

Events



JEFF MANKIE/NEWS & MESSENGER

Jim Walbert has built a scale model of the Merchant's Mill that is currently on display in the Town Hall of Occoquan.

Historic mill scaled down

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You can almost hear the rush of water tumbling back into the Occoquan River after turning the paddlewheel that powered the first automated grist mill in the United States.

The stones along the riverbanks look like they've been splashed. Mill Street looks muddy enough to mess up your shoes. The mill looks well used and worn and there is soot that stains the tops of the chimneys.

It also looks like just about every known picture of Merchant's Mill that was built in Occoquan in the 1750s and burned down in 1924. The miller's house, which stood beside it, still exists and is used as the Occoquan Historical Society's Mill House Museum.

Occoquan Town Councilman James Walbert has recently completed the model he built of the iconic structure, often viewed as a symbol of the town's historic beginnings.

"I was completely blown away by it," Occoquan Mayor Earnie Porta said. "I could not have anticipated it was going to look so fantastic."

"He put a lot of work into it," Porta said. "It is definitely a labor of love."

"Forty years ago, I would not have been able to do this," Walbert said. "The things I did on this model is the culmination of all my years of experience building structures."

Walbert built his first railroad model when he was 10.

"I've always made my own structures from scratch," he said. "This is in keeping with that. It is the same scale as my model railroads," which is 1/4 inch to one foot.

Walbert said the idea of creating a model of the mill evolved over time. He credits former Town Councilman Leo Smith for planting the seed.

"Leo had a long term dream

mill, especially with the historical significance with Washington," Walbert said.

Washington is believed to have used the automated operation of Merchants' Mill as the model for his grist mill. In recent years, the Mount Vernon Association recreated Washington's mill and it is open to visitors.

"It was one of those things that you talk about, dream about but getting someone to fund that would be difficult," Walbert said.

Since Smith is also a model railroader, they talked about making a model of the mill. The problem with that, Walbert said, was access to photos of it.

"You need pictures and you need to have them in front of you to think about it and all the pictures of the mill are at the museum," Walbert said.

However, Porta published a historical photo book of Occoquan early this year and it contained several photos of the mill, giving Walbert something he could work off of in his workshop.

"I had them right there at my finger tips anytime I wanted to think about building a model," he said. He also asked Porta, a member of the historical society, if the museum would be interested in having a model of the mill.

With the go-ahead, Walbert started planning and building in March. He didn't finish until the end of November.

"It was one of those things that I thought, 'Gee I could do that,' then I thought I would," he said.

Merchants' Mill was a stone, brick and frame building, 45 feet high and 75 feet long. From the street it was two stories, but on the riverside because of the bank it rose four stories.

Walbert used the photographs to take measurements for details such as window placement.

"I drew up the plans and I looked at the pictures, then I changed the plans and I looked at the pictures some more," he



Merchant's Mill in Occoquan, built in colonial days, stood in the town until it was burned in a fire in 1924.

dormers: you mock them up and look at them from different angles; you look at the pictures and then you look at the model again. You move them around a little bit, you change their size," he said.

The windows were all framed with individual pieces. Then he deliberately used a thin white acrylic paint so the wood grain would show through. "The idea was not to make this mill look like it was brand-new. It had seen weathering," Walbert said.

The glass is clear acetate with wax paper behind it. "Wax paper lets the light in but you can't really see through it since there was nothing on the interior to be seen," he said.

"In those portions of windows and doors that are open, there is a box-like structure behind them painted flat black so the light doesn't go in. Through some of the openings, you can see some floor but it only goes back a couple of inches," Walbert said.

What took the longest and proved the most tedious was making the roof shingles. "They are individually textured and cut," he said, adding that he spread the work out over a

laundry room where he keeps his tools and a carving bench. The model sat on a card table while he worked on it.

"I wanted it to look, at any angle, like any of the pictures of it," Walbert said. "That was important to me."

While Walbert has a Ph.D. in mathematics, he says modeling is simply "all 10th grade geometry."

He uses modeling as a stress reliever. "Model railroaders are part artists, part engineer, part mathematician but all child," he said. "It has to be fun to do. This is a creative outlet for me."

He saw recreating the mill as a challenge. "The more I thought about it, the more I said, 'I bet I could do that.'"

"I very strongly believe that God has given me some talents and it much more fun, much more worthwhile to share those with other people," he said. "I could have built this and shoved it in a room somewhere in the house but that was not the intent."

The model was recently presented to the historic society. "They were just floored," Porta said.

Everybody who has seen it

landmarks, especially Rockledge, Porta said.

"It's possible. I would have to feel really motivated to do that," he said. But I wouldn't rule it out."

But for now, he will go back to his railroad model and his wood carvings of waterfowl.

The railroad model is "about 10 to 15 percent completed. That's in quotes because as any model railroader knows you are never finished. It's what I enjoy."

For now, the model is on display at the Occoquan Town Hall. At some point, it will be put under a glass cover and used as a centerpiece of the museum.

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