

# REAL ESTATE

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## Fairy-Tale Setting, Practical Goals

*\$110 Million Project Aims To  
Preserve History, Secure Future Of  
National Park Seminary*

By BARBARA RUBEN  
Special to The Washington Post

**H**omes for sale: One castle, draw-bridge missing; a Swiss chalet, minus the Alps; a Dutch windmill with roof deck, and a former chapel with stained glass windows intact. All need tender loving care—and lots of it.

This mélange of quirky decaying buildings, and many more, are part of a \$110 million project to preserve and develop the National Park Seminary in Silver Spring. Built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries first as a hotel, and then expanded as a girls school, the assortment of abandoned buildings also includes a black-and-red pagoda, a sprawling Tudor-style main building with a four-story ballroom, and a former gymnasium, complete with mosaic-tiled swimming pool and running track. All will be preserved as housing.

The school, called the National Park Seminary, became one of the premier women's finishing schools in the country, with tuition higher than that of Harvard then -- a lot of which, apparently, went into a flurry of construction.



BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

A pagoda will become a single-family home near the end of construction at the National Park Seminary. "The whole place has a sort of Walt Disney feel to it, a fantasy," says Cynthia Milloy, who is hoping to restore one of the houses.

"The whole place has a sort of Walt Disney feel to it, a fantasy," said Cynthia Milloy, who is hoping to restore one of the idiosyncratic single-family houses on the 32-acre property. "Whenever we'd see the place, we'd ooh and ah at the architecture and buildings, but feel terribly sad that they were deteriorating."

Plaster and paint peel off the walls in pancake-size chunks. Vines creep up crumbling stucco walls. Entire floors of some buildings have caved in, one on top of each other, all the way to the basement.

During World War II, the Army seized the girls school as a place for soldiers to recuperate, calling it the Walter Reed Annex. Over the decades, the Army slowly abandoned the place, and by the late 1970s it was nearly deserted except for curious sightseers and vandals.

Today, bulldozers churn through earth to make way for 90 new townhouses being constructed by Bethesda-based EYA, formerly Eakin/Youngentob Associates, on empty land on the campus, which is bordered by the Beltway on the north side and Rock Creek Park on the south.

The huge main building and many of the outbuildings that once housed the school's president and served as sorority houses for the girls will be preserved and converted into 89 condominiums and 66 rental apartments by the Alexander Co., a Wisconsin firm that specializes in the adaptation of historic properties. Only one house -- bisected by a fallen tree -- will be torn down.

This summer, the Alexander Co. sought proposals from individuals and renovation firms for the 13 historic single-family houses on the property. "We are seeking qualified purchasers because I was afraid if we waited, the buildings would deteriorate further," said Natalie Bock, development project manager for the company.

Restoration and construction by EYA and Alexander will take years, but some of the townhouses are scheduled to be available as early as this spring. Those that abut Rock Creek Park, across the street from the former school's campus, will be the first to be completed.

The first houses feature Arts and Crafts exteriors with front porches and are priced

at \$648,000 to \$743,000. Others will be built in Spanish Mission and Tudor styles that echo parts of the architecture of the old school; prices will range from \$650,000 to \$910,000.

Sterling Mehring has lived across the Beltway from the site in a historic house for nearly 30 years. Now that his four children are grown, he and his wife Connie have purchased one of the townhouses.

“Our main interest is the site itself. We think the architecture of the seminary is fascinating. Every year after Thanksgiving dinner, we walk with all our guests to the old property. It’s a traditional excursion,” said Mehring, who is a real estate agent with Long & Foster.

Mehring has advocated for preservation of the buildings for years and says he is pleasantly surprised that they will finally be restored.

Mike Hodges, who lives in Germantown, was one of the first townhouse purchasers. Unlike Mehring, he had never heard of the property before. Hodges said one of the features he’s most excited about is a new bike path that will begin near his garage and wind through Rock Creek Park.

“The Arts and Crafts houses EYA had done in Clarendon really caught our eye, so we know what we’ll be getting,” he said. “Moving to Silver Spring will give us an urban feel, but at the same time it’s like a hidden gem back there.”

For EYA community sales manager Sylvia Mader, that’s a concern. So far, 22 of the 90 townhouses have sold.

“The challenge is that we’re kind of isolated. The rest of the world doesn’t know about us,” she said.

The first condos are projected to be completed in early 2008. Ranging from 700 to 3,200 square feet and from \$350,000 to

more than \$1 million, no two units will be alike, Bock said. She has a soft spot for the former chapel, an octagon-shaped space with soaring ceilings and stained glass windows in a palette of turquoise, aqua and green.

Built between 1894 and 1898, the chapel is one of the oldest structures on the campus. Renovation has just begun for the unit, the largest and most expensive in the project, and pews still cover half the floor. When renovation is complete, the condo will have a loft with a bedroom, den and family room.

A large bungalow-style house built in 1898 as the residence for the couple who transformed the campus from a hotel and casino into a finishing school will be split into seven condominiums. It will retain the poetically named Porch of the Maidens, with its arches held up by statues of women in flowing robes. A two-bedroom, one-bath, 931-square-foot condo in this building will sell for \$367,000.

Condos will also be fashioned from the rooms ringing the four-story ballroom, which was built in 1927. One three-bedroom, three-bath unit, for example, will run the entire length of the ballroom, with 21 windows with views of woods. It will be priced at \$749,900. A much smaller unit in the ballroom, a one-bedroom with study, will have an asking price of \$464,900.

“We wanted to appeal to a variety of income levels. We’re really looking at a broad range of housing options,” Bock said, noting that 20 percent of the apartments will be set aside for families who make 50 to 60 percent of the median county income. In addition, EYA is building new housing on site for the 30 men now living on the property, as part of a Catholic Charities program to help the homeless.

The Alexander Co. must work within

strict guidelines set by the Maryland Historical Trust, which put a preservation easement on the property. Approval for both exterior and interior development must be approved by the trust.

That means that even the dozens of styles of windows in the historic buildings must be kept or duplicated and that such features as the ornate fireplaces and wainscoting must remain.

The developers will remove the drab Army signs in the hallways, such as the one reading American Registry of Pathology, and replace them with plaques from the seminary that commemorated each class.

Another goal is to ensure that the larger community can use part of the property. The ballroom, encircled with balconies on two levels and bedecked with plaster busts of literary figures in arched porticos on the top level, will be transformed into public space where classes and dances may be offered, Bock said.

“The ballroom is my favorite. You go in there, and it just takes your breath away,” said Cynthia Milloy, who hopes to renovate one of the single-family houses.

An interpretive trail tracing the historic sites and winding through the 13 acres that will be left undeveloped will also be open to the public, as will a new bike path that will connect to the main path along Beach Drive in Rock Creek Park, less than half a mile away.

Residents in the historic buildings and new houses will share a fitness and community center, which will be fashioned from the former dining room used by the girls and mess hall used by the Army. Its carved fireplaces, historic tapestries and Corinthian columns are intact, although the Army glued ceiling tiles to wood-paneled ceilings.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SAVE OUR SEMINARY

Then: The charming Dutch windmill sorority house stands near the bridge that Seminary students also used for horseback-riding excursions.

BY KEVIN CLARK — THE WASHINGTON POST

Now: After renovation, the windmill will become a single-family home.

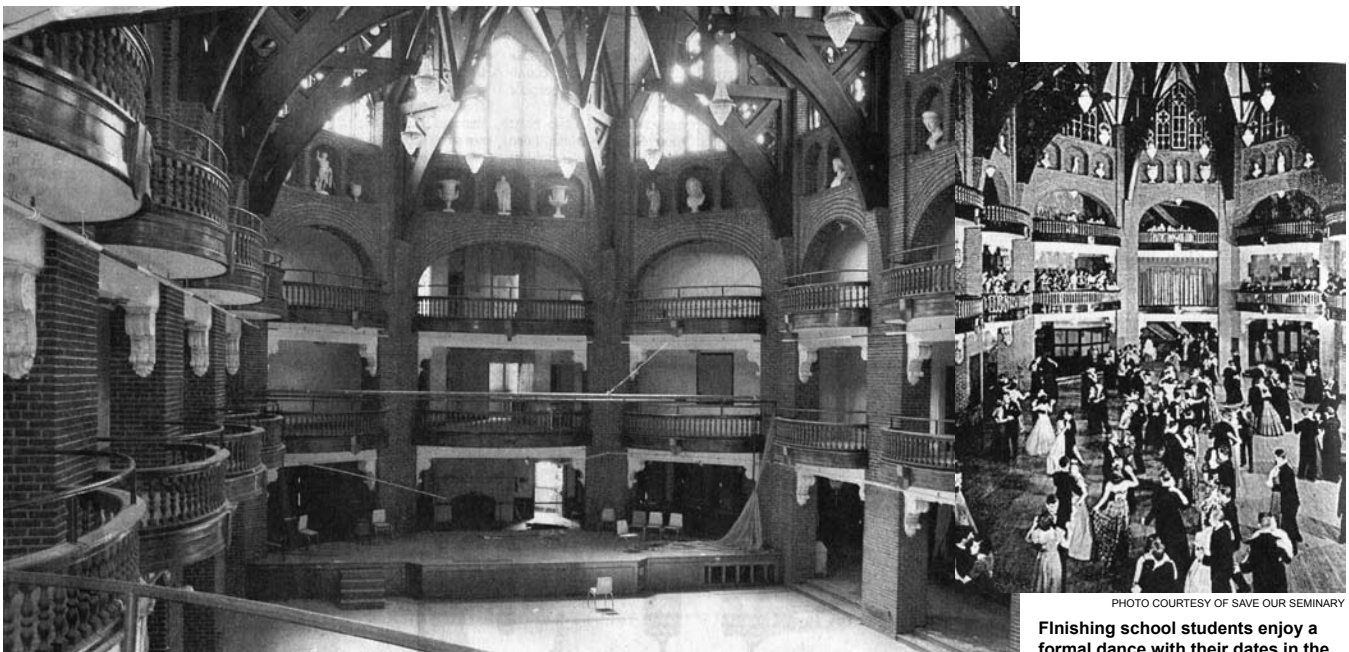


PHOTO COURTESY OF SAVE OUR SEMINARY  
**Finishing school students enjoy a formal dance with their dates in the Grand Ballroom in 1940.**

BY KEVIN CLARK - THE WASHINGTON POST  
**Plans for the seminary's vast ballroom, encircled with balconies on two levels and bedecked with plaster busts of literary figures, include condos and a public space where classes and dances may be offered.**

But all that may be years away. Bolstering the buildings and clearing away decades of decay is a prodigious task.

When the Army deserted the property, it left the water on, coursing through radiators that eventually froze and burst. That sent water streaming down the walls, adding to the deterioration, according to Bock. There are asbestos floor tiles and thousands of square feet of rotted floorboards.

Recent environmental studies on the property found PCBs, mercury and volatile organic compounds in the ground on a small part of the property. The Army has the responsibility for cleaning up the contamination and plans to do so over the next six months.

In 1993, arsonists destroyed the Odeon Theatre, built in 1901. Dozens of historic statues sprinkled through the campus have been stolen or defaced by vandals or have badly deteriorated.

The restoration of the site comes after years of inertia by the Army as well as wrangling over possible other uses. Save Our Seminary, a nonprofit group of 300 nearby residents, alumni of the school and members of the military who recuperated on the campus, was formed in 1988 and helped spearhead some of the restoration ideas.

In 2001, the Army determined the property to be "surplus" and began a process with the federal General Services Administration to divest itself of the 33 acres and 27 buildings. Montgomery County was then given ownership of the property and began to take proposals for development

and restoration.

"We always thought somewhere out there, there's someone who's a little crazy who's willing to take this on," said Bonnie Rosenthal, president of Save Our Seminary. "Some said, 'Oh, we could tear this down or completely change that.'"

So Rosenthal, who lives across the Beltway from the site, said that her group was "immensely pleased at the amount of preservation."

The main neighborhood concern is traffic, she said. "Early on, traffic was the number one issue for most people. It was going to be a dramatic change, essentially going from zero traffic to almost 280 households."

Rosenthal said both Save Our Seminary and the developers asked the county to keep the roads around the seminary narrow. They will remain two-lane roads, but shoulders, sidewalks and other improvements will be added.

Wendy Kern has used the roads around the seminary as a cut-through on her way to visit her in-laws, who live nearby. She and her husband, Raymond, have put in a request to restore one of the houses.

They own a 1928 bungalow elsewhere in Silver Spring that they are "slowly but surely restoring" and plan to sell the house they restore at the seminary. Her husband owns Raymond H. Kern & Associates, a con-

struction and contracting business that focuses on renovation.

"The houses are in very, very poor condition. It will be a challenge to restore what is there, but at the same time bring it into the modern world," she said.

"My husband is a wooden boat restorer and sometimes looks at an old wreck of a boat and thinks this will never float again. In many ways, it's just like this project. But with enough care and effort and varnish, those boats go out on the water again, and maybe these buildings will survive another 100 years."



PHOTO COURTESY OF SAVE OUR SEMINARY  
**The Japanese pagoda sorority house at the National Park Seminary. During World War II, the Army seized the girls school to use as a place for soldiers to recuperate.**