

# OHS QUARTERLY

OCCOQUAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY (OHS)

## SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- The Year Occoquan Lost 1,368 People
- Thank You to Our Sponsors
- OHS/Museum First Quarter Report
- Occoquan by the Numbers
- Art Raffle Winners

## THE YEAR OCCOQUAN LOST 1,368 PEOPLE

If you scan the historical population figures for the town of Occoquan, say on an easily-accessible internet site like Wikipedia, something interesting might catch your eye. Until its noticeable growth over the last two decades, from 1860 to 1990 the town's population waxed and waned between a little more than two hundred people to over three hundred – with one exception.

That exception occurred in 1970, when according to the U.S. Decennial Census the population jumped from 301 in 1960 to 975, a growth rate of 223.9%. Although not easily found online, this population

figure continued to increase until it reached 1,609 during the ensuing years. Then, suddenly, in 1980 the number of town residents plummeted to 241, a figure far more consistent with historical norms.

What could explain such dramatic changes in the town's population? Those with some familiarity with Occoquan might reasonably conclude that the town grew dramatically and then after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Agnes in 1972 (and a subsequent storm a few years later) people chose to leave the flood-prone community. The truth, however, is far less dra-

matic – the Census Bureau simply made a mistake.

According to a *Washington Post* article by Mike Sager from January 26, 1983, a member of the count complaint unit at the Census Bureau explained that the trouble for Occoquan started in 1970 when "some residential units, apparently a considerable number," were included as part of the town. Ms. Ann Liddle of the Census Bureau explained that the Bureau could not be exactly sure what happened. Perhaps, she speculated, it was a map error.

(story continued on page 3)

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## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS!

### Diamond Sponsors (\$1,000+)

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Letty Lynn  
Rick and Lee Fitzgerald

### Gold Sponsors (\$100+)

Jeanne Marie Bebo  
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Sandra Sierdzinska  
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If you are interested in supporting OHS by becoming a member or a sponsor, please go to our web site, whose address you can find on page 3 for more information.

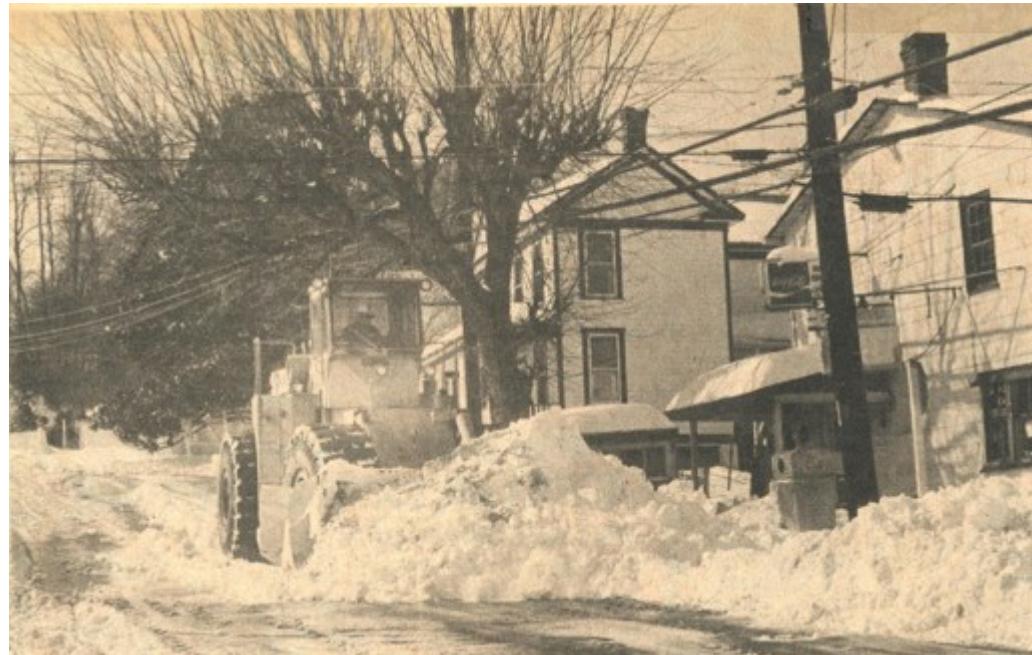
Our end of the calendar year fundraising and membership drive was a great success thanks to the generosity of the community. We appreciate everyone who took the time to support OHS by joining or signing up as a sponsor. In this issue of the *OHS Quarterly* we want to thank our exceptionally generous Diamond and Gold Sponsors, a number of whom also signed up to be lifetime members of OHS.

## O H S / M U S E U M S E C O N D Q U A R T E R R E P O R T

Unfortunately, the Occoquan Mill House Museum has been closed for much of January due to weather and planned interior improvements. If you are brave enough, however, to continue walking up Mill Street and past the museum this month, you will notice some "outdoor" winter exhibits that are up that you can appreciate even when the museum is closed.

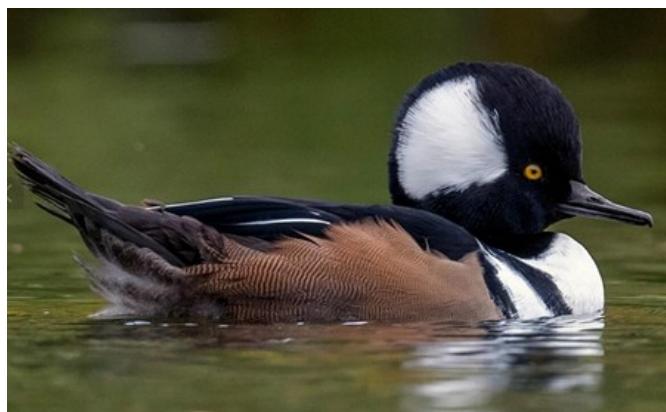
The first is our snow stick, which shows the totals from historic snowstorms (like the one pictured in the upper right from February 11, 1983) that have affected our area since modern-record-keeping began. The red lines nearest to the ground show (and date) the highest one-day, two-day, and three-day snow totals. Blue lines on the upper part of the stick show the five winters that had the highest overall season totals. At the very bottom you will see the green arrow that shows how much we've gotten so far this year. As I write these words, this year so far we are just above average.

The exhibit also features pictures of D.C. and Occoquan during these historic storms. If you have any pictures from these storms that were taken in historic Occoquan that you would like to share, please email them to [millhousemuseum@gmail.com](mailto:millhousemuseum@gmail.com), and they may be featured in a future winter exhibit.



We also have pictures and information on things to see outside in Occoquan during the winter. While at first glance the whole world might be seen as nothing but empty, white, brown and gray, there are birds, trees, and signs of mammals that are much easier to see in the winter than in any other season. Because some birds migrate for the winter, there are ducks and other waterfowl that can be found on the Occoquan River only in the winter! The duck in the picture to the right (called a Hooded Merganser) is a winter visitor spotted in the river behind the museum just two weeks ago.

We will open the museum again on weekends that are warm enough during January and will reopen six days a week (11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.), beginning in February. Hope to see you then!



In the meantime, looking back on the fall months of 2024 (October through December), the Occoquan Mill House Museum welcomed more than 3,850 visitors coming from as close as right here in town to as far away as countries on the other side of the world. These visitors donated more than \$1,000 during the time they spent at the museum and

made nearly \$1,300 worth of purchases from us! Remember that the profits from all sales go directly back into the operation and support of the museum.

Thank you so very much for your support over all of 2024; we look forward to hosting you in the coming year. — Z. Vitter

## THE YEAR OCCOQUAN LOST 1,368 PEOPLE (CONT'D)

Regardless, the bureau discovered and corrected the error during the 1980 count.

The population drop was no small matter for the town. Then, as now, the state provided financial support to localities on the basis of population. Occoquan allegedly did not learn of the counting errors until September 1982 when the annual police grant shrunk from \$3,500 to \$500, to be followed by drops in the amounts received from other revenue-sharing arrangements. According to the town council minutes for Septem-

ber 14, 1982, Mayor Don Lynn reported "that town funds from Revenue Sharing and the Police grant had been slashed by approximately 83% because the 1980 Census reported only 240 people as opposed to 1609 people in 1978." Continuing, he noted that "the town has as many problems as if it did have 1609 people."

Town leaders were frustrated that the revenue drop had occurred so suddenly without any time to prepare. "Our budget is shot," Mayor Lynn exclaimed to the *Washington Post*, which noted that the "once affluent town government stands to lose

more than \$24,000, almost half its annual budget."

To address the issue town leaders rented out the upstairs of the town hall to a gift shop and moved town business to the basement. It also planned a craft show for the spring and sought state relief through the late Senator Charles Colgan, who informed them the prospects were bleak.

The mayor argued that the state and federal governments were wrong, and sought a recount, which turned up one additional person, bringing the town's total population to 241.

No doubt the Census Bureau found it hard to believe that the leaders of a town of 241 people actually thought their town had as many as 1,609 residents. Consequently, when the town requested further recounts the Bureau demurred unless the town was willing to foot the bill.

While Occoquan's population has grown significantly over the last three decades, it has yet to reach 1,609. As of the most recent annual count it stood at a bit above 1,000 residents, all firmly within town boundaries. -E. Porta

## OCCOQUAN BY THE NUMBERS



## ART RAFFLE WINNERS

Congratulations and thank you to our Art Raffle winners, Richard and Deborah Rohloff! OHS president Bob Love donated a signed print from local artist, photographer, puzzle-maker, and Air Force Veteran, Kevin Poorman, as the prize for a fund-raising raffle OHS began months ago. Mr. Poorman's puzzles and art work are available at several shops in Northern Virginia, including Puzzle Palooza and the Art A La Carte Gallery in Occoquan, The Old Town Shop in Alexandria, The Virginia

Store in Fredericksburg, and a number of historic sites including George Mason's plantation at Gunston Hall, Tudor Place in Georgetown, and the Fairfax City Museum.

We appreciate everyone who participated in the raffle to support the Occoquan Historical Society and hope you will consider participating in future such events.

In the meantime, congratulations and thank you Richard and Deborah (at right with OHS president Bob Love).



### 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](mailto:millhousemuseum@gmail.com)  
[www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org)

## 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.

# OHS QUARTERLY

OCCOQUAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY (OHS)

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## WHAT DID JOHN DAVIS REALLY THINK OF OCCOQUAN?

When you walk into the Occoquan Historical Society's Mill House Museum, almost directly across from you in an alcove you'll see the following quote: "Yet no place can be more romantic than the view of Occoquan to a stranger, after crossing the rustic bridge, which has been constructed by the inhabitants across the stream. He contemplates a river urging its course along the mountains that lose themselves among the clouds; he beholds vessels taking on board flour under the foam of the mills, and others deeply laden expanding their sails to the breeze; while every face wears contentment,

every gale wafts health, and echo from the rocks multiples the voices of the waggoners calling to their teams."

These words were written by the English novelist, John Davis, in his work, *Travels of Four Years and a Half in the United States of America; During 1798, 1799, 1800, 1801, and 1802*, dedicated to Thomas Jefferson and published in London in 1803.

Davis came to America in late 1797, arriving in New York with the desire to set himself up as a private tutor for a family. Before eventually coming to Occoquan in 1801, he trav-

elled up and down the east coast a number of times, translating and writing, becoming friends with Aaron Burr, attending the presidential inauguration of Thomas Jefferson, and writing about how strongly he detested the institution of slavery that he witnessed in the South.

In the summer of 1801, Davis had gone to Washington, believing that through the intercession of Aaron Burr he was to receive a diplomatic position in the Department of the Treasury. It was not to be, however, the supposed job offer apparently based on a (continued on page 2)

## LUNCH WITH OUR DIAMOND SPONSORS

On Saturday, March 1st our President and Treasurer had the pleasure of hosting some of our Diamond Sponsors for lunch at D'Rocco's restaurant in the town of Occoquan. Attending were Rick and Lee Fitzgerald, who are longtime town residents, and Peter and Marsha Jackson, who were representing VFW Post 7916 (Peter is the Quartermaster at the Post).

Our sponsorship program is a

new initiative started in 2024 that offers a variety of benefits to those able to support the Society's efforts at a level beyond membership. The generosity of our sponsors at various levels has been instrumental in putting the museum operations back on a solid footing and helping us tell the story of Occoquan to a wider audience.

Thank you to all our sponsors for your support.



## WHAT DID JOHN DAVIS REALLY THINK OF OCOCOQUAN? (CONT'D)

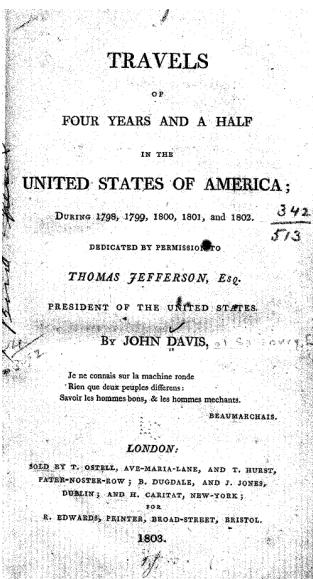
misunderstanding. A dejected Davis thus soon found himself in the middle of July in an excessively hot Alexandria, Virginia. There he put an advertisement in the *Gazette* and within a few weeks a Quaker gentleman approached him about a job tutoring the children of a Quaker named Nathaniel Ellicott along the banks of the Occoquan. During this entreaty, the gentleman, according to Davis "lavished his eloquence on the romantic beauties of the river Occoquan, and the stupendous mountains that nodded over its banks."

Accepting the invitation, Davis left Alexandria for Occoquan, where Ellicott engaged him to educate his children for a quarter year in reading, writing, and arithmetic, but thought French and Latin an abuse of time and asked Davis "not to say another word about it."

Davis described his introduction to Occoquan thus:

"On crossing a little bridge, I came within view of the Settlement, which is romantic beyond conception. A beautiful river rolls its stream along the mountains that rise abruptly from its bank, while on the opposite rocky shore, which appears to have been formed by a volcano, are seen two mills enveloped in foam, and here and there a dwelling which has vast

masses of stone for its foundation. The eye for some time is arrested by the uncommon scene; but it is soon relieved by a beautiful landscape that bounds the horizon. In a word, all the riches of nature are brought together in this spot, but without confusion."



That quotation and the one with which I opened this segment are the two most used Davis quotes in Occoquan promotional literature. And, in fact, in multiple places in his work beyond just these two instances, Davis extolled the natural beauty of the area. He even wrote two odes about it entitled, "Evening at Occoquan" and "Morning at Occoquan." Yet, Davis's view of the then settlement, its people, and his time here, was not always as flattering as these references might lead one to believe.

Though he initially appeared to

think well of Ellicott, Davis noted the failed vision of his employer, writing that due to "the richness of the adjacent country, and the healthfulness of the climate," the proprietor had been induced to project the plan of a city, but his visions were never realized and Occoquan "consists only of a house built on a rock, three others on the riverside, and a half a dozen log-huts scattered at some distance."

"Occoquan," he noted, "scarcely supplied more literature than Ovid's place of banishment on the Black Sea," and it was friendship with a Frenchman near Fauquier Court-house that cheered "the gloom of [his] solitude at Occoquan." To alleviate this gloom Davis also rode to Alexandria every Saturday, visited what he considered to be an excellent tavern by the bridge that crossed the Occoquan near its mouth at the Potomac, and wrote letters – in one instance "execrating the honey-promises of the great men of power, who had doomed [him] to the obscurity of Occoquan."

But it was the people of the area and his pupils that generated Davis's most unflattering descriptions of Occoquan. They possessed more "curiosity than breeding," he remarked when they assembled around a party of Indians who had turned from the road to visit a grave on the north bank of the river. After three months at Occoquan, Davis

had had his fill of the people and his pupils. He was, he wrote "surrounded by a throng of oafs, who read their lessons with the same tone that Punch [a popular English puppet show character at the time] makes when he squeaks through a comb."

Three months later Davis held even Ellicott in lower estimation. Upon informing Ellicott of his resignation, Ellicott chose as Davis's replacement "an old drunken Irishman of the name Burbridge," who according to Davis "was so drunk that he could with difficulty stand on his legs" when addressing Ellicott. Davis alleges that he protested to the Quaker that it was improper to employ such a person to educate his children, to which Ellicott allegedly responded, "Friend, of all the schoolmaster I ever employed none taught my children to write so good a hand, as a man who was constantly in a state that bordered on intoxication. They learned more of him in one month, than of any other in a quarter."

It was not without some melancholy that John Davis left Occoquan, but one can easily imagine him saying to a tavern acquaintance some years later, "Occoquan? Yes I know it. I spent three months there one night."

If you are interested in John Davis's work, it's in the public domain and available online.

## LECTURE SERIES AND OTHER HAPPENINGS

We have a number of things coming up with the Society. The Board is planning a quarterly lecture series starting this coming June. Among the topics are a general history of Occoquan, the history of the Dogue Indians, the development of religion in the region, and the geography and geology of the Occoquan basin. Stay tuned for more information as the details on the lecture series are finalized.

Also, in June, the Occoquan Historical Society will be

holding its annual meeting. This meeting typically involves a brief recap of the fiscal year (which runs from July to June) and the election of board members for the coming year. All members in good standing are eligible to participate and will receive notice of the meeting details by email.

We're also looking for volunteer docents to work at the Mill House Museum starting after July 1. You do not have to have knowledge of Occoquan history, but it is im-

portant that you are generally comfortable handling sales transactions and interacting with the public. Relevant training will be provided. We have 5-hour shifts available and you do not have to work every week. These are volunteer positions and involve no monetary compensation. If you are interested, please send an email to our email address below. You can also check us out at the Occoquan volunteer fair taking place from 10-Noon on May 3.

Last, we are again raffling off an Occoquan print. This is a framed print on canvas of an Occoquan winter scene. The artist is Kevin Poorman, a local Air Force Veteran whose work is available in several shops in Occoquan and Northern Virginia, including Puzzle Palooza, the Art A La Carte Gallery, the Old Town Shop in Alexandria, the Virginia Store in Fredericksburg and a number of historic sites.

Raffle tickets are available at the Mill House Museum.



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## THE MISFORTUNES OF ELISHA JANNEY'S MILL

Most often when we discuss an Occoquan mill we're referring to the Merchants Mill, which was attached to the building that today houses the Mill House Museum. But there were other mills in Occoquan's past, and more than 215 years ago in June and July of 1809, the *Alexandria Daily Gazette* published notices about the sale of one of those other mills — or what was left of it. That mill was owned by Elisha Janney, a member of a Quaker family prominent in northern Virginia.

Mill researcher, Debbie Robinson, drawing on Mutual Assurance Society policies for mills in Prince William County in the

early 1800s, reports that Elisha Janney's mill in Occoquan was a 3-story brick structure measuring 44 x 68 feet, which made it a little smaller than the nearby 3-story stone mill owned by Nathaniel Ellicott. Janney's Mill was located at what is today 407 Mill Street and can be seen marked on the 1804 town plat on the parcel to the east of Ellicott's mill.

Janney's luck was not good with his mill and it was a catalyst for misfortune that seemed to follow him to the end of his days. The mill burned in a fire, along with a nearby dwelling-house he also

owned, on Thursday, April 27, 1809. According to the May 2, 1809, edition of Richmond's *Virginia Argus*, the damage wrought by the flames that engulfed Janney's property totaled \$20,000, which would be roughly equivalent to \$522,000 today.

Like many merchants of his time, Elisha Janney's assets were heavily leveraged and the fire in late April of 1809 was thus apparently a very heavy financial blow. As early as May 30, 1809, the *Gazette* began publishing an announcement from the Commonwealth of Virginia directing the county sheriff to sum-

## O H S 2 0 2 5 F I S C A L Y E A R R E S U L T S

The Occoquan Historical Society ended fiscal year 2025 on June 30 with strong financial results, generating a surplus of more than \$17,000. Part of this was attributable to a one-time payment from Prince William County that likely will not be received in the future. Without it, however, OHS would nevertheless have generated a surplus of approximately \$10,000, which is a significant improvement over the prior two fiscal years,

when we experienced a surplus of about \$4,000 in one year and a deficit of approximately \$5,000 in the other.

The dramatic improvement in the operating results is due to a number of factors, the most prominent of which was our annual membership drive and the continued generosity VFW Post 7916 and of a number of individuals who responded to this year's sponsorship solicitations.

The Mill House Museum addressed some staffing challenges with reduced hours that also reduced visitor numbers, but we still welcomed nearly 15,000 people to the museum. While gross sales figures were also down as a result of reduced hours, improvements in inventory management resulted in growing net margins on sales.

## THE MISFORTUNES OF ELISHA JANNEY'S MILL (CONT'D)

mon Janney and others to the Superior Court of Chancery in Richmond to answer a bill against them by John P. Smith. Less than a week later on June 12, the Gazette announced the public sale of the "Schooner Henry and John" and the "Schooner Lark," both the property of Elisha Janney.

Then, on June 15, the Gazette reported that based on an indenture duly executed and dated May 29, 1809, Elisha Janney had conveyed "the whole of his estate real [sic] personal & mixed, in trust for the purpose of disposing of the same and applying the proceeds thereof to the payment of his debts."

To pay his debts the trust began to sell Elisha Janney's assets located in Occoquan, Alexandria, and elsewhere. The advertisements for sale of his Occoquan properties ran in the Gazette multiple times in June and July of 1809, and read as follows:

### Valuable Property for Sale

Pursuant to a deed of trust made by Elisha Janney to the subscriber for the benefit of his creditors, will be exposed to public sale, before the tavern door of Zachariah Ward, in the town of Occoquan, at twelve o'clock, on FRIDAY, the twenty-first of next month —

That Valuable MILL-SEAT, the property of the said Janney, situate in the said town of Occoquan. On this scite was erected, about ten years ago, a spa-

cious three story brick mill house, which ever since has been occupied as a manufacturing mill until about five weeks ago it was destroyed by fire: the stone work of the mill and a considerable part of the brick work still stands and would be found sufficiently substantial to erect new work upon it—considerable part of the iron work would also answer for a new mill, which might with these aids be erected in time to grind the growing crop of wheat. The advantages appertaining to this valuable property which in the driest season never wants water, are so generally known as hardly to need a particular enumeration. Suffice it to state that it is situated in a healthy and flourishing little town at the falls of the Occoquan river, about 16 miles south of Alexandria, on the great state road leading from north to south, in the heart of a fine wheat country, and has navigable tide water to the mill door where vessels may come of sufficient burthen to carry 400 to 500 barrels of flour.

The advertisement continued to list other properties in or near Occoquan, including the "TANYARD and the Improvement thereon" and about 500 acres of valuable timberland on the north side of the Occoquan River.

Other properties belonging to Janney were announced for sale (or in some cases for rent) in June and July in the Gazette, as well. These included two dwellings on a half acre at the corner of Duke and Royal streets. One of these was relatively recently built by Janney and was described as "an elegant three story house built within the last year, finished in

the handsomest stile, and calculated to accommodate a large family."



Janney House, 404 Duke Street.  
Courtesy Library of Congress

The same advertisements noted also for sale the wharf of Elisha Janney and its associated improvements located on the south side of Prince Street, a half acre of land at the corner of Cameron and Henry streets, a small house on an alley east of Union Street between Duke and Wolf Streets, and finally a small farm of about 12 acres on the Leesburg road about three miles from town "on which there is a tolerable good frame dwelling house and kitchen" . . . "under a good enclosure, good orchards, a good well of water, and is in a high state of cultivation, having at present a growing crop upon it."

Announcements of sales of former Janney property and claims against him in the Superior Court of Chancery continued to run in the Gazette for several more years.

Over his lifetime Janney fathered 12 children, one with his first wife, Albinah Gregg, who died in 1787, and 11 with a second, Mary Gibson. Even some of his children and grandchildren, according to an announcement in the September 4, 1815 edition of the Gazette, found cause to file suit against him.

The financial misfortune sparked by the burning of his mill generated a substantial note in the entry for Janney in The Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy. Janney, it relates became insolvent in 1809 due to "overexpansion of his business, and the burning down of his mill, extension of credits, borrowing from his bank and giving preferential promises to bank and special creditors, the immediate cause being the 'EMBARGO', [a reference to trade restrictions imposed due to tensions in Europe] which caused many business failures about that time." It relates that the Quaker Alexandria Monthly Meeting exonerated Janney from fraudulent intentions "after receiving his written acknowledgement of his errors of judgement which caused some of his creditors to lose heavily in the final settlement."

Janney died on July 18, 1827, at Hillsboro in Loudoun County, Virginia. - E. Porta

## NATHANIEL ELLICOTT'S CONTROVERSIAL ROAD

August 19, 1805, was an important date in Occoquan's history. On that day, less than a year after being chartered, the town became a stop on a new mail route. The *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* reported as follows:

MONDAY, AUGUST 19.

COMMUNICATION

*Mail Stage, by Occoquan to Dumfries*

*THIS DAY, the Mail Stage from this place to Dumfries will commence running on the new road by the town of Occoquan, instead of the old route, as heretofore, by Colchester.*

*To the exertions of an individual, and at a very considerable expense, the public are indebted for a new and elegant road for ten miles of the rout [sic], which make the difference between this place and Dumfries somewhat shorter and infinitely better.*

*This new road leads off from the old rout [sic] by Colchester, a little north of Pohic church, crosses over Pohic creek upon a new and substantial bridge, passes through a well cultivated country to the river Occoquan, which it crosses upon a fine new bridge, and falls in with the old road some distance from Dumfries.*

*The flourishing little town of Occoquan, which is the first stage and distant 15 miles from this place is one of the most romantic, interesting places, that can be conceived: Situate on the south side, and at the head of tide water of the little river of the same name, it already contains several handsome houses; but what will ever render it a place of industry, activity, and business is its flour mills, which are of the best construction; and those already built are capable of grinding two hundred thousand bushels of wheat per year.*

The person who constructed this road at "very considerable expense" was none other than Occoquan's Nathaniel Ellicott, then the owner of Rockledge and the Occoquan Mills, the person who built the "fine new bridge," and the person who with others had set about chartering the town the prior year. Ellicott's new road branched off from and then rejoined what was at that time the main north-south road on the east coast in what was then the young United States of America. If it came into regular use it would put the newly-chartered town of Occoquan on that main north-south route, where Ellicott lived and engaged in a variety of commercial operations.

Ellicott's new road was known, of course, before the mail stage announcement. A week before, for example, Alexander Gordon, a tavern keeper formerly of Woodbridge, cited the new road

in his own announcement dated August 13, but also printed in the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* on August 19.

Alexander Gordon

*Formerly Tavern Keeper at Woodbridge;*

*TAKES the liberty of informing the Public, that he has opened a HOUSE of ENTERTAINMENT at the Occoquan Mills — where he solicits the patronage of his friends and hopes for the encouragement of the public.*

*He begs leave to inform those who may please to favor him with their custom, that his house is commodious, his tables good, and shall be well kept; that he is furnished with a good assortment of liquors, and that in the different duties of an inn-keeper, his exertions to please shall be unremitting.*

*He hopes that his house will be found a convenient stand for travellers, being a moderate stage from Alexandria to Dumfries; and from the great labor and expense that has been bestowed by Mr. Ellicott, in making a new road leading by this place of unequalled firmness and excellence, he had not doubt that the rout [sic] by Occoquan, needs only to be known to entitle it a decided preference to that by Colchester, and more particularly it will accommodate those travelling from Fauquier, Culpepper, and Orange to Alexandria and the Federal City. A view of the different works at Occoquan, will always be amusing to the stranger who*

*has an hour to spare.*

The anonymously-penned announcement of the road set off a series of sharp, also anonymous, exchanges in the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* over the ensuing weeks. For some the stakes were understandably high. Alexander Gordon's announcement provided direct evidence of the potential the new road had for drawing business toward Occoquan—and away from Colchester. Naturally, this did not please supporters of the latter, and the first sign of discontent was hinted at by the editor of the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* on Wednesday, August 28, when he posted the following:

WEDNESDAY, August 28.

*The editor acknowledges receiving a long reply to an article which appeared in this paper on Monday the 19th instant, under the head "Communication," which is on a subject too uninteresting to his subscribers to publish; at the same time he deems it his duty to inform the writer, that the "Communication" did not come from the quarter he alludes to, neither is the writer interested in any shape or manner whatever in the subject of controversy.*

It seems likely that the anonymous writer whose long reply was not published believed that Ellicott himself was the self-interested party behind the "Communication" an-

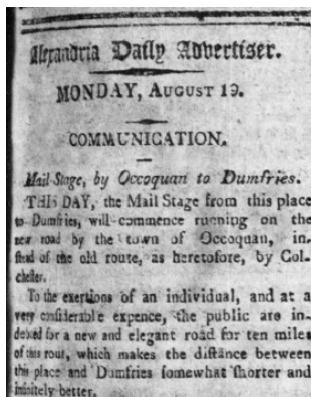
## NATHANIEL ELLICOTT'S CONTROVERSIAL ROAD (CONT'D)

nouncing the new road and the route of the mail stage. This was confirmed soon after, when the unnamed writer, identifying themselves only as "One of the Community" apparently convinced the editor of the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* to print a harsh, lengthy follow-up in the September 4, 1805, edition that lay bare his allegations against Ellicott. Not only was the road not shorter, or better than the existing road, the anonymous critic asserted, but Ellicott had built it because his attempts to get the county to do so for a number of years had been unsuccessful since the latter realized that the primary purpose of such a road would simply be to benefit Ellicott's business ventures in the town of Occoquan. Ellicott, the writer noted, was also the carrier for the United States mail, and consequently, his unilateral decision to make his new road the post road was a violation of his contract and the law.

### *The Road from Alexandria to Dumfries*

Mr. SNOWDEN, [publisher] ON the 23rd instant, I took the liberty of sending you a reply to the communication on this subject, inserted in your paper on the 19th—in yours of the 28th I remark that it will not be published because the subject is not deemed sufficiently interest-

ing to the public; in this I beg leave to differ from you: The communication you observe, did not come from the quarter to which allusion was made, and the writer is in now way interested in the subject of controversy. This, as you so



state it, I have no doubt is the case.—But the writer, whoever he may be, announces, at the head of one, of your columns, a change in the great road leading from one extremity of the Union to the other; and he tells the world that by means of a new and elegant road, opened at the expense, and by the exertions of an individual, the distance is lessened—the way made infinitely better—that it leads thro' a well cultivated country—passes over good bridges &c.—and he heads his communication with the following words in Italie, "Mail Stage by Occoquan." What was the intention of the writer who made this communication, it is not for me to say, but what its tendency is, no man can mistake. Is it not to advise the traveller to take this new road because it is shorter and better?

Is it not to insinuate, that the water courses are well bridged on this route, and not on the other, and that this has become the main post road, and that the other has been abandoned, as such, by the proper authorities? Is it not to eulogize an individual, for thus accommodating the public, in so many points, by his own exertions, at his own expence, and without any private or interested view? Now all those things I do most positively and unequivocally deny, and should the traveller not have the means of judging between those who assert and those who deny, on a subject so interesting, to him, as the road he rides on—I have too much confidence in your impartiality, sir, to believe that you will refuse it.

The first and principal question is which is the nearest route from Alexandria to Dumfries, by Colchester, or by the [unclear] the Occoquan Mills? —Any map on [unclear] adjacent country will shew that a straight line drawn from Alexandria to Dumfries [unclear] cross the Occoquan river considerably below Colchester—and most particularly [unclear] beg to refer, to a survey, made by authorities about ten years ago (when a question was discussed in the Virginia legislature) as to locating the district court of the three neighboring counties—Here it may be seen how much below Colchester, the straight line cross-

es; and that the distance from Alexandria to Dumfries as laid down, on this line, is exactly 20 3-4 miles—It will not be denied that the Occoquan mills lie on this river, at least 2 1-2 miles above, and to the westward of Colchester, nor that the course of the river is nearly straight here. The road to Colchester, already diverges too much to the westward, and the distance is considerably lengthened by it, still it is asserted that by making it diverge more to the westward, and cross 2 1-2 miles higher up, is it shortened: This is indeed a paradox. The fact is, that the mill road is from three to four miles longer than the post road; it is taken out of the post road, at about four miles to the northward of the Occoquan, and returned to it about the same distance to the southward of the river—between those two points the post road runs 8 miles the mill road at least 11, the difference 3 miles—More than one third of the distance would be added by taking this last mentioned route—How then are the public indebted to the exertions of an individual—it would be an awkward thing for a traveller from Boston to Charleston, to have many of these debts to pay. Suppose only one half of the individuals near his route should insist upon laying him under this sort of obligation, and induce him to pass their mills and stores to acknowledge his gratitude.

## NATHANIEL ELLICOTT'S CONTROVERSIAL ROAD (CONT'D)

*The distance by the post road is 1162 miles; one half of which is, 581 miles; now as 11 is to 8 so is 581 to 811: difference 230 miles only, which our traveller would have to ride out of his way, between Boston and Charleston, to thank those who so indulgently accommodated him.*

*The mill road, is not better than the post-road between the points in questions, nor is it so good. It leads through a country infinitely more unlevel, but having been lately cut, wears more the moment a newer garb nicely fitted, to captivate the unwary; at each point where it has been taken from the post-road, special pains have been bestowed to lead off the unsuspecting stranger—a spacious avenue smooth as a bowling green, invites him to enter and least [sic] this should not be enough, an handsome sign-post is planted encroaching on the post-road, to keep it out of view. No sooner, however, has he fairly embarked, than he has to encounter at almost every step, hills, morasses, and streights scarcely wide enough to admit the passing of one carriage by another, the road is no where in those places more than 18 feet wide, and in many not so much, at one place for the extent of half a mile, on the north side of the Oc-*

*coquan and near that river, I do aver from personal inspection, that it is impossible for carriages to pass each other without taking the horses out, and even then not without great danger; such is the narrowness of the way, such is the precipice above, and such is the abyss below, closely bordering on each side; as a proof, let me state a fact. On the 27th of this month, the stage full of passengers met at this place, a waggon loaded with wood; the stage was stopped, to pass was presently found impossible, nor could it be effected but by unloading the waggon, taking off the wheels, and removing it by hand.*

*As to bridges, the only place on the post-road which needs a bridge is at Colchester, and here travellers pass on an excellently strong and safe bridge, 650 long.*

*Next, as to the insinuation that this road by the mills has become the post-road; the proprietor at the mills, the individual by whose exertions this "new and elegant road" has been made, and the carrier of the mail of the United States, on the route from Alexandria to Dumfries, are one and the same person. That part of the road north of the Occoquan is a private road, authorized by no legal authority. Constant attempts have been made during now a course of ten years, to get the court of the county in which it lies, to open and support it; they have as constantly*

*refused to do so, knowing that it was of no consequence to any but the individual in question; it leads to his mill, his store, his bridge, his dwelling house. At length he has opened it at his own expence, and strange, but true, on the 19th inst. he commenced, in violation of the law, in the teeth of his contract, against usage, and against the safety of the public property committed to his charge, to take the great mail of the United States, off the route designated by law and contract, to leave out a post town, named as such in the law, Colchester, to carry the Colchester mail twice a day, & every day, in the hands of a boy, on horseback in a bridle path, three miles from the mail stage and three miles back, repeated, make twelve miles a day, and this practice was continued for one week! Braving the consequences and setting the laws at defiance, since which I have been informed, some regulation of the post office department has made him change his conduct in part, but that he is still playing the same game as to half the road. How long he will continue to ride superior to the law and regardless of the restrictions of his contract—How long the officer at the head of that department will permit such things to be done, or how long the community will suffer offences of this nature to pass without information and prosecution—time will shew.*

### ONE OF THE COMMUNITY

August 30th, 1805

The final major public communication on the subject came not long after the scathing attack on Ellicott and his new road. Again, the writer, who claimed to write from Fairfax, was anonymous, but asserted that he had been the one responsible for the original "Communication" about the new road. Believing that since the person who had done such a service for the community by creating the road had done so without remuneration, he thought that individual should receive some recognition. He took issue with both the accuracy and the tone of the missive from "One of the Community," in a response printed in the September 14, 1805, edition of the Alexandria Daily Advertiser.

### COMMUNICATION

Mr. SNOWDEN,  
*Being under the necessity of taking a number of journeys through divers roads in this state, sometimes obliged to ford rivers in danger of my life, at other times to break through inclosures, in danger of the law—and having lately to pass from Dumfries to Fairfax, and recounting my "hair breadth escapes from flood and field," I was directed to try a new road then just opened by the Occoquan Mills, which I did—and what was my surprise when I found a handsome, spacious road made*

## NATHANIEL ELLICOTT'S CONTROVERSIAL ROAD (CONT'D)

almost entirely new for 10 miles, absolutely the best road I ever saw, turnpike roads excepted: I then thought, in the simplicity of my heart, that the maker of this new road "had done the state some service," and if he could not be remunerated, he might at least be innocently eulogized: This accounts for the "COMMUNICATION" in your paper of the 19th ultimo. It is however, proper here to correct a small mistake that crept into that communication. It was there said, that the new road was somewhat shorter." Upon enquiry the writer of this has been since informed, that the new road is somewhat longer by measurement, but so much better, that from point to point, the stage drives it sooner by three-quarters of an hour.—I did not suppose that any individual would expend several thousand dollars in opening a new road, without having some interest in so doing; but this I knew, that I was benefited, and was willing to shew my gratitude by pointing out the object to others. What then, Sir, do you think was my surprise to find in your paper of the 4th, a most violent attack on my poor little "Communication." The writer, who figures away under the signature of "One of the Community," attacks me en militaire, horse and foot, front and flank; and with his

mill road, and Colchester road, his assertions and denials, his post-master-general, stage drivers and mail carriers, with a dozen other auxiliaries that he has pressed into his service thinks he lays me prostrate. Let us however examine his positions, to do which we will pass over his first paragraph as entirely irrelevant to the subject. In the second, with a good deal of extraneous matter, he says "any map of the country will shew that a straight line from Alexandria to Dumfries will cross the Occoquan below Colchester."—Now this happens to have just as much to do with the subject of dispute, as if I was to say that a straight line from Washington to Alexandria could not profitably be made to go by Mason's Ferry at George-Town. No, Sir: Alexandria and Dumfries in this question have nothing to do; but draw a straight line from the diverging point at Pohic church, to where the roads meet at Neabsco, and say where will that line cross the Occoquan: However even this is not a fair argument—The only proper thing to measure roads by is the time it takes the traveller to pass them.

Our writer proceeds to say, that the person who made this new road, has made it spacious and smooth at its entrance, to invite the traveller into hills, morasses and difficulties: to this assertion, let those who travel each road answer. But by the writer of this it is denied to be the

truth; the new road is clear through, as good, and in most places better, than at the entrance at each end. If the new road is not so good as the old one, and is farther, few will be found to travel it; if on the contrary, the new road is found better, and can be travelled sooner and with more ease, (as is the case) the traveller will surely enter it, more especially when he reflects on the genteel reception he will meet with at Mr. Gordon's tavern at Occoquan; if by the bye, he has not first to obtain leave from the proprietors of the Colchester bridge and tavern. The writer further proceeds to aver from personal inspection, "that for the extent of half a mile it is impossible for carriages to pass each other without taking the horses out, and even then not without great danger." Now, Sir, the truth is, that there is not 40 feet together in any part of the road, in which carriages cannot pass each other in perfect safety, and if the writer will make a little further enquiry he will find his story about the wood waggon rather embellished.

Whether the mail stage is driver over Colchester bridge or Occoquan bridge, it matters I believe very little to the public, and certainly none to me; but permit me to ask this writer what makes a post road? Is it any act of congress? Is it any act of a state legislature or county court? No; it is neither,

but any road is a post road that a post-rider or mail-carrier chooses to travel from one post office to another; neither does the postmaster general ever force his carriers to go any particular road, but leaves them at liberty to travel what road they choose and while the mails are delivered in order, and in time, the contract is certainly complied with.

With the charges in the closing paragraph, against the mail-carrier, for "setting the laws at defiance, regardless of the instructions of his contract, and threatening a prosecution," the writer of this certainly has nothing to do: very well convinced, however, he is, that upon cool reflection, "One of the Community" will acknowledge, that an anonymous paragraph in a newspaper is not exactly the place to exhibit charges of this description.

Fairfax, Sept. 10.

The new road did indeed become an important one, most especially for the town of Occoquan. It became the primary road after floodwaters wiped out the bridges at Occoquan and Colchester in 1807 and the latter was not rebuilt. Eventually, it became a part of Route 123, which until Hurricane Agnes washed away the one-lane bridge that sat where the footbridge is today, brought travelers into and through the town of Occoquan. - E. Porta

## MUSEUM NEWS AND OTHER HAPPENINGS

The Occoquan Historical Society held its annual meeting on June 5, 2025, at the Occoquan Town Hall and via Zoom. No board member or officer terms were expiring so no votes were necessary on those matters at that time. Not long after, however, one of our board members, Merial Currer, left the board as she has relocated to Alabama. We're grateful to Merial for stepping in to help us when she did and wish her all the best. To fill out Merial's term, the board welcomed Gillian Gonzalez as a new board member at our first meeting of the new fiscal year. Gillian brings a

wealth of knowledge and experience with her and we are looking forward to having her with us.

We also wish the best to two of our wonderful docents, Jim and Nancy Harvey, who recently retired from working at the museum after a number of years. They have contributed in varied ways to our success and we hope they will come back and visit when they are able.

Our museum is now staffed by a number of volunteer docents, as well as our Curator, Zoe Vitter, and our Collections Manager, Olivia McDaniel. If you are interested in volunteering for the Occoquan Historical Society,

please go to our web site at [www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org) (no hyphen), where on the home page you will find a link to a form you can complete. We have a variety of opportunities available, not all of which involve a shift at the museum.

Staff also participated in a number of events early in our new fiscal year, the most prominent of which was the Fox 5 Zip Trip, which took place on July 11. Both Olivia McDaniel and Zoe Vitter set up and staffed a display that made its way on to the television broadcast that morning.

And thanks to the efforts of



Olivia McDaniel, the Mill House Museum now has an Instagram page, where Olivia regularly updates the community with interesting facts about Occoquan's history as well as about upcoming events in which the Society will be participating. Make sure you check us out there and follow us.

## THANK YOU TO OUR SPONSORS!

With the end of our fiscal year on June 30, we also want to once again thank our sponsors and members. Your generous contributions have helped put the Occoquan Historical Society on a strong financial footing for the coming year. We appreciate all that you do for us and we look forward to seeing you in the months.

### Diamond Sponsors (\$1,000+)

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If you are interested in supporting OHS by becoming a member or sponsor, please go to our web site, whose address you can find on page 8 for more information.



#### 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](http://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.

# OHS QUARTERLY

OCCOQUAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY (OHS)

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## THE OCCOQUAN MILL FIRE OF 1924: ABSOLVING AUSTIN BARBEE

Just over a century ago, at around 7:00 p.m. on the evening of Sunday, October 19, 1924, fire destroyed the Occoquan Merchants Mill, which had been in operation since at least about 1790. This same fire also damaged what is our current Mill House Museum building, a structure attached to the mill that served as its office and a storeroom. The Janney family had operated the mill for almost a hundred years, dating to when Joseph and John Janney purchased it from Nathaniel Ellicott in 1826.<sup>1</sup> In fact for much of the 19th century the extended Janney family owned and operated an expansive mill

complex in Occoquan that at times included multiple grist mills of both the merchant and country toll mill variety, a saw mill, a plaster of paris mill, and a cotton mill or factory. (For those who might be unaware, a merchants mill is a commercial enterprise where the operator purchases grain for their own account and grinds it for sale, while a country toll mill is one where local customers bring grain to be milled, and the operator keeps a portion of the grain as the miller's toll or payment for the service.) By the time of the fire, only the large Merchants Mill remained in operation, and the Janney fami-

ly no longer actually owned it, having sold it in 1899 to a Northern syndicate.<sup>2</sup> Tyson Janney, however, was still leasing the facility from the syndicate and it was run by his sons H.M. Janney and J.B. Janney.<sup>3</sup>

The fire originated next door in the old country toll mill, which at the time was no longer operating as a mill, but was the home of the Occoquan Electric Light & Power Company, which had been established in 1921. In an Occoquan Historical Society (OHS) oral history interview from 1980, that was reprinted in part in the December 2005 issue of the OHS newsletter, (continued on page 2)

## THANK YOU TO OUR NEW SUPPORTERS

We have some generous new supporters this quarter that we would particularly like to thank. **D'Rocco's Restaurant** and **Jerry's Occoquan Jewelers** have joined **VFW Post 7916** as Diamond level sponsors (\$1,000+). **Prince William Marine** has become a Platinum level sponsor (\$500), and **Gary Blohm, Henry Brinton, and Ricardo Torres** have all added their support as Lifetime Members (\$300).

**D'ROCCO'S**  
RESTAURANT

**JERRY'S**  
*Occoquan*  
JEWELERS  
*A gem waiting to be discovered...*

**Prince William**  
MARINA

## THE OCCOQUAN MILL FIRE OF 1924: ABSOLVING AUSTIN BARBEE (CONT'D)

the individual interviewed recounts how "along about 1924, the town had a little power plant there that furnished the town its electricity and Mr. Austin Barbee . . . had charge of getting the motors running that made electricity. It was sort of a Delco system hookup. He went in there one evening, one night, and they wouldn't start. So he used some kind of high-powered fuel to get them going, and it set the whole thing on fire. Well, of course that ruined the power plant right quick; and it worked on over into the old mill and burnt out the interior of that so it could no longer operate."<sup>4</sup>

Now we all know that memory can be a tricky thing, and in fairness to the interviewee, he was apparently about 11 years old when the incident he was recounting in 1980 occurred. But the problem with this oral history account is that poor Austin Barbee actually was not even at the power plant on the night of the fire. We now have online access to a variety of contemporaneous sources that were not readily available either in 1980 when the interview took place or in 2005 when it was republished by OHS, and they all agree on the cause of the fire. As one newspaper account from the time reports, contrary to using some high-powered fuel to get the generator motors running, "the man in charge of the plant [Mr.

Barbee] did not arrive . . . at the usual time and two boys, without any authority, undertook to start the plant with the aid of gasoline. A match was struck," the news account continues, "the gasoline fumes ignited and quickly spread, enveloping the engine and woodwork. The boys were too terrified to put out the fire or to give the alarm until the blaze had gained considerable headway."<sup>5</sup>

Without any fire apparatus in town (there was no town fire department at the time), residents (one newspaper



Electric plant was in the old country toll mill on the right.

claimed "practically the entire male population of the village"<sup>6</sup> and another "composed of all the available persons in the little town"<sup>7</sup> formed bucket brigades to fight the fire, and Columbia Engine Company, No. 4, of Alexandria was called. By the time the Alexandria firemen arrived, however, "both build-



Mill ruins after the fire of 1924

ings were under control of the flames and the men concentrated their work on checking the flames."<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to the efforts of the residents and firemen, the fire did not spread as it had almost a decade previously during the town fire of 1916. All electrical power was shut off, of course, and a newspaper reported that residents were using oil lamps and candles to light their homes.<sup>9</sup> The damage caused by the fire was valued at \$50-60,000 dollars, which would be approximately a million dollars in 2025 terms. Some wheat and corn and some of the machinery owned by Tyson Janney was believed to be insured, but the building and most of the machinery owned by the Northern syndicate was not.<sup>10</sup> According to the newspapers the owners of the property did not contemplate rebuilding the mill. In fact, they did not do so and thus ended the long

history of milling operations in Occoquan.—E. Porta

<sup>1</sup>Prince William County Deed Book 10:247-250; Nathaniel Ellicott et. al. to Joseph and John Janney, 23 March 1826.

<sup>2</sup>"Fire Destroys Colonial Mill in Operation Since 1790," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 23, 1924, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>"Occoquan Electric Plant Razed by Fire," *Evening Star* (Washington, DC), Oct. 20, 1924, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup>Martha Roberts, "Inside the Museum," *Historic Occoquan Inc.*, Volume III, No. 7, December 2005.

<sup>5</sup>"Fire Destroys . . .," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Oct. 23, 1924, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>"Occoquan Flour Mill And Power Plant Burn," *The Washington Herald*, Oct. 20, 1924, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>"Occoquan Fire Does Heavy Damage," *Times Herald*, (Washington, DC), Oct. 20, 1924, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup>"Occoquan Fire . . . , *Times Herald*, (Washington, DC), Oct. 20, 1924, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup>"Occoquan Fire . . . , *Times Herald*, (Washington, DC), Oct. 20, 1924, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup>"Historic Old Mill Burned," *The News and Advance* (Lynchburg, VA), Oct. 23, 1924, p. 2.; "Historic Mill is Destroyed," *The Daily Review* (Clifton Forge, VA), Oct. 23, 1924, p. 1.

## SCHOOLS THROUGH TIME IN OCQUOQUAN AND BEYOND

In case you missed our Mill House Museum special (rotating) exhibit on education, here is some information it provided on the history of education in Occoquan. Beyond what is recounted in this newsletter, we have at the museum a timeline with some national and statewide milestones, the Prince William County 1833 rules for schools, some old report cards, and information on the student experience from over 100 years ago.

Today we take for granted modern school amenities like buildings with electricity, central heating and cooling, plentiful educational supplies, and students brought by bus. But that has not always been the case – education in Prince William County and Occoquan has come a long way since the first public schools in Virginia in 1870.

### Pre-Public Schools

Before public schools, education was provided by private tutors, community-funded “old-field schools,” church-sponsored schools, and private academies. Families who could afford it hired tutors for their children, while other communities would pool resources to pay a teacher for a local school.

Occoquan had private schools as early as 1867. Citizens raised the money to pay the teacher's salary and when the money ran out, the school

closed for the year. There were exceptions, such as when the grandfather of Fred Lynn, a PWC educator for whom the Fred Lynn Middle School was named, taught without pay to keep the school open.

These Occoquan private schools were likely held at multiple locations in town. Two likely spots include some property owned by the Janney family and the Alton Hotel, which burned in the 1916 fire and sat where Jerry's Occoquan Jewelers is today.



Alton Hotel

### Occoquan (Commerce St.) School

The first public school for White children in Occoquan was a two-room schoolhouse at 310 Commerce Street (currently a private residence). This school opened sometime between 1901 (it does not appear on the county map of that year) and 1909, when it was painted by Mr. Selecman.

The two classrooms had separate entrances, and there were two cloakrooms for each room, one for boys and one

for girls. A heavy sliding door separated the “Big Room” where the 5th, 6th, and 7th graders were taught and the



Occoquan School on Commerce Street

“Little Room” where the 1st through 4th grades met. Children were called into school by a big bell. Water for the school came from the spring at the nearby Rockledge property. Each room had a large iron stove with a galvanized shield around it to prevent burns. Maps were displayed on the wall above the blackboard on which, just as today, the teacher often stenciled special designs in several colors to celebrate holidays and important dates.

In front of the Big Room was a platformed area that served as a stage for programs. The playground was a grassy area in back of the schoolhouse. A tall, solid board fence divided the boys' and girls' sides of each, which had an outdoor privy. A fence also ran across the back of the play area.

### 1927 “New” Occoquan Elementary School

In 1927, as part of a consolidation effort, a new and large school building was built to serve the needs of the White children in the southeastern part of the county. The two-story school was an eight-room structure that cost \$28,500 to build and housed 1st through 11th grades. There were six classrooms, three for elementary grades, three for the high school; a laboratory; and an auditorium with a stage that was partitioned, with the rear used as a library. The high school portion of the structure served a large geographic area until



1927 Occoquan Elementary/High School

1952: Quantico, Triangle, Dumfries, Woodbridge, Hoadley, and Occoquan, while the elementary grades served those children living in the immediate community. A majority of the students commuted to the school by bus, among the first in the county to do so. Although the county furnished the bus, the students who rode had to cover the cost of the gas.

This new Occoquan District School was touted as having (continued on page 4)

## S C H O O L S T H R O U G H T I M E I N O C C O Q U A N A N D B E Y O N D ( C O N T ' D )

been built with "all modern conveniences." There were drinking fountains with water supplied by a well on school grounds, water toilets, electric lights, and a central heating system. Each classroom had a desk and chair for the teacher, reading tables with chairs, maps, a globe, and books.

### Summit School (Near Top of Minniewille Road)

The Summit Elementary School for the Black children of Occoquan was founded by the Reverend Lewis Henry Bailey, a former enslaved individual who also founded Ebenezer Baptist Church in Occoquan. While the exact date of the founding of this school is unclear, we do know it was likely sometime around when the church was founded in 1883. Before there was a dedicated building, students likely met in homes and churches in the area.

Sometime before 1901 the one-room Summit School was constructed on two acres that was about a two-mile walk from the town of Occoquan. It stood around the north end of Minniewille Road, near where Tackett's Mill Shopping Center is today. It housed grades 1st through 7th. In 1919, needing additional space, the community expanded to a two-room school. While the work was being completed, another place had to be found for classes. So, the school rented space in the Black Odd Fel-

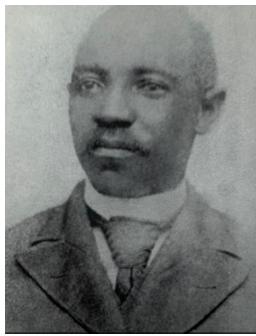
lows Hall in Occoquan, which was near Ebenezer Baptist Church (in the corner of the property's current parking lot).

The new schoolhouse was a wood-frame building that cost \$4,000. It had two classrooms, that by folding the dividing wall between the two could be made into one large room. There was also a cloak-

thereafter.

As was the case with many schools for Black children, the conditions could differ substantially from other schools. In a report from 1934, Superintendent of Schools, R.C. Haydon, reported that the "walls have not been painted as of yet, but they have been well taken care of." He also said that more equipment was necessary for the school, although the desks were in fair condition and of varying sizes. Only a few maps, charts, and story books, however, were available for the children. The outhouses, Mr. Haydon reported, were "fairly sanitary" and had "good drainage."

The Summit Schoolhouse closed about 1947.



Rev. Lewis Bailey

room. Black children from Occoquan had to walk the two miles or so from the town to the school, much of it up Tan-yard Hill Road. Sometimes the children were lucky and were given a ride to school, often crowding eight or ten to a car.

The building was heated by two coal stoves, and building the fire, like other building maintenance, was the responsibility of the teacher and students. Coal was kept in a shed near the schoolhouse. Water had to be carried up until 1934, when the pump from the old Smithfield School in the Coles District was given to the Summit School. By then, a well had been dug and the pump was installed soon

many.

The Manassas Institute, which opened in 1908 and later became the Manassas Agricultural High School, was the first formal site in Prince William County for White children. For Black children, the Manassas Industrial School for Colored Youth started in 1893. Although it was a private school until 1938, tuition and school operations were supported by members of the local Black community and sympathetic religious communities in the North. Until 1958, it was the only public secondary school for Black students who lived in northern Virginia.

In the years before cars and modern roads, a daily commute would have been even more difficult than it is today. To get to schools in DC, some students caught the train in Woodbridge. Some made the trip every day while others boarded in Alexandria during the week. This was actually easier than getting to Manassas from Occoquan. Those students usually boarded with a local family, coming home for holidays and an occasional weekend.

### What's Next at the Museum

This education exhibit is rotating out on October 22, when the Occoquan quilt will return for display. Then in late November through the end of the year look for our exhibit on winter feasts and holidays.—  
G. Blohm



2-Room Summit School in the 1930s

### Secondary Education Opportunities

Until 1927 for White students and until the 1960s for Black students, the only "secondary school" opportunities in the area involved traveling to Manassas or Alexandria, or to Washington, DC and beyond. While continuing formal education through high school at all was costly for most Virginia families, this additional burden of travel, tuition, and boarding fees would have put high school out of reach for

## S E S Q U I C E N T E N N I A L O F O C C O Q U A N ' S F I R S T E L E C T E D T O W N C O U N C I L

This year, 2025, is the sesquicentennial (150th anniversary) of the first elected council for the town of Occoquan. For some this may come as a surprise, since it is common knowledge among those familiar with town history that the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation chartering the town in 1804. So, why did it take more than seventy years for the town to have an elected council? For the answer to that question, we have to go back to the town's founding.

When in 1804 the Virginia legislature passed legislation chartering the town of Occoquan, it did so in response to a petition dated 7 December 1803 submitted by three men: Nathaniel Ellicott, James Campbell, and Luke Wheeler. In the petition the three noted that they held title to thirty-one acres of land along the Occoquan River in Prince William County at a location known by the name Occoquan Mills, which they were "desirous of having laid off into Convenient Lots and Streets and Established as a Town with the usual Privileges annexed to towns and particularly the Prohibition of Hogs and Geese running at large therein...."<sup>1</sup> The legislature viewed the petition favorably and passed legislation on January 5, 1804, directing that "so soon as the same shall be laid off into lots with convenient streets, shall be

established a town by the name of Occoquan [sic]...."<sup>2</sup>

This "so soon as" element of the legislation introduced a certain amount of ambiguity in the town's founding date. On April 18, 1804, Mr. Henry Hooe submitted a plat to the town trustees that laid Occoquan out into lots. For unknown reasons, the trustees did not certify that the plat was agreeable to them until December 31, 1804, and thus it was not until January 7,

*Notice is hereby given,*  
THAT we intend to petition the next General Assembly of Virginia, for a law to establish a town at the Occoquan Mills, in the county of Prince William, under certain regulations.  
*Ellicot, Campbell & Wheeler.*  
Occoquan Mills, Oct. 5, 1803.  
*Notice.*

Ellicott, Campbell & Wheeler announce in *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* of October 5, 1803, intent to petition the Virginia legislature.

1805, that it was submitted to the Prince William County Court and recorded.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, while the town understandably uses 1804 as the year it was chartered, it arguably was not so founded until January 7, 1805. These trustees that delayed certifying and submitting the plat were part of a system that explains in part why it was not until over 70 years later that Occoquan got its first elected town council.

The act that authorized the establishment of Occoquan

was confusingly written. It contained five sections, the last of which simply indicated the act would be in force after it passed. But the other sections mixed various subjects, which included authorization for the establishment of the town of Newhaven in Rockingham County. Only two sections applied solely to the town of Occoquan. The fourth, for example, stated "That if any person residing in the said town of Occoquan [sic], owner of swine or geese, shall suffer them to run at large within the limits of the said town, it shall and may be lawful for any person to kill the same without being liable to any damages whatsoever for so doing."<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the proprietors of Newhaven harbored no such strong feelings toward roaming swine and geese, for this provision of the act applied only to Occoquan.

The other section that applied exclusively to Occoquan was the first, which not only included the "so soon as" language discussed above, but also appointed five men to serve as the trustees of the town: James Keith, George Gilpin, Thomas T. Page, Edward Washington, and John Coffer. Their duties were outlined in the second section of the act, which started with the establishment of Newhaven and the appointment of its trustees, but then continued to explain the powers of the trustees for both towns.

They were "empowered to make such rules and orders for the regular building of houses therein, as to them shall seem best, and to settle and determine all disputes concerning the bounds of the lots." A third section in the act empowered a majority of trus-

*In the Name and by the Authority of the  
House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of  
Virginia.*  
*William of Occoquan Ellicott, James Campbell  
and Luke Wheeler, Trustees, of the  
House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of  
Virginia, to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth  
of Virginia, for a Law to establish a town  
at the Occoquan Mills, in the County of Prince  
William, under certain regulations.*  
*Ellicot, Campbell & Wheeler.*  
*Occoquan Mills, Oct. 5, 1803.*  
*Notice.*

Ellicott, Campbell & Wheeler's Petition, 7 December 1803.

tees, upon the death, resignation, removal or otherwise of a trustee to select someone to fill the vacancy.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the governance of the town was not entrusted to individuals elected by its residents, but rather to trustees appointed by the legislature, who if a vacancy occurred could appoint someone to fill it as if they had been appointed by the legislature itself.

This was a common feature of unincorporated areas, which were regularly referred to as towns during the colonial and early republic periods in Virginia. Such towns were generally established for governmental purposes like the oversight (continued on page 6)

SEQUICENTENNIAL OF OCCOQUAN'S  
FIRST ELECTED TOWN COUNCIL (CONT'D)

of ports and regulation of commerce but did not constitute incorporated bodies. In fact, the section of the act establishing Occoquan that dealt with the power of trustees notes that the charter does not convey on its own the rights of incorporation, articulating that “[s]o soon as the purchasers of any lots in the said towns shall have built upon the same a dwelling house equal to twelve feet square, with a brick or stone chimney, they shall then be entitled to, and have and enjoy all the rights, privileges and immunities, which the freeholders and inhabitants of other towns in this state, *not incorporated*, [emphasis added] hold and enjoy.”<sup>6</sup>

As the early 1800s progressed, the Virginia legislature on a town-by-town basis adopted legislation requiring that the trustees of specific towns be elected on an annual basis. Presumably this action was taken at the request of the inhabitants of those towns. For reasons that are not readily evident, however, this did not happen in the town of Occoquan. In fact, by 1870, all the trustees of the town of Occoquan had died, resigned, or otherwise been removed. None remained, in other words, to select anyone to fill vacancies.

Accordingly, on June 13, 1870, the Virginia General Assembly passed legislation which, after noting the estab-

lishment of the town and the names of the original trustees, appointed four new trustees to govern Occoquan: John S. Powell, John H. Ham-



Platt Recorded Jan. 7, 1805

mill, Abner Lynn, and Albert A. Selecman.<sup>7</sup> So even though some other towns in Virginia had been moving toward electing trustees, the old appointed-trustee system remained in place in Occoquan – but not for much longer.

In 1870 a new constitution went into effect in Virginia. Known as the Underwood Constitution after the chair of the constitutional convention that drafted it, Judge John C. Underwood (no relation to the Underwood family of Oc-coquan), this new constitution was part of various reconstruction steps Virginia had to take in order to be readmitted to the Union after the Civil War. Among other things It granted universal suffrage to men 21 years and older, in-

cluding African-Americans. The resulting changes to the state code spurred in part by the new constitution resulted in a variety of governmental reforms, including a movement away from the ad hoc chartering of towns and toward a more regular process.

The code established rules for elections in cities and towns of 5,000 people, but also required “unless the charter of said town otherwise provide” elections on the fourth Thursday in May of a mayor and council for *incorporated* towns with less than 5,000 inhabitants.<sup>8</sup>

other document has turned up to conclusively identify a motive. Nevertheless, now the town's governance would no longer be the purview of trustees appointed by the legislature, but of a five-person town council elected annually, who could appoint (including from outside their ranks) a mayor, clerk, and sergeant, from among town residents.

Under the act incorporating the town, the first council election was set for a little over a year later on the *first* (not the *fourth*) Tuesday in May 1875. But in the interim the legislature appointed upon qualification of a magis-

CHAP. 131.—An ACT appointing Trustees for the town of Occoquan, in the county of Prince William.

Approved June 13, 1870.

## Preamble

Whereas, by an act of the general assembly passed January fifth, eighteen hundred and four, entitled an act for establishing several towns, James Ruth, George Gilpin, Thomas Q. Page, Edwin Washington, and John Coffey were appointed trustees of the town of Occoquan, in the county of Prince William; and whereas, it was provided by the third section of said act, that in case of the death, removal, or otherwise of any of the said trustees, it should be lawful for the remaining trustees, or a majority of them, respectively, to supply such vacancy; but whereas, all the said trustees have either died, resigned, or removed, by which a full vacancy has occurred; and for the purpose of putting in operation the act aforesaid—

Trustees of  
Occoquan

Their powers,  
&c.

## Commencement

1. Be it enacted by the general assembly, That John S. Powell, John H. Hamill, Abner Lynn, and Albert A. Selected be, and they are hereby appointed trustees of the town of Occoquan, in the county of Prince William, with all the rights, powers, and duties conferred on trustees of towns, either by the act of January fifth, eighteen hundred and four, not inconsistent with the general laws of the state relating to towns, or by chapter fifty-four of the Code of eighteen hundred and sixty, or any acts subsequent thereto.

2. This act shall be in force from its passage.

## Legislation in 1870 Appointing New Trustees

It was under these provisions on April 30, 1874, that the Virginia legislature passed an act incorporating the town of Occoquan.<sup>9</sup> Although it is presumed this was done at the urging of town residents, for the moment no petition or

trate, John S. Powell, John H. Hammill, John Underwood, Joseph T. Janney, and Thomas L. Selecman, as the council of the town of Occoquan, to serve until the first weekday (continued on page 7)

## S E S Q U I C E N T E N N I A L O F O C C O Q U A N ' S F I R S T E L E C T E D T O W N C O U N C I L ( C O N T ' D )

of July 1875, when the first elected council would take office.

It appears that this interim council selected Thomas L. Selecman as the town's first mayor for in a list of grand jurors in the Prince William County Clerk's loose papers is an entry from 22 September 1874 that includes "Thomas L. Selecman (Mayor of Occoquan)." <sup>10</sup> An entry in the *Alexandria Gazette & Virginia Advertiser* from April 26, 1875, notes "Occoquan having been incorporated by the law of the last Legislature has assumed municipal dignity, the Mayor and other Corporation officers having been inducted into their respective positions."<sup>11</sup>

So, what was the result of the first town election in May of 1875? According to the *Alexandria Gazette & Virginia Advertiser* of May 7, 1875, "At a regular election for the Corporation officers held in the newly organized though ancient town of Occoquan, on Wednesday last, Oliver Underwood was elected Sergeant,

and T.L. Selectman [sic], John Hammill, Dr. John Powell, and J.T. Janney, Councilmen, who will select one of their own number, probably Mr. Selectman [sic], for Mayor."<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that the vestiges of the trustee system in Virginia remained sufficiently resistant to complete elimination that in 2003 the Virginia legislature felt the need to take further statewide action. They acknowledged that (a) the codes of Virginia from 1819 to 1873 recognized the existence of boards of trustees, but that such references had disappeared thereafter, (b) that such boards had generally been replaced with elected councils for towns and supervisors for counties and unincorporated areas in counties, and (c) that the constitution of Virginia now required that governing bodies of counties, cities, and towns be elected by the people. Accordingly, on March 19, 2003, they adopted legislation transferring the property, duties, rights, and contractual obligations of the trustees of any unincorporated area com-

monly referred to as a town or township to the board of supervisors of the county in which the incorporated area is located.<sup>13</sup> The trustee system of governing unincorporated areas had finally reached its end in Virginia.

For the town of Occoquan, that system came to an end 150 years ago, when the town began its journey as a self-governing municipality with its first democratically-elected town council.— *E. Porta*

<sup>5</sup>Hening, *Statutes At Large of Virginia*, Vol III., p. 49.

<sup>6</sup>Hening, *Statutes At Large of Virginia*, Vol III., p. 49.

<sup>7</sup>*Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1870, p. 170.

<sup>8</sup>*Code of Virginia*, 1873, Title 16, Chapter 54, p. 525.

<sup>9</sup>*Virginia Acts of Assembly*, 1874, p. 459.

<sup>10</sup>Prince William County Clerk's Loose Papers, Volume III, 1804-1808, p. 115 at Ronald Ray, Turner, Prince William County on the website of Historic Prince William ([www.historicprincewilliam.org](http://www.historicprincewilliam.org)).

<sup>11</sup>*Alexandria Gazette & Virginia Advertiser*, Apr. 26, 1875, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>*Alexandria Gazette & Virginia Advertiser*, May 7, 1875, p. 3. The legislation required election of 5 councilmen and it appears from this account that among their number they chose Oliver Underwood to also serve as town sergeant.

<sup>13</sup>*Virginia Acts of Assembly* – 2003 Session, Chapter 747.

<sup>1</sup>The petition may be viewed online via multiple sources including on the site of the Library of Virginia in the Legislative Petitions Database. Ellicott, Campbell, and Wheeler printed a notice on October 5, 1803, on page 3 of the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* that they intended to petition the General Assembly to establish a town at Occoquan Mills (the notice actually misspelled "Ellicott," by leaving off a "t."). See image on page 5.

<sup>2</sup>Virginia, William Waller Hening, and Samuel Shepherd. *The Statutes At Large of Virginia: From October Session 1792, to December Session 1806* [i.e. 1807], Inclusive, In Three Volumes, (new Series,) Being a Continuation of Hening .... Richmond: Printed by S. Shepherd, 183536, Vol III., p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>Prince William County Deed Book 26:470-472. This is most readily accessed by going to the Historical Online Portal (HOP) of the Prince William County Circuit Court Clerk's Office.

<sup>4</sup>Hening, *Statutes At Large of Virginia*, Vol III., p. 49.

**Occoquan.—At a regular election for Corporation officers held in the newly organized though ancient town of Occoquan, on Wednesday last, Oliver Underwood was elected Sergeant, and T. L. Selectman, John Hammill, Dr. John Powell, and J. T. Janney, Councilmen, who will select one of their own number, probably Mr. Selectman, for Mayor.**

*Alexandria Gazette and Virginia Advertiser* announcement of the results of Occoquan's first town council elections.

## MUSEUM NEWS, YEAR-END FUNDRAISING AND MEMBERSHIP DRIVE, AND PRINT RAFFLE

In Museum news we have welcomed several new docents, and some of these docents and staff were on hand with a museum table and more during several popular events in town including the Snakehead Roundup, National Night Out, the Swords/Brooms/Magical Beasts event, and the fall Arts & Crafts Show.

During the last quarter staff have worked on recruiting and training new docents and archival volunteers, analyzing our

collections software and collections information, sorting and organizing the closet and physical archival system, meeting with local businesses about fundraising, creating social media content on our Mill House Museum Instagram page, planning and announcing the Mill House Book Club and the OHS speakers series, assembling a new interactive area in the museum, and proceeding with various aesthetic improvements to the structure

and display areas. The last quarter of the calendar year is also the time of our annual fundraising and membership drive. Those of you whose memberships expire at the end of December will soon be receiving emails about renewal. 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.

Please check out our website at [www.occoquan-historicalsociety.org](http://www.occoquan-historicalsociety.org) (no hyphen) for more information.

Last, we want to thank former town residents **Todd & Robbin Hewitt** for their generous donation of five original prints from the 1974 Bicentennial anniversary of Occoquan's incorporation. You can purchase a raffle ticket for \$5 at the Mill House Museum for a chance to win these prints.



### 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](mailto:millhousemuseum@gmail.com)  
[www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org](http://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.