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Occoquan Historical Society

(Formerly Historic Occoquan, Inc.)

HOME ABOUT US MILL HOUSE MUSEUM SPECIAL EXHIBITS EVENTS DONATE CONTACT US LINKS NEWSLETTER PRODUCTS
HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS CIVIL WAR LEGACY PROJECT MEMORIES CHILDREN'S PAGE

Special Exhibits

John Underwood Exhibit

John Underwood was one of some sixty (60) Abraham Lincoln supporters in Occoquan, who on July 4, 1860, elected a pole with pennants bearing the names of Lincoln and his running mate, Hannibal Hamlin. On July 27, 1860, the Prince William militia entered town and chopped down the pole, to the jeers of the Lincoln supporters and the cheers of Southern sympathizers. Once the Civil War began, Underwood was viewed suspiciously by the Confederacy, and during a raid in December of 1860, was captured and imprisoned by Confederate forces. After his release, President Abraham Lincoln rewarded Underwood's loyalty by appointing him U.S. Marshal. Visit the Mill House Museum and view a display compiled by Dolores Elder on the life of this prominent Occoquan resident.



Underwood's House on Mill Street

John Underwood - Occoquan Resident & Abolitionist



John Underwood

On August 3, 1857, a Grand Jury indicted John Underwood of Occoquan for violating a Virginia statute passed almost a decade earlier in response to the growing abolitionist movement in the North. The law made it illegal for anyone to publicly "disturb" the peace of any city or town by "displaying" or "posting" any effigy or picture in their streets. ... Not many found guilty of violating the statute could be fined and imprisoned. Underwood's crime was exactly that. He offended his public that in the Commonwealth of Virginia no citizen had a right to carry another individual. John Underwood died to give way to the freedom now being being defined as a citizen.



Underwood Home - 314 Mill Street
Destroyed by fire in 1916

In 1860, Prince William County's local population was 2,568. Almost one-third of the population, 756 (29.5%), were enslaved. People like John Underwood who spoke out against slavery and announced their slaves were among the bravest men and women of the time.

John Underwood was a master wheelwright, carpenter, boat builder, resident of Occoquan, Virginia and a frequent voter. In 1850, the 32 year old was elected to the office of the most important man in Occoquan, Virginia being a Republican and a proponent of slavery in the Virginia of 1850. Underwood was married to a young girl of 18 years when on July 4, 1860, caused a scandal on the property of Joseph Jolley in Occoquan. The dispute that followed, suggesting the "United States and Lincoln" banner flying made him on July 27, 1860, the Prince William militia raid on Occoquan from the north into the town in Prince William and was it was the trigger. In the posthumous election, the subsequent November, candidates like the arrested and 55 years old Prince William County jail or which came from the Occoquan district. Later on May 23, 1861, the citizens of Virginia voted to secede from the Union.

The Capture of Mr. Underwood by Confederate Forces
It has already been stated that the John Underwood publicly expressed their Occoquan was not Judge G. Underwood of the Eastern District of Virginia but John Underwood, a staunch Union man, abolitionist for reason of his having voted for Mr. Lincoln at the Presidential election, and on account of his accepting money and national expenses in behalf of the Union cause since the commencement of the rebellion. He was a resident of the neighborhood in which he was captured, and even it and for the greater body, which the decline of their fortunes has recently induced among the abolitionists, as well as the national abolitionist agents and agents of the rebel Government, he would probably have suffered death. As it is, he will be closely confined. - New York Times, September 13, 1861

The death of First Manassas on July 23, 1861, in March of 1862, the Confederates withdrew north to restore the Shenandoah River. On December 14, 1862, Underwood led a party into Occoquan. New England General Wade Hampton wrote in his report: "...and in the winter 1863 John Underwood, a great abolitionist and patriot."

Occoquan: John Underwood remained in Confederate hands until his release in late September 1861, at New York. He was then sent to the Secretary of War calling him to find a position for John Underwood who had proved himself a great citizen of the United States of America while being in a Union Army before being a member of the Union. He had later been appointed John Underwood, Marshal of said district.

Copy of note written by President Abraham Lincoln on behalf of John Underwood

This favor of this is John Underwood, lately captured at Occoquan. I shall be very glad if the Sec. of War, can find a place for him.

G. Lincoln
Sep. 23, 1863

William Lincoln
President of the Board of War

William Lincoln
President of the Board of War

On July 4, 1860, a group of Abbeville Lincoln supporters erected a liberty pole to Occoquan with a banner bearing the names of Lincoln and his running mate Hannibal Hamlin. Local officials in Prince William County objected, and on July 21, 1860, dispatched the Prince William militia from the county courthouse to dismantle the pole's remains. Arriving in Occoquan at 2:30 p.m., the mounted militia and some 40 soldiers surrounded the pole. Stockbridge owner Joseph Hamner, who had given permission for the pole to be erected on his property, asked the militia commander to protect his property. His estate was spared, however, as James Jackson of Fairfax County Regiment, pulled the pole and chopped down the pole to the base of the Lincoln supporters and the cheers of the local southern sympathizers. Carrying the pieces of the pole and banner with them, the militia returned to Riverdale.



Before the Battle of First Manassas

Occoquan after Virginia's Secession

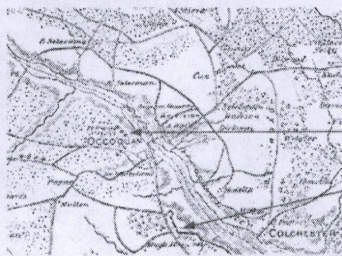
On April 17, 1861 Virginia delegates in Richmond voted 88 to 55 in favor of the Ordinance of Secession. The *Washington Chronicle* (D of the 2nd Virginia Cavalry) ran the following notice to the Liberator's agents that was printed on Nov. 15, 1861, under their banner column under the title: "The Democrats reported that they had been gathered at Occoquan for nearly three weeks. They wished to make the residents of the city the residents of Occoquan had for the Confederacy."

"Previous to the arrival of the Company most of the leading Black Republicans had left for it an especial Washington City. The Federal back... [text continues with details of the political and social tensions in Occoquan at the time, mentioning the presence of Black Republicans and the actions of the Democratic Party.]

Alexandria Gazette May 1, 1861

Occoquan: We understand that during the late rebellion in the neighborhood of Virginia most citizens of Occoquan and vicinity had been their former state of their first taking down the ensigns and tearing the stars into fields of rye, wheat. One man with a female qualified his farm and a family of young children shared his farm and to maintain others for enough dinner or enable him to get to his former place of residence in Farmington. General James of Virginia, (see Lee's History, T. A. Stone) who has been charged by Gov. Lee with carrying arms and purchasing defensive supplies, is actively engaged in the work of 'reconstruction' and has visited Occoquan [sic] and preached the sublimation of the protection of the State. This is as it should be.

When the war commenced it did not matter that Occoquan was not part of the Confederacy: people of the town were not to be regarded as the further allies of the Black Republicans. June 22, 1861 The Alexandria Daily Herald's Company R of the 2nd Virginia Cavalry was ordered to march to their camp, Farmington on the Occoquan and Black Republicans in the area. Some 2000 men of Virginia's secession had already taken place. The people of Occoquan were reported at their means of travel and trade, probably due to the activities of the Black Republicans in the area.



Map written from the Library of Congress digital collection. Map of a section of Virginia and vicinity of Washington recorded in Department Engineer's Office of Division Head Quarters of General Irwin M. Price, Jr., Alexandria, January 16th Feb 1862, was published and manuscript notes corrected by various sources and reexamined; engraved on stone by J. Bellin... NT

14 CSA guns positioned above Occoquan at 175'.

CSA rifle pits protecting the Occoquan River from Union forces.

CSA Colonel Wade Hampton commanded a 12 mile line of troops stationed along the Occoquan River from Mill Run Shoals west of Occoquan and east to the junction with the Potomac River. His troops would remain entrenched from the early fall of 1861 until March 9 of 1862, when the Confederates moved their line of defense south to below the Rappahannock River. During these six months Occoquan would be shelled by a Union gunboat and fired on by Union Infantry. At the same time residents would be arrested by Confederate authorities who questioned their loyalty to the South.

Hampton, who had encamped himself in the Occoquan area, would later use the local knowledge he gained to raid Occoquan on December 18, 1862, and again ten days later with CSA General John Stuart on December 28.



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Historic Photographs

Occoquan Methodist Episcopal Church and Shanklin Home

Underwood Home - Methodist Church - Town Hall

Occoquan Methodist Episcopal Church and the Shanklin Home (the *Pink Bicycle Tea Room*)

Occoquan Historical Society

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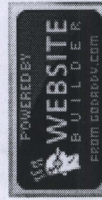
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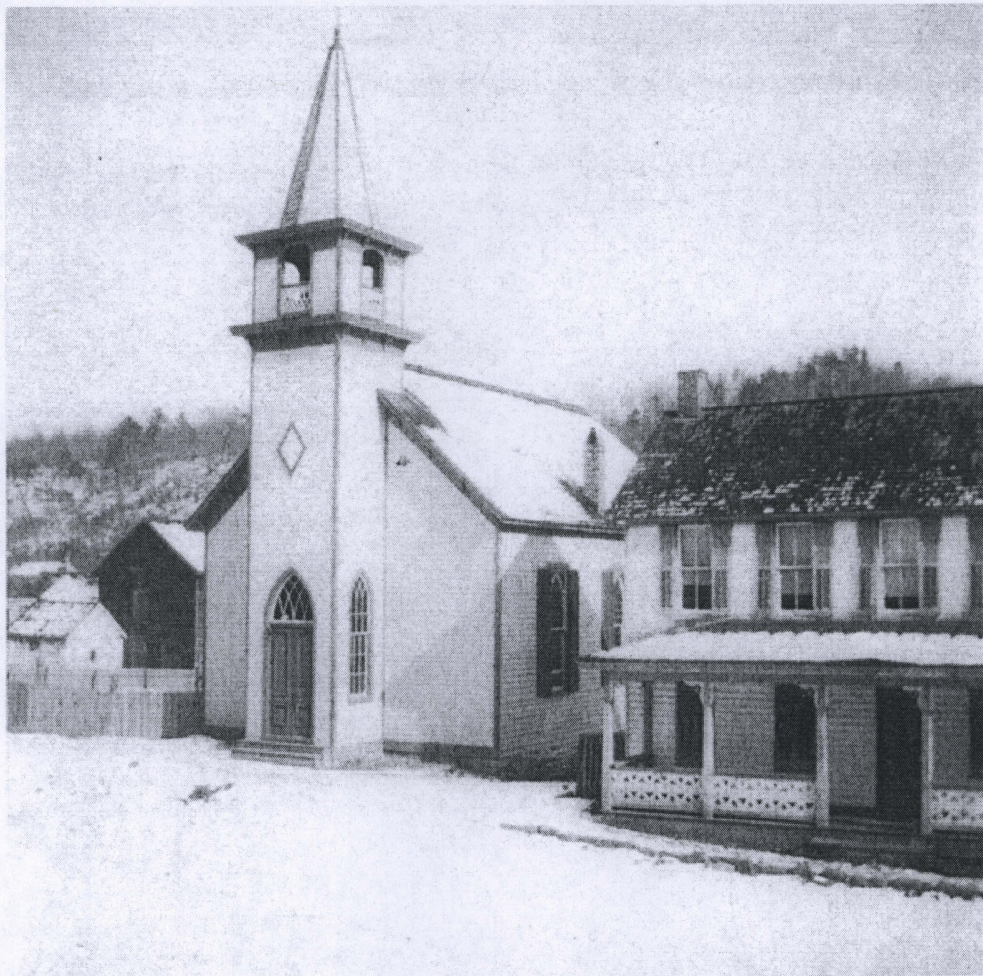
Memories

MEMORIES

Memories is a collection of writings from Occoquan residents past and present about everyday life in Occoquan during an earlier time. [Click here](#) to access Memories. Requires Adobe or another PDF reader.

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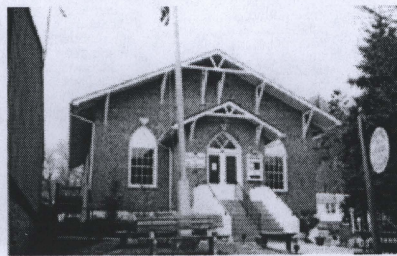


The photograph above shows the first Occoquan Methodist Episcopal Church and the home of the Shanklin family. Although Methodist congregations held services in the Occoquan/Woodbridge area earlier in the 19th century, it was not until 1862 that trustees purchased land in the town of Occoquan from the Samuel Janney family for the construction of a church. After securing the land, more than two decades passed before the congregation was finally able, in 1884, to build and dedicate the Occoquan Methodist Episcopal Church on Commerce Street in Occoquan.

In 1916, a fire originating in the Alton Hotel on Mill Street swept through town, destroying a number of buildings, the church among them. For a decade the congregation was thus forced to meet elsewhere, including in the Odd Fellows Hall on Commerce Street, until a new church was eventually built on Mill Street in 1926. The congregation continued to worship in the new church until 1958, when it merged with the Woodbridge Methodist Episcopal Church to become St. Paul's United Methodist Church, and moved to its current location on G Street in Woodbridge. The church on Mill Street became Occoquan's Town Hall in 1963.

Although nothing remains of the original church, the adjacent Shanklin family home (on the right in the picture above) remains today as the *Pink Bicycle Tea Room* at 303 Commerce Street, and retains many of its earlier exterior features.

Underwood Home - Methodist Church - Town Hall



The photograph above left shows the home of John Underwood. Underwood was a wheelwright, carpenter, and boat builder in Occoquan. On July 4, 1860, at the age of 32, Underwood participated with other local Abraham Lincoln supporters in erecting on the property of Joseph T. Janney (at Rockledge) a pole adorned with banners containing the names of Abraham Lincoln and his running mate Hannibal Hamlin. The Prince William Militia chopped the pole down on July 27, 1860. In the presidential election the following November, Abraham Lincoln received 55 votes in Prince William County, all of which came from Occoquan. Once the Civil War began, Confederate forces held Underwood in suspicion. On one of two raids into Occoquan in December of 1862, Confederate forces took captive the "noted abolitionist and traitor." To reward his loyalty after his release in 1863, Abraham Lincoln sought a position for Underwood, who became a U.S. marshal.

Underwood's residence burned down in the fire of 1916. The congregation of the Occoquan Methodist Episcopal Church, whose original structure on Commerce Street had also been destroyed in the fire of 1916, in December of 1926, dedicated a new structure on the old Underwood property. The congregation continued to worship in this new church until 1958, when they merged with the Woodbridge Methodist Episcopal Church to become St. Paul's United Methodist Church, and moved to their current location on G Street in Woodbridge. In 1963 the town of Occoquan purchased the former church on Mill Street to serve as the Occoquan Town Hall, a use which continues today (photograph above right).

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Memories

Myrtle Jennings



Ice House, Mill Street

The frozen winter ice on Occoquan river was cut into blocks and stored in this ice house, underground and covered with straw, lasted through the hot summer. This business was owned and operated by Carl Lynn Sr. General Merchandise Store, selling groceries, yard goods, clothing, hardware, you name it.



Ice House on the far left of the photo

Occoquan Pharmacy

Established in 1903 by Mont Ledman sold to Dr. Frank Hornbaker. Dr. Hornbaker served the town and surrounding area for miles-Woodbridge, Hoadly, Lorton. A family physician day and night calls also the Lorton Prison physician. Dr. Hornbaker sold the store business to Herman Jennings in 1936. Later the Occoquan pharmacy moved to 306 Mill Street. The pharmacy closed in 1963.



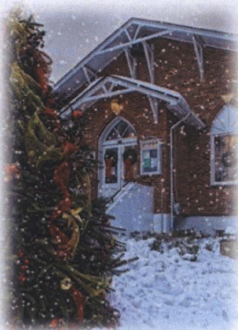
Lyric Theater

The theater was the delight of the young and old in Occoquan. It was first owned and operated by Dr. Hornbaker later by his son Frank Hornbaker and Harold Wilcher. The movies were good, also the popcorn.



Lynn Store

Lynn Store located on Mill Street established in 1936 by Mr. & Mrs. William S. Lynn-served Occoquan as a general merchandise store-including fresh meats, groceries-dried goods, clothing, shoes, boots-hardware-guns, fishing licenses. It is now owned by grandson Andy Lynn, a very thriving business serving Occoquan.



Occoquan Methodist Church

Occoquan Methodist Church seemed to be a happy congregation bringing people together from Lorton, Woodbridge, Davis Ford Road as well as Occoquan. The old Church bell ringing on Sunday morning was a happy sound. The building now is owned by the Town.

Pearl Humphries Clark

I was born and raised in Occoquan, a small town I love. Of course it has changed a lot over the years. It has now become a Commercial Town instead of a neighborhood community, families and homes.



OGLE HARRIS & SONS GENERAL STORE ON WASHINGTON STREET, CIRCA 1940. OGLE AND SON ARTHUR IN PHOTO. Photo contributed by Harris family.

The town as I knew it consisted of businesses such as the Post Office, Jennings' Drug Store, Halls' Funeral Home, The Methodist Church, Fred Lynns' Grocery, and Ogle Harris' Grocery Store, plus our volunteer Fire Dept., O.W.L.

Since being a small town, everyone knew each other and we were a caring friendly community. Traffic was nil at this period of time and I can remember when we kids all got together in the winter time and blocked off Tan Yard Hill when it snowed for sleigh riding from the top of the hill all the way into town, what a great time we had. We also use to go swimming up at the "old Mullet Hole", a very dangerous place because of the rocks and strong currents, but the older boys and girls sort of looked after the younger ones. Thank goodness for that. My sister Joyce, Becky Lynn, and myself were the threesome. We always did things together.

Occoquan is enhanced by the river which brought in a lot of fishermen and boaters on the weekends. The river has its good and bad points. By bad, I mean the terrible floods we had which destroyed a lot of property and finally the "Old Bridge". Through all of the hard times the community pulled together and rebuilt.

The highlight of entertainment for our town was meeting after school for a coke at the drugstore and the movie theater at nights. My brother, Carroll and I used to work at the drugstore for Doc. And Mrs. Jennings and he also use to work at the funeral home for Mr. Hall. My brothers Johnny and Billy and my sister Joyce and I used to work at the theater for Mr. Wilcher, selling tickets and popcorn and of course seeing all the movies for free. Frank Hornbaker opened up a small appliance shop and my brother John worked for him. These places no longer exist, they are in the past.

Today as I am walking the streets again amongst all the craft shops, I try to visualize the way things used to be and the people who use to live here (some of whom are deceased) but still part of my memories. Yes, Occoquan today has become a busy, bustling Commercial Town, things and places have drastically changed, but for me I have fond memories of what use to be and the caring people I grew up amongst. Occoquan changed or not-It will always be my Home.

Bine Selecman Cross

Occoquan was a wonderful little town for a child to grow up in. There were lots of happy things to do, and we had no sense of fear. My earliest memories go back to about World War I. The army had a camp across the river below the town. In the evenings the soldiers would row across the river in small boats and the children would be gathered around. One soldier in particular we watched for. He would line us up and march us in formation up and down the streets and then reward us with an ice cream cone from the corner store. They also enjoyed hearing us sing.

We went to school on a two-room school building that is still standing on Commerce Street. The first four grades were in one room and fifth, sixth and seventh in the "big" room. We were close enough to run home for lunch, but we always hurried back to have time to play before the bell rang. The classes were small so we had almost individual attention. We had good teachers because when we went on to high school, either in Manassas or Alexandria, we had no trouble keeping up with the work.

We all learned to swim in the mill race. Mrs. Gardner who with her husband ran the Gardner House Hotel would leave her work and take us swimming every warm sunny day. We had to walk up a narrow path to get to the "head gate" where we swam and sometimes there would be a snake across the path which added to the excitement. After we learned to swim well, we swam in the river. There was very little pollution then. In the spring and autumn Mrs. Gardner would take us walking up in the woods around the town. We loved to slide around in the thick pine needles. In the spring we had a special place up in the woods off Tan Yard Hill where we hunted for arbutus and wild pansies. My friend, Juanita and I would wander all around in these woods, because arbutus was hard to find, with no fear of being hurt.



THE OCCOQUAN - The water holding tanks
we OCCUW this spot shown at the turn of the

In the winter Tan Yard Hill was a favorite place to sleigh ride. When the river froze over everyone, youngsters and adults, took their sleighs and ice skates for fun on the ice. Some of the strong skaters would skate from Occoquan to Woodbridge when the river was frozen good and hard. In the summer we played endless games of "Rook" and "Flinch" and "Parachese" on our front porch. We had a place near our house that was smooth and flat where we played "hop-skotch." We roller-skated on the cement walk on Mill Street, but Mrs. Leary wouldn't allow us to skate around her store on the corner.

Christmas time was a wonderful time. Everyone went in the woods and cut their trees. Mr. Janney's store would display a whole row of ornaments and special Christmas

things that were marvelous to us. We also gathered sycamore balls and covered them with tinfoil to hang on the tree. There was a certain sycamore tree on the other side of the bridge where we found the balls.

Highway One, which was the main highway going North and South, ran right through Occoquan. Therefore we saw some unusual sights. Sometimes a group of very colorful gypsies would come through and stop in the town. That was one time all of the children would run home, because we heard tales of what they might do. One night the KLu Klux Klan marched through town in their white robes and hooded masks and we children huddled together to watch.

On Sunday afternoon we often sat on the upper porch of The Gardner House to watch the cars go through town. We tried to see how many out-of-state cars we could count. Another exciting event was when the traveling shows would come to town. They would put up a large tent on the "flats" by the river in front of where the post office is now. Everyone from all around would come to see the performance.



Garner House or Hammill Hotel

We also had a movie hall where we went to see silent films. Between each reel a player piano would entertain us, and sometimes even a real pianist. During the week we would save our allowance so we could go to Dr. Hornbaker's Drug Store and get a chocolate nut sundae. What a treat!

All of the families in Occoquan knew each other and were concerned for each other's welfare. If one family had trouble everyone helped out. We grew up feeling loved and cared for. Even when my children were growing up in Occoquan they could play anywhere in the town or around with no feeling of fear. My wish is that all children everywhere could have a happy carefree childhood like I had in the small town of Occoquan.

Tom Joyce

November 20, 1984

I don't believe I can contribute much to the "lore" of Occoquan. I was born there but spent most of my Virginia life in Quantico. The family moved to Occoquan after my father retired in 1936 or 7.

The chief recreation of my group was to gather. Around the pot belly stove in the old drug store and listen to Benny Goodman every Friday night. Some of the generation before mine—Bill Selecman—would talk about the Halloween tricks and New Years Eve. They once took someone's buggy apart and reassembled it on top of the Janney store—prior to the apartments—prior to the boathouse. Bill drowned while duck

hunting. They would stop by the ABC store for heat as you couldn't build a fire in the rowboat. A shotgun barrage at midnight would bring in the new year.

We were visiting the Starkweathers the night the mill burned (1924). From on top of the hill it looked as if the whole town would go up. We didn't go down to investigate.

My children talked themselves into believing the old Slack house was haunted. After that was torn down the ghosts moved two houses up the road.

We would go skinny dipping in the pools among the rocks where the pumping station is now. Water snakes would be running on the rocks just outside our area. One of the snakes had a catfish inside that was 3 inches in diameter. The snake ordinarily would have been 1- 1/2 inches. Quite a feat to catch and swallow a live fish that size.

As far as the war is concerned, I can't think of anyone in the area that missed it. My father was on the draft board and I went, so there were no favorites. I had a very short period in the area. The war intervened and then I moved to Jersey. 11/20/1984 Pompton Plains, NJ

Bob Payne Jr.

I was not born in Occoquan, but moved there with my parents during the fall of 1942 at which time I was 12 years of age. I guess I can say that "I grew up" in Occoquan.

A few years ago, after checking my family "roots", I learned that my so-called immigrant ancestor, John Payne, born @1615 in England, owned large quantities of land during the period from 1659 to 1689, which included 1500 acres at Occoquan in what is now Prince William County. Before his death he apparently disposed of all his property.

In 1942, however, I was not aware that I was returning to the area of my ancestors, although I now appreciate their taste for the lovely scenic area they chose.

I remember crossing the "old" Occoquan Bridge as we neared our new home town, with all the family possessions in a rented "pick-up" truck.

As we drove by the old Mill House, now the Museum, we encountered a "Fender-Bender" with a local fisherman, later to be identified as Mr. Carl Eike, a well known resident, who became one of the dearest friends my family and I have ever known.

The house we moved into was owned by Ms. Mamie Davis, next to her home and that became my residence for the next 15 years or so, until I entered the Armed Services. Those fifteen years will establish the period that I "grew up" in Occoquan.

I enrolled in the seventh grade at Occoquan Elem. & High School, under the guidance of Ms. Eliz. Vaughn; Mr. Norb Saunders; Ms. Eliz. Taylor; Mrs. Curtis; Mrs. Best; Mr. Murphy, etc. I would say the classes consisted of about 20 students.

Although there was a school bus, the "in-thing" among the boys was to walk to school and wave to the boys as it went by.

On rainy or snow days, naturally we would wait on the post Office porch on Mill Street until the "ole" yellow bus came by. I believe Johnny Russell was the name of the driver, and if you remember him, you didn't dare whisper during that one mile ride to school. That bus had the largest rear-view mirror I have ever seen.

After school I had the opportunity to obtain a part-time job with the Jennings' drug Store as a "soda jerk." So most of my evenings and week-ends were occupied. The other boys were either fishing, swimming, diving off the top of the "ole" bridge, ice skating on the river during the winter, or going to the movies. No TV in Occoquan during those years.

I met lots of good and wonderful people while performing in my little white jacket and cap to match. What an experience to hand a four or five year old child a "double dip" ice cream cone and to watch their eyes light up, and for only 10¢.



Jennings Drug Store

I must have been small for my age, because Mr. Jennings suggested a row of "coke" cases behind the counter for me to stand on. Made it much easier to reach the counter and the cash register.

Being a small town, and after a period of time you could anticipate what flavor ice cream your customer liked, or be it a cherry mash or vanilla shake. "doc" Jennings used to say that his employees were expected to know.

Across the street from the Drug Store was the other big attraction in town. The Occoquan Theater, operated by Mr. Harold Wilcher. The only Theater in the area as far as I knew with families coming from Lorton, Woodbridge, Dumfries, etc., for the daily performance. It was a dress-up occasion for them to go to the movies.

What about commercial shops, stores, in Occoquan in 1942? I remember two gas pumps, Lynn's store and Leary's Hardware and Lumber Co. now called The Lynn Company and Leary's hardware, currently named Blackbeard's Seafood restaurant. In addition to Jennings' Drug and the theater, there was Janney's Store, Lynn's Store & Ice House, Hall's funeral home, barbershop, ambulance service, boats for rent and a tackle shop, The Bank of Occoquan, managed by B.W. Brunt, the Post Office run by Mrs.

Woodyard, Postmistress, and last but not least Ogle Harris's general store. He had a candy counter that was out of this world. Either three or five pieces for a penny, and you could put it on Pop's ticket until payday.

I believe the Mayor, Captain Joyce, and the Chief of police, Mr. Green, had the easiest jobs in town. They were very seldom needed, but you always knew they were there.

As I see Occoquan in 1984, yes, there have been changes. But the old shops, although restored, and most with new names, still embrace the memories of a small town that never grew too large, and one that I will never forget during the years that I grew up in Occoquan. Thank you for letting me share my memories.

Frank Phelps

About a quarter of a mile upriver from Occoquan was a natural swimming pool. Three sides of this pool were guarded by huge rock formations that had been carved and eroded since being uplifted sometime during the Paleozoic era, probably during the Permian Period some 280 million years ago. Crystal clear water cascaded over an eight foot water fall to feed this pool that God made for fish and children.

When I was growing up, this is where children learned to swim. This skill seemed to naturally evolve when one of the smaller boys (in those days girls did not go to the mullet hole) would follow the older boys up the path to this forbidden place that he had heard so much about. Upon arrival, clothes were stripped off and deposited on a flat rock. Swimming there was done in the raw. Boys would dive from the rocks, shouts of joy would ring from the surrounding forest. When one finally got the nerve to remove his clothes and, shivering with anticipation, crawled down the side of a steep rock to touch a toe to the cool water, a boy would sit there thinking, "Boy, this is great." He would think he was really grown up. He would probably be all of eight. Somehow with the instinct that God gives young boys, the older ones had known when to let you tag along.

Suddenly from out of nowhere, a pair of strong hands would lift you up and toss you in the middle of the rushing water. When you came up, licking and spitting, arms flailing, someone would gently guide you across the hole to a rock in the center of the pool about two feet under water. With his help, you would stand up and think, "man, I swam a couple of strokes." There you stood with no idea how you were going to get back where you came from. Later, under the watchful eyes of the older boys, you pushed off the rock and started fighting the water for the other side.

This method of learning to swim may not conform to modern-day accepted techniques of teaching swimming, but it certainly was effective. In two to three weeks, you were

swimming and more than water safe. Generally, long before mothers always fearful of the river suspected, you had mastered the skills necessary to living next to the river.

The permanent inhabitants of the Mullet Hole always allowed you to become part of their environment. Big fish paid no attention to underwater swimmers and would allow you to reach out and touch them, then swim slowly along their way. Sometimes a water snake would leave his hole in one of the rocks and swim across the river, paying no attention to a crowd of swimmers. We never bothered any of the inhabitants, and they left us alone. The fish even seemed to enjoy our company. The Mullet Hole was a forgiving place to swim. Never, in all the years my friends and I swam there, was anyone hurt or drowned. In fact, I cannot remember even hearing of anyone losing their life in this swimming hole. This cannot be said of the lower part of the river.

When or how this little pocket of paradise came by its name I do not know. I would assume that, at one time, mullet fish were in great evidence, but this was not the case when I grew up. The large fish we played tag with under water were carp.

In 1942 with a rising population in the area, a dam was needed to accommodate the water requirements of the growing community. This dam was built. If you walk up stream to the first dam, you can see the big rock that was the north side of the swimming hole. The dam is tied to that rock.

Close your eyes and listen, and you will hear the joyful shouts and laughter of youngsters having the best time of their lives. I know I can. *Occoquan Va., September 21, 1983*



Far right, home of Lorraine Musselman,
circa 1890

Lorraine Musselman

My name is Lorraine Musselman and I was born in Alexandria, Virginia on February 6, 1930. My family moved to Occoquan in November 1930 because my father, who worked at RF&P Railroad as a brakeman, was laid off because of the depression and was able to get a job at the D.C. Workhouse. I had two brothers, Jay born in 1925 and Amos born in 1928. We first lived in a house we rented from Susie Hixon on the hill above Center Alley as it runs along Ellicott. Two years later we bought the house at 312 Commerce Street and I have lived there ever since. My parents were John and Florence Musselman, both born in Stafford Virginia.

It was great to grow up in Occoquan, even after I went to work in Alexandria at age 19. Coming home after work it was a wonderful feeling to come home to Occoquan. Very seldom did you have to get out of the street for an automobile. When the jail and the Methodist Church burned in 1916, that side of the street was vacant until the Harvey Janneys built on that corner of Commerce Street in 1929, just before we moved to the town. The jail had been in the location where the Janney house was built. When Gladys Chapman bought the Janney house¹ I would help her dig in the yard to plant flowers. I once dug up a clay pipe that still had tobacco in it. I believed it belonged to prisoners who were once kept at the jail. It was said that the town let the prisoners go home at night and they returned the next morning.

When I was about 8 or 9, I had a dog named Skippy that would lie down in the street and if an automobile came by it would have to wait until Skippy decided to move out of the street. This is an example of how busy the traffic was. When I was in first grade I had to stay after school one time for talking too much and ended up having to walk home. Occoquan Elementary was a mile from the town and not one car passed me while I walked. Back then, any car that passed me would have been trustworthy to ride with. They would have known me and offered me a ride.

In the summer we could fish for a half-hour and catch the allowed limit. Mrs. Leary and Mrs. Hall would fish from a rowboat and tie up at the dike. Those two ladies would have five lines out of their boat, and I would row down and tie up next to them and catch more fish with my one line than they got with their five. As kids we would go swimming everyday in the summer at the "Mullet Hole." It was named for the mullet fish. We also raced the water moccasins across the water and we usually won. They were fast, but we were too, and there were a great many of them. The Mullet Hole was enclosed with rocks and if you weren't careful you could put a hand on one of those snakes as you got out. There were also copperhead snakes to step around on the "mill race" which was the path we walked to get to the Mullet Hole. It was said that there were a large number of copperheads living around and in Rockledge. Another thing I remember about swimming at the Mullet Hole was that the boys usually didn't bother with bathing suits, so when we girls showed up they all would be scrambling for their clothes.

When I was small the river froze over every year and we would have to ask Fred Lynn when it was thick enough for us to skate. Sometimes it would be 18 inches thick. My brother Amos and I would skate all the way to Woodbridge bridge. The older boys would make fires in barrels on the wharf and most of Occoquan would go ice skating into the night. When there was snow, and usually there was plenty, we all went sledding. We would start at the top of Tanyard Hill with 5 or 6 sleds hooked together

¹ 309 Commerce Street

with our feet, and go flying all the way to Mill Street. Fortunately there were no cars to worry about—the streets were closed.

Growing up in Occoquan was filled with fun and adventure and interesting people and we never missed TV or video games a bit. Halloween in Occoquan was a busy night for all the work we had to do. We would move all Mr. Hall's rowboats out of the river and put them on the post office porch. There was a horse drawn hearse in a garage between Union and Washington on Poplar Alley, which belonged to Harry Slack, the town mortician. On Halloween we would pull it down to Miss Gertie Selecman's yard and put a sign in it saying "Gertie lies in here." Then she would shoot at us and thank God she was a poor shot.

Miss Gertie was very intelligent but a little eccentric². Anything that happened that she didn't like would cause her to holler and you could hear her all over town. She always hollered, "C'mon law, I pay my taxes." She had wooden shutters on her windows and they were always shut and locked. She said that the people who lived across the street from her (the Jackson family) threw rocks and broke her windows. She would call the town sergeant, Gene Bryant, to come and see the rock that they had thrown at her. Then she would go upstairs, pick up the rock, show it to him from the window and then throw it down and practically hit him in the head with it. Everytime she hollered I would hurry down to see what was going on and would usually find Gene Bryant there. Sgt. Bryant and I were thick as thieves in those days.

Even after we stopped renting from Mrs. Hixon she remained a great friend. She lived in a big old house on the right side of Ellicott Street halfway up the hill. That house burned down in 1939 because the Fire Department had to come all the way from Alexandria and by the time they arrived it was too late. Well into her seventies Mrs. Hixon used to sun-dry apples and pears on racks in her yard. Most people were canning their fruits then, but her dried fruits were very tasty. I would visit Mrs. Hixon almost everyday. She was an "Old-School" Baptist and she set type for a magazine called the "The Sectarian" which was a collection of letters from the members of Elder Smoot's church³. When I was a very small child, Mrs. Hixon and I would walk through the woods past where Pat Lynn⁴ lives now almost to where Mt. High Street is now to Elder Smoot's house where the printing press was kept in a shed. I "helped" her set the type for the magazine. When Elder Smoot died, the undertaker took the printing press as part of the funeral expenses. It was stored under the funeral home on Mill Street until Hurricane Agnes swept it down the river in 1972.

² Miss Gertie was Christine Gertrude Selecman born April 11th, 1860. She was well-educated and enjoyed acting and writing. Her home was located just to the east of 200 Mill Street. (From the Selecman family history)

³ The cemetery and marker for the Beulah Baptist Church are located on the west side of Washington Street

⁴ 407 Union Street

Behind Mrs. Hixon's house there were a lot of woods and grapevines. Those were the days when Tarzan movies were playing at the Lyric Theatre⁵ and we would jump from rocks grabbing the vines and flying through the air like Tarzan. My older brother Jay and Dick McKenzie cut down our vines because they said we would get hurt. We had been swinging on them for six months by then.

Another "older" friend of mine, Jennie Hammill, lived in the house where the Frame-up is now⁶. The original house on that lot burned in 1916 and her father built the house that stands there now. She lived in the house alone and when I walked by she was always on her porch wearing one red slipper and one blue one. I got to know her real well. We would go to the Lyric Theater together every time the movie changed. I've been told that after the original house burned in 1916 she lived on a houseboat on the river. She was the mayor of Occoquan at the time and held the town council meetings on her boat.

In the 1940's Mrs. Hammill sold the Frame-up house to a retired marine captain, Thomas F. Joyce, and moved into a house she built on Ellicott and Commerce. That house was sold to the Jennings family when Mrs. Hammill moved to Florida.

Martha Slack was a good friend of Mrs. Hammill's. Mrs. Slack lived where the Hope Company⁷ is now and she had a millinery shop in her house. It was her husband's hearse that we borrowed on Halloween. Mrs. Slack caught rainwater in a large barrel and got water for her coffee from the barrel. Mrs. Slack always wore several of dresses at one time. The cleanest one would be on top with successively dirtier ones underneath. Mrs. Slack always said of herself that she was smart as a whip in spelling and dumb as an oyster in arithmetic.

One summer after I graduated from Occoquan District High School I worked at a temporary job in the business office of the Lorton Reformatory. Harold Wilcher⁸, Martha Roberts' father, was my boss. I thought it was very interesting that a person who had murdered his wife brought me water and shined my shoes everyday!

In late fall, before the river froze, the oyster man would come from Colonial Beach in his small boat and tie up at Hall's Wharf⁹. He would stay there for about a week and all the townspeople would come there to buy his oysters. You could buy them shucked or in the shell. It was risky for him because the river could freeze and the ice would block him from going home. Amos was about 8 then and would take him a newspaper everyday and talk to him. When the oysterman left for Colonial Beach he always gave

⁵ 403 Mill Street

⁶ 402 Mill Street

⁷ 212 Commerce Street

⁸ Operated the Lyric Theater
403 Mill Street

⁹ 309 Mill Street

Amos a bushel of oysters in the shell. Amos and my father would shuck them and we would have them raw, stewed and fried. They were wonderful oysters.

Fred Lynn owned Lynn's Store¹⁰ and he was on the School Board. We waited in the store for the bus. The school was a mile away we still rode the bus. He told us when the ice was thick enough to skate. We asked him everyday if the ice was okay to skate.

One year the ice was 18 inches thick and we could skate all the way to Woodbridge. People would come from all over to skate. We built a fire on the wharf at night to keep warm. Fred and Mrs. Lola Woodyard the Postmistress would skate with us, they had clamp on shoe skates. You know when you were a young kid you thought people were a lot older, I always thought Mrs. Woodyard was about 110 years old. Boy was I surprised, she and Fred could really skate, they couldn't write their names in the ice but they could draw flowers. In the daytime people would throw rocks on the ice to see how thick it was, the sun would melt the ice and then it would refreeze at night with the rocks in it. When you were skating at night you couldn't see the rocks, if you hit the rocks with your skate blade you would go up in the air and come down on your knees, I'm surprised we didn't break our kneecaps. Buddy Lynn hit some rocks and fell and broke his two front teeth. If it snowed on the ice Barbara Hall's brother, Bill Selecman, would take his truck with a scraper on it and make paths for us to skate. When the dam was put in the water current was so strong the river wouldn't freeze anymore. So much for ice skating



We waited for the school bus in Lynn's Store. Since Fred Lynn was on the School Board he would tell us we could go home if the bus was more than ½ hour late. When it snowed all the kids would go to the top of Tanyard Hill with their sleds. We made something like a bobsled, we put our feet in the sled behind and we rode all the way to Mill Street. We didn't have any brakes to use. Once you left the top of Tanyard Hill you were committed to go all the way to Mill Street. There weren't many cars so you didn't have to worry about being run over, all you had to worry about was making the curves. Before Frank Phelps house was built we went to the top of the hill and rode our sleds down the hill. At the bottom of the hill was a branch and barbed wire fence to keep you from going into the water. I tangled with the wire and had about a three inch cut over my eye. It just missed my eye by a hair.

Bruce Chapin Duncan

My relation to Mamie and Helen Davis; my mother Genevieve Chapin married Claude Edward Duncan. Her

¹⁰ 313 Mill Street



Home of Mamie and Helen Davis

mother was Martha Alyce Keys born October 11th, 1872 and was the youngest sister to Florence Virginia Keys born September 15th, 1859.

Florence married William Armistead Davis. Florence and William were the parents of Julian Armistead Davis born 1884, Mamie Lynn Davis born March 14th, 1887 and Helen Agnes Davis born May 26th, 1892.

Florence Virginia Keys and Martha Alyce Keys were the children of Henry Armistead and Sarah Frances (Lynn) Keys of Prince William County.

My mother Genevieve told me when she was 12 years of age and lived in Falls Church Virginia, she would travel with her parents Paul and Martha Alyce Chapin to her Uncle Solomon and Martha (Keys) Beach's farm on Old Ox Road, then on to Occoquan to leave my mother at the Davis home on 202 Commerce Street for a week starting in the summer of 1909 and for several summers afterwards. My mother and Helen who was 5 years older would sit on the front porch swing and read to each other. "The Children's Classic Library" with titles such as "Little Women", "The Secret Garden", "Little Lord Fauntleroy" and "Girl of the Limber Lost" were some of the classics that Helens sister Mamie was able to get in Washington D.C. where she worked. Then there were times when my mother and Helen would walk from Helen's house up to the Mill race passing the iron bridge. Helen on her crutches got around Occoquan very well. Years later in 1941, I spent the school spring vacation with Helen and Mamie.

I was age 19, I would drive Mamie to Woodbridge to catch the train to Washington and pick her up in the late afternoon. During the day Helen and I would visit all the historical sites in Virginia. Madeline Bell fixed a picnic lunch each day for us. One of the trips was up to Harpers Ferry, through Winchester. A trip to Gunston Hall while we were walking down through the boxwood hedges to the Potomac River and back to where we parked the car, a very well dressed gentleman came out of the house and invited us to come in and see his house, which we both never forgot as he showed us all the downstairs' rooms. I have always been interested in architecture and seeing historic houses. On another day Helen showed me the Bell Air Plantation. At that time the house was empty and we walked around and through the ground level, basement and climbed the front steps to the main floor thru all the rooms. Afterwards we went back to the car, which I had left parked in the shade of a large tree, and there we had a picnic lunch. Helen and I enjoyed each others company as we both had the same interest in historical places as well for years afterwards. I learned a lot about our ancestors. On the weekend a cousin of ours came down with Mamie from Washington D.C., Olive Mae Keys, and on Sunday cousin May and I went to Quantico to a Catholic Church early service and to a late morning service at Aquia Church (1757), in Stafford County Virginia.

About the Davis home at 202 Commerce Street. I was told the building is over 200 years old, that would be the two main rooms on each floor. There is a narrow stairway from the reception room, which was entered from the screen porch and the front parlor. The stair steps were at an angle and in the front parlor was a square rosewood grand piano. Then a step down from the reception room to the parlor and two steps to the dining room. This was formerly a store that William Armistead Davis had built. The built in cabinet with glass doors and storage below were used for the merchandise. At the end of the screen porch was a small kitchen that was entered into the dining area. In the early days the grape arbor led to the barn and out house. In my visit one would drive into the back yard and walk past the well to the steps going down into the screen porch. There is a large beautiful magnolia tree on the corner of the house and a complete picket fence yard with two gates, one from the side yard and one from the alley.

In 1987 I had a nice visit with Madeline Bell at her home across the street from the Davis' home. I do not know how many years Madeline worked for them.

Mamie Lynn Davis died February 24th, 1987 she was buried at Pohick Church, Fairfax, Virginia.



Beautiful Mamie Davis Park

Ralph Turner with Record Setting Occoquan Catfish

Story and photos submitted by Sara Perry, Ralph's daughter

There is no date on the original photo of my Dad with the Catfish and he caught this monster before I was born. On the same page of the photo book with the original Catfish photo there is another photo of Dad in Occoquan on a dock showing several fish he caught and the date on that photo is June 1958.

I remember my Mom saying that Dad was in the newspaper, probably in an Occoquan or Prince William County publication after catching the fish.

Dad was in a small row boat fishing just beyond the iron bridge and hooked this fish. The fish pulled the boat down the river towards the town. Dad was using a 6-10 pound test line. People came out of the stores in Occoquan and lined the banks of the river to watch my Dad reel in this fish.

At one point, Mr. Lynn (Fred) who lived across the river from the town, came out of his house with a gaffing hook telling my Dad to get the fish close to shore and he would gaff it. Mr. Lynn ran out with the gaffing hook into the water but, when he saw the size of the fish he told my Dad he was on his own. It took my Dad hours to finally reel in the fish.

Dad brought the photo that was taken at his house with the fish to show Mrs. Jennings at her Drug Store (306 Mill Street) and she had postcards made of it and sold them in the store. There was also a postcard behind the counter at Lynn's store where bait and tackle could be purchased.



Ralph Turner on an Occoquan dock
with his catfish catch in June 1958



Ralph Turner and record setting 34 lb. catfish

Dad received not only a Citation from the State but thanks to Mrs. Jennings, he received all kinds of fishing tackle from different fish tackle companies, poles, line, reels, etc.

My Dad was an Officer at the Lorton Reformatory's "Central Facility" and after catching the monster catfish he was given the nick name of "Catfish." His friends and co-workers always called him "Catfish" and he would answer to the name too.

Since both photos are on the same page of the photo album I would date the Catfish Postcard circa 1958.