

April, 2017
Mill House Monthly
A Publication of the Occoquan Historical Society

The Mill House Collection

The Mill House Museum, only one room big, has cataloged close to 500 items in its collection since the museum opened in 1970. Not all items are on display or still a part of the collection. Some objects were on loan and have been returned to their owners and sadly, some items were stolen in the past.

Certain pieces have been de-accessed, like our woodsy owl. The owl was dearly loved by many, particularly children. Mounted stately on a wood stand at the top of a display cabinet next to the entryway he greeted all our visitors. Over the years it became infested and unsightly and had to be removed to protect other museum items.

A few pieces though significant are not related to Occoquan history and would use so much of our limited display space that they are currently stored. One item is a hand crocheted bed spread. It was made by an Italian lady who worked as a servant for a family in NYC. The family took it as payment for their homesick employee's passage back to Italy. It came to the Mill House as a donation soon after the museum opened.

A large portion of the collection is our wonderful array of photographs. Individually these numerous photos are not framed and hung but now with our video display we can share this section of the collection with slide shows.

On display however are the majority of the objects within our collection. When the museum opened, the curator, Nellie Curtis, and many volunteers, started an index card catalog along with supporting photographs. Over the years when an item was donated to the museum a card was made and so the collection continued.

So what happens to an item that is donated or loaned to the museum today? About five years ago OHS purchased the Past Perfect software program designed for museum collections. Much of the original card catalog data has been transferred to the program. As new items are donated or loaned that information is quickly logged into the program. Each item is assigned its own catalog number. Numbers can tell us what year an item was accessed. So any item added since January first of this year starts with the #2017. Photographs of the newly donated or loaned pieces are taken and added with the physical descriptions to the data base. No matter if a piece is displayed or stored that location



information is also included. If an item is on loan the Past Perfect program can be set to alert us when it is time for the item to be returned to the owner.

In March our most recent item was donated to the museum. During work on the retaining wall along the river at Occoquan Regional Park a small midden pile was uncovered. A nearly perfect ginger beer bottle was among the refuse of an earlier generation. The bottle was assigned #2017-1-9. It was the ninth item added to our collection this year. The #1 in the center of the catalog number refers to the type of item within the collection. The collection contains objects, photographs and a library.



The ginger beer pottery bottle was made between the years 1890-1920 and measures 8.75" tall and is 2.75" wide at the base. The #1 in the center of the Gray/Portobello stamp indicates it was made on day 1 of a 9 day cycle. It was crafted at the Gray pottery in Portobello Scotland, a suburb of Edinburg, located along the Firth of Forth. Shown are photos added to the Past Perfect software entry along with a physical description of the bottle, information about the donor, how the item was discovered and where it is currently located.

Ginger beer was a non-alcoholic beverage. While the 1908 prison construction was occurring, brick kilns being erected soon after, was a ginger beer opened to help quench the thirst of a tired worker on a hot Virginia day and tossed aside into the trash heap? Did someone from the Scottish pottery works come to Virginia and help construct the Lorton prison brick kilns and bring his own supply of tasty drinks from home? Hmmm.....

Any physical donation or loan to the museum generates a certain amount of paperwork. Before an object can be left for consideration as a donation or loan a form needs to be filled out and signed by the potential donor acknowledging the item has been left at the museum. Once accepted, forms have to be filled out and sent to the donor for a signature allowing the release of the item to the museum.

The decision to de-access an item creates another form. The decision to actually remove an item from the museum collection is decided by a vote from the OHS Board. This information can be added to the Past Perfect entry related to that item.

So what item at the museum gets more comments than any other? It has to be the size 4½ woman's shoes. According to public opinion they are the narrowest, pointiest and most uncomfortable looking shoes they have ever seen! Visit the museum and you can decide.



The shoes belonged to Occoquan resident, Gertrude Selecman. The mill house has a copy of a letter written by Gertrude. In the letter she writes, "When I was a child my father's aged sister made her home with us. She was the dearest little body, very bright and vivacious. She seemed never to grow old, and was very pretty even at the advanced age of 76 years. She was petite in figure, weighing only 85 lbs., and wore a child's size shoe number 13."



It seems these Selecman ladies were very tiny. A child size 13 shoe fits a $7\frac{3}{8}$ " long foot and an adult woman's size 4.5 shoe fits an $8\frac{1}{2}$ " foot. Gertrude must have also had an abundance of patience to lace her shoes for a daily stroll to the general store.

If you ask the curator what her favorite item is it's a combo. The iron bar and blacksmith vise from the 1755 iron furnace is what she will point out. They tell the story of the origins of a town with its first major industry, an iron furnace. Secondly it tells the heritage of a family who knew the value Henry Selecman's blacksmith vise represented. The Mill House Museum doesn't tell a story of things, it tells the many stories of the many people the things belonged to.

Annual Meeting

In May look for an announcement of the annual Occoquan Historical Society membership meeting. Membership dues of \$20 are collected at that time. Details will appear in the May newsletter. See you in June!

Mill House Museum
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Open Sunday through Saturday 11-4

