

Mill House Monthly Mid-August

PLAYING DETECTIVE PAYS OFF....OR DOES IT?

By Marge Shaffer

It started with curiosity...mine...about the huge rusty anchor jammed into cement at the corner of Mill and Union Streets in Occoquan. You've seen it. Haven't you wondered too? Imagine, this heavy object (maybe 850 lbs) was once attached to a rope or chain and used to moor a vessel to the sea bottom. It's heavy metal 9 foot shank with a 16" tall ring at the top end for the rope and a pair of curved flukes measuring 50 inches tip to tip at the bottom end has a story yet to be revealed.



Anchor symbolisms are now running rampant in my mind: steadfastness, salvation, stability, security, hope, safety, and fidelity. I feel a need to learn the rest of the story about the anchor incarcerated in time right here in historic Occoquan.

Researching and asking around (the internet; long time local residents; Laverne Carson, owner of The Golden Goose Christmas Shop which shares the same corner as the anchor; and, of course, Occoquan's history guru, Dolores Elder) merely provided the following information:

The man who once owned Blackbeard's Restaurant (now The Golden Goose Christmas Shop) found the anchor and cemented it in stone about 50 years ago so no one would steal it. His name was Donald L. Sonner.

And then Google tells me that Mr. Sonner also owned Rockledge Mansion. Both Blackbeard's Restaurant and Rockledge succumbed to mysterious fires in 1980 (Washington Post, October 29, 1981). Not too long afterwards both properties were sold and Mr. Sonner left the area for parts unknown.

Nonetheless, unanswered questions remain. Researching old newspaper articles were a dead end to finding Mr. Sonner's current whereabouts. However, a diligent Prince William County librarian located an address and phone number. A PHONE NUMBER!!! I was so happy; I wanted to do cartwheels in the Library right then and there.

I finally had a direct connection to the answers in my quest. I patiently refrained from calling Mr. Sonner right away (well, at least until I got home five minutes later).

Before making the phone call, I envisioned Mr. Sonner delighted with my interest and waxing extensively about bargaining for, and eventually acquiring this heavy piece of iron. He would most likely describe the big old ship it once anchored. I imagined the ship had been sunk in a mishap at sea and had been discovered at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. I imagined the difficult process to hoist it up perhaps by NUMA(National Underwater and Marine Agency) or even Jacques Cousteau himself.

I imagined that negotiating for a piece of history must have been an exercise in diplomacy as well as shrewd bartering. Nevertheless, Mr. Sonner would have been able to cleverly acquire the anchor. I imagined the long transport from its ocean home via a flat bed truck and, finally, a heavy duty lifting crane placing it in Occoquan. Its final resting place.

I even envisioned a little plaque at the base chronicling the anchor's past. I thought that albeit historically new, the anchor might represent the strength of Occoquan's townsfolk who rebuilt and survived after wars, floods and fires just as this rusty big anchor had survived its made-up past.

OK, enough of my quixotic mind's eye anticipation. I phoned Mr. Donald Sonner. Mrs. Sonner answered the phone. She informed me that her husband passed away. In fact, she is dealing with the recent death of her daughter and is in shock right now. Mrs. Sonner admitted to loving history and while she didn't know anything about the anchor, promised get back with answers to my questions if she could find any.

Hope leads to FIZZLE. Weeks later, with no response from Mrs. Sonner, I suppose it's safe to assume she discovered nothing. Alas, the anchor's past glory may forever remain a mystery. (Unless, of course, we make up our own audacious story for the anchor's little plaque--just for fun, mind you.)

But wait, all is not completely lost. Further research revealed a similar anchor for sale on *eBay Vintage Boat Sales*. While there only one difference between their anchor and ours, the measurements are the same.

The eBay seller advertises:

"Salvaged off the coast of Maine this heavy iron anchor (850 lbs) would have had a wooden stock as was common in the 17th and 18th century. Of course the wood has wasted away leaving the iron anchor as it is shown in the pictures. Notice the metal grain revealed from years of corrosion. The wooden stock was built around the square portion of the shank where the raised bars are. This wooden stock could be replicated if buyer desired."



The 82" wooden stock (arm) on our anchor is obviously not original and also sits in a square-shaped iron-forged fitting at the top of the shank. Could this possibly mean that our anchor is also from the 1600's or 1700's?

Further searching online and with a stroke of good luck, I located Dr. Kevin J. Crisman.

Dr. Crisman, Nautical Archaeology Faculty Fellow, Texas A & M University, specializes in Western Hemisphere seafaring from 1500 to the present. Among his related areas of interest is historical archaeology. *(The promise of authentication is now making me giddy.)*

He has directed or participated in the underwater investigation of numerous wrecks, including sailing merchant craft, naval ships, steamers, and canal boats. He has completed and published studies of two War of 1812, 20-Gun Brigs and an early-19th century horse-powered ferry boat sunk in Lake Champlain. He is currently directing the excavation of an 1832 Western River Steamboat in the Red River of Oklahoma. Dr. Crisman teaches courses in New World seafaring, post-Medieval European seafaring, and rigging and outfitting ships.

I sent Dr. Crisman an email with measurements of our anchor. He replied:

... anchors are notoriously difficult to date. Their forms, materials and assembly processes were slow to change. Also, ships typically carried a range of sizes, from heavy-duty storm anchors (sheet anchors) to light kedge anchors, so the dimensions do not necessarily tell you much. But let's take a look at this one and see.

Next day after I sent photos:

I've downloaded all the photos and spent some time looking at the details. That is a fine example of a wrought iron anchor, and it has some curious features, one of which I do not recall having seen before on this style of anchor (the shackle substituted for a ring at the top of the shank). Wish I was in my office at the university, there are a couple of books on my shelf I'd like to check for similar examples (am up in Vermont right now on a project).

Here's my thoughts on this, in no particular order:

1. The long and fairly thin shank suggests an earlier date, since shanks tended to get shorter and thicker with the passage of time. There were always variants, though.

2. The diamond-shaped opening in the top of the shank for the wooden stock is an unusual feature. I've seen it only a couple of times before, once on a similarly-sized anchor found by divers in Pemaquid Harbor on the coast of Maine. I do not have a set of dates for this manner of fitting the stock, but am pretty certain that it is later (1800s or early 1900s) rather than colonial era (1600s and 1700s).

3. *The use of a shackle and forelocked pin for the cable ring at the top of the anchor is something you see on navy-style stockless and other types of 'modern' anchors of the second half of the 1800s and the 1900s. The usual attachment for the cable on earlier styles of anchors was a circular ring fitted in a hole in the head of the shank.*

4. *On the basis of the shackle-ring, I think your anchor is probably not from the 1600s or 1700s, and more likely from some time after ca. 1850.*

5. *This would be a small anchor on a large ship, or a moderately-sized anchor on a small ship. As I said earlier, individual ships tended to carry a range of sizes to deal with different conditions, so the size of an anchor alone can only give you a very rough estimate of the size of the ship that lost the anchor.*

I wish anchors were more useful as dating tools, but the traditional styles used from the 1500s to the early 1900s often look very much alike, and because they were assembled by a forging process in many different foundries, they are somewhat like works of art, each reflecting the talents, materials, and technology of the folks that made them. We almost never find names or dates on anchors, alas.

Hope this is helpful, sorry I cannot be more specific.

Yrs, Kevin

According to Dr. Crisman, our anchor could be from the Civil War era. As an aside, *The Potomac River: A History & Guide* by Garrett Peck reveals an enormous number of ships on the Potomac River during that period. Can you imagine the considerable quantity of anchors unintentionally falling off ships into the Potomac during that time and buried in the muddy silt below? Could our anchor have been one of them?

Even though we still don't know where it was resurrected and what type of boat it serviced, we do have a plausible age. . . OLD.

Dr. Crisman will get back to us after he checks his books back at the University. I told him that it will never be too late to help us solve the mystery of Occoquan's token anchor.

Until we have something definitive, let's not give up on writing that little fictional plaque I mentioned earlier. . .

I want to thank Marge Shaffer for her dedicated research on the history of the anchor at 302 Mill Street. I will never walk by the anchor without wondering about what ports it has traveled to and how it ended up in Occoquan! *Dalores*

Save The Date!

Look for more details early next month!



Join OHS for our fall fundraiser at the **Bottle Stop** located at 311 Mill Street in Occoquan at **6:30 p.m. on Tuesday, September 29, 2015.**

Great wine and a fundraiser too, can't wait!

Occoquan Historical Society
Mill House Museum
413 Mill Street, PO Box 65
Occoquan, VA 22125
www.occoquanhistoricalsociety.org
703-491-7525
Museum Daily 11a.m.-4p.m.

Occoquan Historical Society
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Vice President Alice Gardiner
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Curator Dolores Elder
Boyd Alexander
Stewart Christiano
Kim Deal
Rose Destefano
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June Randolph
Annette Riley
Martha Roberts



Don't Forget: Get online and vote through August 23! Go to www.vatop10artifacts.org and vote for our group of Mill House Museum artifacts which include Henry Selecman's blacksmith vise, the iron ingot and a section of the iron conduit that brought water to the mill sluice. These three items are all connected to our 1755 Occoquan Iron Works.

The Virginia Association of Museums (VAM) is sponsoring this program and it will put us in touch with conservators and possibly grant money. We need your support!

www.vatop10artifacts.org has a wealth of information about the program.

There are 26 nominees so we are very appreciative of being one of those selected. Tell your friends and family, post it on Facebook or anywhere you think will help. Voting runs through August 23 so vote today! Thank you! *Dolores*