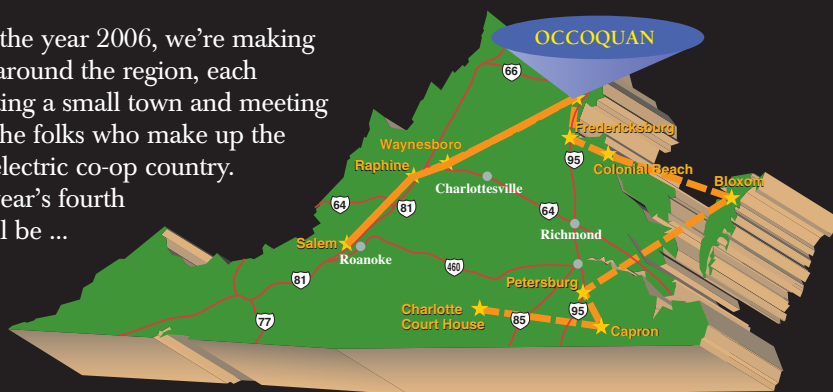


## DOWN HOME SERIES

Occoquan's downtown area is lined with brick sidewalks that lead to dozens of unique specialty shops and restaurants.

Again in the year 2006, we're making our way around the region, each issue visiting a small town and meeting some of the folks who make up the heart of electric co-op country. On this year's fourth stop, we'll be ...



## DOWN HOME IN OCCOQUAN

by Bennie Scarton, Contributing Writer

### AT A GLANCE ...

**POPULATION:** 759

**LAND AREA:** 0.2 square miles

**FOUNDED:** 1734

**ELEVATION:** 20 ft.

**FUN FACT:** Occoquan, which means "end of the water," was originally mapped by Captain John Smith in 1608.

The historic and quaint town of Occoquan, with its bounty of small shops, art studios, old houses and restaurants, boasts an old-fashioned charm that lures thousands of visitors.

Antiques and unique, handmade specialty items can be discovered all over the picturesque, riverfront town.

Wooden or brick storefronts greet local shoppers and draw tourists from all over the world, especially during the nationally known spring and fall arts and crafts shows.

Occoquan is not the usual tourist attraction – it's more like visiting an old friend who has worked hard to get your attention

and wants you to enjoy what you see and treats you as part of the family.

It is more than a wonderful experience to visit the rustic and charming town. This is a community that seems to have stopped moving and changing over the years, very much like an old postcard reminiscent of the days when life was slower and happier.



Kathleen Farra Palermo (inset, right) of nearby Chantilly and her visiting parents, Ron and Jo Farra of Saratoga, N.Y., enjoy a day on the waterfront at Occoquan's new Riverwalk.







BENNIE SCARTON PHOTOS



Mayor Patricia Conway (above) has been instrumental in effecting change that addresses the ever-increasing tourism and development in Occoquan, while the town's Architectural Review Board strives to maintain the original character of the town. Most of the historical homes and businesses have been in continuous use for over 100 years, and many for over 200.

Its mayor the past eight years, **Patricia M. Conway**, loves the town as do other town officials and merchants who look forward to having visitors come to their stores and restaurants.

"We liked the place so much that when my husband, **John**, retired in 1990, we decided to move into town," she says.

When elected mayor, Conway made sure the town effected changes to keep pace with the growing number of tourists, as well as new commercial and residential development. The town has completed several major projects, including improvements to the traffic flow and reopening its waterfront to recreational boaters.

A new Riverwalk and docking facilities now welcome visitors to enjoy the waterfront by land and enjoy the town from the river.

In addition to its historical interest and significance, Occoquan offers year-round fishing, including the herring run in the spring, boating facilities and more than 100 shops, boutiques, antique stores and eateries.

**Walter Bailey**, a former Prince William County history teacher, is the chairman of the town's seven-member Architectural Review Board that strives to keep the town looking as it did in its early history.

"We review and check on building contractors in the historic district to make sure their work fits into the historic period of Occoquan," he says.

Occoquan is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is a Virginia Historic District.



Occoquan may be a small town, but it is a special place offering antiquing, boating, fishing, fine shopping and dining for visitors to escape mall and city shopping.

Come prepared to spend the day.

A perfect place to start is the **Prince William County Tourist Information Center** at 200 Mill St. ((703) 491-4045), where guests can pick up a brochure for a walking history tour of the village, compliments of the Occoquan Merchants Association, Inc., organized more than 30 years ago to advance the civic and commercial well-being of the town and all of the association's members. The group sponsors many events, including Christmas in Occoquan with the

\$1,000 Shopping Spree, Load the School Bus with School Supplies, and Halloween. The association conducts evening walking-history and ghost tours year-round for groups of 10 or more people. For event information and reservations, call (571) 334-7357.

More than 100 specialty shops and restaurants line the streets of the tiny hamlet, which extends four blocks long and three blocks deep. There are stores offering everything from jewelry to pottery, home accents, furniture, gifts, antiques, flowers and herbs and folk art. Several galleries feature works by local artists and there are boutiques featuring unique fashion items. Visitors can enjoy restaurants, cafés, a bakery and sandwich shops during their day of shopping.



For the history buff, a visit to the **Mill House Museum** at 413 Mill St. is a must. The museum is located in the only remaining part of an 18th-century gristmill. The museum also serves as the home of Historic Occoquan, Inc., an organization dedicated to the research, restoration and preservation of the historic town. The museum

A former mill town and a natural site for water-borne commerce from the earliest days of Virginia, Occoquan has survived fires, a hurricane, flooding and the Civil War.

Towns have been born, have flourished, and many have died over the course of time. Some of those that died passed unnoticed, some are mourned throughout history, and some, fortunately, have been reborn. Occoquan seems to be one of those special towns destined to survive.

Despite the decline of its port and the loss of an early industrial complex, despite repeated devastating fires, and despite re-routing of highways, Occoquan has persisted.

The efforts of the townspeople, the merchants and those interested in history, have created a pleasant little town that offers fishing and boating, unhurried browsing in shops that display beautiful crafts and art of long ago, pleasant dining in nearly a dozen restaurants and, most of all, a chance to stroll for a few minutes through its charming streets.

**Earnie Porta**, a board member of Historic Occoquan, Inc., for the past two years, says, "While we are only a mile or

so from the main highways, first-time visitors find that we offer a much more relaxed atmosphere than many of the shopping centers in the area."

He adds, "I like the small-town feel and its historical significance. We have a nice mixture of people living here and visitors coming in."

Occoquan is a Dogue Indian word meaning "at the end of the water." It is believed that the Dogues stayed close to the Occoquan River because of its abundance of fish and the ease of traveling by canoe.

A tobacco warehouse was built as early as 1736 and an industrial complex began in 1750. By the turn of the century, Occoquan had forges, gristmills and sawmills, a bake house and storehouses. The Merchant's Mill was the first automated gristmill in the nation, in operation for 175 years until it was destroyed by fire.

Nathaniel Elliott formally established the town in 1804, bringing to fruition industrial and commercial developments that began at or near the falls of the Occoquan River.

By 1838, the town boasted one of the first cotton mills in Virginia. Farmers and traders came from as far away as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Prior to the Civil War, Occoquan's economy specialized in a wide variety of goods and services, from shipbuilding and cotton and gristmill products to trade in cord wood, fish and river ice. The first commercial ice-storage house in the area was built in the town.

A mail stage route ran through Occoquan as early as 1805. The post office became the main delivery point for letters and packages between families in the North and South. During 1862, the Confederate forces under Gen. Wade Hampton wintered in Occoquan in the Hammil Hotel, which still stands, before their spring campaign.

The dawn of the 20th century saw Occoquan bustling with grocery stores, a lumber and hardware store, drugstore, millinery, churches, school, blacksmith, barber, undertaker, bank, doctor and pharmacy.

The town became a social as well as a commercial center for the area. The

contains many exhibits of the town's rich history. It is open daily from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Call (703) 491-7525.

A special display in the museum is a quilt completed in July 1978 by many of the town's seamstresses, with each of the 30 squares depicting a historic landmark in the town.

Two craft shows, held on the first full weekend in June and the last full weekend in September, are the town's major events. This year's spring show with more than 350 juried artists and crafters will be June 3-4 from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., rain or shine. Follow signs to free park-



ing. Shuttle-bus service is available from satellite parking areas at \$3 per round trip. Children under 13 ride free. Call (703) 491-2168.

The Occoquan Town Hall is located at 314 Mill St. in the former Methodist Church built in 1924 ((703) 491-1918). The police department is also located in the building and the unit's non-emergency number is the same. A walking bridge behind the museum gives an excellent view of the Occoquan River.

For people coming in by boat, there is free parking during the day at the boat dock. Overnight docking is \$1 per foot of the boat's length. For more information, call (703) 491-1918, ext. 10.

From left: 1) Allen Harrison of Alexandria casts a line in the Occoquan. The river offers year-round fishing. 2) Ye Olde Dominion Wine Shoppe carries a selection from nearly 50 Virginia wineries. 3) Pat Bowen at the Golden Goose, a year-round Christmas shop. 4) Rockledge Mansion hosts receptions for up to 150 and offers on-site catering.

Occoquan is located south of Washington, D.C., off Interstate 95. Take Exit 160 onto Route 123 North, then turn left at the traffic light just before the bridge. ■

Oddfellows Hall became the first opera house in the area and the Lyric Theater brought people from the surrounding communities. Circuses and traveling shows set up at the public wharf in summer and ice skating on the river became the favorite winter activity.

However, a major fire swept Occoquan in 1916 and destroyed much of the town. U.S. Route 1 opened in 1928 and carried traffic away from Occoquan and the town was no longer on the main North/South route.

Finally, in 1972, Hurricane Agnes struck, destroying many of the buildings, sidewalks and streets along the river's edge. Any one of these events could have been enough to wipe away the town, but Occoquan survived. Townspeople, businessmen and people interested in history quickly began to rebuild and restore the town everyone enjoys today – a truly special Virginia town.

Many of the old homes and shops, dating back 200 years, are believed to be haunted with local ghosts, or so say some of the residents of the town.

Mill Street is the locale of most of the town's commercial ventures, along with the Mill House Museum on one end and the Prince William County Tourist Information Center on the other. In 1758, Rockledge Mansion, an 11-room stone house that overlooks the town, was built by manufacturer John Ballendine, under the architectural supervision of William Buckland. Buckland was also associated with the construction of George Mason's Gunston Hall.

**Kathy Smith**, who has owned Simply Country for the past 16 years at three different locations, says she first opened a shop to sell her crafts.

"I soon discovered that I needed more items, so through the years I've added gift items like copper cookie cutters, prints, bakeware, books, wood crafts, weather vanes, country signs, antiques and collectibles and military items in honor of my husband, **Gerald**, who's retired from the U.S. Air Force," says Smith.

Smith adds, "The location has been good to me. I've met a lot of nice, friendly

people. In such a small town, nearly everyone gets to know everyone."

Mayor Conway says the town has 759 residents. The five-member council is comprised of **Vice Mayor James O'Connor** and council members **Pamela Konwin**, **Leo Smith**, **James N. Walbert** and **Barry Dean**. The town administrator and clerk is **Claudia A. Cruise**. The town treasurer is **Linda Dunnigan**.

The Mamie Davis Park occupies a sliver of waterfront on Mill Street, opposite the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post. It also provides access to the town's Riverwalk and boat docks.

**Pat Bowen**, co-owner of the Golden Goose, a year-round Christmas shop, has been in business for 30 years and is one of the oldest continuous merchants in Occoquan.

"You can't beat the atmosphere here in Occoquan ... there is a strong sense of community involvement that is hard to find anywhere else," she says.

**Joy Zerby** has been a volunteer at the museum for seven years, spending at least a day a week at the landmark.





Local business owner Kathy Smith: "The location has been good to me. I've met a lot of nice, friendly people."



Visitor center supervisor Rene Cardenas: "We stress to the visitors that the village today is a quiet, pleasant town ..."



Mill House Museum volunteer Joy Zerby: "I get to meet so many interesting people from all over the world."

She says the reason for her interest is, "I get to meet so many interesting people from all over the world, including some who recently came in from Japan." The museum is located in the only remaining part of an 18th-century gristmill.

Another person who gets to meet a lot of people is **Rene Cardenas**, who has super-

vised the visitor center for the past nine years.

"I love my job because I get to meet mostly happy people. When they come in here for information, they are usually happy because they are on vacation and they have nothing to do but have a good time," he said.

The center has more than 300 different brochures, providing information on local

areas, as well as on Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

"We stress to the visitors that the village today is a quiet, pleasant town uniquely combining the convenience of modern life with the visible heritage of more than two hundred years of history," Cardenas concludes. ■