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PRINCE WILLIAM

EXTRA

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BY MARGARET THOMAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Preservationists Pamela Sackett, left, and Wilkie Leith finalize plans for Civil War Weekend 2000, a series of reenactments in the Brentsville Historic District. The district encompasses four original buildings, including the Brentsville Courthouse, marked by a plaque, below.

Brentsville Tries to Re-create Its Past

Preserved Buildings Envisioned as Historical Village

By CAROL MORELLO
Washington Post Staff Writer

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County officials and historians insist that underneath the shed's ugly-duckling skin is a sturdy swan in the form of an early 19th-century log cabin. And the cabin, moved last month to the Brentsville Historic Centre from a site four miles away, is a cornerstone of an ambitious plan to preserve a trace of Prince William County's

past before it vanishes amid 21st-century suburban sprawl.

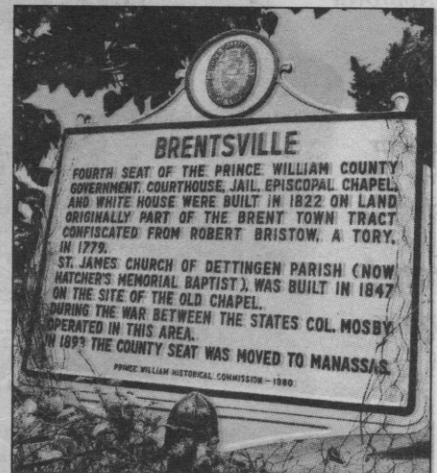
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Though just a bend in the road now with only about 60 residents, Brentsville was a political and population center before the county seat moved to Manassas in 1894.

This weekend offers a glimpse of Brentsville's heyday and, in a sense, a

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Brentsville Historical Area Fraught With Challenges

BRENTSVILLE, From Page 1

foreshadowing of its future. In what is billed as Civil War Weekend 2000, cavalry reenactors paraded from Manassas Junction to Brentsville, where South Carolina troops had a rendezvous after the Battle of First Manassas in 1861.

On the schedule yesterday was a chatty news conference for children held by "President Lincoln," and this afternoon brings a "Tea With Mrs. Lincoln."

Preservationists expressed hope that the events not only will be educational and fun but also profitable. They are seeking donations to help stabilize and refurbish existing buildings and to help pay the astronomical costs of moving others.

During the last four years, the Brentsville Historic Centre Trust has raised about \$600,000 from county and federal grants and private donations. For lack of funds, it has had to turn down donated historical buildings that were too costly to move.

The trust couldn't even afford the run-down shack hiding an original log cabin. A developer who found it on his property gave it to the trust and paid to move it to the site, where it sits on blocks behind a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire.

Preservationists say Prince William has more history worth remembering than most residents realize.

"This is a hard area to get people excited about history," said Pamela Sackett, vice chairman of Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre, a civic group. "It's a transient area, with bedroom communities. It's not that local history has been erased. It's that people didn't have time to research it. But it's there."

Brentsville, in the geographic center of the county, was a focal point.

Thomas Jefferson may not have slept here—he apparently did that about a mile away, in the now-demolished Brown's Tavern—but historians say he definitely traveled through what is now Brentsville on the route to his inaugural from Monticello

to Washington.

Into the middle of the 19th century, Brentsville was something of a hub. In 1835, just 15 years after its founding, documents show that the town had 19 houses, three stores, two taverns, three doctors and, already, three lawyers. The 1860 census counted 135 families in the immediate vicinity.

But during the Civil War, historians say, the town was ravaged and plundered by soldiers—no one is sure which side—who dismantled buildings to cart away stones with which to build fireplaces for their officers.

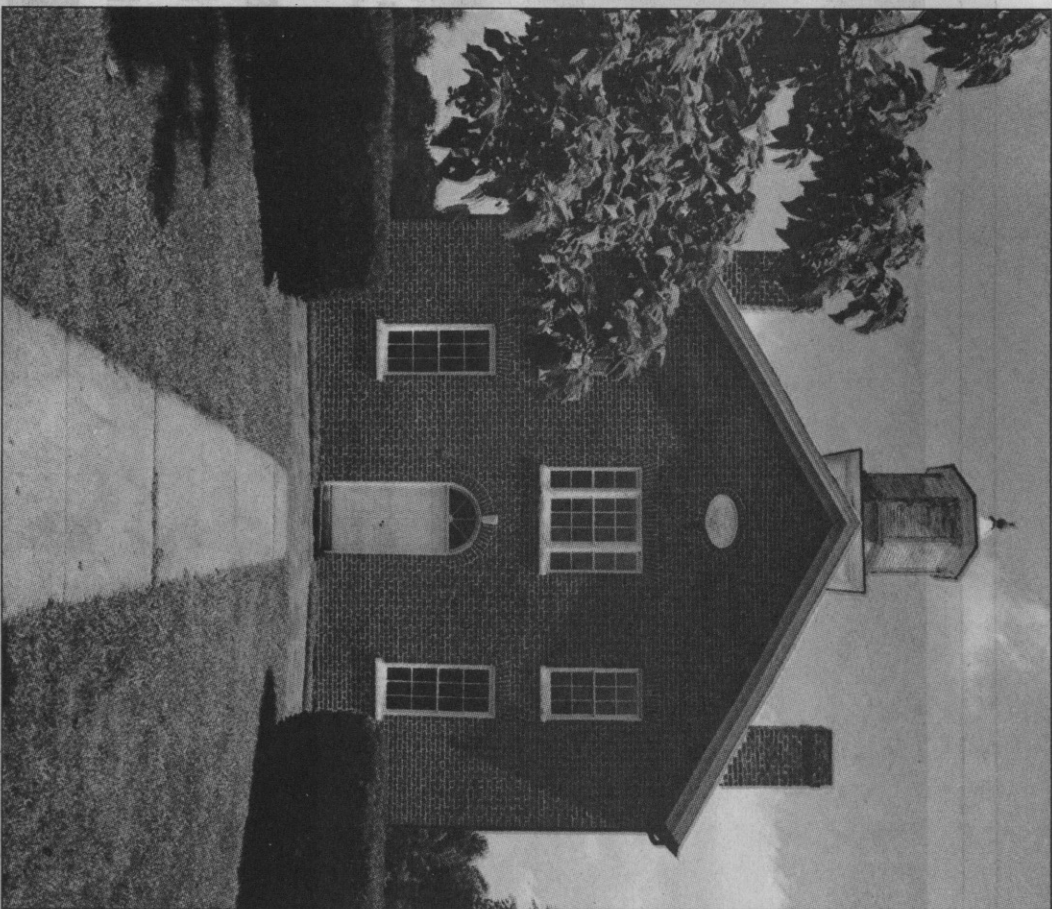
Four structures of note survive, in varying states of disrepair. The best is the nearly pristine one-room schoolhouse built in 1910. The 1822 courthouse needs at least \$1.1 million in repairs to stabilize it. The jail, though it serves as offices, is in worse shape. And Brentsville Union Church, more than 125 years old, is riddled with termite and gopher holes.

The ambition of turning the site into a rural historical village is both modest and difficult. There simply aren't as many preserved houses and sheds used by average working people as there are plantations and mansions.

"For a long time, the focus was on the buildings of the landed gentry," said Wilkie Leith, an English professor at George Mason University who is working to preserve and develop the Brentsville site. "The destruction of the average rural country structures was not seen as the destruction of history."

"These buildings are rare, especially in Virginia, because they weren't revered. To find a 24-acre site in Prince William with significant history to it is exciting, even if we have to move structures here and re-create it."

But when Leith and Sackett discuss preserving the history of Prince William in Brentsville, they aren't talking only about the four original buildings. The structures are meaningless without the often dramat-



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The 178-year-old Brentsville Courthouse needs \$1.1 million in repairs to stabilize it.

ic and poignant stories of the people who passed through them.

These include a woman identified only as Agnes, charged with murdering a man in whose house she was a slave. At her trial, she related how she rebuffed her drunken owner's advances, only to see him lift her baby over a pot of boiling oil. The infant died from inhaling the fumes; after the man passed out, Agnes stabbed him with a kitchen knife.

After her conviction, two of the town's three doctors examined Agnes and pronounced her pregnant, making it illegal to

proceed with hanging her. The third doctor, however, said she was not pregnant, and the judgment against her was carried out.

Nothing that records show that four slaves were hanged outside the Prince William County Courthouse, Leith said their stories need to be remembered and honored.

"The stories are still here," she said. "Generations should not continue to pass by without hearing those stories and not knowing what it was like living here during the Civil War."