

## History of Occoquan

by Bernadette Plunkett  
Occoquan is derived from a Dogue Indian word meaning "at the end of the water." It is believed that the Dogues stayed close to the Occoquan River because of the abundance of fish and ease of traveling by canoe.

It was the river and its location, at the head of the tidewater, that made Occoquan a natural site for water-borne commerce. A tobacco warehouse was built as early as 1736 and an industrial complex had forges, water grist mills, and a bake house, saw mills, stoves, and distilleries. The Merchant's Mill became the first automated grist mill in the nation. Grain was taken from the holds of ships and off barges, processed, and returned to markets from Alexandria by only one man...then transported to markets from Alexandria by the West Indies.

The only remaining part, the miller's office, is now a museum operated by Historic Occoquan. By 1826, Occoquan had one of the first cotton mills in Virginia and by 1835, several mercantile stores and various Farmers and traders came from as far away as the Blue Ridge Mountains. Those who came to town by horses and the building still stands. A day was spent shopping for necessities. An 1874 ledger from one of the general stores shows 260 charge accounts on the books including at least two steamer companies.

Prior to the Civil War, ship building began in Occoquan specializing in schooners and long boats. In addition to products from the cotton and grist mills, there was trade in cord wood, fish and river ice. Occoquan had also built the first commercial ice storage house in this area. River ice was harvested every winter and stored for shipment to Washington, D.C. A marsh at that time, Washington also needed pine log piling. These were rafted up the river from Occoquan. Railroad ties and large logs were shipped to Philadelphia and New York.

A mail stage route had been authorized through Occoquan back in 1805. During the Civil War, the Occoquan Post Office played a key role in passing letters and packages between North and South (since Washington and Alexandria were blockaded). During one winter, the Hammill Hotel served as headquarters for Confederate General Wade Hampton.

The mill race, used to power the mills, also provided recreation for the townspeople and a swimming hole for youngsters. Washington residents soon discovered the natural beauty of the area and cruised down on excursion boats summer weekends to picnic along the water's edge.

Circuses and traveling shows set up at the public wharf in summer. Ice skating was a favorite winter pastime. The dawn of the 20th Century saw a town bustling with grocery stores, a lumber and hardware store, drugstore, millinery, churches, school, jail, blacksmith, barber, undertaker, doctor and pharmacy. The Oddfellows Hall became the first opera house in the area, and the Lyric Theater brought people to town by car (if gasoline was available), row boat and yacht.

Occoquan became the social as well as the commercial area.

But a devastating fire destroyed much of the town in 1928. With the opening of Route 7 in 1928, the town no longer straddled the major north-south travel route. The river had silted and industry declined. The railroad bypassed the town, and replanting began destroyed buildings, sidewalks, streets and the iron truss bridge that crossed the Occoquan. Any one of these that crossed the Occoquan, repaired, rebuilt and restored, creating a unique town to survive. Townspeople, merchants and those interested in survival offers boating and fishing, unburied shopping, pleasant dining, casual strolling and an opportunity to meditate on it all in a park. Antiques, museum or under a flowering plum tree in a needletown, pleasurable, fine art, crafts, fashions, water-borne replaced mills, ice houses, lumberyards and Robert Letho, town council member and past president of Historic Occoquan, says it best:

"With a history spanning a period almost as long as Virginia itself, Occoquan provides a unique mixture of pre-revolutionary, Victorian and modern aspects of life resulting in the living charm which no restoration or genuine love for the town of Occoquan and interest in its well-being."

Bernadette Plunkett, retired Prince William County Tourism Director was made an Honorary Citizen of the Town of Occoquan in 1988 for her deep and genuine love for the town of Occoquan and interest in its well-being.

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At the end of the river and its location, at the head of the tide-water, to the Occoquan River because of the abundance of fish and ease of traveling by canoe. It was Occoquan a natural site for water-borne commerce that made Occoquan a natural site for water-borne commerce, a tobacco warehouse was built as early as 1736, and an industrial complex began in 1750. Before grist mills, the century, Occoquan had forges, water grist mills in the bake house, saw mills, the first automated grist mill in the nation. Merchants' Mill became the first of shops and machinery operated by fire. Grain was taken from the holds of ships from Alexandria processed, and returned to the markets from Alexandria by only one man... then transported to markets from Alexandria by the West Indies.

The mill operated for 175 years until it was destroyed by fire to the West Indies. The only remaining part, the miller's office, is now a museum operated by Historic Occoquan. By 1826, Occoquan had one of the first cotton mills in Virginia, and by 1855, several mercantile stores and various mechanics.

Farmers and traders came from as far away as the Blue Ridge Mountains. Those who came to town by horses and wagon stayed overnight at the Alton or Hammill Hotels (the latter building still stands). A day was spent shopping for necessities.

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Occoquan became the social as well as the commercial center for the area.

But a devastating fire destroyed much of the town in 1916. With the opening of Route 1 in 1928, the town no longer stood astride the major, north-south travel route. The river had silted and industry declined. The railroad bypassed the town, and soon trucks began carrying cargo. Supermarkets began replacing small grocery stores. Then in 1972, the ravaging waters of Hurricane Agnes destroyed buildings, sidewalks, streets and this iron truss bridge that crossed the Occoquan.

Any one of these could have meant the demise of a small riverside town. But Occoquan is a town destined to survive. Townspeople, merchants and those interested in history registered, rebuilt and restored, creating a unique town which offers boating and fishing, un-hurried shopping, pleasant dining, casual strolling, and an opportunity to meditate on it all in a park. Antiques, collectibles, fine art, crafts, fashions, needlework, pleasure craft, gourmet food, and unique gifts and services have replaced mills, ice houses, lumberyards and water-borne commerce.

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*"With a history spanning a period almost as long as Virginia itself, Occoquan provides a unique mixture of pre-revolutionary, Victorian, and modern aspects of life resulting in the living charm which no restoration or modern city can equal."*

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