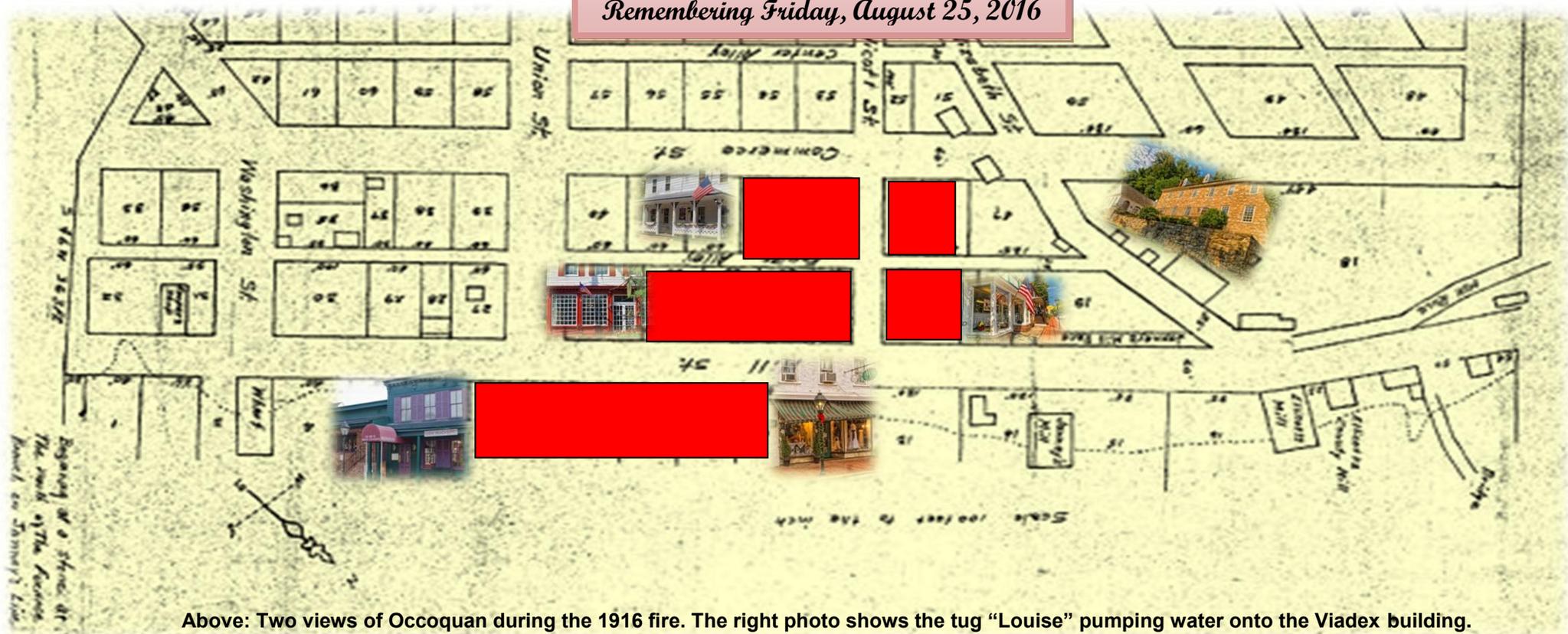


*The Mill Racer
 Summer, 2016
 Occoquan, Virginia
 Remembering Friday, August 25, 2016*



Above: Two views of Occoquan during the 1916 fire. The right photo shows the tug "Louise" pumping water onto the Viadex building.
 Below: The 1804 Occoquan plat showing surviving structures that rimmed the basic fire area, which is blocked off in red.

Washington Post, August 26, 1916

\$50,000 Occoquan Fire

**Business Section Wiped Out and
One Person Hurt**

Many residences Destroyed

**Flames Started by Oil Stove in Absence of
owner from Home. Beyond Control of
Citizens' Bucket Brigade, Until Arrival of
Alexandria Automobile Engine.**

Historic Occoquan, at the head of Occoquan Bay, 24 miles south of Alexandria, VA, was visited by a fire yesterday afternoon that wiped out the business section of the little town with a loss of \$50,000, on which there is an insurance of probably half that amount. The big new automobile fire engine of the Alexandria fire department went to the scene in response to a call for aid and making the run at a new record speed, saving the town from being wiped out entirely.

The fire was started by an oil stove in the house of Mrs. J. Hood Weedon, in the center of the business section adjoining the Occoquan Bank, during Mrs. Weedon's absence. When the fire was discovered the entire populace of the village turned out, men, women and children, to fight the fire. With a swift wind blowing from the burning building toward the bank, the flames quickly destroyed the Weedon house and its contents and began to eat up the bank building.

Businesses' houses and residences in the path of the fire were emptied of their stocks and furnishings, which were placed in the middle of the narrow streets, only to be consumed by the fire as it progressed. When it was seen the bank building was doomed, all the valuables were placed in the vault, which was locked. The bank will only lose the building, on which there is a good insurance.

One Person Injured

During the fire James M. Barbee, cashier of the bank; N.C. Davis, W.S. Lynn, W.H. Hammill, Milton Botts, W.H. Smoot, H.G. Leary, George W. Hunter, Tyson Janney, and other business men and property owners led the fight against the flames. Mr. Botts, who had one of his feet badly cut in a manner he could not explain, was the only person injured.

As there is no fire department in Occoquan, the citizens formed a bucket brigade to fight the flames, which were beyond control from the beginning. When the Alexandria automobile engine arrived the flames had jumped the creek at the old wooden covered bridge and partially destroyed a building.

The destruction of her home is the second misfortune that has befallen Mrs. Weedon in less than two weeks. On August 13 her daughter, Miss Virginia Weedon, after being rescued from drowning in Occoquan Bay, had her entire scalp torn from her head by the shaft of the motorboat that saved her from the water.

List of Burned Properties

The fire destroyed the following properties in the order in which they are named: Weedon residence and contents, Occoquan Bank building, residence and general store of W.S. Lynn, the latter containing between \$4,00-\$5,000 worth of general merchandise, farm machinery etc.

Oliver Underwood property occupied by F.B. Allen with most of its contents.

Dr. J.F. Carroll property, occupied as a residence by W.H. Hammill, and contents.

Viadex Manufacturing Company, making speedometers and route indicators for automobiles, owned by W.S. Lynn.

Two frame residences, one occupied by Mrs. Walter O'Neill and the other by Dr. F.W. Hornbaker as a garage. The Hornbaker drug store nearby caught fire, but the flames were extinguished.

Residence of Mrs. F.C. Davis and contents.

Methodist Episcopal Church totally destroyed: loss, \$3,000.

Residence of the Rev. George W. Allen badly damaged.

Residence of Carl Lynn damaged, as were the contents.

Three large barns filled with hay, feed, carriages, harness and other property owned by Elder William M. Smoot, H.G. Leary and George W. Hunter.

Residence of Mrs. Charles Joyce, and most of its contents.

Auto Engine Checks Flames

When the flames crossed the creek from the Viadex Manufacturing Company and communicated with the Joyce residence, the Alexandria fire engine was brought into action, quickly checking the progress of the flames. The general store owned by Tyson Janney, containing \$5,000 worth of general merchandise, caught fire several times, but the flames were extinguished by the bucket brigade the first time and later by the Alexandria fire company.

Members of the emergency fire department of the District workhouse, 2 miles away, went to the fire, but were unable to render much material assistance.

The old town of Occoquan lies at the head of the Occoquan Bay, more than one mile from the railroad station of Woodbridge. It was founded as early as 1720, and was frequented by Gen. Washington as a place of trade before and after he was President. Old Pohick Church on the Mount Vernon estate, which was attended by Washington, is not far away.

Fairfax Herald, September 1, 1916

**Occoquan Swept: Fire Nearly Destroys
Prince William Town;
Hotel, Bank, 12 Stores Burn.**

Fire which swept the western part of Occoquan, the little town near the District workhouse, in Prince William Co., Friday afternoon, completely destroyed twelve stores and houses and numerous outbuildings, and caused \$40,000 loss, partially covered by insurance.

No one was injured. Forty persons will be forced to rely on neighbors for homes.

The fire originated at 2:30 o'clock in the old Alton Hotel, now occupied by Mrs. Weedon. The explosion of an oil stove is thought to be the cause. At 6 o'clock, after the arrival of No. 6 Engine Company, from Alexandria, the fire was under control.

Swept by a stiff breeze, the fire completely destroyed the old Alton Hotel; The new two-story Bank of Occoquan, the house and store of W.S. Lynn, both frame; the two story house of Carl Underwood, the frame house of Wade Hammill, the frame M.E. church, South; the

Allen house, the brick manufacturing plant of the Viadex Manufacturing Company, manufacturers of speedometers, whose buildings were owned by W.S. Lynn, the house of Mrs. Carl Lynn, the barn of R.S. Woodward, and about a hundred frame sheds and barns.

But for the quick formation of bucket brigades, which relayed water from Occoquan Creek, nearby, and the timely arrival of No. 6 engine, of Alexandria, which made a record run of forty-five minutes from Alexandria, seventeen miles away, the whole village would have been destroyed.

The wharves and the eastern section of the town were not touched, nor was the district workhouse, more than a mile away across Occoquan creek.

The chemical engine from the workhouse and a number of trustees aided in the rescue work. About seventy-five men worked in bucket lines. The government tug Louise gave assistance by pumping water.

**Washington Star, August 26, 1916
Occoquan Visited by Serious Fire
Loss Between \$40,000-\$50,000, and Many
Persons are Homeless.
Prisoners Fight Flames.**

Occoquan, Va., August 26- Between forty and fifty residents of Occoquan last night slept in the homes of friends or in the Odd Fellows' Halle here as a result of a disastrous fire which swept away their homes and other property in the afternoon. The loss is between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

The fire originated about 2:30 o'clock from an unknown cause in the rear part of the home of Mrs. J. Hood Weedon on Mill Street, the principal thoroughfare of this little town. By the time the flames were discovered by Mrs. Weedon, who had gone to the front porch of her home a few minutes before, they had gained considerable headway. The cries of Mrs. Weedon were heard by neighbors and soon an alarm was sounding throughout the village calling for help. A bucket brigade was formed. Water was taken from nearby wells and also from Occoquan Creek, on which the town lies. The

fire-fighters, however, were unable to do much good against the flames which were fanned by a strong wind. Although Mrs. Weedon's home, formerly the Alton Hotel, was built of brick, it was soon a mass of ruins.

BANK BUILDING BURNED

With the outbreak of the fire James Barbee, cashier of the Bank of Occoquan, which adjoined the hotel, placed all the money in the vault, and then went to join the fire fighters in their efforts to keep the fire from spreading to the bank building. Their efforts, however, were without avail, as the roof of the building was soon a mass of flames, and in a few minutes the interior of the institution was wiped out. It was said the money and the papers in the vault were believed safe.

The fire soon spread northward, and soon the general merchandise store and dwelling of W.S. Lynn went up in smoke. About the time this building caught fire, Ralph Whitaker, son of W.H. Whitaker, superintendent of the District workhouse, across the creek, heard of the fire and dispatched the chemical engine, stationed at the institution, to the scene. For a time the volunteer firemen used the chemicals to advantage, but the wind shifted the flames to the rear, and soon the dwelling and the Occoquan M.E. Church South were on fire.

PRISONERS RENDER AID

In connection with the sending of the fire apparatus to Occoquan, Mr. Whitaker with several guards took seventy-five prisoners from the workhouse to the scene, and they worked diligently in carrying furniture, clothing and other property from threatened buildings. They also formed bucket brigades.

After the flames destroyed the Lynn store and residence they burned through the residence of Oliver Underwood and then jumped across an alleyway and destroyed the home of Wade H. Hammill.

Calls for help were telephoned to nearby towns, and an effort was made to reach Alexandria telephone to ask for fire apparatus to be sent. Communication however, with that place could not be had and a telephone message was sent to the Washington Star asking for the fire department of Alexandria be notified. It was on

the message sent from The Star that the big motor fire engine of that town was dispatched to the scene. The run of fifteen miles over a road which is bad in spots was made in forty-three minutes. When the fire apparatus, in charge of Capt. Henry Beach, pulled into town, he said later, it looked as if the entire place would soon go up in flames. The motor engine was backed up to the Occoquan Creek and residents assisted the firemen in carrying the hose several hundred yards and soon water was being thrown, but not before the fire had jumped across the street and destroyed the plant of the Viadex Manufacturing Company, a dwelling occupied by Walter Neal and the ice house of Dr. Frank Hornbaker.

AIDED BY SHIFTING WIND

It was but a short time later that the firemen succeeded in checking the fire in the northward spread. The wind, which had shifted, also aided the firemen, as the flames were kept away from a number of buildings. Telephone wires and brick walls of some of the buildings began to fall while the firemen were working nearby and for a short time menaced them. When it was seen there was but little chance of saving the church and property on Commerce Street articles of furniture were removed to places of safety.

It was not until the church and several residences on Commerce Street had been burned down that the fire was actually under control. It was about 6 o'clock last evening before the danger of the flames spreading was passed. The firemen and residents, as bucket brigade, worked long into the night putting out the smoldering flames in the burned buildings. No one was injured during the fire, although after the flames had wiped out the places on Mill Street and several venturesome ones had narrow escapes from falling walls. As soon as it was seen that the fire was under control, preparations were being made by the more fortunate residents to care for those whose property had been destroyed. The Odd Fellows Hall was thrown open and several families spent the night there, while others were taken into the homes of friends.

ORIGIN OF FIRE UNKNOWN

Mrs. Weedon, in whose home the fire originated, is the mother of Miss Virginia Weedon. A report was spread that the fire started from a gasoline stove, but this was denied by Mrs. Weedon, who said she had not been using such a stove. Persons who reached the scene shortly after the fire had been discovered expressed their opinion that the flames were of spontaneous combustion, as they appeared to have started under the flooring in the rear of the house.

Occoquan was built in 1730. It was here George Washington traded during his residence at Mount Vernon.

**Reprinted in the Potomac News
Wednesday, September 3, 1969, Page B-1**

2:30 p.m., August 25, 1916 Fire Devastation in Occoquan

Imagine dialing 911 (911 doesn't exist before 1968) and there is no fire department to answer your plea for help. The OWL (Occoquan, Woodbridge, Lorton) fire department isn't organized until 1938 and its charter granted in 1940. Occoquan resident Fred Lynn is our first Fire Chief and 204 Mill Street was the OWL fire station from 1946-1958.

Now you and your neighbors must rely on your own resources. Grab a bucket and throw water on an already enveloped fire is the only alternative at the moment. The closest fire department that can respond is from the City of Alexandria. A plea for help in a phone call to the Washington Star newspaper office finally reaches the Alexandria fire department and an engine arrives 43 minutes later.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index Inflation Calculator, shows that the buying power of \$50,000, the amount of damage reported in the Washington Post article, in 1916, would be \$1,102,000.00 today. It's hard to picture everything on the south side of Mill Street destroyed by fire from and including Town Hall at 314, burning east and stopping just short of 302,

where today is the Golden Goose. The fire jumped across to the north side of Mill Street burning structures between 313, where LaBella's Bridal Shop is and 301, the Occoquan Inn location.

When the winds shifted, blowing south toward Commerce Street, several structures were destroyed on Poplar Alley. In 1916 not many people had automobiles. Several of our Occoquan photos from that era show horses and wagons and the infrequent motor vehicle. The newspaper articles covering the fire wrote about the big new automobile fire engine being sent to Occoquan. Stables for horses filled with dry hay for feed and straw for bedding were the norm rather than garages for cars and these stables would have quickly gone up in flames.

As the winds pushed the fire across Polar Alley it burnt the beautiful Methodist Church on Commerce Street and destroyed everything on the north side of Commerce Street from the corner of Ellicott and stopping before 303 where today is the Pink Bicycle Tea Room.

There are some points of confusion in the articles. The Washington Post article describes the fire crossing the "old wooden covered bridge". The bridge was an iron truss bridge, built in 1878, and the floor of the bridge was wooden. Carl Underwood was listed as the owner of the 402 Mill Street property rather than Oliver as the Fairfax Herald reported. The Fairfax Herald also exaggerated the amount of destruction, saying that 100 frame sheds and barns were destroyed.

The Washington Post article tells us the bank building adjoined Mrs. Weedon's home and the Fairfax Herald informs us that the bank building was new and two-story. In our collection of photos we have a picture showing the Bank of Occoquan on Union Street. That must have been taken soon before its move to Mill Street. After the 1916 fire the bank would eventually be located at 308 Mill Street. The night depository box can still be seen to the right of the front door, at 308, on the exterior wall facing Mill Street.



The picture above shows the Bank of Occoquan on Union Street before its move to Mill Street. This photo shows carriages and horses being the prevalent mode of travel. Our streets are dirt, rutted and muddy. Alexandria's fire truck would have been dealing with dirt roads on their speedy trip down to Occoquan in 1916. It's amazing they covered the 15 miles in 43 minutes as the Washington Star reports.

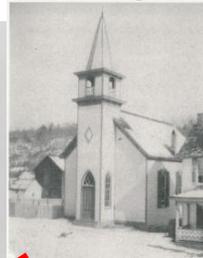
Nancy Mooney, who has lived in or very near Occoquan all her life, was told by older residents how they hung wet sheets out of windows to cover walls, hoping to prevent sparks from the fire taking hold.

Occoquan residents, the Alexandria Fire Department and volunteers from the District Workhouse and Reformatory all pulled together to keep the fire from being more devastating than it was. The Lynn store soon reopened across the street in the portion of the Viadex building that stood after the fire. W.S. Lynn added on to the structure for his business and family home. It would be 1926 though before the Methodist Church is rebuilt and dedicated. The fire destroyed many historic buildings in Occoquan, the old brick Alton and Occoquan hotel buildings along with the Underwood property dated from the early 1800's. Some things just can't be rebuilt but our instincts keep us moving forward. *Dolores*

Major Structures Destroyed in the August 25, 1916 Fire



Methodist Episcopal Church South



Hammill home (Previously the Occoquan Hotel & Dr. Powell's Home & Infirmary)



Bank of Occoquan

Weedon home (Previously the Alton Hotel),



Viadex Manufacturing Company
(The brick portion of the structure survived the fire)

Left: W.S. Lynn store and home on the left, Underwood home on the right.

Occoquan Historical Society June Membership Meeting

OHS met at the Occoquan Town Hall on Thursday, June 16, for the annual membership meeting. The following were elected to the OHS Board; Boyd Alexander, Stewart Christiano, Kim Deal, Rose Destefano, Jim Drakes, Dolores Elder, Bobbie Frank, Alice Gardiner, Angelee Mehta, Earnie Porta, June Randolph, Annette Riley, Martha Roberts and Marge Shaffer. Officers will be elected at the next monthly meeting.

July Happenings

July 12- The Leadership Prince William Youth Summer Academy visited Occoquan. Approximately 40 future leaders had a short visit to the Mill House and groups worked together to complete a history scavenger hunt. There are some great leaders in our future!

July 14- Occoquan Minnieland Daycare visited the museum for an early morning milling exhibit conducted by our "miller", Stewart Christiano. Twelve 4-5 year olds had fun using a mortar to pulverize wheat seeds and then grinding the grain with a hand turned mill. The boys and girls also decorated a cup planter and planted wheat to take home to watch the wheat grass develop.

Volunteer Award

The Occoquan Historical Society congratulates OHS Board member, Barbara "Bobbie" Frank, on receiving the Town of Occoquan annual Walter D. Bailey Volunteer Award on July 20. Bobbie has given service to many groups in the community including all the work she has done for our historical society. Thank you Bobbie!

Membership Renewal

Thank you to everyone who has renewed their Occoquan Historical Society membership!
If you have not had a chance to do so, membership can be renewed at: www.occquanhistoricalsociety.org
Or a check made to OHS for \$20 can be mailed to: Mill House Museum, PO Box 65, Occoquan, VA 22125.

Mill House Museum

413 Mill Street, Occoquan, VA 22125

Open Daily 11a.m.-4p.m. Saturdays and Sundays 11a.m.-5p.m. Memorial Day-Labor Day

703-491-7525

www.occquanhistoricalsociety.org

