

THE NEW YORKER

RIP VAN WINKLE DEPT.

FIXER-UPPER

by Margaret Borden

JUNE 11, 2007

Many New York City residences contain stacks of old newspapers, but most of these papers do not include reports on the funeral procession of Abraham Lincoln, the sinking of the Titanic, or the death of King George VI, as did those (from 1865, 1912, and 1952) found piled in the living room of a West Village town house that was recently put up for sale.

The house, at 112 Washington Place, is a four-story Federal-style building, constructed in 1832. Its owner, a seventy-nine-year-old man, had been living there alone for more than four decades, since inheriting it from his grandmother, who bought it in 1878. Many of the original details remained, including a winding staircase that split into two on the second floor, six fireplaces, a set of ornate French doors, and a working dumbwaiter. Decades-old paint—in one room, a robin’s-egg blue—was peeling mightily, and a leaking roof had caused some plaster to collapse. The owner was not a man who leaped to make changes. As with the newspapers, the crumbling ceilings were left undisturbed.

Last year, the house finally got to be overwhelming, and the owner, through a lawyer, approached a team of three brokers from Prudential Douglas Elliman, who put the property on the market for \$3.695 million. The listing touted a “rare opportunity to own best of bones!” before soberly concluding that the property was “in need of a full renovation.” Because many of the lights in the house were not working, the brokers showed prospective buyers around by flashlight. Marco Pirozzolo, one of the brokers, said, “I would tell them this is not about money—it’s about having the wherewithal.”

The owner, a devout man, lived in almost monklike simplicity. He had no central heating or air-conditioning. He lacked hot water. He used only the top floor of the building, and slept in the smallest room in the house. Next to his bedroom was the kitchen, which contained a large mint-green enamel sink and a matching gas stove from the twenties, which he used to cook soup and make coffee. There was no refrigerator.

Among the prospective buyers was the actress Mary-Kate Olsen. “She showed up with her big sunglasses,” Dennis St. Germain, another of the brokers, said. “She knew her real estate. She said, ‘This is three million to renovate and it’s a two-year ordeal, and I just can’t do that.’” After six months on the market, the house was purchased by Blesso Properties, a development company, which plans to gut the interior and rebuild the house in a modernist style, with a double-height space connecting the rear of the garden floor and the parlor floor, both of which will open to the back yard. The two rooms on the second floor will be combined into a master suite. “These houses were built as functional,” the company’s president, Matthew Blesso, said the other day. “Today, we’re making it into something more”—he paused—“spectacular.” The dumbwaiter will be removed, and a penthouse floor with a roof deck will be added. A new kitchen, on the garden level, will have a refrigerator (a Sub-Zero). The asking price of the refurbished house will be in the range of ten million dollars.

Before demolition began, in early May, the brokers helped the owner sell things he no longer wanted—furniture, oil paintings, a set of gilded frames that held photographs and his grandparents’ immigration papers. A collection of early American flags was dispersed among the owner’s friends. “Several of them didn’t have very many stars and were probably from the middle of the eighteen-hundreds,” Scott Allison, another of the selling agents, said. “He used them as bedspreads.” One could see a blue shirtwaist dress hanging in a second-floor closet. A wall calendar was open to November, 1974.

The owner donated the money from the sale of the house to a Catholic charity, leaving aside a trust to pay his living

expenses. He has settled around the corner, in a one-bedroom rental. “His top priority was to be within a couple of blocks of Our Lady of Pompeii Church,” Allison said. “Years ago, he had gone to St. Joseph’s, across the street, but a pastor had taken the beautiful old statues that had been part of the church since it was built and put them out for the garbage. When he saw all of the statuary on the street, he went out and rescued the cupola that had been on top of the pulpit and put it in the back yard of his house.” The man’s new apartment came fully furnished, and is equipped with modern appliances. Pirozzolo recalled that one of the apartments he had shown the man “had one of those LG refrigerators, very dramatic, and he said, ‘I don’t know. . . . What am I going to do with this? I could use it for storage.’ ” The owner brought only a few things with him when he moved in, among them the Lincoln newspaper. “He’s very happy,” Allison said. “He loves his new apartment.” -----
