



**TOWN OF OCCOQUAN**  
**ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW BOARD**  
**DESIGN GUIDELINES MANUAL**

Prepared by the  
Architectural Review Board  
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## I. Introduction

In 1983 the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, after conducting a survey of structures within the Town of Occoquan, designated 13.25 acres as a historic area. Consequently, the United States Department of the Interior's National Park Service added the Town of Occoquan to the National Register of Historic Places. The Occoquan Town Council subsequently enacted ordinances that created an Architectural Review Board (ARB) to "preserve the unique cultural heritage represented by the original section of the town" and gave the ARB certain powers to regulate rehabilitation and new construction in the Historic District, as well as the right to approve or disapprove signs within the business district. The ARB works to uphold the intent of the ordinances and to further the aims set forth in the Comprehensive Plan.

The Code of Ordinances of the Town of Occoquan (Code), Section 157.179, "Matters to be Considered by the Board", states:

*(A) "The board shall not consider interior arrangement, relative size of the building or structure, detailed design, or features not subject to any public view. The Board shall not make any requirements, except for the purpose of preventing developments obviously incongruous to the old and historic aspect of the surroundings.*

*(B) The board shall consider the following in passing upon the appropriateness of architectural features:*

- (1) Exterior architectural features, including all signs, that are subject to public view from a public street, way or place;*
- (2) General design and arrangement;*
- (3) Texture, material and color;*
- (4) The relation of the factors, (B)(1)through(B) (3) above, to similar features of the buildings and structures in the immediate surroundings;*
- (5) The extent to which the building or structure would be in harmony with the old and historic aspect of the surroundings;*
- (6) In the case of a building to be razed, a primary consideration will be the extent to which its continued existence would tend to protect irreplaceable historic places and preserve the general historic atmosphere of the town; and*
- (7) The extent to which the building or structure will promote the general welfare by:*
  - (a) Preserving and protecting historic places and areas;*
  - (b) Maintaining and increasing real estate value;*
  - (c) Generating business;*
  - (d) Creating new positions;*

- (e) Attracting tourists, students, writers, historians, artists and artisans, and new residents;*
- (f) Encouraging study of and interest in American history;*
- (g) Stimulating interest in and study of architecture and design;*
- (h) Educating citizens in American culture and heritage; and*
- (i) Making the town a more attractive and desirable place in which to live.*

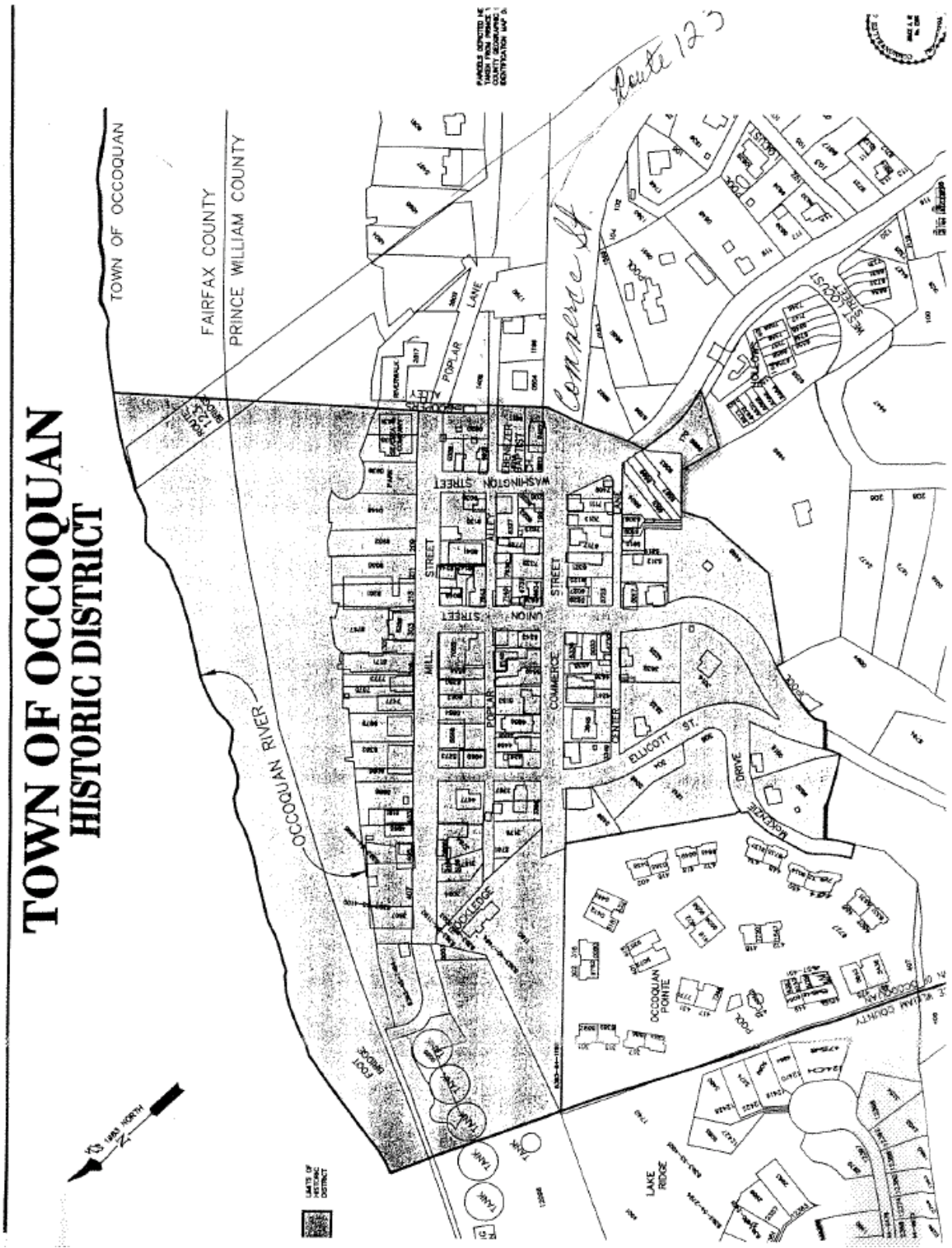
Note that the ARB considers the following things before issuing a certificate of appropriateness.

1. Exterior features that are subject to public view.
2. General design and arrangement.
3. Texture, material, and color.
4. Compatibility of factors 1, 2, and 3 with the surrounding buildings.
5. The harmony of the building or awning or bricks with the old and historic aspect of the surroundings.

The ARB must consider each and every one of these criteria in their decisions. Take note that interiors are exempt from ARB review as well as “detailed design or features not subject to any public view.”

This Design Guidelines Manual has been created to assist members of the ARB, builders, merchants, residents, and the public in protecting the historic character of Occoquan. It is the hope of the ARB that this document will assist in the ARB review application process by better informing and preparing applicants for presenting their plan to the ARB for review.

## II. Map of the Historic District



### III. A Brief History of Occoquan

Occoquan derived its name from the language of the Dogue Indians. It is believed that the Dogues had settled next to the Occoquan River due to the abundance of fish and ease of travel it afforded. It was the river and its location at the head of the tidewater that eventually made Occoquan a natural location for water-borne commerce. The “falls” of the fall line prevented ships from sailing farther upstream, and because the river is at its narrowest point, it became a natural spot for river crossings between what eventually became Fairfax and Prince William Counties. Early records indicate that agents of Robert “King” Carter hauled copper ore from the Frying Pan Copper mine near present day Dulles Airport. A tobacco warehouse was built as early as 1736, and an industrial complex began in 1750. In the 1790’s, Oliver Evans established and patented a milling process at the Merchant’s Mill; thus making it the first automated gristmill in the nation. The mill remained in operation for 175 years until it was ultimately destroyed by fire. The only remaining structure, the Miller’s office, is now a museum operated by the Occoquan Historical Society.

By 1828, Occoquan had a cotton mill, and by 1835, several mercantile stores and various mechanics had established themselves here. Farmers and traders came from as far as the Blue Ridge Mountains to patronize the town’s businesses, and those who traveled here often stayed overnight at the Alton, Occoquan, or Hammill hotels, the last of which still stands today.

Prior to the Civil War, shipbuilding began in Occoquan, specializing in schooners and longboats. In addition to products from the cotton and gristmills, there was a lucrative trade in cord wood, fish and river ice. Occoquan also built the first commercial ice storage house in this area. River ice, railroad ties and large logs were shipped upriver from Occoquan to Washington, D.C. and points north.

A mail stagecoach route was established through Occoquan in 1805. During the Civil War, both Washington D.C. and Alexandria were under blockade, and as a result, the Occoquan Post Office played a key role in passing letters and packages between North and South. During one winter, the Hammill Hotel served as temporary headquarters for Confederate General Wade Hampton.

The dawn of the 20th Century saw a town bustling with grocery stores, a lumber and hardware store, drugstore, millinery, churches, school, jail, blacksmith, barber, undertaker, doctor, and pharmacy. The Oddfellows Hall became a performance venue in

the area, and the Lyric Theater brought people to town by car, thus making Occoquan a social and commercial center. For Occoquan, the twentieth century also unfortunately brought one economic disaster followed by another. In 1916, a devastating fire destroyed many of the structures located in the historic center of town. The coming of the automobile and silting of the river heralded the end of shipping as the main commercial highway of the area.

With the opening of Route 1 in 1928, Occoquan no longer stood astride the major north-south travel route. The construction of Interstate 95 in later years caused an explosion of residential and commercial building in nearby Woodbridge, and as a result, the town's standing as the area's primary center of commerce declined. Then in 1972, the ravaging waters of Hurricane Agnes destroyed buildings, sidewalks, streets and the iron truss bridge that crossed the Occoquan River.

Any one of these events could have meant the demise of our small riverside town, but Occoquan is a town destined to survive. After every tragedy, townspeople and merchants alike repaired, rebuilt, and restored it creating a unique place that offers boating, fishing, shopping, and pleasant dining in an historic atmosphere. Antiques, collectibles, fine art, crafts, clothing, gourmet food, and unique gifts have replaced mills, ice houses, lumberyards, and shipyards. Through good times and bad Occoquan is a town that refuses to die. As history has shown time and time again and with each passing year, Occoquan shall remain as it has always been--unique, special, and unforgettable.

## IV. District Character

Geographically, Occoquan is bounded to the north by the Occoquan River and to the south by wooded bluffs. The streets are laid out in a simple grid pattern that stretches up a light sloping hill to the south. Five major streets—Mill, Union, Commerce, Washington, and Ellicott—comprise the district.

The potential value of the site on a river that opens into the Potomac River was recognized as early as 1755 by John Ballendine, who hoped to establish forges, mills, stores, and dwellings on the site. As early as 1804, Occoquan achieved the status of an official town. A map which survives from that date illustrates a street pattern nearly identical to the present layout. Over thirty structures are noted on the map, including a mill and cooper shop. Few buildings constructed during the town's settlement years stand today. Most notable is Rockledge, constructed by Ballendine in 1758. The Georgian two-story stone house with elaborate work rises on a rock ledge overlooking Mill Street and the Occoquan River.

The most widely recognized structure in Occoquan was a flour mill owned by Nathaniel Ellicott. Illustrated in Oliver Evans' *The Young Mill-Wright and Miller's Guide*, the building was destroyed in 1924. However, the miller's office, now the Mill House Museum, still stands on Mill Street immediately southeast of the mill site. The small one-story stone and brick structure above a raised basement covered by a gable roof was erected in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century or early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The house is presently occupied by Occoquan Historical Society, which uses the building for exhibition space. A replica of the original mill is found in the museum.

Occoquan continued to flourish throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Both commercial and residential structures remain from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The circa 1830 Hammill Hotel, located in the center of the district at the intersection of Commerce and Union streets, is a square, three-story building constructed of five-course American bond brick beneath a hipped roof.

Evidence of Occoquan's continued prosperity during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century survives in a large number of residences that line Commerce and Union streets. Constructed primarily in the building vernacular of folk Victorian tradition, the two-story frame buildings frequently display German siding and decorative porches. Buildings in the 200 through 300 blocks of Commerce Street are examples of this type. Typical of these houses is 202 Commerce Street, a two-story frame, five-bay building with a gable roof, the façade



decorated by a porch consisting of stylized Doric columns and sawncut balustrade. Dating to the same period is 306 Commerce Street, a two-story frame, three-bay house with a shed roof fronted by a porch supported on chamfered posts with scroll brackets connected by a sawnwork balustrade. A variety of simple un-ornamented buildings also exist in the district, including 209 Commerce Street, a two-story frame house covered in German siding beneath a gable roof, and 304 Commerce Street, another two-story, three-bay building sheathed in weatherboards.

Fire swept down Mill Street in 1916 destroying many of the town's major commercial structures. However, a few residential structures which date to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century still stand at the west end of Mill Street and have now been converted to businesses. Among these is 406 Mill Street, a two-story, five-bay building with a porch consisting of turned posts and a decorative sawncut balustrade. The residence at 402 Mill Street, now a business, is a good example of early twentieth century craftsman or bungalow architecture. There are several of these in the Historic District. Most of the commercial buildings are simple commercial vernacular structures built after the fire.

The Historic District contains few public buildings. Two churches, both dating to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are located within the boundaries. The Ebenezer Church, built in 1924, stands on Washington Street. The Methodist congregation constructed their church at 314 Mill Street in 1926 which now serves as Town Hall.

Toward the end of the last century improved economic conditions in town and an increase in the population of Northern Virginia combined to create an atmosphere favorable to new commercial and residential construction. Keeping true to the tradition of eclectic design in Occoquan, these buildings reflect Federal, vernacular, even Tudor influences. Several townhouse developments have dramatically changed the landscape of the town.

Each major period of Occoquan's history is represented in its buildings. Well-kept, shaded yards surround many of the residential structures on Washington, Commerce, and Ellicott Streets. Shops and commercial buildings on Mill Street are tightly knit and open directly onto the paved streets. The lawns and decorative details of the residential structures, in contrast with the density of the commercial core, create a unified, yet varied, combination of buildings and building types within the Historic District.

--Adapted from *District Character* by Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission

## V. Rehabilitation and Construction

### 1. Additions

An exterior addition to a historic building is acceptable with three suggestions strongly recommended:

- a) Locating the addition so as not to be conspicuous.
- b) Limiting the size and scale of the addition in order not to compromise the integrity of the building or any structures surrounding it.
- c) Using materials compatible with the historic building and the other buildings nearby.

The Occoquan Code requires a building permit when constructing, enlarging, altering, repairing or demolishing a building or structure.

### 2. Awnings

The use of attractive awnings and canopies is encouraged in the Historic District. Fabric shall be limited to canvas or similar cloth. Vinyl, plastic, and aluminum are not compatible materials for use in the Historic District. The color should be in the palette of historic colors. See Colors.

Words on your awning are considered signs and must be preapproved by the ARB.

### 3. Bricks

18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century bricks were much larger than 20<sup>th</sup> century bricks and the use of the oversized bricks is encouraged. Brick color shall be in the terra cotta or reddish-orange tones. Colored bricks were unknown in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. All bricks were made from natural clays, and varied in shade depending on the region of the origin. Burned or black bricks were usually used only on the gable ends or chimneys.

Mortar shall be sand-colored. "C-73" is an example of a modern mortar which most closely resembles historic mortar. Blue Bond or gray mortar is prohibited. Mortar joints were "grapevine" or other patterns were used rather than the smooth joints used in modern times.

Bricks were laid to form patterns, such as Flemish bond, English bond, common bond, rather than modern-day running bond. A “water table” course was built about two feet about the foundation to deflect running off the roof.

#### 4. Chimneys

Chimneys shall extend at least six (6) feet above the roof ridge, corbelled and be of a design appropriate to the architectural style. Suitable materials are brick or stone.

#### 5. Colors

Exterior paint colors shall be appropriate for the architectural period of the building. Colors of a building shall take into consideration roof and foundation colors. The book *A Century of Color* is an excellent reference.

Another resource is the following color chart which is taken from the website Archive.org and the document “Every Man His Own Painter!” which was originally written in 1872.

Note that none of these colors are modern paint chips. Use these colors as a guide as you pick out your exact paint colors. Most popular exterior paint brands now have historic palettes available.

Painting of brick or stone is not recommended. Existing paint may be removed if done in a manner which will not damage the surface of the structure. Methods such as sandblasting, chemical application and heat guns tend to damage the structure.



## 6. Doorways

The placement and proportions of windows and doors are of paramount importance in achieving an historic reproduction. Original doors should be repaired and rehabilitated if possible. Storm doors shall allow visibility of the original door. Sliding glass doors are not considered to be in keeping with the character and architectural detail of the Old and Historic District, and are prohibited if visible from the street (waterfront is also considered a street).

Style of doors from:

18 <sup>th</sup> Century	Six-panel (cross and open Bible); small glass light above door Solid wood or stone header over top of door 1775-1800 had very elaborate doorways, with sidelights and fanlights above front door and columns beside door or entry porch
19 <sup>th</sup> Century	Wide variety of elaborate doorways Stained glass in doors Double doors Columns

## 7. Fences and Walls

If fences and walls are to be used as screens or accent elements, the design, colors, and choice of materials shall be consistent with the design and materials of the building. Landscaping can be used in conjunction with these structures to strengthen their screening properties. Chain link, stockade, bamboo, vinyl, and snow fencing are not considered appropriate. Composite fencing can be considered appropriate if it has historic features.

## 8. Foundations

Foundation walls shall be covered with brick, stucco, stone, aluminum, vinyl, or wood siding. Paneling and exposed cinder or concrete block or monolithic concrete walls are not considered appropriate.

## 9. Handicap Ramps

Handicapped ramps shall be ADA compatible and located at the rear or side of a building, if possible. The design shall be consistent with the design, textures, materials, and colors of the building.

## 10. Landscaping

Trees, shrubs, and flowering plants contribute greatly to the character of an area; therefore, existing vegetation, especially trees, should be preserved if at all possible. Adding shrubbery does not need ARB review. Taking out trees 4" in diameter or more needs permission from the Town Manager.

## 11. Lighting

Exterior lighting for structures in the Historic District shall reflect the style and era of the building. Freestanding lights shall not exceed 15 feet in height, and all light shall be directed downward into the site. A combination of freestanding and wall-mounted fixtures is recommended in order to yield varied levels of lighting. Appropriate decorative fixtures are desirable over utilitarian fixtures. Sodium vapor lighting or anything that looks like neon is inappropriate in the Historic District.

## 12. Materials

Siding – Original siding materials shall be repaired to retain the original character of the surface rather than removed or covered. Often this is not possible so a look-a-like and modern material will be sufficient as long as all efforts are made to maintain the same appearance.

Exterior trim – Dentil molding and crown molding were simple in the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and elaborate in the later with columns added. 18<sup>th</sup> Century trim consisted of dentil and crown molding on the fascia boards, corner moldings, and lentils above windows. Lentils were of brick, stone, or a solid piece of wood. Brick lentils were laid to form an arch, either a "jack" arch or a "segmented" arch. The segmented arch was curved rather than straight.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century trim was elaborate. The mid- to later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has often been called the "Gingerbread Age" with immigrant skilled laborers providing elaborate trim on fascia boards, soffits, rake boards, windows, doors, and porches at low costs. Brackets attached to the soffits were commonplace.

## 13. Porches

Porch posts shall be at least 4x4, round or square, so the correct scale between the building and the porch is achieved. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century square posts were chamfered on the corners. Victorian porch posts were decoratively turned on a lathe or trimmed in a decorative manner. Victorian porches, often up to three per house or wrapped around

three sides of the house in a continuous line, were widely used and elaborately trimmed with spandrels, brackets, and often flat lacy balusters. Porches in the latter part of the century were decorated with “gingerbread” on rake boards, and spandrels and brackets, as well as flat lacy spindles were often used.

#### 14. Roofs

Pitch - The pitch of a roof shall be a minimum of 8/12 except on a hip roof, mansard, or gambrel (barn). On a flat roof, a parapet with trim should be erected above the roofline (such as a store or Italianate Victorian).

Materials - Cedar shingles were widely used during the 18th Century (approximately 90 percent), and the remainder of the structures most often had oak shingle roofs. Shakes were used on outbuildings only. During the 19th Century, roofs were standing ridge (metal) or slate shingles. Modern composition shingles shall be chosen in colors to match the color of weathered historic roofing materials. Wherever pressed tin or standing seam style roofs exist an effort should be made to preserve and/or refurbish. The same roof style shall be extended on any addition to buildings with existing pressed tin roofs.

#### 15. Rooftop Screening

If roof-mounted mechanical equipment is used on a flat roof, it shall be screened from public view on all sides by a parapet. If additional screening is necessary, the screening material and design shall be consistent with the design, textures, materials, and colors of the building. The screening shall appear as an integral part of the building. All effort should be made to locate equipment in a location that takes full advantage of the screening provided by the parapet from a street perspective.

#### 16. Satellite Dishes

FCC rules allow for satellite dishes even though they are not historically accurate. If a satellite dish is installed it should be placed in an obscure location.

#### 17. Screening

All outdoor utilities, transformers, meters, trash dumpsters, and mechanical units shall be screened from the public view by walls, fences, or landscaping as long as such uses are compatible with zoning regulations. Screening should appear to be an integral part of the overall site plan.

## 18. Streetscape

Town standards must be adhered to when sidewalks are placed on public right-of-way. Benches, trees, trash receptacles, and street lights may not be placed on public right-of-way.

## 19. Vending Machines

Vending machines are not allowed in the Historic District.

## 20. Windows

The placement and proportions of windows and doors are of paramount importance in achieving a historic reproduction. In new construction simulated true divided light windows with white panes in the appropriate style shall be used. Storm windows shall not be used unless the design allows the original window to show through.

18 <sup>th</sup> Century	Small panes; six over six window lights and up 1775-1800 arched at top, shutters Proportions - one-half the width of the height Placement - Lined up one above the other and over doorways Headers - Wood, solid beam; stone; brick; jack arches or segmented arches; lighter brick often used around windows
19 <sup>th</sup> Century	Windows in the early 19 <sup>th</sup> Century were usually six over six. The emergence of styles such as neo-Gothic, Italianate and Queen Anne led the use of two over two, one over one, and in Queen Anne a multiplicity of combinations. By the end of the 19 <sup>th</sup> Century, two over two dominated and this is the pattern most often seen in 19 <sup>th</sup> Century houses in Occoquan Proportions - Usually, one-half width of height Headers - Elaborate, eyebrow, segmented and jack arches

*For information on the Architectural Review Board, visit [www.occoquanva.gov](http://www.occoquanva.gov).*