

# Occoquan District High School

## A COMMUNITY, ITS SCHOOL, AND THE TIMES

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In today's suburban environment, we are used to seeing large, sprawling public high school buildings constructed to support a variety of needs from specialized programs to sports. That wasn't always the case. In fact, having a nationwide network of public high schools did not really occur until the 20th century. Up until that time, the agricultural and 19th-century industrial economy didn't dictate a need for widespread schooling beyond the early grades.

That all changed after the dawn of the 20th century when needs for increased trade and domestic skills, coupled with better preparation for college-bound students, provided the impetus for what is known as the "High School Movement" in the United States. This movement lasted roughly from 1910 to 1940 and resulted in the establishment of new public high schools in communities across the country. The Occoquan community was no exception.

Locally, in the early 20th century, secondary education was concentrated in the Manassas area with the public Ruffner School and private Manassas Institute. In some instances, Prince William County parents called for some high school classes to be taught in existing elementary schools. This requirement was met by hiring teachers to provide secondary level classes at these schools. This was the case in Brentsville and Haymarket.

In the mid-1920s, it was determined that there was a need for a high school in the eastern portion of the county. This occurred at a time when the county was interested in consolidating its smaller schools. The Occoquan area was chosen for the site of the new Occoquan District High School.

The modern brick school opened in 1927 on Occoquan Road (near its current intersection with Old Bridge Road). It sported a colonial revival design with 6 classrooms. In line with providing a variety of educational opportunities, it included an auditorium with modern stage facilities including electric footlights. The rear of the stage area contained the school library. There was even a pump house to provide water for the building with a bank of batteries for back-up in case of power failure.



Students at the first graduation in 1931.

Photo courtesy Mill House Museum



Compatible with the school consolidation thrust, the high school incorporated elementary school students in the building, which was not unusual at the time. These students were drawn from the original two-room schoolhouse on Commerce Street, which was then decommissioned as a school and still stands today. In the new school, three classrooms were dedicated to secondary students and three to elementary level students.

At the high school level, students from Quantico, Triangle, Dumfries, Woodbridge, Hoadly and Occoquan were served. The elementary school students were drawn from the local Occoquan region.

Its first graduating class (1931) had the misfortune of being put out in the world at the beginning of the Great Depression, but there was still population growth in the area, and depression or not, the school needed to grow. The community found the resources to make this happen with expansions starting in 1933 and 1939 as it grew to two stories and 16 rooms. Occoquan High School now had a science lab and home economics classroom with a modern kitchen at a time when wood and coal-fired kitchen ranges were not uncommon in homes.

Many of the teachers were recruited from outside the immediate area. In the days before Shirley Highway, I-95 and VRE, extensive commuting was out of the question. As a result, a number of teachers boarded at Miss Mamie Davis' boarding house at the corner of Washington and Commerce Streets in Occoquan. Over the years, romances and marriages among the faculty sprung forth, helping the area continue to grow.



Home economics students at work in their modern kitchen.  
Photo courtesy Mill House Museum

Transportation for students was not always a "given" as it is today. The county got its first "school wagon" in 1924 that consisted of a handmade body on a truck chassis with canvas covering. It was privately owned and transported students for a \$2.00 yearly fee. The year before Occoquan District High School opened, the county fleet consisted of five "buses" built on Ford Model T chassis with little protection from the elements. It wasn't until 1933 that there were 19 modern school buses with glass windows in use.

At the high school, students were sometimes recruited to drive the buses. There were instances where collections were periodically taken among student passengers to chip in for gas. In the early days of the school, before better transportation and roads, there was a report of at least one student from mid-county who boarded in the town.

In the 1940s a gymnasium building was added, funding for which was supplemented by money raised by alumni. These prior students also raised money for the school clinic. A cannery building was built as part of home front support of the war effort during the World War II period. This was used by members of the community and faculty and was not uncommon at secondary schools in the Commonwealth of Virginia at the time.

In the 1950s, post-war suburbanization was beginning to be felt in the area and a larger, more modern secondary school was needed. The first Gar-Field High School met this need, opening in December 1953, near the intersection of U.S. Route 1 and Cardinal Drive. It then transitioned into the high school serving the eastern part of the county. The last full-year term for secondary students at Occoquan District High School was 1952-53.

The building continued to grow in size with the addition of kindergarten facilities. The school was converted to an elementary school with the opening of Fred Lynn Middle School in 1963. It continues as such today and is the oldest continuously operating public school in the county.

*Per PWC School CIP documents: Occoquan Elementary School is scheduled for a "Re-Build" in the next several years.*

