

The Mill Racer
 Spring 2019
 A Publication of the Occoquan Historical Society

Friday, March 15, 2019
Installation of the Iron Works & Cotton Mill Marker

HISTORIC OCCOQUAN

Ballendine's Ironworks & Janney's Cotton Mill



John Ballendine established Occoquan's first industry, the Occoquan Iron Works, in 1755. It consisted of a blast furnace and a forge. The furnace was located above the western end of present-day River Mill Park, while the forge was erected on the riverbank. In 1758, during the French and Indian War, Virginia militia Col. George Washington ordered three tons of iron from the works for Fort Loudoun, which was then under construction near Winchester. The ironworks changed hands several times and operated until about 1780.



Grain mill complex, bridge, and cotton mill ruins, ca. 1900

Samuel M. Janney constructed a four-story, 38-by-55-foot cotton mill and related buildings to your left in 1828. The complex, enclosed by a fence, stood on the site of the park. A passage connected the mill with a picking house, while the waterwheel was located on the south side of the mill near the millrace that flowed along the hillside. The warehouse stood between the mill and the wharf. The tollhouse, which stood to your left, was where the keeper collected fees from travelers going to or from Alexandria and crossing the bridge.



Courtesy Darryl Hawkins

By 1830, Occoquan was a bustling town. The cotton mill employed more than thirty women, and John Morgan's general store did a thriving business. Houses were under construction, partly in hopes of attracting a much-needed tailor and shoemaker. Over the next century, two automated grain mills, a country grain mill, a plaster mill, and sawmills operated here. An arsonist burned Janney's Mill on May 3, 1862, during the Civil War.



Part of ironworks wall, ca. 1900
 All photographs courtesy Mill House Museum



Cotton mill ruins, south side, 1906 photo - Courtesy Mill House Museum

On May 1, 1836, Janney's Mill was advertised for sale in the *Alexandria Gazette*: "The house is substantially built of stone and contains 1,088 spindles with a large proportion of carding machinery of the best kind and in good order. It has twine machinery just completed, capable of converting nearly half the yarn into seine twine [strong small-diameter twine], and there is room in the building for looms and power to operate them."

Through the efforts of many individuals we have a new historical marker, pictured above, that tells two of Occoquan's earliest stories. The Civil War Trails program designed, constructed and installed our new pedestal marker. A big thank you goes to architect and Occoquan resident, Darryl Hawkins, for redrawing the 1828 map that Samuel M. Janney provided to the Virginia Assembly when requesting permission to redesign the mill race.

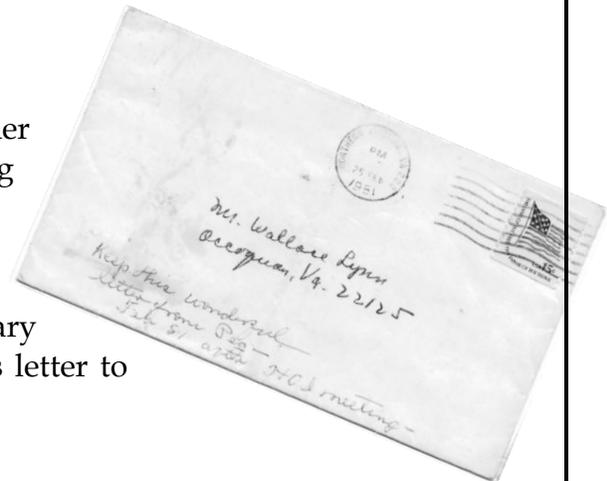
Daily, many of us walk into River Mill Park, enjoying the rugged beauty of the river, never knowing of the cotton industrial center that sat in the center of the parks loop walk. That 1828 fenced area included Samuel M. Janney's four story cotton mill, warehouse, picking house, wheel house and a toll house for the bridge. A wharf adjacent to the complex brought cotton to and finished products from the mill. Such a contrast to the soaring eagles and serenity of the park we treasure today!

Just above River Mill Park was the first major industry on the Occoquan River, John Ballendine's 1755 iron works. Imagine looking up the river, seeing a huge furnace in operation that was producing tons of iron bar. That bar would be shipped to England, purchased by George Washington and forged in local blacksmith shops.

So the next time you enter the park, close your eyes for a moment and picture earlier Occoquan residents hard at work and their toil and visions that helped build the town we all love today.

From the Collection

At the Mill House Museum it seems there is always another discovery resulting in history we need to share. While sorting through files I found the following from Peg Williams. Peg wrote this letter to Wallace Lynn, after Wallace's presentation at a Historic Occoquan Inc. meeting. Peg was serving as our HOI president at the time. In 2018 we shared some of Peg's diary in our newsletters that described her life in Lake Ridge. This letter to Wallace describes the loss of her family's home in a 1939 fire.



Feb 25/81

Dear Wallace

I just want you to know what a great job you did in reminiscing about the "good old days" at the meeting last night. There's so much of interest when life was simpler that should be recorded and I know you could recall volumes=on many tapes no doubt the present system is much more efficient but it somehow loses the personal touch evoked in stories of the beginning, which at this distance seems sort of romantic but at the time must have been very harrowing and heartbreaking due to lack of equipment, time to cover the distance to be traveled, and no water when you got there. The original O.W.L. had to cover such a large territory, in 2 counties, and how did you manage?!

At the "Hyde Place" where we lived, for instance, the well was inside the house, and your truck couldn't have negotiated the narrow rutted track to the river at bottom of hill to get more water or did you attempt to do so? As you know I was at work in D.C. and knew nothing of the fire (Aug 14, 1939) till I drove into the yard=fortunately Daddy was waiting to pick me up when I collapsed! I carried Mary Edith Thurman, Mary Anne Green, Wallace Jett and Wyron Reynolds to business schools and someone had left a message at Wyron's house but just turned in the driveway at bottom of their hill so of course never got the message=probably just as well. I always had a feeling the Hyde house was hexed, as neighbors said he'd broken up gravestones in the old Colchester town burying ground for aggregate in the concrete work for the foundation. I just barely remember him as an eccentric old man, as I recall Mrs. Hyde (Jean) spent her last days in an institution, Marion or Staunton I believe? They are both buried at Pohick. They (at least he) came originally from Oil City PA, but how did he wind up in Colchester, and what did he do, other than farm? Daddy farmed the land, had cows, horses and pigs=there was an apple orchard, a large well-built barn, across the lane from the house; and an old well that one of our horses fell through the old covering and Daddy had to shoot and just leave it in the old well, which he and Rob and Alex filled in. Once in roaming the partly grown-over field between the barnyard and the bay formed by Giles Run and Massey's out let I came across a few broken tombstones, but so covered by fallen trees and honeysuckle jungle I could never go back to the place in later years. All of this was before and early days of WWII=after the 2 boys went to service Daddy got rid of the stock, except chickens, as he was ill and Mother and I couldn't do the work. We moved into the old tavern, Fairfax Arms, the day of the fire; it

belonged to daddy's cousins, Reuben, Emma and Lido Gillingham, as a summer home, and they let us move in. Eventually we were able to buy, thus ending our 10 years of wandering from place to place, 5 houses, since daddy's farm near Mt. Vernon burned in 1929. Anyhow=thanks for trying to save Hyde's! I was told also that many people off the highway (US 1) came and helped=us, but several helped themselves to the things that had been carried out and left in the yard. There are such people in every generation. The piano you all carried out we gave to Hilton Lamphier, who lived up on the hill on what's now called Furnace Road, as we had no room for it at Fairfax Arms and none of us played. It had been Grandmother Robert's (Daddy's mother) but she went to live with her other son, or daughter, by turns.

You see how your reminiscences stirred up old memories of the "ante-bellum days". I hope the others appreciated what you were saying and the hard times you early fire fighters endured to help others.

Sincerely, Peg

Notes: In the 1930 census Alfred Hyde was listed as 77 years old and his wife Jean was 65. Alfred was born in Michigan and his wife in Pennsylvania. In earlier census' he's listed as a civil engineer. In 1910 Alfred and Jean have a daughter Sydney who is age 16. Today Hyde Street is a turn off of Old Colchester Road.

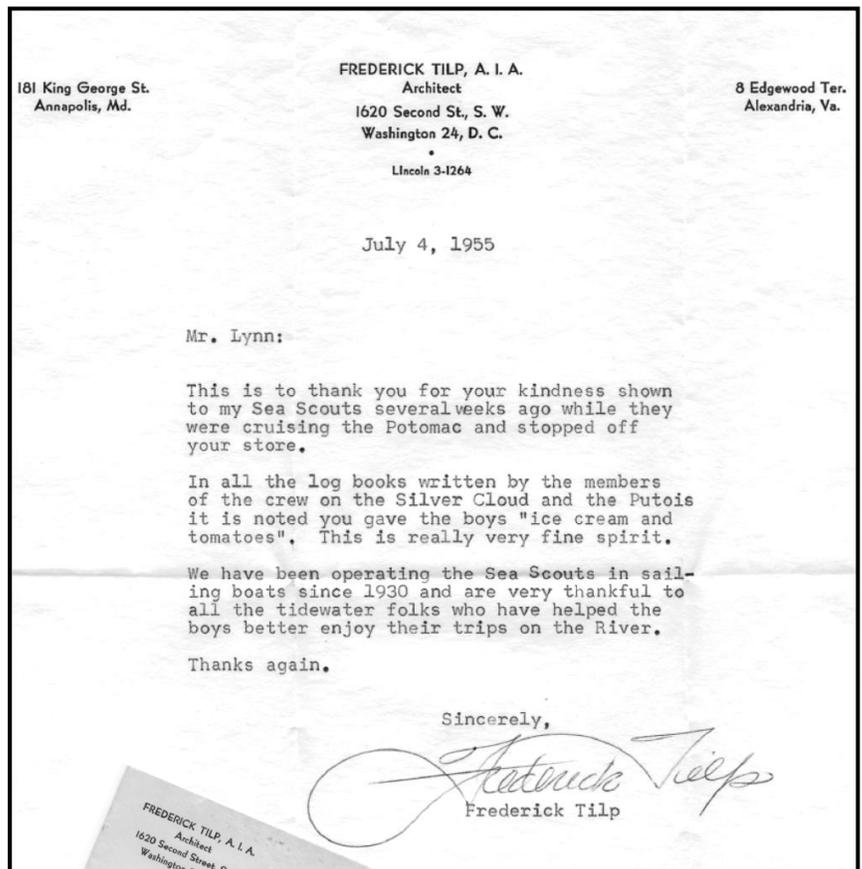
Peg liked to roam the fields as a young girl just as she wrote about doing in her later years. An adventurer at heart!

Frederick Tilp Letter

To the right is a copy of a letter written by Frederick Tilp to William S. Lynn & Sons, thanking them for the kindness shown to the Sea Scouts during their visit to Occoquan.

In 1978 Frederick Tilp wrote and published, "This Was Potomac River". Here he tells us that in 1930, Sea Scout Ship #322 was formed from Boy Scout Troop #82 of the Brookland Methodist Church and troop #22 of the Brookland Baptist Church. They operated from the Corinthian and Capital Yacht Clubs of Washington D.C.

In 1931 young Frederick Tilp sailed with the Sea Scouts to Occoquan. He grazed along the Occoquan riverbanks, stacked along the stone jetty and the grain and cotton mills. Along the jetty Silver Star, reported to have been built at shipyard after the Civil War.



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If you have not had the opportunity to read a copy of Tilp's book, put it on your to do list. It's an interesting read filled with local stories of the towns along the Potomac River. Finding a copy might prove difficult but it's on the shelf in the research section of the PWC Chinn Library.

Learn more about our local Sea Scout Ship 7916, sponsored by VFW Post 7916, from Michael Henry at Occoquan's *The Pretentious Gourmet*.

Our Volunteer's Adventures!

One of the joys of working at the museum has been meeting the volunteers that have walked in the door, offering to help just for the experience and love of learning. Crystal Alavez is on the top of my, "what a great volunteer" list. Crystal worked at the museum occasionally, but mainly helped out during the Arts and Crafts shows, the Winter Fest and whenever the call went out. One huge donation of time and effort was to help log our card catalog of the museum collection into the Past Perfect software.

Last month I heard from Crystal, all the way from Aberystwyth, Wales. There Crystal is earning a degree in archival studies. Crystal said she is thoroughly enjoying her time in Wales. She has also connected to a local church where many of the older members recount stories of WWII, sharing experiences that only those who lived through it can tell.

Below are two photos from Crystal. Can't wait for the next update!



Time to Say Good-Bye

Twenty-two years ago I started working at the PWC Visitor Center located at 200 Mill Street, three days a week and every other weekend. The first summer I worked there we could have up to 400 people daily that came to the center and three of us worked the counter, handling requests. The changes in the way we receive information have drastically reduced the number of visitors, but one thing hasn't changed, I still have fun meeting people from other states and countries, sharing with them our local history and then sending them on their journeys, though now it's from a different counter.

I fell in love while working in town, with Occoquan history! My journey continued six years ago this May, taking me to the Mill House Museum. I have many people to thank on this journey of mine. Among them are Martha Roberts, June Randolph, Lorraine Musselman (who is sorely missed), Bobbie Frank, Boyd Alexander, Kim Deal, Letty Lynn and Earnie Porta, for all their support and encouragement over the years. Most importantly thank you to my husband Gary for helping me any time I asked!

In July of 2002 I started printing a newsletter to share the Occoquan history I was learning about while doing research. There were just too many discoveries to keep to myself. Some of the early contributors to the newsletter were Martha, June, Lorraine and Earnie. Among our newsletter articles were diaries and letters, memories, pictures and research on collection items.

Never wanting to miss an opportunity to add to the story, the visitor center and now the museum put me in touch with many people who had connections to Occoquan's past. There are so many wonderful people I have met. Members of families that have gone back generations in our community, Lynn's, Selecman's, Hammill's, Davis' to name only a few.

I can't forget to thank all the historians at the museum, the OHS Board, the Town of Occoquan staff all the great people of Occoquan, residents and merchants alike. Historians within the county, among them Ron Turner, Bill Olsen, Jim Burgess, Rob Orrison and Justin Patton, you all are such a positive influence.

What a trip this has been! I don't know what is on the top of the list, being able to see historical markers placed so everyone can know more of the story, helping organize a re-enactment, sharing the adventure of finding Selecman's Ford but possibly it's the smile on a child's face when they know flour comes from little wheat seeds.

Now it's time to jump into retirement. I don't intend to sit in the rocker all day (just during morning coffee). With roots in art studies, I want to paint again and enjoy some of my other crafts. Bike rides, walks, volunteering, building an outdoor bake oven, I'll keep busy.

There have been many stories to tell and the story telling isn't over. This will probably be the last newsletter I send out but "The Stories" will continue in a new section on our web site. *Dolores Elder*

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Open Sunday through Saturday 11-4

