

OHS QUARTERLY

OCOQUAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY (OHS)

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SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPEARING OCOQUAN BRIDGE

In December of 2005, our society newsletter included an intriguing article about the mysterious disappearance of Occoquan's bridge sometime during the middle of the 19th century. Those of you familiar with Occoquan history may recall that in late 1795 the Virginia General Assembly authorized Nathaniel Ellicott to build a toll bridge across the river where the town is today, and the general consensus is that the bridge became operational in 1797. Although in 1807 floodwaters wiped out that original bridge, by May of 1808 it had been rebuilt. After that is when things get fuzzy.

We know that there was no bridge at Occoquan during the Civil War and that eventually, in 1878, Fairfax and Prince William Counties built the single-lane iron Pratt truss bridge that brought Route 123 into and through the town until Hurricane Agnes destroyed the bridge in 1972.

But what happened to the Occoquan bridge between 1808 and the Civil War? The article from 2005 reviews advertisements and maps to reach the tentative conclusion that something may have happened to the bridge between 1848 and 1858, and ends by noting, "[h]opefully specifics will be uncov-

ered [in the future] to give us the answer to this mystery."¹ As luck would have it, new sources have become available that appear to have solved this particular Occoquan mystery.

When reviewing the information available in 2005, our researcher noted that in 1811 Nathaniel Ellicott had advertised the sale of the toll bridge along with the mills he owned in Occoquan. Then in 1848, a visiting English historian, Benson Lossing, wrote of "coming down the craggy hill and over the bridge into Occoquan."² Consequently, it's clear that a bridge existed here at least into 1848.

(continued on page 2)

NEW BOARD MEMBERS AND A RETIREMENT

One of our board members, **Ms. Bobbie Frank**, recently retired from board service after a long tenure with the Occoquan Historical Society. Over the years, Bobbie has not only been an active member in the Society, but has been a generous contributor as well. On a regular basis, for example, she has funded the renewal fees for one of our historical markers. Bobbie is one of the individuals who through her perseverance and

support helped ensure the Society continued to exist through challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. As some may know, Bobbie was also formerly a member of the Occoquan Town Council and for a time also ran the juried Occoquan Fall and Spring Craft shows into the early 2000s. Words cannot adequately express our gratitude, Bobbie. We thank you for your service and hope to continue to see you.

We also recently welcomed a new board member, Ms. Margaret Alexis Wright. Among other things, Ms. Wright is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and has a Masters degree from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). She is a Lt. Colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve and currently serves as a Marine Corps Civilian GS-14 at Training and Education Command.

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPEARING OCCOQUAN BRIDGE (CONT'D)

Ten years later, however, other materials suggest the bridge had disappeared. Our researcher in 2005 noted that in 1858 Joseph Janney and Co. advertised for sale essentially the same mills as Ellicott had in 1811 but made no mention of the toll bridge. Additionally, and most compelling, an 1858 map commissioned by the Virginia legislature did not contain at Occoquan the markings that typically would be expected to connote a bridge crossing.³ Understandably, this evidence suggested that something had happened to the bridge between 1848 and 1858.

What has always led to uncertainty about this tentative conclusion is the absence of a report of the bridge's demise during that time frame. The *Alexandria Gazette* throughout its various iterations in the 19th century seemed to cover all major events in Occoquan, including the past construction, destruction, and rebuilding of the bridge at Occoquan, as well as the pursuit by others of permission to build competing bridges. Given this consistent coverage, it seems highly unlikely that the *Gazette* would fail to mention an event as significant as the destruction of the Occoquan River bridge. As for Joseph Janney not advertising the bridge for sale in 1858, while Ellicott had done so in 1811, it is conceivable that Janney simply wanted to retain own-

ership of the bridge and its toll revenue, even as he tried to sell the nearby mills.

But what of the absence of bridge markings at Occoquan in the 1858 map? At face value, this might appear to be definitive evidence that no bridge existed at that time. The map at issue is *A Map of the State of Virginia* that consists of Ludwig Von Buchholtz's revisions to John Wood and Herman Böye's Virginia map of 1826, published in both nine-sheet and reduced four-sheet formats. Its most glaring flaw, according to Peter North of the Library of Virginia, was that to save money the Virginia General Assembly required that the original copper plates from 1826 be used, with the revisions incorporated on those original plates. It resulted, according to North, in a map that might have been the best available for military purposes but that frustrated North and South alike. "Both Union and Confederate planners," according to North, "would find that the Buchholtz maps were a serious obstacle to carrying out major military operations in the Commonwealth." The revision's major contribution was that although Buchholtz "ultimately failed to produce an accurate and useful map of the Commonwealth, [the] failure spurred incredible innovation in cartography during the ensuing Civil War."⁴

Now, even if we assume the

map that showed no crossing at Occoquan is unreliable, we are still left with the mystery of what happened to the bridge, since we know it was not standing during the Civil War. That is where more recently-available resources have given us the likely answer.

After Abraham Lincoln's victory in the presidential election of 1860, southern states began holding secession conventions. Virginia's convened on February 13, 1861. Delegates were elected at the request of the Virginia General Assembly, which also required that the decision of the convention be ratified by a statewide referendum. The majority of delegates to the convention were Unionists, however, with the result that secessionists lost a vote on April 4. But, when Fort Sumter fell to secessionist forces on April 13 and President Lincoln responded by calling up 75,000 volunteers, momentum at the convention shifted in favor of secession. On May 23 in a statewide referendum, Virginia voters ratified the convention's decision and Virginia became one of the last four states to secede from the Union.

Northern newspapers in Ohio, New York, Connecticut, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, reported that Occoquan gave 60 votes against secession, but that rebel troops marched into town

before the polls had closed on May 23 and drove the Unionists out.⁵ Then, on May 28, 1861, the *Fall River Daily Evening News* out of Massachusetts reported: "The Occoquan bridge has been burned by rebels."⁶ This story, was repeated substantively in various northern newspapers.

By itself, this report alone from northern newspapers would not necessarily be definitive, as many of them were likely simply pulling the story from each other without independent verification. In fact, some later reports referencing Occoquan would show geographic inconsistencies. A number of them published in June of 1861, for example, erroneously refer to the "Occoquan" bridge near Martinsburg when reporting on Confederate actions around Harper's Ferry. In fact, these actions involved Confederates destroying important railroad bridges over "Opequan" creek just east of Martinsburg, which the papers obviously confused with "Occoquan."⁷

But there was a newspaper published near to Occoquan that reported with sufficient specificity to make the accuracy of its account likely. On Tuesday, May 28, 1861, the *National Republican*, out of Washington, DC, reported: "On Friday night [May 24] at nine P.M., the Prince William Cavalry burned the toll bridge over the Occoquan River (continued on page 3)

SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF THE DISAPPEARING OCCOQUAN BRIDGE (CONT'D)

16 miles from Alexandria), to the water's edge, injuring Messrs. Janey, its owners, to the extent of \$8,000."⁸

Thus, it appears that the mystery of the disappearing Occoquan River bridge is solved. Having stood for more than fifty years, it was destroyed by local Confederate forces on Friday, May 24, 1861, the day after Virginia seceded from the Union and the town's anti-secession Unionists were allegedly driven out or fled. But why, you might ask, was this story not covered by the *Alexandria Gazette*, which I earlier mentioned seemed to cover all important events in

Occoquan? The day after Virginia seceded, Abraham Lincoln ordered federal troops into Alexandria and on May 25, 1861, the *Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser* ceased publication. —E.

Porta

On Friday night, at nine P. M., the Prince William cavalry burned the toll bridge over the Occoquan river (16 miles from Alexandria) to the water's edge, injuring the Messrs. Janey, its owners, to the extent of \$8,000.

¹See "Ellicott's Wooden Bridge: Disappearance Prior to 1858," December 2025, Historic Occoquan, Inc. newsletter.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Peter North, "The Best for Military Purposes of Any Map Available": The Ludwig Von Bucholtz Revisions To The Wood-Böye Map and the Civil War." Library of Virginia. <https://uncommonwealth.lva.virginia.gov/blog/2025/05/19/military-purposes->

map/

⁵*Cincinnati Daily Press*, May 27, 1862, p. 2; *The Buffalo Commer-*

cial, May 27, 1861, p. 1; *The Hartford Courant*, May 27, 1861, p. 3; *Chicago Tribune*, May 27, 1861, p. 1; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, May 27, 1861, p. 3; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 27, 1861, p. 2.

⁶*Fall River Daily Evening News* [Massachusetts], May 28, 1861, p. 2.

⁷Among the newspapers that confused "Occoquan" and "Opequan" in reporting on Confederate actions around Harper's Ferry, was *The New York Times* (June 8, 1861, p. 9).

⁸*National Republican* [Washington, DC], May 28, 1861, p. 3.

OCCOQUAN IN AUSTRALIA IN 1885: JAMES N. CARTER AND AYER'S HAIR VIGOR

Occasionally while researching matters important to the town's history, one runs across a piece of historical ephemera that doesn't seem particularly important, but nevertheless piques your interest. That happened to me not long ago when I ran across something about Occoquan from November 2, 1885, in a newspaper called *The Express*, from of all places Adelaide, South Australia.

The paper contained an ad for Ayer's Hair Vigor, a product that allegedly could work all sorts of wonders for various conditions, among them scalp diseases. It claimed that conditions like dryness, brittleness, and falling of the hair,

dandruff, itching, and annoying sores, "are all quickly cured by AYER'S HAIR VIGOR." Ayer's, it asserted, cured Herbert Boyd, Minneapolis, Minnesota, of intolerable itching of the scalp; and "J.N. Carter, Jr., Occoquan, Virginia" of scald head. The ad goes on to list other individuals and appeared that same day in a number of papers in Australia, as part of what was an international marketing blitz by Ayer's Hair Vigor, based in Lowell, Massachusetts.

Seeing this, I wondered what was Ayer's Hair Vigor? Who was J.N. Carter, Jr. of Occoquan? And how did he end up a de facto spokesperson for Ayer's?

The first question, regarding Ayer's Hair Vigor, was relatively easy to address as there is a Smithsonian entry on the product. Made by the J.C. Ayer Company of Lowell, Massachusetts, it was patented in 1868, and although the company offered a variety of health products typically referred to as "patent medicines," this was their only product that actually had a patent. It was one of the products that was advertised in the popular *Ayers American Almanac* that continued to be published into the 1920s.

As for James N. Carter, Jr., was he actually an Occoquan resident, and if so, when? While census records for Oc-

coquan do not list a James N. Carter, "Jr.," they do include a James Newton Carter, who was born in Occoquan on July 19, 1843, and died in town of heart disease on August 22, 1923. This is almost assuredly the James Carter Ayer's mentions in their ad.

Unlike many of Occoquan's more famous personages, the relatively unknown James Carter was not a Union man. According to Confederate Service records, late in the war, in 1865, at the age of 22, he joined the Confederacy's 14th Battalion of Virginia Cavalry, commanded by Edgar Burroughs, which later was consolidated with the 15th (continued on page 4)

OCCOQUAN IN AUSTRALIA IN 1885: JAMES N. CARTER AND AYER'S HAIR VIGOR (CONT'D)

Battalion of Virginia Cavalry. He no doubt was following in the footsteps of his father, Samuel, who died of disease in January of 1865 as a POW of the Union army in Elmira, NY. When James's widow, Anna, at 74 years of age in 1925, sought Confederate Pension benefits after his death, she listed as his immediate superior Colonel Mosby, presumably a reference to the famous Confederate Cavalry officer John Singleton Mosby, the "Gray Ghost". Whether mistaken family lore, wishful thinking, or part of the valorizing tendency of the Lost Cause mythology, this appears unlikely as the units to which Carter belonged in 1865 do not appear to ever have been commanded by Mosby. There is, however, a James "M." Carter listed among the roster of Mosby's Rangers, so who knows for certain?

From census records it does not appear that these Carters were slaveowners, and census records after the war note that James and his wife and four children apparently lived on Commerce Street (the records from the time did not list house numbers, so it's hard to know exactly where). At the time of the 1880 census James was a shoemaker who worked out of his own shop.

Prince William County business licenses from the early 20th century do not show any

James Carter operating as a shoemaker, but his 10-years younger brother Giles had business licenses stretching from 1907 through 1925 as a merchant, as a seller of retail tobacco, as a butcher, as a green grocer, and as a purveyor of general merchandise.

There are records indicating

Ayer's Hair Vigor

Is not a dye, but, by healthful stimulation of the roots and color glands, speedily restores to its original color hair that is

Turning Gray.

MRS. CATHERINE DEAMER, Point of Rocks, Md., had her hair suddenly blanched by fright, during the late civil war. AYER'S HAIR VIGOR restored it to its natural color, and made it softer, glossier, and more abundant than it had been before.

Scalp Diseases

Which cause dryness, brittleness, and falling of the hair, dandruff, itching, and annoying sores, are all quickly cured by AYER'S HAIR VIGOR. It cured HERBERT BOYD, Minneapolis, Minn., of intolerable itching of the Scalp; J. N. CARTER, JR., Occoquan, Va., of Scalded Head; MRS. D. V. S. LOVELACE, Lovelaceville, Ky., of Tetter Sores; Miss BESSIE H. BEDLOE, Burlington, Vt., of Scalp Disease and Dandruff. Tenderness of the roots of the hair, which, if neglected, may result in incurable baldness, is readily cured by AYER'S HAIR VIGOR. As

A Toilet Luxury

AYER'S HAIR VIGOR has no equal. It is colorless, cleanly, delightfully perfumed, and has the effect of making the hair soft, pliant, and glossy.

Ayer's Hair Vigor,

PREPARED BY

Dr. J. C. Ayer & Co., Lowell, Mass.
Sold by all Druggists.

Now we have gone far afield. The question still remains – how did James N. Carter of Occoquan, Virginia, end up in an international advertisement in Australia for Ayer's Hair Vigor? Well, business records actually do provide a potential explanation. Both a business directory in 1917 and the 1910 census, list James N. Carter at that time, as a barber, with his own shop. While we can probably never know for certain, what appears most likely is that at some point between 1880 and 1885, James N. Carter became a barber, Ayer's Hair Vigor made it's way into his shop in Occoquan, and whether through volunteered information about it relieving his scalded scalp, or perhaps some sort of offered financial incentive, his name – and Occoquan – were included in an advertisement that went half way, maybe all the way, around the world.

Occoquan's James N. Carter is buried in Prince William County in a private family cemetery off the Prince William County Parkway. The transcribed online entry for his name mistakenly lists his middle initial as "M", but the headstone is clear: "James N. Carter, July 19, 1843 August 22, 1923." – E. Porta

that a Carter & Underwood (perhaps of the famous Unionist Underwood family) were licensed undertakers, and this is almost certainly our Carter, as a business directory in 1917 listed a J.N. Carter as an Undertaker; this is also the occupation listed on his death certificate in 1923.

MILL HOUSE MUSEUM NEWS: SCHEDULED CLOSURE IN JANUARY

The Mill House Museum finished 2025 strong. We welcomed more than 19,000 visitors over the calendar year, more than two-thirds of whom visited during the last six months of the year. This represents approximately a 50% increase over the same period last year. Some of this is attributable to increased operating hours, but the museum also saw more visitors per day than any quarter save one since fully re-opening in 2023.

In December, staff opened the museum 27 days, greeting almost 2,000 visitors. Our Mill House Museum Instagram account posted 10 times during the month, engaging 4,400 people, an increase of more than 25%. Our Instagram followers have now reached 157.

As in the past, the museum also featured special outdoor activities and provided several outdoor exhibits, particularly during the town's tree lighting and winter artisan market. Visitors were down relative to the prior Artisan Market, but this reflected its location change in 2025 from adjacent to the Mill House Museum to Commerce and Union Streets.

Among other activities, staff are processing a set of unique items of significant historical value donated by a town resident Valerie Jones. These items include photographs, pamphlets, memorabilia and a family bible. This large col-



lection provides a glimpse of, and valuable insight into, town life of past generations. These items are being scanned, cataloged, and described so they may be electronically searchable for future displays and research.

Staff members Zoe Vitter and Gary Blohm also recently met with Ken Terzian of Perkins Eastman, a firm working with Prince William County Schools on the new Occoquan Elementary School net-zero building. Mr. Terzian is leading the team that is creating an educational dashboard for the lobby of the school (and online) for use by students and visitors. We contributed photographs and information about the predecessor to, and history of, the existing Occoquan Elementary School.

Staff also purchased a new laptop that is being used for a variety of purposes, including now wirelessly casting historic Occoquan images and slideshows to the monitor

mounted above display cases.

Largely completed is a project to standardize archival storage of the museum's collection of historic and more recent photographs, as well as a project to organize existing high-quality prints into themed binders. Work has now shifted to doing the same with documents in our collection.

Significant progress has also been made in organizing the museum's operating materials, event and interactive supplies, and decades of museum administrative records and documents (including those contained in the museum basement). All this includes better use of appropriate storage containers and disposal of redundant or outdated materials.

The museum is closed the month of January and is scheduled to open in early February. This scheduled closure time is being used to renovate the interior of the museum, specifically by re-

moving a closet, reorganization the floor plan, and improving some displays (including that of the old Post Office window). We have also contracted with a local town resident to construct a custom front door that more accurately reflects the type of door that would have been on the Mill House during its main period of use. Staff is also using this time to continue to update the collection information in our collection management software.

Much of this effort is being led by Zoe Vitter, assisted by several volunteers who are working behind the scenes on archival work, research, and collection activities, while Olivia McDaniel directs and posts videos for our Instagram account, assists with special events, and organizes the Society's book club.

As you can see our staff and volunteers are working diligently to help preserve, interpret, and display Occoquan's past. When we re-open in February, stop by to say hello, see what they've been working on, and enjoy what the museum has to offer.

Of course, in addition to your donations and purchases, which we always appreciate, please don't hesitate to tell the staff and volunteers that you appreciate their efforts. Without them we could not operate the Mill House Museum.

COLLECTION DONATIONS, ANNUAL CAMPAIGN SUCCESS, EVENTS, AND BOOK CLUB

In closing this issue we'd like to start by thanking Occoquan resident, **Valerie Jones**, who as mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter recently donated a collection of photographs and other items to the Occoquan Historical Society. Thank you for your generosity and for thinking of us, Ms. Jones. We appreciate very much that you have trusted us with some of your extended family's valuable historical items. It's donations like yours that enable us to tell Occoquan's

story.

We also want to thank everyone who responded to our annual year-end campaign. Among the many of you who did so, were three new sponsors who joined us at the end of the year. These included Platinum Sponsor **Gretchen Chapman of Forever Young**, as well as



Gold Sponsors, **Erik Quist** and **David McMaster**.

Our membership categories include 1-year (\$25), 3-year (\$70), and Lifetime (\$300), and come with various benefits, as do our Gold (\$100), Platinum (\$500), and Diamond (\$1,000) sponsorships. Check out our website at www.occoquan-historicalsociety.org (no hyphen) for more information.

Last, we want to note some past and upcoming events. We successfully

kicked off our speaker's series on October 28 at the Piazza (the old Tap Room/Down Under), where a substantial crowd attended Earnie Porta's slide-illustrated lecture "An Introduction to the History of Occoquan." And Olivia McDaniel is continuing into the new year our Mill House Book Club. The next meeting will take place on February 15 at 4 p.m. The book is *A Place Called Ilda* by Tom Shoop, and is available for purchase at the Museum.



MILL HOUSE MUSEUM

413 Mill Street,
PO Box 65
Occoquan, VA 22125

Free Admission

Open Thursday thru Tuesday
11:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

millhousemuseum@gmail.com
www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org
Instagram: millhousemuseum

Occoquan Historical Society

The Occoquan Historical Society (OHS) is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization founded in 1969 and dedicated to telling the story of the town of Occoquan, Virginia.

OHS operates the Mill House Museum, an historic structure containing an eclectic collection of documents, photographs, and other artifacts related to the town's history. Over 400 items are catalogued and many of these are on permanent display. Admission to the museum is free Thursday through Tuesday weekly from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. We hope you will consider dropping by.