

This year **Cooperative Living** is taking a road trip along the length of U.S. Route 1 as it crosses Virginia from the North Carolina border to Washington, D.C. In each issue, correspondent Deborah Huso will relate her experiences along the way.



by Deborah Huso,
Contributing Writer

Oasis in a Sea of City

Situated just off Route 1 in Prince William County, the historic village of Occoquan is an anomaly in Northern Virginia — a quaint haven from the metro-region hustle.



DEBORAH HUSO PHOTO

I ended up in Occoquan quite by accident. Heading up Route 1 from Woodbridge, I saw a neat little brown sign reading “Occoquan Historic District,” so I could not help myself. I had to turn off the highway onto Route 123 and see what this little waterfront village was all about. I was amply rewarded for my side trip. Settled in the mid-1700s, Occoquan retains much of its historic character in large part because the six square blocks of its historic district are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. And

Settled in the mid-1700s, Occoquan retains much of its historic character. Buildings are neatly lined up along the riverfront, and many of them house restaurants, shops, and galleries.



(Clockwise from far left) Stroll down brick sidewalks through Occoquan's historic district. • Narrow streets are lined with many 18th- and 19th-century buildings. • Town mayor Earnie Porta (foreground) enjoys paddling his kayak around the waterfront village. • The Mill House Museum contains an eclectic collection of documents, photographs, and other artifacts. • Museum Director and Curator Delores Elder is considered the local historian of record.

it seems largely out of place in the hustle and bustle of Northern Virginia.

The streets here are narrow and lined with many 18th- and 19th-century buildings, neatly lined up along the Occoquan riverfront, and many of them house restaurants, shops, and galleries, easily providing a day of exploration for a wanderlust traveler like myself. "I really think the town crams a lot into a small space," says Occoquan Mayor Earnie Porta. The town has a population hovering just under 1,000, yet it boasts 16 historic markers.

HISTORY GALORE IN SIX BLOCKS

Porta is in his eighth year as mayor of this village. He has been re-elected four times. He's lived in Occoquan 10 years, having moved here after living in the D.C. region for three decades.

"I'm semi-retired," he says. "I'm a full-time graduate student at Georgetown University." He is also author of the town



history, *Images of America: Occoquan*, which is available for purchase at the Mill House Museum, located in a small building adjacent to where the gristmill was located before being destroyed by fire in 1924.

Mill House Museum Director and Curator Delores Elder works here most days, and she'll give you a

quick history of the town's industry, which started in the 1790s with the construction of this automated, four-story mill, which was used in later years to generate electricity for the town. The town was also once home to an iron foundry, a lumber mill, shipyard, and even a riverboat excursion business.



Elder, a native of Wisconsin, says Occoquan means “grove of trees,” and she’s considered the local historian of record. “I got interested in history because people always asked about it, and I didn’t have any answers.”

Today she’s fond of relating the story of local abolitionist John Underwood, who was arrested in 1857 for speaking against slavery. He had to pay a fine of \$312.50. Underwood was not alone in his abolitionist sentiments in antebellum Occoquan. “The only votes for Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 election in Prince William County came from the Occoquan District,” Elder says. That’s because it was home to a pretty strong Quaker community. Underwood was a master wheelwright, and during the Civil War, he was arrested in 1862 by Confederate General Wade Hampton. President Lincoln was so impressed with Underwood’s dedication to abolitionism and his loyalty to the Union that he awarded him a position with the U.S. Marshalls.

HOW TO EXPLORE THE VILLAGE

After you visit the Mill House Museum, you can wander across the Occoquan River via the Nathaniel Ellicott Foot Bridge to view a small waterfall on the opposite bank. And if you really want to get on the river, then join Mayor Earnie Porta for one of his kayak tours of the waterfront on the second and fourth Saturday of every month.

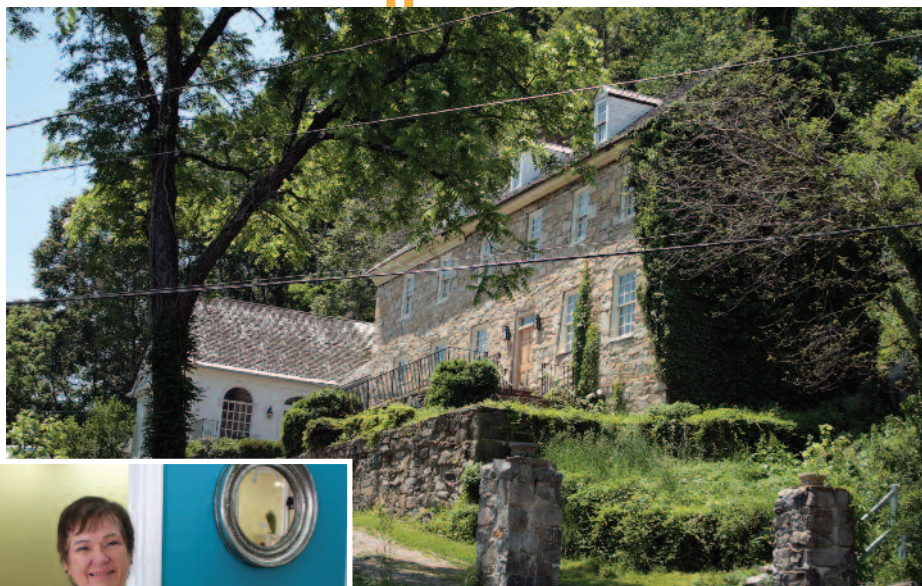
“I’m a regular kayaker,” Porta says, “and I give walking tour histories of the town all the time.” When the director of the Occoquan Regional Park asked him to start doing tours by kayak, he jumped at the chance to get on the water and give visitors to the town a look at Occoquan from the water.

It is Elder, however, who advises me about another way to explore Occoquan ... by ghost tour. Local resident Kay Pietrewicz, who works part-time at Spiral Creations on Mill Street,

leads regular “Haunted Occoquan” tours. She was actually featured recently on “My Ghost Story” on the Biography Channel. Reportedly there are 20 haunted structures in the village, and Pietrewicz, who has been trained as a “paranormal investigator,” has investigated three of them. Among the haunted buildings is historic Rockledge, a stunning c.1760 Georgian-style stone house on a hill overlooking the Mill House Museum.

Occoquan’s history extends further back than the 1700s, however. Chris Bury, a rare native Northern Virginian, who works at the Occoquan Visitor Center, says John Smith paddled up the Occoquan River to the site where the current town stands in 1608. And if you choose to do some paddling of your own on the river, you might enjoy some serious birding here, too, according to Bury, who says visitors often spot bald eagles.

“Occoquan is a great place to explore,” she says. “There’s so much history in here in such a little space.” ■



(From top) Historic Rockledge is one of 20 structures in the village that are purported to be haunted. • Local resident Kay Pietrewicz, who has been trained as a paranormal investigator, leads regular “Haunted Occoquan” tours. • Pick up a map of the six-block historic district at the Visitor’s Center on Mill Street.



IF YOU GO ...

Visit the Occoquan branch of the **Prince William County & Manassas Convention and Visitors Bureau** (200 Mill Street, 703-491-4045, www.discoverpwm.com), and pick up a map of the six-block historic district. Among the historic points of interest here are the **Mill House Museum** (413 Mill Street, 703-491-7525, www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org), which is the best place to stop for an overview of the town’s history. If you want a history of the town’s ghosts, then hook up with Kay Pietrewicz, owner of **Haunted Occoquan Tours** (540-846-7449, www.haunted-occoquan.com).

Occoquan is loaded with fun shops and galleries to explore. It would be easy to spend an entire afternoon just browsing. Be sure to check out **Art A La Carte** (310 Mill Street, 703-496-9540, www.artalacartegallery.com), which features pottery, jewelry, and paintings by regional



artists. Local artist Jackie Liedl, who sells some of her historic paintings of Northern Virginia and the Outer Banks here, can often be found manning the cash register. How did she become an artist? "Well, I always wanted to be a stand-up comedian," says Liedl



DEBORAH HUSO PHOTOS

with a laugh from her chair behind the counter, "but now I can't stand up." Other fun galleries to check out include **The Loft Gallery** (313 Mill Street, 703-490-1117) and **Artists' Undertaking Gallery** (309 Mill Street, 703-494-0584, www.theartistsundertaking.com).

You can find some seriously good eats, particularly if you're into dessert, at **The Secret Garden Café** (404 Mill Street), which serves up courtyard dining in a beautiful garden off Mill Street. I highly recommend the coconut pecan cake with cream cheese frosting. A girlfriend and I, who for the first time ever declined sharing a decadent dessert in favor of getting our own pieces, agreed it's the best cake we've ever eaten in our lives. The 28-year-old owner of this café, Sarah DeVight, came up with the recipe herself when she was a child. Other popular dining spots include the **Cock & Bowl** (302 Poplar Alley, 703-494-1180, www.cockandbowl.com), known for its Belgian beer, and **Tastefully Yours** (406 Mill Street, 703-499-8809, www.tastefullyyoursva.com), which offers free beer and wine tastings as well as sandwiches, salads, pastries, and gelato.

If you want to schedule a kayak tour of the Occoquan waterfront with Mayor Earnie Porta, contact **Occoquan Regional Park** (703-690-2121, www.nvrpa.org/park/occoquan). The park also offers kayak rentals. The last full weekend of September, you can visit the **Occoquan Craft Show** on the streets of the historic district (www.occoquancraftshow.com). And on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m., check out the **Occoquan Farmers' Market** (www.occoquantransportationco.com/farmers_market) in the Mill Street parking lot.



OTHER PLACES TO CHECK OUT IN PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

While you're exploring Route 1 in Prince William County, take a side trip to **Rippon Lodge Historic Site** (15520 Blackburn Rd., Woodbridge, 703-499-9812). Built around 1747, it is one of the oldest residences in Prince William. The home's last private owner was Admiral Richard Blackburn Black, who helped Admiral Richard Byrd in his explorations of Antarctica.

If you love to shop, then you absolutely must check out **Potomac Mills** (2700 Potomac Mills Circle, Woodbridge, 703-496-9350, www.potomacmills.com), home to more than 200 retail outlets, including big names like Nordstrom Rack and Bloomingdale's-The Outlet Store. For some non-franchise eats close to the mall, try **The Bungalow Alehouse** (2840 Prince William Parkway, Woodbridge, www.bungalowalehouse.com). ■



(From top, l-r) Local artist Jackie Liedl sells her work at Art A La Carte. • The Secret Garden offers courtyard dining. • Rippon Lodge is one of the oldest residences in Prince William. • Occoquan's Town Hall meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the first Tuesday of the month. • Potomac Mills is a shopper's paradise.