

## Occoquan stone cottage houses museum

By GREGORY TRIPLETT  
for the Potomac News

**OCCOQUAN** — A stone cottage built in 1765 houses the town museum in this river-front village.

Mill House Museum, formerly known as Merchants' Mill House, overlooks the Occoquan River at the top of a steep, rocky bank at the end of Mill Street.

### Places

Some of the stones are remnants of Merchants' Mill (also known as Ellcott's Mill after 1800) which was constructed in 1755 by John Ballendine, according to an historical description posted inside the museum.

Merchants' Mill, a flour and grist mill owned and run by merchants of nearby towns, operated from 1759 to 1924, according to the posted description. The mill was destroyed by fire in 1928, then Hurricane Agnes flood waters in 1972 displaced most of the stones of the old wall.

Merchants' Mill House, which has been used as an office for the grist mill, according to Pendleton, has survived.

Inside the one-room museum, photographs show the effects of Hurricane Agnes on the Occoquan River and the town. An album also holds more photos of the disaster.

A wooden U.S. Post Office window box is propped against one wall. The structure has a mail slot and columns of boxes on either side. The window box was used when the post office was located at the Beach home on Commerce Street, according to a sign.

A showcase in front of the window box displays photographs, milk and medicine bottles, a baby dress, shoes, apron, a coat, and other relics from Rockledge, a stone house across Mill Street from the museum built by John Ballendine in 1758, according to an Historic Occoquan Inc. brochure.

Fifteen items are spread on a table in front of the window on a side wall. Each object has a number attached which corresponds to the same number on a list of descriptions. Included in the display is a shingle splitter and a pair of doorknobs.

A white tombstone resting against a table is inscribed with the year 1893. It was unearthed by workmen excavating for a bulkhead along the Occoquan River.

History books and documents fill shelves from floor to ceiling near one corner of a side wall.

Two upper shelves of a glass display



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The Mill House Museum is at the end of Mill Street in the historic riverside town of Occoquan.

cabinet hold medical equipment used at various times in Occoquan's history. A small doctor's bag was used during the Civil War. Another doctor's bag and contents, including surgical instruments, were used by Dr. Frank W. Hornbaker from 1908 to the 1930's in the Occoquan area, according to a label inside the cabinet.

Items from local schools are exhibited inside the cabinet also. A photograph shows the pupils of Occoquan District High School in 1931. A bell was used by a physical education teacher to signal the students.

Near the cabinet, two student desks, each with a hole for an inkwell, are at least 60 years old, according to Dave McMaster, a museum attendant and former teacher in the school.

A showcase near the center of the room and another near the front door display utensils and containers for food and drink. A few of the items are: pots, jugs, bowls, a rum decanter from

one of the early town saloons, a teapot, sugar bowl, and colorful tins for storing coffee, tea, tobacco, or peanuts.

One-celled oysters 42 to 52 million years old, according to a label, and other fossils found in the area are exhibited. There is a collection of arrowheads, axes, and other stone weapons and tools also.

Outside a window on the back wall, the Occoquan River's high, dark waters rush, and tree branches swing and sway in the wind.

On a bottom shelf beside the window, a rusted iron chunk about two feet long has "Occoquan" lettered across it. It is a piece of "pig" iron poured at Occoquan Iron Works between 1755 and 1765, discovered in clearing land for a house in Falmouth, according to a display description. These smaller molds off of the main mold resembled piglets suckling and came to be referred to as pig iron, according to McMaster.

Relics from the Civil War make up

another exhibit along the back wall. A brass drum with linen heads was carried by a mascot of one of the Leesburg regiments. Various shells for firearms, canteens, a ration box, a bayonet, and buttons are displayed.

A hand-forged broad ax, ice tongs used in the early 1900's to fill ice houses in Occoquan, and a grain cradle for harvesting wheat or oats hang from the wall in one corner of the museum. A two-horse left-hand wooden plow beam rests on the floor nearby.

A large quilt hangs on a side wall beside the fireplace. The quilt was a large-group effort, made by 29 women of Historic Occoquan, Inc. as a commemorative piece in 1976. Twenty-nine patches on the quilt illustrate landmarks and buildings of Occoquan; the center patch is the Occoquan town seal.

"Everything in the museum has been given or loaned by people in the surrounding community," McMaster said.