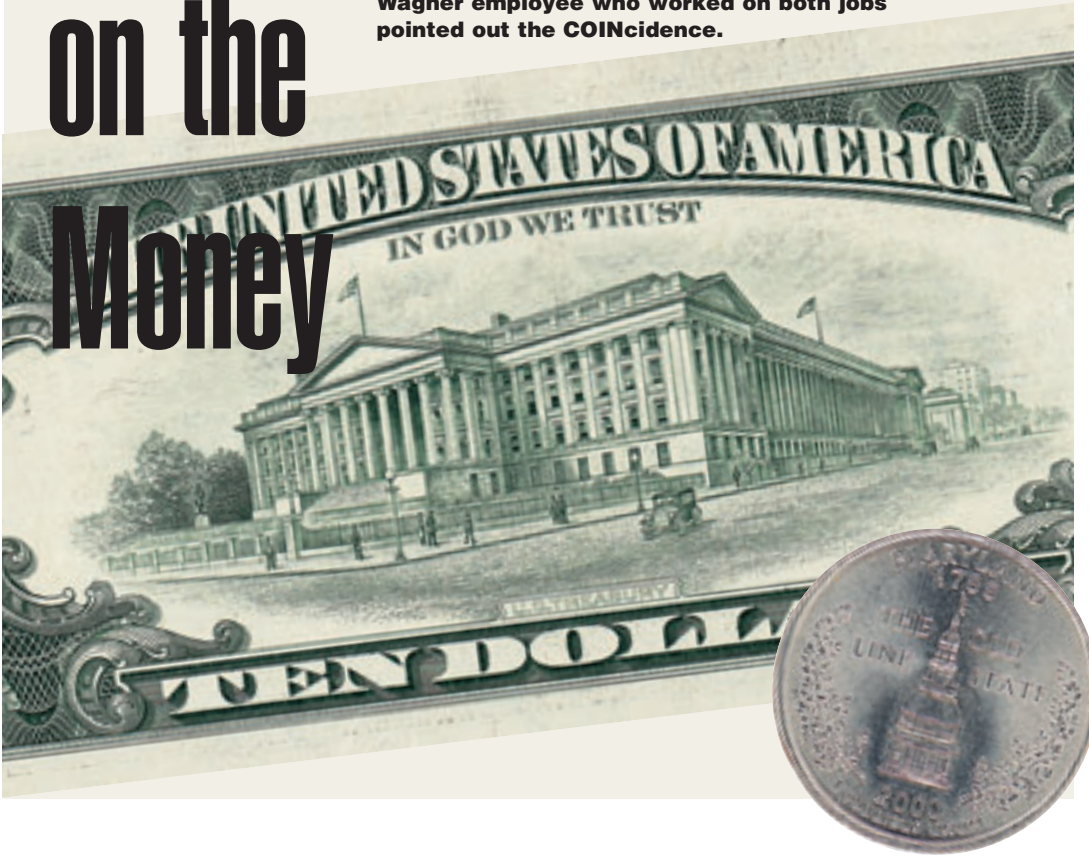
Crossroads Place Shopping Center, 3490–3556 S. Jefferson St., Falls Church, VA (Gordon & Maizel Construction Co.): Rubber roofing, aluminum roof and siding

George Washington University, Mt. Vernon Campus, Hand Chapel, 2100 Foxhall Rd., NW: Slate and gutter replacement; repairing and painting cornice

Folger Building, 725 15th St., NW: Interior remodeling

Right on the Money

Two Wagner Roofing jobs are right on the money—the U.S. \$10 bill and the Maryland quarter, to be exact. Wagner is restoring lead-coated copper flashing on the U.S. Treasury building, portrayed on the back of the \$10 bill. Last year, Wagner refurbished the roof of the Maryland State House, whose image is engraved on the back of the new quarter. A Wagner employee who worked on both jobs pointed out the COINCidence.



Who We Are

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