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## The Importance of a Roof: Saving Lee's Boyhood Home

When an individual buyer took possession of Robert E.

Lee's boyhood home at 607 Oronoco St. in Old Town Alexandria, Va., several years ago, the controversial sale made headlines in Washington and around the country. Opponents decried the transfer of the property from the Lee-Jackson Foundation and the closing of the house to the public.

Overshadowed by the argument over whether the house belonged in public or private hands was the rapidly deteriorating state of the property itself. The house, and particularly the roof, was "in desperate need of major work," says Cy Merkezas of Archetype, architects for the current restoration project. "The roof was leaking badly, and structural members were rotted even beyond what we had imagined. Another decade and there would have been nothing to argue over."

The nonprofit foundation had done its best to keep the roof patched, but lacked the resources to maintain the his-

toric and complex property. "If you looked at the structure," says Merkezas, "you knew the right thing to do was to start spending money immediately."

Responding to the controversy, the new owner, Merkezas's client, offered to sell the Lee home to another buyer that would operate it on behalf of the public—if that entity could demonstrate sufficient resources to underwrite the necessary repairs. No offer came close to the millions of dollars required.

The new owner next commissioned a historic structures report, a detailed, meticulous documentation of the property, illustrated with measured drawings.

Securing the house by replacing the long-neglected, leaking slate roof was a priority, and Wagner Roofing was selected as subcontractor for the project. Before Wagner could install the new roof, it was necessary to replace any decking that could not be repaired, stiffen the structural members and correct other underlying problems.

In its work, the Wagner team has confronted a number



CHUCK WAGNER

Wagner replaced the slate roof of this historic Virginia structure.

of unusual challenges. The slate roof features numerous gables and dormers with complex intersections that caused

the original builders to invent a series of crickets that weren't well executed and haven't been properly maintained. In

addition, small, nearly flat roofs are interspersed with the more visible steep roofs—an obvious source of leaks.

Fortunately, Wagner was able to locate new slate that exactly replicates the old slate in size, texture, thickness and color, demonstrating that it is possible to restore historic structures using materials of a character identical to the original.

Along with replacing the roof, another critical step in stabilizing the property was repairing the garden retaining wall, which runs for about a half block along St. Asaph Street. “We found that the whole property was sliding toward the Potomac,” says Merkezas. “Until the wall was stabilized, the foundation of the house would continue to move east.”

Historians who helped create the structures report commissioned by the new owner confirmed that Robert E. Lee’s family rented the house for a period of time and that he lived there as a youngster. The document makes a valuable contribution to what is known of the history of Alexandria, as well as developing new information about the boyhood home of the future brilliant general.

As for the naysayers who did not wish to see the property in private hands, Merkezas says that his client and everyone else working on the restoration “are still being watched. But I think the general feeling of observers is that the property is starting to look good—and that it will be here for future generations to enjoy and appreciate.” ●

## Letter From the President

# It’s All About Performance

**A**lthough these newsletters take a lot of time and effort to produce, the process is an excellent one. It gives us an occasion to reflect upon what we have accomplished. With each and every roofing job, we continue to create our history, and then we get to write about it and share this history with you.

With a Wagner Roofing project, the “process” of roofing begins with the customer. First, we try to find out what the customer wants from us and to obtain as much information as possible on the history of the roof. Customers may want us to stop a leak for the short term or replace the roof for the long term. Or they may just need an opinion. Then, we visit the job site to determine existing conditions.

Once the bidding has been completed and the job has been awarded, we have a proj-

**Our interest in old buildings is complemented by our employees’ ability to re-create a roof equal to or better than the existing one.**

ect. Oftentimes with restoration work, “unknowns” such as structural problems may alter a job. That’s why ongoing communication with customers is critical. In the end,



everyone has the same priority: quality workmanship or, in roofer-speak, “done well and doesn’t leak.”

Washington, D.C., is a unique city in which to run a roofing business—especially if you enjoy the architecture and the quality of the buildings on

train and stress quality workmanship, so that we can be good stewards of our craft.

In his book, *Tudor Place*, which describes the history of his family’s landmark Georgetown home, Armistead Peter III included an appendix entitled, “Recommendations on Maintenance and Advisors.” “Make it a rule,” recommended the historic property’s last private owner and a Wagner Roofing customer, “to call only upon firms especially equipped through profession, experience and reputation to perform these services.”

That’s still good advice today.

Sincerely,

Chuck Wagner

**WAGNER**  
ROOFLINES

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## Our Customers Say ...

... thank you for the extraordinary roof reconstruction that your company recently completed on my personal residence.

The ... job that fell to Freddy Oltman and his assistant, Baltazar Ortega, was extensive, complex and daunting, as the old roof was poorly constructed and the shingles on the vertical walls of the home were panel sections, not individual shakes as previously assumed. The team had to remove entire three-course panel lengths for recutting in order to install the copper flashing properly. In areas around the dormers and gable ends, the premanufactured shingle corners were painstakingly removed and refit seamlessly.

The art of what Freddy did was to leave the house looking as if the siding was never touched, let alone removed ... What they left behind was something artful, of fine craftsmanship ...

—Glenn Chen Fong, Custom Design Concepts Architecture

## Serving the Community

As a member of the metropolitan Washington, D.C., community since 1914, Wagner Roofing Company is committed to supporting worthwhile causes and activities that enhance our community and improve the lives of all of us. The following are among the organizations to which Wagner was pleased to contribute goods, services and/or funds during the past year:

Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Washington  
Capital Area Food Bank “Good Neighbor”  
Corporate Campaign

Fannie Mae 5K Help the Homeless Walk  
Friends Unlimited (pediatric AIDS center run by Pediatric AIDS/HIV Care, Inc.)  
Frost Center/Rockville “Career Day”  
The Historical Society of Washington, D.C.  
National Building Museum  
Rebuilding Together (formerly Christmas in April)  
Smithsonian Folklife Festival  
Tudor Place Historic House and Garden—  
Spring Garden Party  
YMCA, Washington, D.C.

## New Video Profiles Wagner Roofing Company

The story of Wagner Roofing Company comes alive in a new 20-minute video produced by the company. The video, which features personal interviews and visits to Wagner projects, shows how the Washington, D.C., sheet metal business started by Otto Wagner and his son Jack (Chuck Wagner’s father) in their basement home-shop in 1914 burgeoned into a roofing firm that today has more than 75 employees and serves clients as far away as the West Indies. The video highlights Wagner’s commitment to promoting the skills of master craftspeople in the building arts, preserving historic properties that reflect such artistry—and educating the public about these subjects. To view the video, contact Chuck or Sheila Wagner at 301/927/9030. ●



## Meanwhile, Back at the Folger ...

Wagner Roofing is again working on the interior of the historic Folger Building at 725 15th St., N.W.

After restoring the Folger’s exterior in 2000—including repairing and cleaning the marble facade, pointing stone and brickwork, installing new slate and copper roofs, painting windows and birdproofing the building—Wagner was asked to renovate the fourth and ninth floor interiors (see the summer 2000 and spring 2001 issues of *Wagner Rooflines*).

The current project will update restrooms on three floors, according to Denise Berti, Wagner project manager for general contracting. In the original design, every floor included only one restroom; the new design calls for each floor to have two restrooms with an anteroom between. “As with our previous work at the Folger, the challenge is to provide 21st century functionality while retaining the charm of this 1907 building,” says Berti.

The project involves gutting each room, core-drilling the floor to provide locations for fixtures, framing out the walls and hanging drywall. All wiring and plumbing will be replaced, and new floors, lights and ceilings will be installed.

## Back When...



**In 1972, Wagner Roofing moved from Rhode Island Avenue to its current Hyattsville, Md., location. The Wagner Roofing team gathered in 1975 at the Hyattsville office for a photo.**

## Who We Are

**Chuck Wagner**  
**Sheila Wagner**  
Owners

**Bill Barnett**  
**Charlie Isom**  
**Tim Schmitt**  
**Jeff Wooldridge**  
Estimators

**Denise Berti**  
Project Manager/  
General Contracting

**Barbara Demarest**  
Project Manager

**Sergio Luise**  
Purchasing

**Colleen Kennedy**  
Administrative Assistant

**Brian Kidwell**  
Operations Manager

**Diane DeCesaris**  
Controller

**Jennifer Rozier**  
Service Department

**Adrienne Whyte**  
Receptionist