

Mill House Monthly
May, 2018
A Publication of the Occoquan Historical Society

Margaret (Peg) Williams
Journal excerpts from April 26, 1975-April 23, 1978

August 18, Monday, 1975

Today my 59th birthday was a very happy day of wishes from friends and family by card or phone call, completed with cake and ice cream in company with all of Rob's family except Steven who was working till 9:00 p.m.

July 10, Saturday, 1976

Today at 9:00 we buried Jesse Curtis, after some 5 months hard struggle to overcome the dread scourge of melanoma. He so loved the earth and all its denizens, flora, fauna, humans, and the morning was lovely with birdsong, sun and beautiful sky. And the church was absolutely filled with friends of Nellie & Jesse, come to show their love and sorrow.

January 8, Saturday, 1977

Went for a couple hours walk in the woods, Andy's Wrinkles and Sadie's Viva breaking the path. Sometimes the dogs went where I didn't plan to but where there was some vestige of an old road they followed it. Snow was beautiful, quite deep, powdery, caps on all the rocks in the streams, water frozen except where it flowed swiftest over a collection of rocks or came over the force of an obstruction as a small waterfall. Beaver Dam Creek frozen and snowed over=dogs ran all over it but I wouldn't have trusted it to hold me, despite the prolonged cold=current too swift underneath. Dogs made so many tracks no chance to see if deer had been through the woods since the snow. Most chagrined to come upon beginning of construction of Airport Pump Station where the creek (no-name) thru the woods behind my house flows into Beaver Dam Creek=a bulldozer and crane parked there, a long berm of hay bales anchored all along the edge of no-name creek to keep silt from getting into beaver Dam, thence the Occoquan Reservoir. Save for dogs and me no sign of life except a pair of Carolina wrens (I think) exploring an old squirrel or hawk nest in fork of a tree, and busily pulling leaves loose so they fall to ground. Why would they have been interested in that rather large collection of leaves and twigs?

February 21, Monday, 1977, Washington's Birthday

I spent a couple hours in woods this afternoon. Was heartsick to see the heavy machinery moving the earth around and destroying trees, for the west trunk sewer line, and sewer pumping station, along the shore of Beaver Dam Creek. The bank where first arbutus blooms has been leveled and place where pink lady slippers grew now a track for the trucks and other equipment.

Reservoir must be very low as ice over beaver Creek is all sunken away from where the high water was when it first froze, and stumps of trees cleared for the back-up from reservoir are showing above the ice. In a couple places the water is running free, but mostly it is all covered with 2-3 inches of ice. It was strong enough to support the dogs, Wrinkles and Viva, but I didn't try it. Crossed the stream on rocks partly out of the ice. Followed along north shore to a point where I could get a better view of the work with my binoculars. Didn't go far enough to see if the Occoquan itself is still covered with ice. Hadn't been on north side of Beaver Dam in many years as usually the water is too high to cross unless I go way upstream. Saw several massive patches of rhododendron, many beautiful hemlocks and white pines, and very large white oaks. Wonder if that area will also be built up eventually?

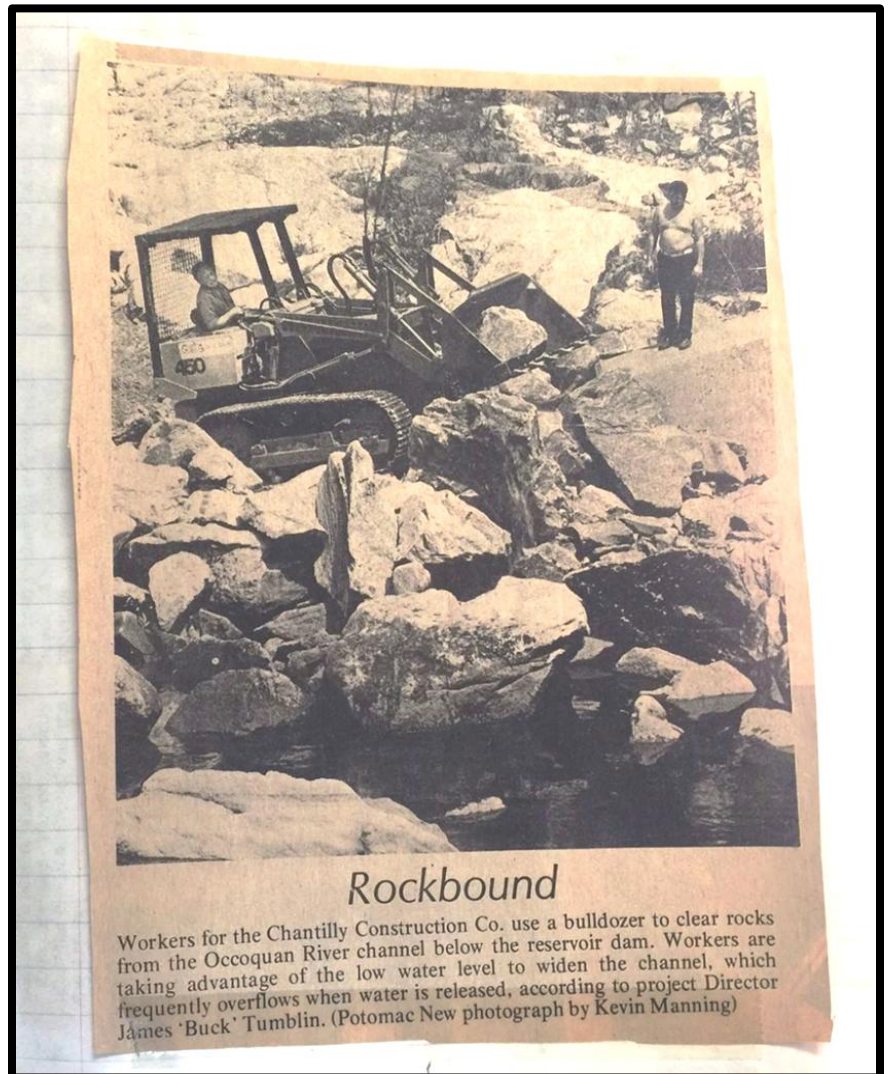
Someone had cut several pines, notched them and started a log shelter=there was a board floor several inches off the ground, saw heavy plastic which evidently had been used to keep out rain. There were only 3 or 4 logs in height placed so far. Found the old road that ran to Manassas, I was told and followed it to another that turned back to Beaver Dam, coming out where a fairly well used woods track would take me to the houses on other side of airport, but I went on downstream and eventually came to a beaver dam, the face of it lovely with lacy ice. Had seen many beaver-cut trees, some freshly worked on, mostly white oaks, as far downstream as I'd gone to observe the sewer line work. For years I'd seen evidence of beaver cutting but hadn't gone far enough up the rocky stream to find the dam. The only birds I heard were a couple of chickadees. Old roads I used to follow are greatly grown up, especially behind the airport runway I couldn't find a trace of the logging road Buddy had used. Lots of deer track, and trails through the honeysuckle jungle where the old chimney with the heart shaped stone (it was removed several years ago) still stands, but still I had difficulty finding a path to get out once I left the honeysuckle.

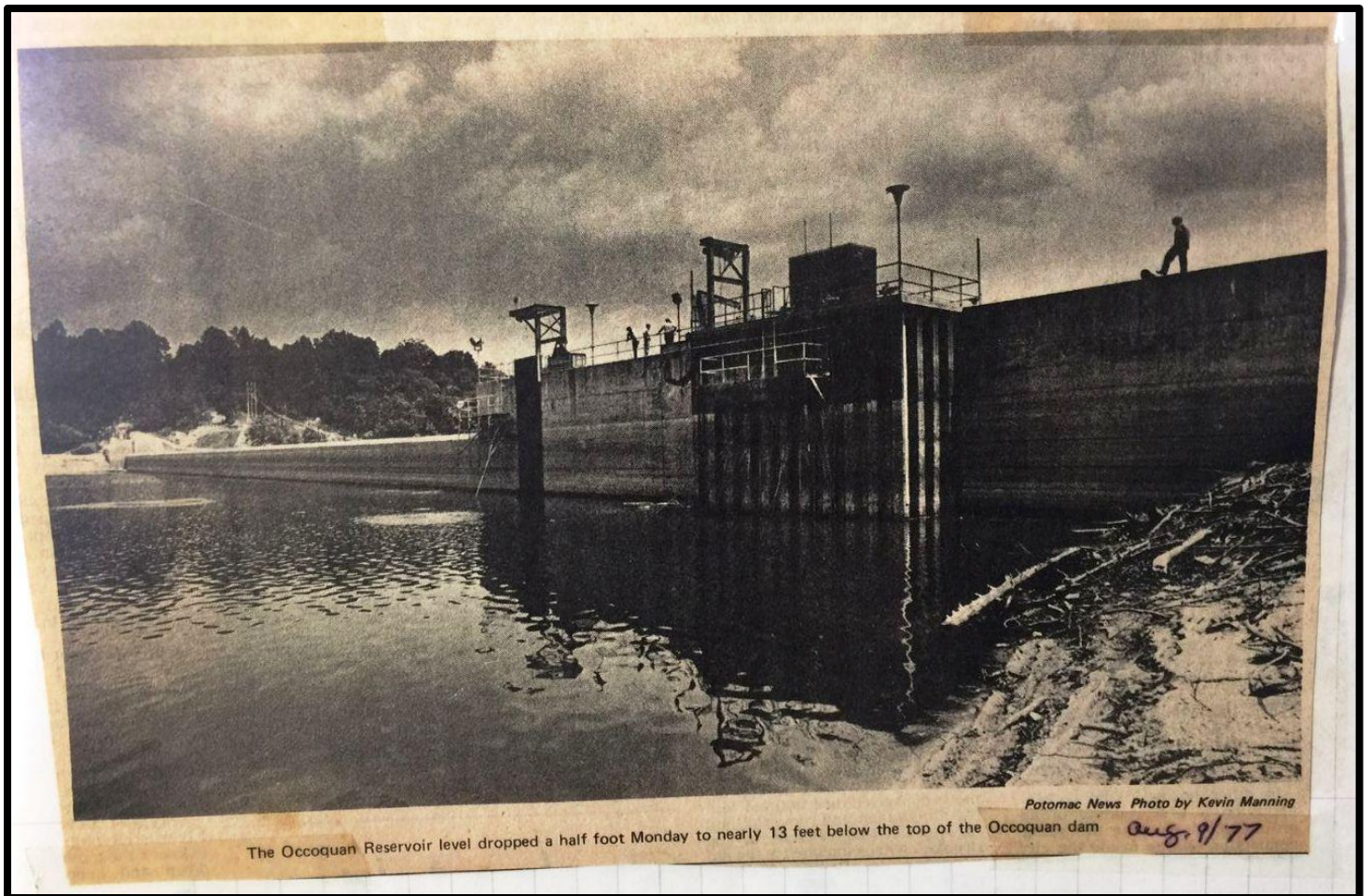
July 23, Saturday, 1977

A day in which to be alive=in 80's clear blue, white puffy clouded sky, light breeze at times. From 6:30 to 9:30 in the lovely morning Nellie Curtis and I picked blackberries in the airport field, from dew-wet vines, amid bird song and wild flowers= water hemlock and swamp pink I tentatively identified but didn't seem quite the locale despite dampness in part of area. On face of slope near the extensive draw at bottom of field a new environment seems developing=holes that contain water algae covered mossy little tussocks that grow a tall grass, cat tails establishing themselves. The slope is so heavily covered with grasses, honeysuckle, berry vines, all holding moisture in addition to that in the holes and ruts tho' one would anticipate no moisture could be retained on the slope.

August 10, 1977 (Question of date)

Picture from Potomac News, by Kevin Manning, with text below saying: "Rockbound; Workers from the Chantilly Construction Co. use a bulldozer to clear rocks from the Occoquan River channel below the reservoir dam. Workers are taking advantage of the low water level to widen the channel, which frequently overflows when water is released, according to project Director James "Buck" Tumblin.





August 9, Tuesday, 1977

Potomac News photograph by Kevin Manning. "The Occoquan Reservoir level dropped a half foot Monday to nearly 13 feet below the top of the Occoquan dam."

August 18, Thursday, 1977

A lovely day for the 61st birthday.

August 20, Saturday, 1977

The past two days have continued the good mild weather=80 during day, in 60's at night. But very dry, and Occoquan reservoir continues to fall in volume. Rain forecast a couple times in past week didn't come at all, certainly not the heavy thunder showers we could use so well.

August 22, Monday, 1977

Despite several predictions of rain there has been none at all this past week and consequently all plants in bad condition.

August 24, Wednesday, 1977

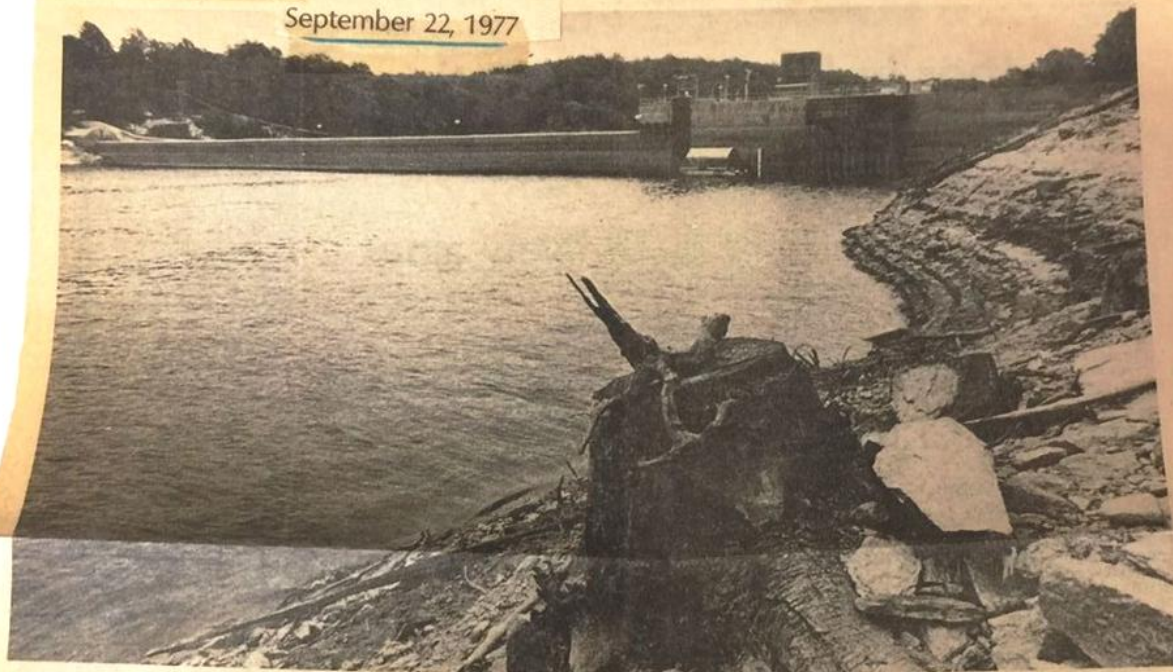
Forecast: 10% chance of rain. So we had 3 good showers, the last like a cloud burst except not much wind but the roof did leak beside the chimney and onto mantel and splashed on sofa till I could get a rag and pan placed. But very lovely wet and cool tonight under a partly cloudy sky. Blessed rain! Perhaps the flowers will revive and bloom for fall.

August 27, Saturday, 1977

After the rains the growing things look much better.

Thursday

September 22, 1977



Lower still

Setting record-low levels each day, the Occoquan Reservoir dropped to 100.4 feet this morning shortly after this picture was taken. The dropping water line is rapidly approaching the second of

three intake pipes from which reservoir water is drawn for treatment. The last intake pipe will be exposed when the water drops to approximately 80 feet. (Potomac News photo by Kevin Manning)

Will warm fall follow long, hot summer?

Northern Virginia's long, hot summer ends officially at 11:30 tonight, and forecasters say it's a tossup whether the fall will be hotter or colder than normal.

The sun will be directly over the equator at 11:30 p.m., marking the autumnal equinox. For the next

178 days, 20 hours, and 4 minutes, the sun will shine more strongly in the southern hemisphere than the northern. The days in the northern hemisphere will grow shorter until the winter solstice Dec. 21.

"This was a warm summer," National Weather Service meteorologist Joe Moyer said today with just a bit of understatement. In fact, only six

summers have been hotter since 1871, when officials record-keeping began.

The average temperature in the Washington Metropolitan area for June, July and August was 78 degrees, Moyer said, which is 1.2 degrees above normal.

Last year, the average temperature was 75.7 degrees. The hottest summer on record saw a

78.8 degree average in 1873.

The number of days with 90-degree temperatures or higher—"always an indication of how warm the summer is"—was 39 for the three-month period, Moyer said. The average is 31 days with 90-degree or higher temperatures.

June 26 through July 2, July 12 through 21, and Aug. 4 through 12

—See WEATHER, Page A-2

September 22, Thursday, 1997 Potomac News photograph by Kevin Manning.

"Setting record-low levels each day, the Occoquan Reservoir dropped to 100.4 feet this morning shortly after this picture was taken. The dropping water line is rapidly approaching the second of three intake pipes from which reservoir water is drawn for treatment. The last intake pipe will be exposed when the water drops to approximately 80 feet."

October 22, Saturday, 1977= Historic Occoquan went on a lovely all day tour by bus to museums at Strasburg (in old railroad depot), Mt. Jackson (Tuttle and Spice), and VMI Civil War Cadet battlefield park= 36, aged 7 to 80+ all with picnic lunches for eating all day! Left Occoquan 7:30 a.m. and returned at 8:00 p.m. A beautiful sunny mild day and leaves very colorful except at top of mountain where we crossed Skyline Drive at Panorama the leaves had lost most of their color, but from a distance the slopes looked like a lovely carpet of many muted colors, with splashes of bright red maples, sumac, gum, dogwood. A lovely day, \$7.80 round trip bus fare, 25¢, \$1 admissions.



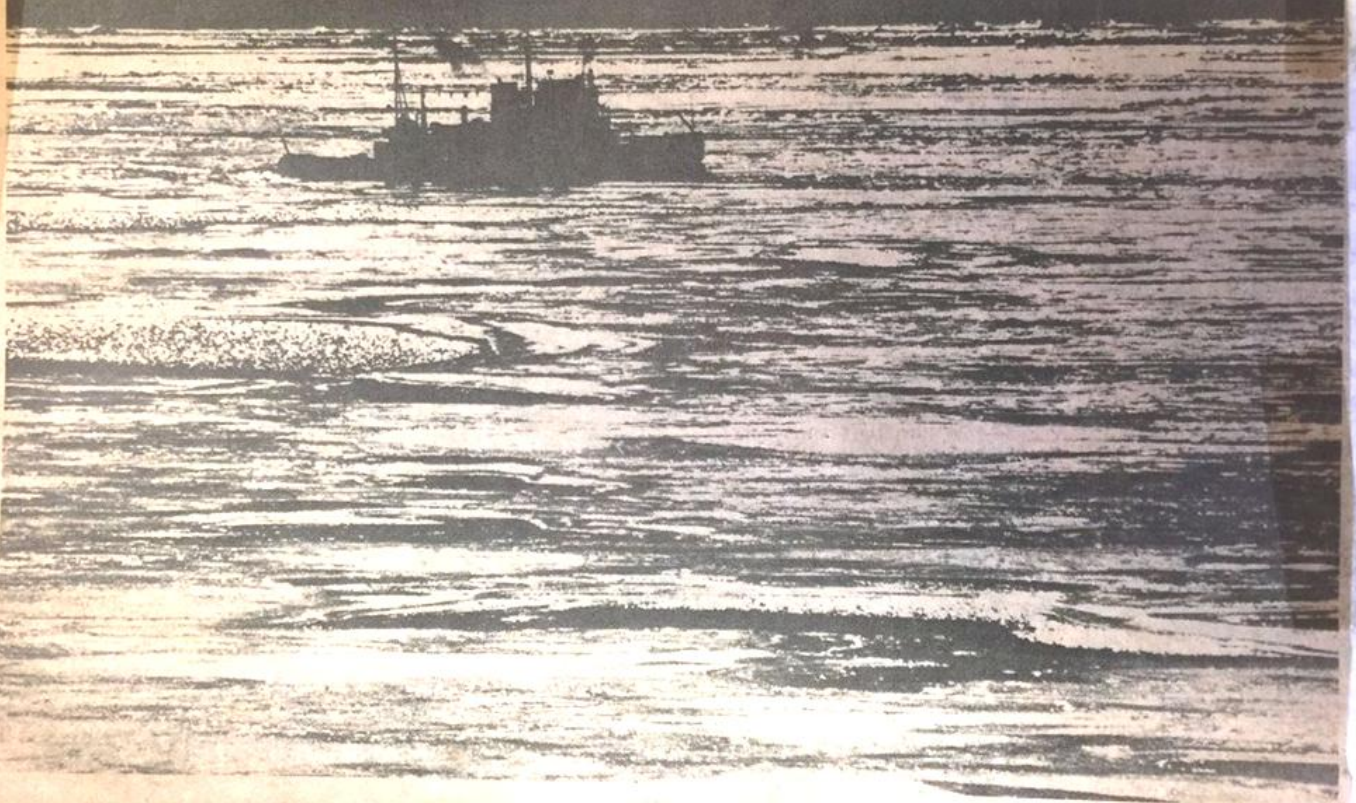
November 14, Tuesday, 1977 Potomac News photograph by Kevin Manning.

“Water started flowing over the Occoquan dam early Saturday for the first time since May 9. On October 26 the reservoir reached a record-low level of 94.8 feet and less than 2 billion gallons of water. In contrast, the overflowing condition means the reservoir is at its maximum, 120 feet high and 9.8 billion gallons. At left Fairfax County Water Authority officials discuss the low level Aug. 8. At right Floyd Steele watches water flow over the dam Sunday.”

February 8 & 9, Wednesday and Thursday, 1978

A foot of ice on Chesapeake Bay hampering boat traffic, so Coast Guard Cutter called into operation. Occoquan River frozen from behind Lynn’s store all way out to Potomac River; earlier in week there was skating behind the dike, but probably not really safe with movement of tide, water coming out onto ice, and the bright sun of a couple days past. Still a pan of water on porch freezes rather quickly.

POTOMAC NEWS, Dumfries, Va., February 24, 1978.



*A cold day
on a cold river*

The Mohican, a U.S. Coast Guard vessel, clears a southbound shipping channel on the ice-covered Potomac River off Mount Vernon recently. Weather reports indicate the cold weather will continue for a while longer, and boats and ships along the Potomac are urged to use caution. (UPI photo)

February 24, Friday, 1978 Potomac News, UPI photograph taken near Dumfries, Virginia.

"A cold day on a cold river. The Mohican, a U.S. Coast Guard vessel, clears a southbound shipping channel on the ice-covered Potomac River off Mount Vernon recently. Weather reports indicate the cold weather will continue for a while longer, and boats and ships along the Potomac are urged to use caution."

March 11, Saturday, 1978

About 1:00 6 ladies in 4 cars from Historic Occoquan, including Martha, came to set up the quilt the members have made of squares portraying various buildings in Occoquan. It's taken about 2 ½ years to get to this stage, but not now it's ready for the final quilting. They stayed till about 3:30. Matt (and Danny) on a stool attentively watching beside his grandmother=Danny mostly playing in living room as the quilting not very interesting for him.

About 4:30 Nellie Curtis stopped by to see the quilt= we'd thought it was to be left at my house but was taken back to Millie Lehto's shop so people could work off and on during week.

Note: The ladies won a first place at the Woodlawn Plantation yearly stitchery show in 1980 and first place at the Prince William County Fair for their Bicentennial Quilt pictured on the next page



This brings to an end the excerpts from Peg Williams' journals. It's been interesting to see through her eyes the development of Lake Ridge and understand the sadness she felt in all the changes. On the other hand, what happiness it was to share her joy of everyday blessings like the early morning dew on the berry bushes. Peg loved and served her community well through hard work and dedication. Anyone who knew her was truly blessed!

Thank you again to Historic Prince William for sharing the journals with us. Please visit their web site at www.historicprincewilliam.org for more history of Lake Ridge and all of Prince William County.

Around the Mill House

In approximately 1820 the museum structure, here at 413 Mill Street, was added on as a storeroom and office for the Occoquan grain mill. At this time the grain mill complex was owned by the Janney family who purchased it from Nathaniel Ellicott. The 1924 fire that gutted the grain mill, caused damage to the old miller's office. Renovations done over the years were to modify the building as an office for the Fairfax County Water Authority. The interior main floor was updated for the museum's opening in 1970. However, the old stone construction of the building left multiple gaps between the building walls and the roof. These gaps were large enough to allow for free rent attic space for several furry Occoquan residents.

On April 12, the Town of Occoquan hired a company to clean out all the old attic insulation and debris, close up all those gaps and re-insulate the attic. We had one major complaint from the visitor pictured here. "Hey lady, you forgot to make me a key!"

The Occoquan Historical Society says "thank you" to the Town of Occoquan for helping to make our museum a safer environment for the town history!



The following article was first printed in our historical society July, 2005, newsletter. I pulled the file up and added the 1923 map for a group of visitors that are coming to town next week. I thought it would be a nice read for those who might not have received the newsletter in 2005!

Ellicott's Road to Occoquan

(From a July, 2005 Occoquan Historical Society newsletter)

Dolores Elder

In the years 1805-1813 Nathaniel Ellicott worked fervently to persuade first Thomas Jefferson and then James Madison to sponsor the building of a major road from Occoquan to Normans' Ford crossing the Rappahannock River near Remington, Virginia.

Previous to this step in his entrepreneurial plans was to open a road at his own expense that brought the flow of traffic from Alexandria through Occoquan bypassing the Colchester area.

Colchester was located on the north bank of the Occoquan River across the river from Thomas Masons Woodbridge Plantation so named for the 650' wooden bridge he built. The petition for this bridge was brought to the General Assembly in 1795 the same year Ellicott petitioned to build his 300' wooden bridge crossing the Occoquan River at the west end of Occoquan at the site of the present day footbridge.

The building of these two bridges within approximately 1¾ miles of each other undoubtedly unleashed a fierce rivalry for commercial traffic from Washington D.C. and Alexandria to southern destinations.

On August 19, 1805 the Alexandria Gazette ran an advertisement for the stage running from Alexandria to Dumfries via Occoquan on the “new and elegant road”. Nathaniel Ellicott constructed this 10-mile road that veered off from the old road to Colchester, north of Pohick Church. He had also acquired the postal route down to Dumfries from Alexandria.

The impact of this new road and the change of the stage route influenced business in the area. Alexander Gordon placed an ad in the August 30th 1805 edition of the Alexandria Gazette to inform the public of a change of venue for his House of Entertainment. His move as a tavern keeper in Woodbridge to Occoquan was in response to the change in traffic patterns through the area. He writes that “his house is commodious, his stables good,... and he is furnished with a good assortment of liquors...”

The opening of the road to Occoquan set off a series of letters to the editor of the Alexandria Gazette. In response to the ad printed on August 19, “One of the Community” strongly responded to the description of Ellicott’s road and its diversion from Colchester. The writer suggests signage was placed for the new road to obliterate the view to the old route. He accuses Ellicott of designing the road to entice the traveler away from the old post road with its wide smooth lanes but does not follow through with the same design down the length of the road to Occoquan. He describes the road as full of mud, hills and barely wide enough to accommodate one carriage much less two if they should meet on the roadway.

“One of the Community” also complains about Ellicott putting the U.S. mail in the hands of a boy on horseback riding from Occoquan on a bridle path down to Colchester twice a day.

The counterpoint to this letter comes in another editorial on September 14, 1805. This reader of the Alexandria Gazette expected to find a dangerous, poorly designed road down to Occoquan after the August 30, editorial appeared. Instead he discovered the best road he ever saw excluding major turnpikes. He also says a person should not judge a route by the shortest distance but by the amount of time it takes to travel and found the new route speedier. He views the roadway amply wide to accept the travel of passing vehicles and upon arriving in Occoquan a person is greeted in a friendly manner at Gordon’s tavern. His key point is the public in the end will take the best route.

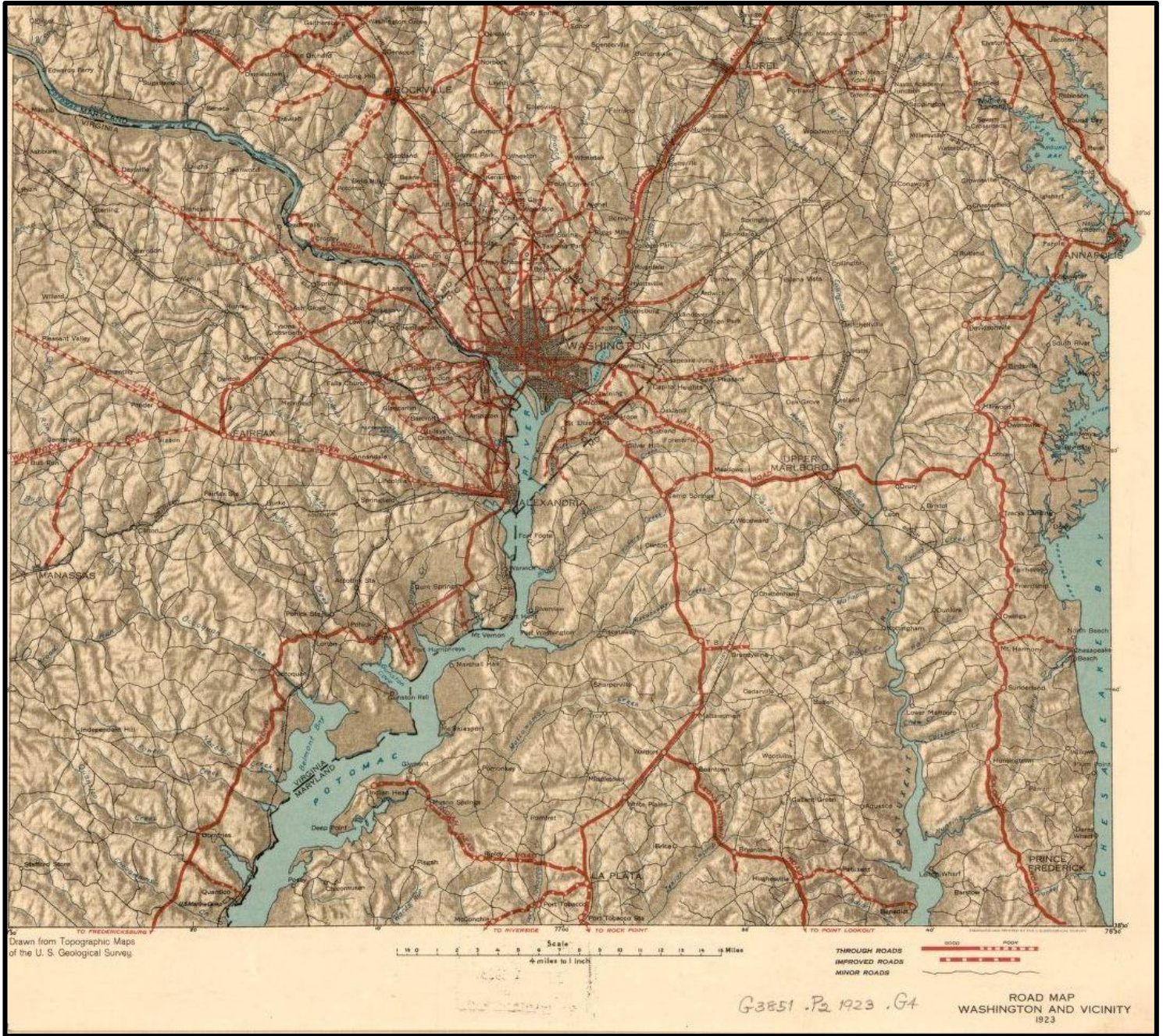
In December of 1805, Ellicott offered a reward for information on who was responsible for the Colchester mail being tossed off the stage in route to Alexandria. Conflict over the control of the mail route appeared to continue.

Both bridges over the Occoquan were destroyed in an August, 1807, storm. Only Ellicott’s bridge was rebuilt to reopen in May of 1808. This bridge would stand until the 1850’s. It was written about in 1849 by Benjamin Lossing but does not appear on the 1859 Virginia Public Works map. There were several major storms in this decade that destroyed the Long Bridge into Washington D.C. and bridges on the Rappahannock. This could have been the final demise of Ellicott’s bridge

The Potomac Steamboat Co. chartered in 1813 cut in half the travel time of mail and passengers from Alexandria to Potomac Creek. The river then became the fastest mode of travel in northern Virginia surpassing any stage route.

Following is a section of a 1923 road map. The main travel route from the north, to Richmond, is through Occoquan. Nathaniel Ellicott’s 1795 wooden bridge and the road he constructed off the old King’s Highway set the stage as the major travel artery for over 100 years.

Section of 1923 U.S. Geological Survey Road Map



Geological Survey, U.S. Road Map, Washington and Vicinity, Maryland-Virginia-District of Columbia. [Washington: Dept. of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey.1923] Map. <https://www.loc.gov/item/87695632/>.

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Open Sunday through Saturday 11-4

