

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 begun in 1750. Before the turn of the century, Occoquan had forges, water grist mills, tanning mills, a bake house, saw mills, storehouses and dwellings. 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 these carriers by machinery operated by only one man...then transported to markets from Alexandria to the West Indies.

The mill operated for 175 years until it was destroyed by fire. The only remaining part, the miller's office, is now a museum operated by Historic Occoquan.

By 1828, Occoquan had one of the first cotton mills in Virginia, and by 1835, 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.

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, ships specializing in schooners and products from the cotton and wood, fish and river ice. Occoquan commercial ice storage houses harvested every winter and sent ice to Washington, D.C. A marsh at that time, Washington, D.C. pilings. These were rafted up. Railroad ties and large logs were also rafted up to New York.

A mail stage route had been established back in 1805. During the Civil War, Occoquan played a key role in passing messages between the North and South (since Washington, D.C. was under Confederate control). During one winter, the Hamill Hotel was used for Confederate General Wade Hampton's headquarters.

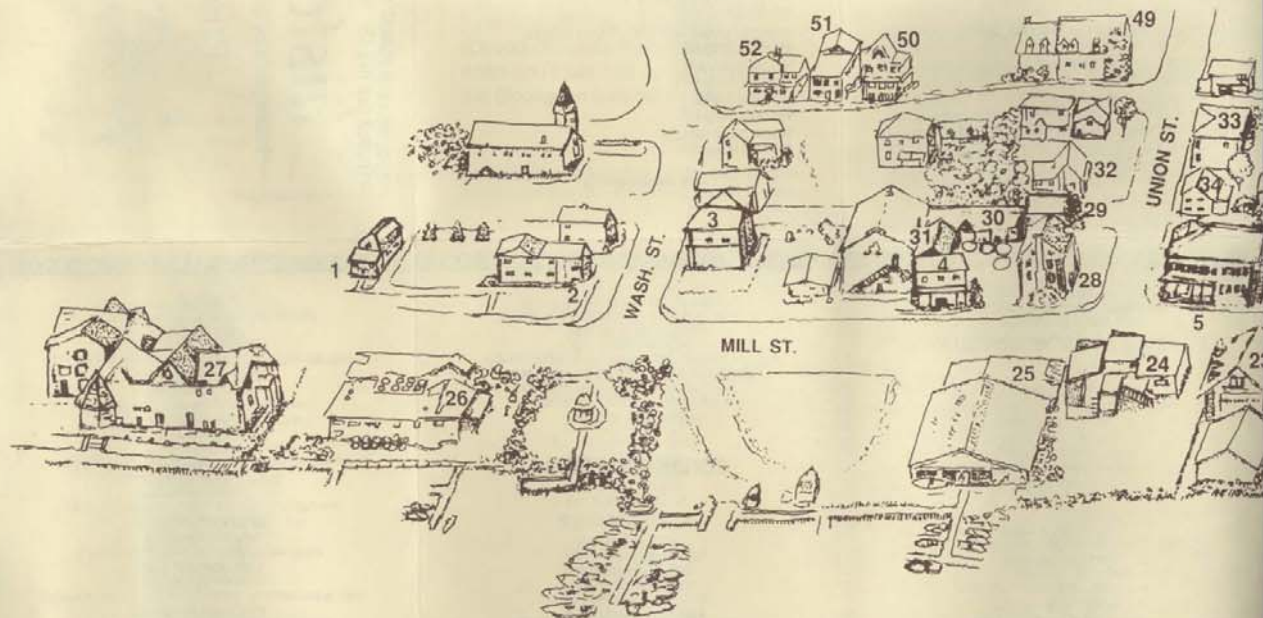
The mill race, used to power machinery for the townspeople's recreation for the townspeople's youngsters. Washington residents come to Occoquan for the beauty of the area and cruise along the river on weekends to picnic along the banks.

Circuses and traveling shows were common. Ice skating was a favorite winter activity.

The dawn of the 20th Century brought grocery stores, a lumber and millinery, churches, school, a doctor and pharmacy. The Occoquan opera house in the area, and the town by car (if gasoline was available).

Historic Occoquan

Enjoy yourself. Shopping is a pleasant change in town. Here you'll find a wonderful selection of shops filled with art and antiques, handcrafts and gifts. The hospitality you'd expect from an unusual community. We hope you have a pleasant stay and we welcome you back.



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 begun in 1750. Before the turn of the century, Occoquan had forges, water grist mills, tolling mills, a bake house, saw mills, storehouses and dwellings. 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 these carriers by machinery operated by only one man...then transported to markets from Alexandria to the West Indies.

The mill operated for 175 years until it was destroyed by fire. The only remaining part, the miller's office, is now a museum operated by Historic Occoquan.

By 1828, Occoquan had one of the first cotton mills in Virginia, and by 1835, 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.

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 pilings. 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.

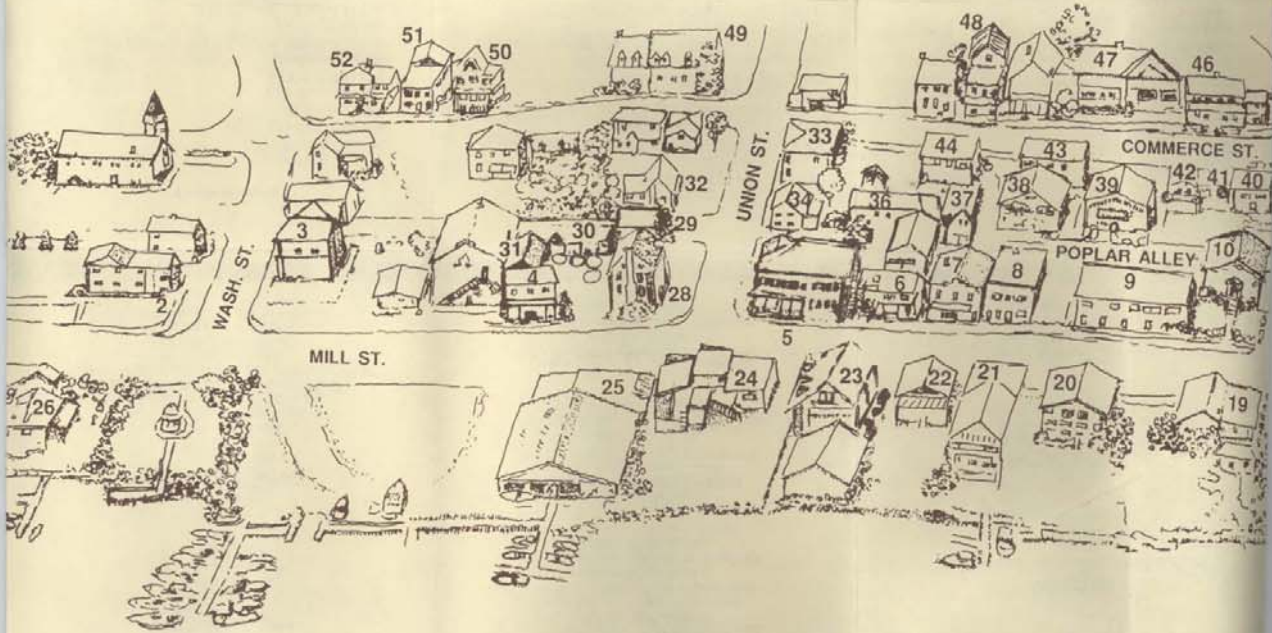
Circuses and traveling shows set up at the public wharf in summer. Ice skating was a favorite winter pastime.

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.

ris
To
regu
offe
casu
small
park. A
needl
servic
water-b
Robert
Historic Oc
"With a histo
Occoquan prev
modern city can
Bernadette Plunkett
made an "Honorary
genuine love for the T

Historic Occoquan, Virginia

Enjoy yourself. Shopping is a pleasant change in this authentic waterfront mill town. Here you'll find a wonderful selection of specialty shops and restaurants filled with art and antiques, handcrafts and gifts, and the kind of warm Virginia hospitality you'd expect from an unusual community of merchants and artisans. We hope you have a pleasant stay and we welcome your return.



building began in Occoquan long boats. In addition to grist mills, there was trade in cord. Occoquan had also built the first in this area. River ice was stored for shipment to Washington, and Washington also needed pine log from the river from Occoquan. These were shipped to Philadelphia and

authorized through Occoquan. After the War, the Occoquan Post Office letters and packages between North and Alexandria were blockaded. The Mill Hotel served as headquarters in Hampton.

er the mills, also provided a swimming hole for. Residents soon discovered the natural beauty down on excursion boats summer water's edge.

was set up at the public wharf in favorite winter pastime.

visitors saw a town bustling with hardware store, drugstore, mill, blacksmith, barber, undertaker, and the fellows Hall became the first. The Lyric Theater brought people to the town (available), row boat and yacht.

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 the iron truss bridge that crossed the Occoquan.

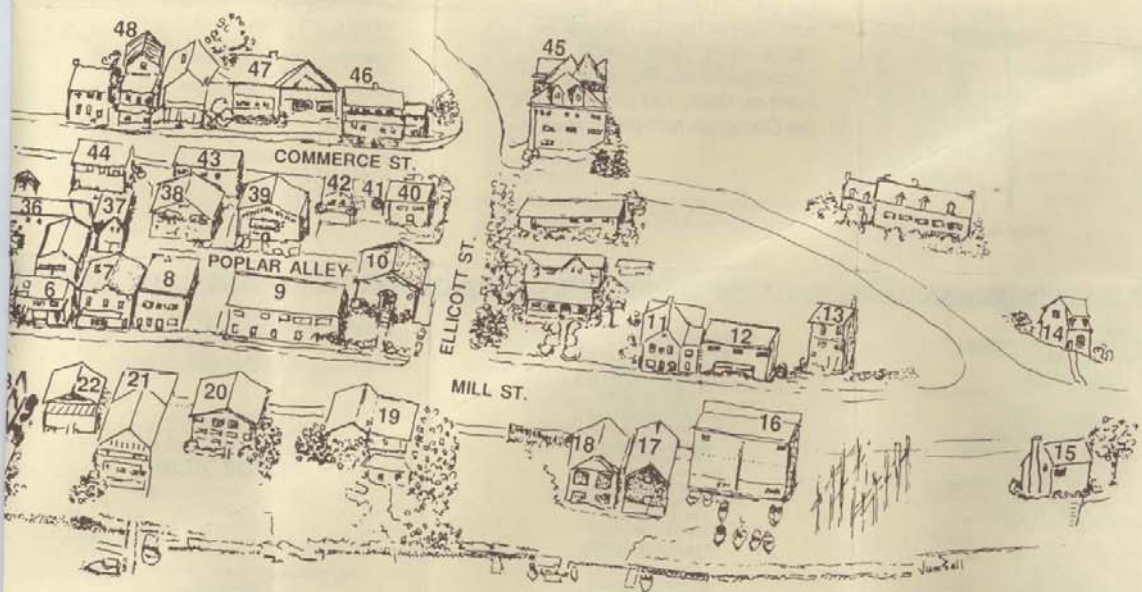
Any one of these could have meant the demise of a small riverside town. But Occoquan is a town destined to survive. Townspeople, merchants and those interested in history repaired, rebuilt and restored, creating a unique town which offers boating and fishing, unhurried shopping, pleasant dining, casual strolling, and an opportunity to meditate on it all in a small town museum or under a flowering plum tree in the town 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.

Robert Lehto, 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 modern city can equal."

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."

Occoquan, Virginia

Experience this authentic waterfront mill town with specialty shops and restaurants, antique shops, and the kind of warm Virginia community of merchants and artisans. Come for your return.



© June Ball 1989
 Two Sisters Gallery