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PWC - Cities and Towns
(Occoquan)

Town Of Occoquan

BY CARON McCONNOR

The tiny town of Occoquan proudly traces its roots to a group of Spanish missionaries who founded it way back in 1570, thus making this quaint town one of the earliest known American settlements. Unfortunately, unknown circumstances forced the mission to abandon their new-found home, which they had chosen to call "Axacan." Less than two hundred years later, however, the gentle hills sloping down to meet the creek yielded their virgin loveliness to become the town of "Occoquan." This lyrical Indian name has been attributed various translations, of which "head waters" and "among the hills" are the most frequently mentioned.

An early journal describes the colony during the period of 1725 to 1792 as having a population of 221 persons "living in small frame homes on the hillside with a small shopping center on the low ground." Many residents were employed at the District Workhouse and Reformatory located just across the creek in Fairfax county.

The falls of Occoquan were marked as the prospective town site in 1734 when the Virginia General Assembly directed a public tobacco warehouse to be built at the north side of the creek at the copper mine landing. Two years later a second warehouse was approved to be built on the lower side of the creek on the land of Valentine Peyton. This order was repealed in 1744.

The year 1774, however, was to bring regeneration to the colony when Charles Ewell, an active promoter of Prince William County, bought 1,520 acres in the Occoquan vicinity and organized a joint stock company to begin iron foundry operations. Although largely responsible for the "Occoquan Works," Ewell's plans did not materialize until after his death, when his brother-in-law, John Ballendine, purchased the warehouse site in the year 1755.

Recognizing the industrial possibilities of the town, Ballendine built a home, forges, water grist, tolling mills, bake houses, saw mills, store houses, and employee dwellings. The town was made up of twenty acres joining the land of the heirs of Charles Ewell and Valentine Peyton. By 1759, the "Occoquan Works," including an iron foundry, were in full operation, processing iron ore transported from Maryland.

By 1795, the General Assembly authorized the building of a toll bridge "not to interfere with navigation," lending additional access to the bustling community. Tolls were fixed at three cents for men and horses; coaches, wagons, and chariots

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were charged "the same as six horses"; a four-wheeled chaise or phaeton "the same as four horses"; a two-wheeled carriage "the same as two horses." Each "hogshead of tobacco and each head of cattle were "one horse" values, while each sheep, hog, goat, or lamb cost "one fifth the ferrriage of a horse."

Near the turn of the eighteenth century the responsibility of running Occoquan's industry fell to Nathaniel Ellicott, who built a home and some half-dozen log huts on the rustic slopes. Although his dreams for Occoquan were never fully realized, Ellicott did manage to establish and operate a successful stage line from 1804 to 1809. Regular mail and passenger runs were established between Alexandria and Dumfries, helping form the first north-south mail and travel route. Ellicott's company boasted twenty-four horses, two large passenger stages, and a stable in Dumfries.

The year 1804 is a highlight in the history of Occoquan, as a tract of land was formally laid out with streets running at right angles. There were then about fifty dwellings and several stores. It was following this period, in 1828, that a cotton "manufactury," the first in Virginia, was built. One "extensive" flour mill, with its accompanying grist and saw mills, produced 150 barrels of flour each day in season.

With its iron foundry, cotton mill, whetstone quarry, mail route, and river traffic for the shad and herring fisheries of the Potomac, plus the natural riches of the falls and glen, Occoquan seemed to have nowhere to go but "up" as a thriving industrial town. In 1850 and 1851, Occoquan was selected as one of the eight election districts in Prince William County. Then came the Civil War. Occoquan was considered a Confederate Town; Northern sympathizers fled. The ensuing battles left the scars that only war can inflict - a burned cotton mill, a ravaged landscape, a disheartened people.

Under the progress of Reconstruction, the pieces of community life were gradually reassembled. In 1870, the township of Occoquan became a magisterial district with one supervisor on the original County Board of Supervisors. Four years later, Occoquan became incorporated into a town, one of the six of present day Prince William County. It still operates today with a mayor and five councilmen, clerk, treasurer, and sergeant, as chartered in 1874.

And what remains today of this once booming little industrial town that nestled itself against the sloping shores of an energetic creek? "The Glen" that stretched its trees and cascading waters for over a mile is marred by the existing waterworks. The site is all that remains of the cotton mill built in 1828 by Nathaniel, and Samuel Jannery. A few ruined stone walls remain of the mill and bridge burned in the Civil War. A pile of hewn rocks and fragmented wall is mute testimony to

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the iron foundry which once flourished there. The Merchants Mill owned by Alexandria and Dumfries residents who operated it from 1759 to 1924 is no longer standing; its "Millers House," built in the late 1700's is now used as an office by Fairfax County. Rockledge, the two and one-half story, gabled, dormered, dwelling built in 1758 by John Ballentine, that early industrialist and founder of Occoquan, has been ravaged by vandals — much to the chagrin of its newest owner, who had hoped to restore it. The tiny school a few yards from the house where John Davis tutored the children of Nathaniel Ellicott is no longer standing.

A drive down the Main Street reveals the Beachwood apartments or the old Hammill Hotel, said to be the temporary headquarters of Confederate General Wade Hampton. The past remains silent.

* * *

Present day Occoquan still enjoys the presence of the Lynn family, the last of the old families. Residents of the three new apartment complexes are employed in the District or one of the nearby military installations and are a relatively transient group. The population of the town was 301 in the 1960 census; the past nine years have brought expansion, but no reliable current figures are available, although the town's population is now estimated at 600, counting apartment dwellers.

Prince William Marina, with its boating and docking facilities, is Occoquan's top attraction today, providing leisure at the site of a once thriving industrial town.

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