

The Mill Racer

*Inside
Occoquan, February 3, 1862
Curators Corner
SC Beans
Author Linda Matthews
Events*

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Occoquan February 3, 1862

Dolores Elder

Six inches of snow fell quickly on Monday, February 3, 1862. The whiteout conditions may be all that saved residents of Occoquan in their homes and the Confederates training in the town square from a high number of casualties.

On that snowy blustery day a reconnaissance party composed of Companies H and I of the 3rd Michigan Infantry left from Fort Lyon. The fort was one of 68 that by 1865 formed a 37 mile ring of defense around Washington D.C. (The Huntington Metro Station sits on the site of Fort Lyon). The party was led by Captain Stephen Lowing. This fact finding trip would take them through Fairfax County toward Confederate territory on the south side of the Occoquan River.

The troops had hopes of traveling west as far as Burkes Station and eventually Brimstone Hill. Brimstone Hill was just east of Wolf's Ford Road. Following this road south would give the Union information on Confederate pickets or possible observation of campsites near Wolf's Ford, a major crossing site on the Occoquan.

According to the report of Colonel Stephen Champlin, snow was falling so hard that Captain Lowing made the decision to turn his troops south on Hoe's Road and by so doing had a shorter route to the Occoquan. The road to the Town of Occoquan led through a ravine. The Union troops after crossing through the cut planned to follow the road and veer north on their return route back to the fort.

As Lowing's men approached the river bank they were surprised to see squads of unarmed men drilling in the town. Quickly the Confederate's realized the Union troops were facing off across the river and an alarm was sounded. Lowing reported the

Confederate's having armed themselves fired first and then return fire was given. It was believed four of the enemy were wounded and carried off by fellow soldiers. However the heavy snow kept the 3rd Michigan from having a clear view of the situation.

The Union returned to Fort Lyon via Ox Road to Telegraph Road, passing by Pohick Church. As the Union troops turned to leave the ravine, the column, with eight men across, fired into the town and retreated along either side of the line to the rear. ¹

There were 78 men in the Union party that day. It must have been terrifying for the residents of town to be subjected to that fire. They had no idea of how many men were among the Union troops as they were hidden from view until they descended to the river bank, firing their guns before turning back to the rear. Children could have been out enjoying some fun throwing snowballs, running by the men training in the area of Mamie Davis Park, perhaps sliding down the hills, escaping for a few moments what must have become a life of fear from one day to the next. Local men may have been harvesting ice, a lucrative business in the winter. The blanket of snow covered and protected the town and her residents that day.

CSA Major James Griffin gives us a Confederate viewpoint from February 3rd. In a letter to his wife, Leila, on February 5th, written from the Headquarters of the Legion (Wade Hampton's) he spoke of that day². The Legion was camped on the south bank of the Occoquan across from Colchester. Griffin was in command of Hampton's troops until Hampton returned from Richmond where he was visiting his family. Griffin thought that the fear of another Ball's Bluff, where 921 Union men were reported killed,

¹ The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. US War Department Series 1 Volume 5, 503-504

² Judith N. McArthur, A Gentleman and An Officer (New York: Oxford Press, 1996) 148

wounded or missing on the steep river banks of the Potomac, kept Lowing from daring to cross the Occoquan. He said the Union fired directly into Occoquan homes but “the rascals left” when his troops returned the Union fire. Griffin spent the evening out in the sleet with his pickets in case the 3rd Michigan troops returned.

Below is another report of February 3, 1862. Again we see that each storyteller has his own spin on the events.

Charles Church of Company G wrote home in February of 1862 of the recent reconnaissance to Occoquan village led by Lowing. “Our Regiment started on the 1st of Feb. Stayed out 3 days. It was very stormy, rain and snow. Captain [Lowing] of company [I] went out and made a reconnaissance. He went to the Occoquan River where he saw a squad of Secesh drilling, in the village of Occoquan about 40 rods over on the other side of the river. He watched their movements a few minutes when they looked up and saw our men and run Bull Run style and that drew the attention of a lot of the devils that were quartered in the houses and they come out as bold as lions.” ³

If what Charles Church wrote can be taken as fact then the men of the 18th Georgia were enjoying the warmth of Occoquan hospitality while stationed near the town. This would have been an extremely difficult situation for many residents who held pro Union views during a Confederate occupation.

The Union conducted frequent reconnaissance through Fairfax down the telegraph roads to the Occoquan. North and South were constantly in fear of the other amassing troops and crossing the Occoquan to raid into each other’s territory. They had each toed a line in the sand and it happened to be the Occoquan. Incorrect reports of Union troops landing on the Occoquan sent the Confederates reeling into unneeded defense through the fall of 1861 into 1862⁴.

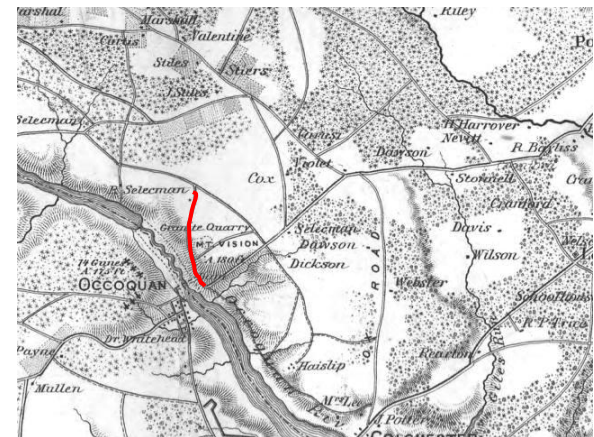
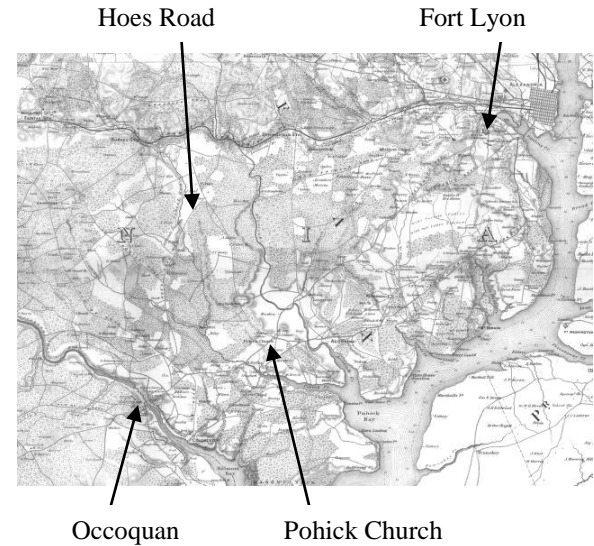
The locals found some relief when Hampton’s troops left Occoquan on March 8th as the Confederates moved their line of defense south. This prime location would soon find another occupant.

Map sections from the Library of Congress digital collection: Map of n. eastern Virginia and vicinity of Washington / compiled in Topographical Engineers Office at Division Head Quarters of General Irvin Mc Dowell, Arlington, January 1th [sic] 1862, from published and manuscript maps corrected by recent surveys and reconnaissances ; engraved on stone by J. Schedler ... N.Y

³ Retrieved from: “Men of the 3rd Michigan Blog Archive.”
Posted by Steve Soper August 11, 2009
http://thirdmichigan.blogspot.com/2009_08_01_archive.html

⁴The War of the Rebellion, 888, 957-960

Note: The map sections below are hard to read at this size. Visit the Library of Congress online and zoom in to view this map at a reasonable size.



Above outlined in red is the road the 3rd Michigan followed down to the river on February 3, 1862. The original plan was to make the sharp turn north to return back to Fort Lyon. Upon finding the Confederates training on the south side of the river the Union infantry returned back through the ravine.

Selecman’s Ford Historical Marker

The date for the dedication of the Selecman’s Ford historical marker is March 22 at 1:30 p.m. The marker will be placed in front of Antietam Elementary School located at 12000 Antietam Road Woodbridge Virginia 22192. Please attend and help us commemorate this site and the events that took place there.



Curator's Corner

Earnie Porta

Accession Policies

People occasionally ask me how we came by something in the Mill House Museum collection. Often they are not really asking about the item's provenance. Instead, they are politely struggling to understand *why* an item is in the collection at all. It can be a very good question, and one that all museums without unlimited space ultimately have to address at one time or another.

Accession policies govern what types of items a museum attempts to acquire and what it is willing to accept from a donor. Criteria enumerated in the policy typically relate to the museum's core mission or theme, expressed in terms of subject matter, ownership, time period, location, or any number of other factors. At the moment, we do not have a comprehensive accession policy for the Mill House museum, something that last year's professional conservation assessment suggested we should remedy, and noted has probably contributed to the unusually eclectic nature of our museum collection. During the coming year we will likely attempt to develop such a policy, and in doing so it is perhaps helpful to consider an item in our collection while thinking about just what type of criteria we might wish to incorporate.

Let's take a look, for example, at the wooden mallet pictured below.



In a typical *Curator's Corner* column I would likely tell you the little we know about the mallet. Ours is wooden, with metal bands around each end of its head. The head is six inches in diameter and eleven inches in length, with a handle thirty-nine inches long. A little

research reveals that mallets are one of the earliest forms of human tools, and that wooden ones are normally used in carpentry to knock and join pieces of wood together, the wooden head avoiding the sort of damage to the piece struck that would occur using a metal instrument. An Occoquan resident donated the mallet to the museum almost forty years ago.

From what we know, should the mallet be in the collection? Actually, I think the mallet is pretty cool, but is that enough? It was donated by an Occoquan resident, and that certainly counts for something. But if that were a determinative factor, imagine what our museum might be expected to display! Is there perhaps something about the mallet that speaks to a particular time period in our history? Well, I have not done enough research to be certain (and one of our members probably knows better than I do), but this might actually be what is known as a beedle, which is an obsolete form of mallet used to set paving stones. If true, that makes the item a little more unique, and perhaps illustrative of the state of a craft at a particular period in the town's history. What is the item's provenance? We know it came to us from an Occoquan resident. If it was used in Occoquan or found in an Occoquan building, that would certainly argue for including it in our museum collection. What, however, if it was, say, found in the trash at Fort Belvoir? Would that make you feel differently about including it in the collection? (That is actually where this item was found—you cannot make this stuff up).

So, as you can see from this very limited example, an accession policy will lead to a variety of questions about an item to determine whether or not it should be part of the museum's collection. At some point in the future I expect that we will poll our members on the criteria proposed in a draft policy. Consequently, I encourage you to take a few moments when you can to think about what factors you believe are important. Should something, for example, have a particular tie to Occoquan to be included in our collection? If so, should we concentrate on acquiring particular types of items related to Occoquan (e.g. photographs and prints)? Or should we seek or accept anything related to a particular era in the town's history? All of these are legitimate criteria to use in evaluating items for our collection, and need not be mutually exclusive.

What, incidentally, happens to items we decide are not appropriate for the collection? Well, that is governed by a deaccession policy. More on that later.

Pass the Soap

SC Beans

As you may have guessed I am not sitting on my porch with a glass of wine to begin my writing. Nobody in their right mind would be on their porch in this weather. Nothing could be further from the truth! I am sitting in my slightly overstuffed office at work contemplating some fun thoughts to share. This is not a fun place but then again I haven't really been in a fun mood in a long time. This weather has brought me down. I know, I know, there are those of you that are huge proponents of the snow white wet stuff but I just can't get enthused about it. It hinders my mobility, makes me cold, brings the gray skies and generally puts a wet blanket on all that I find most wonderful about Occoquan.

But I give our Mayor and Town Council kudos for getting the snow plowed in a timely manner so that if I chose to freeze myself in the current temperatures, I too could wander the streets of town seeing what new events and items have evolved since Christmas. All good things, yep all good things but I still remain blue.

It is in this time of doldrums that I realize how wonderful little things can be. Take soap for example. Yes, I said soap. I love soap. With each bar or gel comes a different fragrance and a millimeter of a mood shift. With orange soap I feel like I am in a Florida field with the warm sun on my skin and green orange groves all around, lavender soap is soothing and calm, lemon soap reminds me of a house after a spring cleaning. Imagine with one bar of soap how much of the winter blues just goes away!

For the time I am holding the soap I am transported beyond snow, ice, and cold onto places that make me smile and remind me of those seasons when I can sit happily on my porch with my wine and my laptop. It does not have to be fancy soap. The clean sent of a Dove or Ivory bar of soap is soothing transporting me to my mother's house as a child. I wish I had a bar of soap with me right now.

The point of this dissertation on soap is that if you have a bit of winter blues maybe there is something you are overlooking that will give you a bit of relief. Maybe it is soap, sorting through old pictures, the feel of clean sheets as you put them on the bed, the taste of lime on your glass, who knows? But if you start looking for those items right under your nose I bet you would find something wonderful. So until I can go to my porch chair I will be satisfied with enjoying the smell of different soaps and being transported to happy, warm places. Hope you find your soap soon!

If you would like to share your thoughts with SC Beans please email her at scbeans@gmail.com.

Going Online

This last week I sent a group email to our OHS members who had provided us their contact information. Our winter edition of the *Mill Racer* will be sent by mail and email to those that had given us an email address.

Following editions will be emailed in PDF format rather than sent by the US postal service. The newsletter can be printed at home if you enjoy reading a paper copy. PDF allows you to see graphics in color and in a much clearer resolution than our usual hard copy.

If you had not received an email notice from me that means I don't have your email address. I know not everyone has internet access and those people will still receive a hard copy by mail. **Please send on those email addresses to Dolores at elderg@comcast.net**

Everyone has been so supportive of all our efforts over the last few years. I hope you will continue to do so. What a great group of people we have for members!



The Mill House Museum in Occoquan after a February snow storm. Most of us in snow covered Occoquan will be ready for spring along with SC Beans.

Middling Folk

Thank you to The Mill Racer and especially to Dolores Elder for so generously reviewing Middling Folk in this issue. Dolores was unfailingly helpful and supportive as I set about collecting material for the book, and her articles on Occoquan history gave me information I might never have tracked down on my own—especially those that dealt with the Civil War as it was fought in and around Occoquan.

Though Middling Folk touches on the history of the Hammill family in Scotland and Ireland, before they came to America, and also on their lives in the far West after they left Prince William County around 1880, most of the story unfolds on the banks of the Potomac and Occoquan rivers, in and around the town of Occoquan. My great-great-grandfather Hugh Hammill was proprietor of the Hammill Hotel and the Hammill Mill, on Marumsco Creek in Woodbridge. His son William, my great-grandfather, left Woodbridge as an adult, to seek his fortune in Washington Territory after the ravages of the Civil War.

I grew up in Portland, Oregon, and moved to Chicago as a young adult, confident of my pioneer roots and completely unaware that my great-grandparents were Virginians before they traveled the Oregon Trail. Yet when I saw the Potomac and the Occoquan, so like the great rivers of the West, I felt amazingly at home. This journey of discovery has been one of the great adventures of my adult life, and I hope it isn't yet over. For instance, I haven't yet made contact with Hugh Hammill's descendants in the Washington, D.C. area. Maybe that will still happen! In the meantime, the beauty of northern Virginia and Occoquan's historic charm will keep drawing me back.

The American Library Association has listed Middling Folk as an Editor's Choice in nonfiction for 2009. That means most local libraries will eventually add it to their collections. I have donated a copy to the Bull Run Regional Library in Manassas, so library patrons can look it over right now. The Mill House Museum offers it for sale, and so does the Mt. Vernon gift shop in Fairfax County. Soon other museum shops will offer it as well. It can also be ordered from on-line retailers like Barnes & Noble, Alibris and Amazon

Linda Matthews

Please pick up a copy of Linda Matthews' book *Middling Folks*. It is a wonderful story of the Hammill family and their life in Occoquan and Prince William County. I also found reading about the life of the Hammills in southern Maryland during the 1700's gave me a window into the life the Elder family had who arrived during the same time frame. Linda will be with us on Saturday July 31, during our *Before the War* living history day for a book signing. Plan on meeting Linda this summer! *Dolores*

Before The War

Saturday July 31, 2010

10 a.m. -5 p.m.

Cavalry

Liberty Pole Cutting

Book Signings

Narrated Boat Rides

Civil War Era Music

Civil War Mourning & Medical Displays
Lectures

The Occoquan Historical Society, the Town of Occoquan and the Occoquan Merchants Association invite you to join us for a free day of Civil War related history events. Join Mark Trbovich for his lecture of the events that led to the Prince William Militia riding into town and cutting down the liberty flag pole. Enjoy cavalry, narrated boat rides on the Occoquan, music in the park, mourning and medical displays, book signings and more. We can't wait to see you all!

Occoquan Historical Society

Mill House Museum

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