

## Occoquan and Riverfront Plantations

Although Occoquan was not our oldest town, this story begins at Occoquan because that area was the first settled, and, as the people moved back from the River, other towns were established.

The first settlers of Occoquan noted in their deeds the pre-existence of an Indian trail leading up the ridge between the waters of the Pohick and Bull Runs, but they needed more than that in the way of access to the interior before they could clear the forest of the upper valleys for the cultivation of tobacco. Therefore, even though they had a road from Colchester to Alexandria dating before 1715, later called the "back road" or Tillet's Rolling Road, they were looking for another. It was not until 1728 that a group of speculators opened a trade artery for the future town of Colchester.

It seems that during the years 1715 to 1728 land hunters took up great tracts of land in upper Prince William and Fairfax Counties. Among them was Robert (King) Carter, whose family pushed on into the upper part of Fairfax County and took up land along the Horsepen, a branch of the Broad which empties into the Potomac above Great Falls. Here they found deposits of green sandstone on the Frying Pan, a small stream that empties into the Horsepen. They immediately formed a mining company and imported Welsh miners to take copper from this green sandstone, deciding on a road to the nearest tidewater which was just below Great Falls.

A certain gentleman named Thomas Lee, having aspired to being proprietor of all the landing places on the upper Potomac, blocked the Carters' new landing by doing a hasty survey and rushing to Williamsburg where he took out patents for all the land around Great Falls. The Carters had to look for another opening and chose the site on the north bank of the Occoquan close by the falls, which was on the land of Miles Cary who had patented it in 1654. The road ran up past Payne's store and the present Fairfax Court House, all the way to Frying Pan Run and came into being as "Ox Road."

This road, even though the mining operations failed, opened up the backlands and gave the

community new life. In Governor Gooch's Tobacco Act of 1730, there was provision for a warehouse on the Pohick, but it did not command public approval, so in 1734 this portion of the Act was repealed and a warehouse was authorized on the Occoquan at the Copper Mine Landing. Two years later Valentine Peyton was authorized to establish another on the south side of the creek.

At this time Occoquan bid for a town, and petitions were made and, even though there were more settlers than on Hunting and Quantico Creeks, they could not compete with the strong influence of those Scot merchants, and it was not until 1753 that anything was accomplished. Up to that time, they wanted a town on the south side of the creek, on the lands of Mrs. Mason, the site of the old courthouse. However, it was argued that this site was too close to Dumfries, and it was overruled by the act of Peter Wagener, who proposed a town on the north shore. The result was Colchester, but, sadly, Alexandria and Dumfries with their five years start and with their influential merchants blanketed the town on the Occoquan, and it remained little more than a small station on the Potomac path.

While Colchester was struggling with its small trade, another industry was started on the south shore, which maintained the neighborhood for another generation. In 1749 Charles Ewell planned to establish iron works on the Occoquan in competition with the works at Neabsco, but it remained undeveloped until 1755, when John Ballendine, a kinsman of Ewell, was offered financial backing by John Tayloe and Presley Thornton, who were operating Neabsco, and a partnership was formed.

By 1759, the Occoquan works were in full swing. They comprised forges, water grist mills, bolting houses, bake houses, saw mills, storehouses and dwellings. Ballendine and his partners dissolved their partnership in 1760, and, almost immediately, Ballendine was hard pressed for money. He borrowed from John Semple of Charles County, Maryland, and by 1762 was compelled to turn over his holdings to Semple, who abandoned the forge and turned his attention to the operation of the flouring mills. The Tayloe works at Neabsco remained in operation until after the Revolution and were later operated as the Cabin Branch Mining Company.

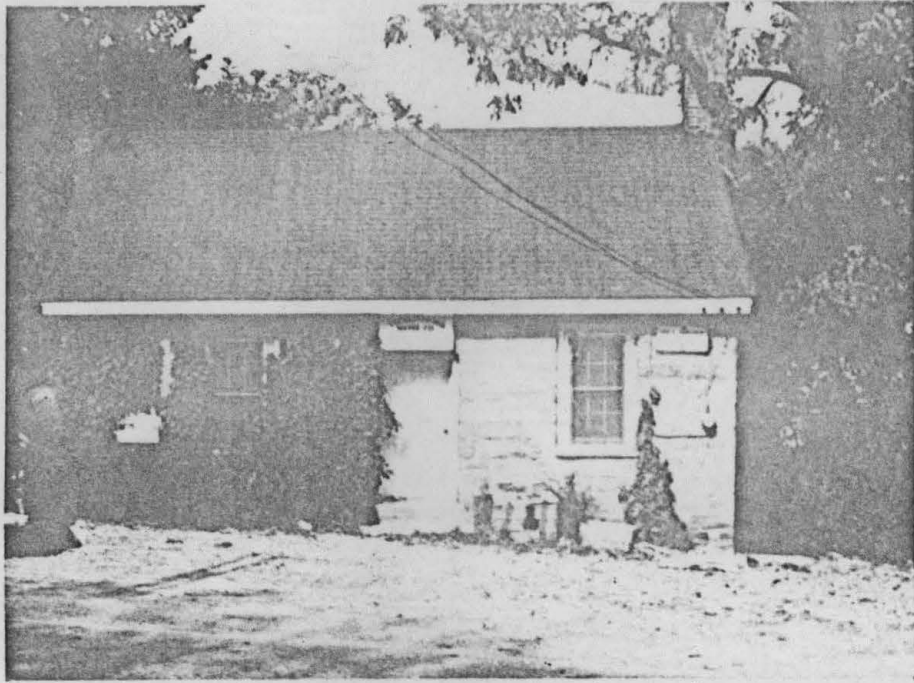
By 1800, the ownership of the flour mills was transferred to Nathaniel Ellicott, a Quaker, who brought John Davis, an English novelist, as a school teacher to Occoquan. It is written that in 1836 the town contained about 50 dwellings, several mercantile stores and various mechanics, a cotton manufactory in complete operation (established by Nathaniel and Samuel Janney, being one of the first in the state which ran 1,000 spindles), and an extensive manufacturing flour mill which ground an average of 150 barrels a day, with necessary appendages of grist, saw and plaster mills.

A handsome and permanent bridge was erected across the river at this point, it being authorized in 1795 as a toll bridge, and through the town ran the great southern mail route. The principal trade of the town was with the Counties of Fairfax and Fauquier. This village was in flourishing condition and looked forward with confidence to further improvement.

But the town was already handicapped because the creek, as did the Quantico, began to silt, and in time the vessels could not reach the mills. Plans had been made for further improvement, even for a canal up Broad Run to Thoroughfare Gap, but they were never carried out. A further diversion was the completion of the Orange and Alexandria Railway, which took the great southern mail route.

The industries along the Occoquan preceded the naming of the town by nearly fifty years. During those years, the area was known as "Ellicott's" or the "Mill Town." It was not until 1804 that the residents received a charter for a town to be called Occoquan.

About a year ago, I received a letter asking where was Ellicott's in Prince William County. This person stated that his great grandfather was born at Ellicott's, and he wanted to know where it was. I was able to tell him that his great grandfather's birth place was now the town of Occoquan.



The Miller's House, built about the same time as the Ellicott's or Merchant's mill, is still standing and is now the home of Historic Occoquan and a museum.



On the hillside across from the Miller's House is ROCKLEDGE, the only pre-Revolutionary dwelling in Occoquan, built about 1758 by John Ballendine, the founder of Occoquan. There have been only five owners. John Ballendine, who lost it to satisfy a loan, Nathaniel Ellicott, John Janney family who owned it from 1829 to 1929, and F. A. Barnes. It is now owned by Don Sauner who has made an excellent job of repairing the damage done by the blasting from the quarry across the Creek and by vandals.



## Flour and Grist Mill, Occoquan, Va



In 1765, John Semple acquired the Occoquan Mills and turned his attention to milling, abandoning the iron furnace. The picture was taken before 1890 at which time the smaller mill, known as the Country Mill, burned. The larger mill, known as Ellicott's or the Merchants Mill, was one of the first to employ automated flour mill machinery invented by Oliver Evans of Wilmington, Delaware, in 1795. Shortly before his death, George Washington sent his overseer to inspect the new machinery with the thought of installing similar machinery in his own mill at Mt. Vernon. The mill burned in 1924.

The bridge shown was erected in 1878, probably the second or third bridge over the Occoquan. It was the only King Truss bridge in the Washington, D.C. area when it was destroyed by tropical storm Agnes.