

Lorton History - Books About the Area

Occoquan and Lorton are assessed

By Irma Clifton

If you like your local history more visual than textual, I have great news for you. Two books, one newly published and one published several years ago are available and will give those interested a real lesson in area history.

The more recent offering, *Occoquan*, written by town mayor Earnie Porta, and published by Arcadia Publishing as part of its "Images of America" series, covers the history of the town and river from pre-European times through the colonial period and the development and prosperity as a mill town, home to gristmills and sawmills. The book traces the town's growth, citing the establishment of a forge and furnace for an ironworks into the Civil War, when Occoquan, although voting for Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 election, was the site of skirmishes and raids by both Union and Confederate troops.

Occoquan contains two hundred photos of the town and river; most have never before been published and are from the museum archives of the Occoquan Historical Society. Many of the buildings depicted in the book no longer exist, several having succumbed to a tragic fire in 1916. Perhaps most interesting are the photos of the buildings that are in use today, shown as they existed earlier.

Many will be surprised to learn that the town had its own light and electric company during the first quarter of the 20th century. In the summer months, beginning during the 1880s, excursion boats came down from Washington, D.C., for day trips. Occoquan was also a port for shipping cordwood, railroad ties, telegraph poles and other items until the end of World War II. Many of these activities are illustrated by images in Porta's book.

A photo of the Bank of Occoquan will bring back memories to some of the older folks in the area. For many years it was the only bank serving southeast Fairfax County as well as the Occoquan and Woodbridge areas. Of interest to new-comers to the area will be photos of the 1878 iron Pratt truss bridge which linked Fairfax and Prince William counties using Route 123. Traffic would travel the one-lane bridge located at the north end of town, and continue down Mill Street through the town to points south. Unfortunately, the bridge was swept away during Hurricane Agnes in 1972.

Porta lists three defining events that altered the town's history during the 20th century. First was the fire of 1916 when many of the town's old historic structures were lost. Second was the construction of Fairfax Water Authority's high dam and third was the flooding caused by Hurricane Agnes. A full chapter is dedicated to photos showing the extent to which the flood waters damaged the town. The destruction wrought by the rushing water is illustrated by a photo of a boat floating along Mill Street in front of what is now the Occoquan Inn.

The cycle is completed by scenes from the Town of Occoquan today, contrasting the new with the old, and telling a story of a town that came back not once but twice during

the 20th century, from a devastating fire and flood, to be prosperous again.

Many structures and part of the commercial area make up the Occoquan Historic District which since 1983 has been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The second book offers a visual story of Lorton and is part of Arcadia Publishing's "Then & Now" series. Titled Lorton, by Yoshie Lewis, it was published in 2005 and contains many photos of structures long gone from the landscape, as well as some old photos of buildings still standing, such as Gunston Hall and Pohick Church. An early photo of the Fairfax Arms, one of the oldest structures in Fairfax County, is contrasted with one showing how it looks today.

A shot of the old wooden bridge on Gunston Cove Road over the railroad track harks back to when that road was a cut-through to Mason Neck before Lorton Marketplace was constructed. An old house, formerly part of the Tyers' farm on Ox Road, has been replaced by a community called Hollymeade, which is pictured as it is today.

Those who enjoy local history will be interested to see the many comparisons of structures and sites from the past and today, thus the series name "Then & Now."

Both books are available at the Occoquan Museum and from www.arcadiapublishing.com. Copies of Occoquan are also available at Hawthorne House Fine Papers, the Coffee House of Occoquan, Salt & Pepper Books, and Miller's Lighthouse. It is also being sold at Pitkins Ace Hardware in Dale City and at the Walgreen's in Manassas.