

Occoquan History for Children

Welcome to Occoquan and the Mill House Museum. Print off the following pages when you plan your visit to town. The first two pages provide some history of the mills that helped make Occoquan famous as an industrial center. The last two pages are a series of fun scavenger hunt questions. The answers are found as you walk through the streets and inside the Mill House Museum. Have fun and imagine what life was like for the people living here over 200 years ago!

Occoquan Historical Society
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The Mill House Museum located at 413 Mill Street, is the only building that survives of the original mill complex. It was built as the miller's office. It may not have been built until the 1790's when the mill was modernized to the automated design. In 1755 John Ballendine purchased land on the Occoquan River that in 1804 would become the Town of Occoquan. On his newly purchased land Ballendine built an iron forge and furnace, grist and saw mills and a large home called Rockledge.



Follow the sidewalk and stand along the fence in front of the historical markers by the Mill House Museum. Just to the left or west side of the museum was a huge merchant's grist mill. At the location of the big sycamore tree was the water wheel that powered the mill. The historical marker talks about the iron conduit that carried water from the race, under the street, and to the sluice and water wheel. On the other side of the water wheel was a smaller grist mill. Grist is any grain the farmer brought to be ground at the mill. Usually it was wheat or corn.

The larger mill would grind flour for people who would bring schooners or wagons full of grain. These people would usually pay cash to the miller for his services. The smaller mill was a toll mill. A farmer who wanted to only grind enough flour or cornmeal for his family would pay for the grain to be ground with part of his own grain. That was the toll or price for using the mill's services.

Stand with the river and the sycamore tree behind you. Across the street was the end of the mill race. The mill race brought water from the river to turn the water wheel. The race was a long narrow channel of water. The water gate on the race could be opened or closed to regulate the water to turn the wheel. The water went under the road from the race through a big iron pipe. The water would hit the paddles on the water wheel with such force that it made the wheel turn. The wheel was connected to machinery inside the mill that would turn the big millstones that ground the grain. A millstone rests against the front of the Mill House Museum.

On the hillside in front of you is a large stone house. This house is called Rockledge Mansion. John Ballendine built this house for his family in the 1750's. William Buckland, an indentured servant who came from England, designed Rockledge. George Mason hired Buckland specifically to finish the design of Gunston Hall but allowed him to work for other people at the same time. People in the 1700s and 1800s did not like the look of a stone house and many times covered stone or brick homes with wood. From reading old insurance policies we know that this is what happened to Rockledge. Older photos show Rockledge appearing to be a wood frame house.

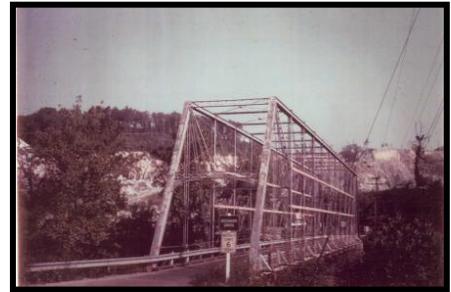


Stone to build the mills and Rockledge came from the local quarry across the river. When you walk over to the river you can see how many boulders are in the water. Occoquan is a Dogue Indian word meaning "the end of the water". Indians in their canoes could travel no further up the river.

In 1789 Henry Lee III modernized the mill so it only took one man to operate it. Oliver Evans designed this new mill operation. A wagon could pull up to the front of the mill or a boat to the riverside. All the grain could be unloaded, ground, and put in sacks by one miller. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson visited Occoquan to see how the mill worked so they could use the same design on their own mills. The local electric company's generator blew and destroyed the mill in 1924.

Walk out on the footbridge. You are standing on the site of a wooden bridge built by Nathaniel Ellicott in 1797. Wagons and horses could cross on this bridge. Mr. Ellicott charged 12¢ for each wagon along with the horses and 3¢ each for a man or a horse to cross his bridge. The mail and passengers traveled by stagecoach from Alexandria over this bridge. They could stop for the night at an Ordinary (Inn) in Occoquan before travelling south to Fredericksburg and points beyond that. Before the bridge was built a wooden raft or ferry was the only way to cross the river. A ferryman who lived near the river would be on call to run the ferry.

The wood bridge stood until the 1850's. A storm probably destroyed it. During the Civil War ferries or pontoon bridges were used for troops and supplies to cross. Pontoon bridges were made in sections that floated and could be connected together depending on how long the bridge had to be. In 1863 a temporary pontoon bridge was erected here. Union General Joseph Hooker's wheeled artillery and supply wagons crossed here over the length of several days. These troops were marching to Gettysburg, where one of the biggest battles of the Civil War occurred.



After the Civil War an iron truss bridge was built in 1878. This bridge lasted until Hurricane Agnes destroyed it in 1972. Following this event, the footbridge was built and a new bridge was built for cars. The new bridge site, on Route 123, is on the east end of Occoquan.

In 1828 Samuel M. Janney and his cousin Samuel H. Janney built a big cotton mill. This mill was located where *River Mill Park* is now. This mill hired so many people more houses had to be built for them to live in. Many of the workers were women of Irish decent. Cotton picked from plants was brought to the mill to be spun into thread that could be made into clothes. This mill was set on fire and destroyed in 1862, during the Civil War.



Look up the river (west). At a point on the left bank (south side of the river), about as far as you can see, was the site of the iron furnace. Here raw ore was brought by wagon and smelted to make iron bars. These bars would be sold or forged in town. George Washington purchased iron from John Ballendine for use at Fort Loudon, during the French and Indian War. Daniel Morgan was one of the wagoners who brought ore to the mill. Daniel Morgan would later be a soldier during the French and Indian War and become a famous General in the Revolutionary War. An iron forge was located just to the east side of the Mill House Museum. At the forge iron bars could be made into useful items such as pans, horseshoes, nails, hinges, etc.

These industries, the grist mills, cotton mill, saw mill and iron works provided jobs and income for the people of Occoquan. They also offered necessary services people needed to survive in a world before big groceries, shopping malls and home supply stores.