

The Mill Racer

Winter 2021

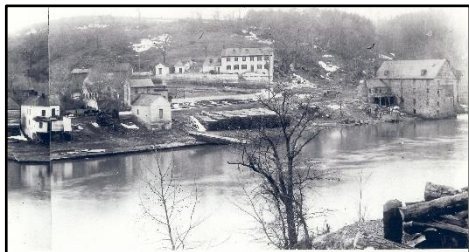
A Publication of the Occoquan Historical Society

Things have changed on the “Rockledge”. Do you ever look up at the old stone house and wonder how it came to be and how it’s managed to cling to the rock hill all these years? We can’t turn the clock back to the good old days. We can though, turn the pages back and take a peek into those early days of Occoquan’s development.

John Ballendine purchased land along the Occoquan in 1755 and set the town of Occoquan on its course to become an industrial hub, starting with the ironworks. Ballendine needed a home for his family to live in as he managed his growing industries. His choice to design his manor was William Buckland. Buckland, a master carpenter, came to the colonies as an indentured servant to George Mason. While working on the interior of Gunston Hall, Buckland was allowed to plan what we know as Rockledge Mansion.

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the ownership of Rockledge passed from Ballendine to John Semple, Nathaniel Ellicott and several generations of the Janney family.

On June 10, 1796, the third owner of Rockledge, Nathaniel Ellicott, insured Rockledge for \$3,000. The description on the insurance papers calls it a *stone house* two stories high and it measured 63’x20’. The narrative also states it was *fronted with wood*.



The pictures above from the nineteenth century show Rockledge sitting prominently on the hillside. The zoom view of the house shows the wood front over the local quarried stone. Aesthetics of the day must have

encouraged one of the early owners to encase the house with the wood shell. In the photograph you can see the hill below Rockledge is terraced for gardens. The house high on the hill allowed the home owner to watch over his mills and see ships arriving carrying goods to and from the various operations.

The following excerpt describing Rockledge was written by William Perry to his daughter when he was 86 years old. Perry lived in Occoquan from 1837-1847. At age 20 William came to Occoquan to work for his brother David. David had leased the cotton mill and was running the operation.

“...A large granite mansion and its surroundings, that was the residence of the owner, I might say, of all in sight, but oh how dilapidated. He was a bachelor and 70 years of age, and showed it. I often took luncheon with him at his request, refused to drink wine with him -- not using it those days. He spent much of his time alone -- brooding over the “might have been”, of his passed life. I liked him. The house was built at the base of a hill 600 feet high and very rocky and a stone wall 8 feet high had been built to level up the yard by filling it with earth. The hill side had been dug away to get a level place on which to build. House was two stories high, faced East. Fine piazza in front from which a good view of village, mills and river close by was had. The garden in front. A side street passed from street up and by the house. So steep was the lot for garden that low walls of stone was laid at intervals to level the beds. Plenty of vegetables and small fruit were raised to perfection. Back of the house was a big rocky hill several hundred feet high and almost perpendicular on top which was an orchard filled with fruit trees of various kinds, but I am getting tired and no doubt you also.”

William Perry described Rockledge as a house badly in need of repair when it was nearing 100 years old. Through his descriptions we can picture flourishing gardens and naturalized areas that have since disappeared.

Rockledge is a survivor. Over the years it has been violently shaken by quarry blasts and survived the flames of arson.

In April 1902 Edith Janney sued the Consolidated Stone Co. of Washington D.C. Blasting that they were conducting at the quarry across the river from Rockledge was “carried on in such a manner that large stones are

thrown across the river into the town, crushing roofs, battering walls, and shattering the glass in the houses.”¹

Rockledge was later restored only to have fire gut the mansion on January 17, 1980. Over 60 firemen responded to the call but the blaze lasted several hours causing \$250,000 in damage. The fire was deliberately set and the arsonist was sentenced to eight years in jail.



Twenty years prior to the fire a Historical American Building Survey (HABS a division of the National Park Service) was completed in February 1961 by Worth Bailey, a HABS Architectural historian. The entire report including photos and drawings of Rockledge from 1960 can be found online in the digital collection of the Library of Congress. [Rockledge, Mill Street, Occoquan, Prince William County, VA | Library of Congress \(loc.gov\)](#)

That Rockledge still stands more than 250 years later, looking on the exterior much as it did in the 1750's has to mean something to Occoquan's history. It has withstood the Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and the Civil War. It has held itself together through quarry blasts, arson and hurricanes.

If walls could talk. Luckily history exists that allows us to tell the stories for the old stone house. Along the original Rockledge property line a mill race carried water down Mill Street to Elisha Janney's grain mill that burnt in 1809. That section of mill race ended right before the property at 406 Mill. Are some of the old mill race stone still left?

People dared to stand up in 1860, in front of Rockledge, against the insurrectionists of that era. The stone house has seen it all.

Hopefully there is a savior out there to once again bring Rockledge Mansion back to the days it proudly stood guard over its home town.

Looking for More Occoquan History

The Mill House Museum, which is normally a font of local history, has been closed due to the pandemic. In its absence, please visit www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org. Past newsletters are filled with history. Examples; the **Winter 2016 Mill Racer** gives history of the River Mill Park site. The **Fall 2017 Mill Racer** includes the survey John Ballendine had requested of the ironworks.

Collecting COVID-19 Stories of Occoquan March 2020-2021

It's been almost a year since we first heard of COVID 19. Generations from now will want to hear the stories of what happened and how we coped.

The Occoquan Historical Society would like to collect your stories including any photos. Some will be shared on our web site and all will be stored in our archives for future generations.

As an example, someone in my neighborhood has been painting rocks with upbeat messages. The rocks are left by their mailbox with a small sign and asking others to pick up a rock and place it by their mailbox. Many of us walk for exercise and we can see these inspirational notes as we travel the local streets.

Zoom- not only can we visit family but for some of us we reconnected with old friends that in our "normal" life we just didn't take the time for because we thought we were too busy. Wine parties, knitting groups, what have you been up to besides work and school groups. Any good stories to share?

What did you survive without or what creative recipes, games or inventive ideas filled the void?

What have you observed, crazy signs, etc., please share them with us. Email your stories and photos, **including dates and location** to: bytheterrapinpond@yahoo.com

Mill House Museum
PO Box 65, 413 Mill Street, Occoquan,
VA 22125
www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org



¹ Washington Post, April 15, 1902, pg. 9