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BRENTSVILLE COURTHOUSE

Manassas
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Having survived the Civil War and years of weather damage, Prince William County's original courthouse, located on Brentsville Road, is undergoing restoration with help from the Brentsville Historic Trust Center and the Friends of the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Center.

AMY DREWRY
MANASSAS JOURNAL
MESSENGER

REBUILDING HISTORY

By **JESI KETTLER**
MANASSAS JOURNAL MESSENGER

■ BRENTSVILLE

Married couples, sweethearts, daring singles and longtime friends used to steal away to the old Brentsville courthouse. Wearing hoop skirts, slicked back hair and with sweat dripping off their animated bodies, they danced all night to records. So they wouldn't have to carry it back and forth, they kept the phonograph in a room upstairs where the sound could carry in the large empty room below.

Decades before the dancers opened the unlocked doors for clandestine parties, the building served as Prince William County's public seat. Brentsville is the geographic center of the county, and because of that, some residents feel responsible for keeping the memories of the courthouse alive. Beginning in 1822 and for the 74 years after that judges brought the gavel down in the building on cow thieves, trespassers and some of the most hardened criminals in Brentsville. Deputies then would walk the prisoners across the slim dirt road to the jail.

Now, the Brentsville courthouse is the subject of a major restoration project that includes the jail, also built in 1822, a nondenominational Union church built for travelers in 1872, a one-room schoolhouse built in 1928 and a four-acre site where a tavern once stood. In what has been a very slow process, many residents of Prince William County will work to bring the buildings back to their original conditions. Residents with a devotion to the Civil War site formed the non-profit

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group Friends of the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre four years ago with the intent of preserving the buildings and the 23-acre site. One year later, county officials, the Prince William Park Authority and the County Historic Commission joined the Friends — as they refer to themselves — and formed an organizational branch called the Brentsville Historic Trust Centre.

Working together the agencies have been able to make more strides than the residents working by themselves, including acquiring the acreage and buildings for the restorations. The Friends work to receive grants — totaling \$350,000 — and organize fund-raisers because the buildings, in particular the courthouse, need to be repaired to last into their fourth cen-

tury.

The courthouse is missing two fireplaces and two stoves, although one fireplace has lasted since the 1820's. Decades of rain have severely damaged the paint and plaster inside the building. What either was a balcony or second floor was removed at one time and what remains is a railed walkway leading to two tiny rooms upstairs. Original panes of glass remain in the windows, which are encased in the original woodwork. The two massive doors have been refinished but contain the original locks, with their skeleton keys hanging by chains beside the doors.

Shutters once decorated the courthouse's outside windows, but only one sits in a corner room beside the vintage heating system. The courthouse was built with two staircases to access the second level, but one has been walled over.

The tin roof has been secured to prevent rain

from dropping into the structure, but the floor is so damaged that water soaks the walls from the ground up.

Those working to repair the courthouse have compiled a long list of what needs to be done, including a new Heating Ventilation and Air Condition system and cornice and cupola repair.

Although the groups know what must be completed to keep the courthouse standing, the final aesthetic vision of the courthouse is not yet complete. The Friends and Trust members are enduring a "dilemma of traditions" with the courthouse's inside design, said Pam Sackett, vice chair of the Friends and member of the Trust.

"We're hoping to accommodate for community uses with the structure. By community, we mean all of Prince William County, not just Brentsville. The ideal situation would be to have

school groups come in on Thursdays and see what the time was like. Then on Saturdays couples could come and get married in the courthouse," Sackett said.

The teams want both furnishings that are reminiscent of the period, but also open space for events. The Friends and Trust members, Sackett said, might decide on portable furniture and platforms that would help with both designs. In total, estimations for the courthouse have added up to a cool \$1 million.

However, to complete any repairs and make any designs come to fruition, money needs to come in from grants and donations. The Friends are the money-raising part of the joint group.

Since 1997, the group has applied for and received \$350,000 in state and federal grants to restore the buildings. Sen. Charles Colgan III, D-29th, is pushing for another \$50,000 dur-

ing the 2000 session of the state's General Assembly for improvements to the courthouse.

The Friends are developing relationships with corporate sponsors to help with an encampment fund-raiser and improvements, as well. The Friends have organized three fund-raisers for 2000.

During the spring, residents can taste dozens of chili recipes in a cook-off that benefits the historic buildings. In July, a Civil War Living History encampment will take place on the area surrounding the buildings. For a donation to the project, residents can participate and learn from the re-enactment. During the winter months, the Friends have sold Christmas tree ornaments that are replicas of the courthouse and schoolhouse.

An ongoing effort to raise money for the improvements is the sale of reprints of a 1907 book titled "Autobiography of Arab."

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The book is written by a South Carolina Calvary man stationed in Brentsville who told of the people he met in Prince William and the raids on Occoquan and Dumfries.

Individual donations have come in the form of money and artifacts, such as school books, a voter registration book from the early 1930's and a \$10,000 donation from a former student of the one-room schoolhouse.

Although the members of the Friends and the Trust are working hard to raise money, the detailed work is extensive and Sackett said the restoration process could last into another generation.

"I don't think I'll be able to see the final product. But, within six years I hope we will have transformed the [courthouse] into a site Prince William County can be proud of," Sackett said.

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