



By Way of Brentsville

The Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre cordially invite you to come "By way of Brentsville," on July 24th, anytime from 10:00 AM until 6:00 PM. As you stroll around the grounds enjoying the buildings, we thought the following extracts (just a sampling of the many we've gathered) from the *Official Records of the Army War of the Rebellion* may provide a bit of background for your tour of the site. Despite the research we've conducted, we're convinced this is only the tip of the iceberg. Some obvious questions remain:

- **What exactly did happen in Brentsville during the Civil War?**
- **How did the steadfast Courthouse survive?**
- **What do you think?**

As the County seat and geographic center of Prince William County, Brentsville is mentioned in **both Union and Confederate accounts** of troops in Prince William County. From 1861 - 1865, Brentsville hosted hundreds of soldiers from both sides, as evidenced by the following quotes. From the early beginnings of the Civil War, cavalry played a prominent role in Brentsville.

After the John Brown Raid at Harper's Ferry in October 1859, Brentsville raised her own militia the following winter. The Prince William Cavalry boasted a number of Brentsville native sons in the ranks, including Captain W. W. Thornton, a Brentsville farmer. The Cavalry was later incorporated into the **4th Regiment VA Cavalry, Company A**, which "has been described as one of the most distinguished cavalry commands in the Confederate service," according to Kenneth L. Stiles, author of *4th VA Cavalry*, The Virginia Regimental Histories Series, p.1.

Following 1st Manassas in the Fall of 1861, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston commanded the forces occupying much of Prince William County, including the **2nd SC Cavalry**, whose principle scouting ground was Brentsville. Union correspondence from Buxton to Colonel Marcy dated October 6, 1861 warns "...The movements of troops in VA are numerous and uncertain. They are expecting an attack and scarcely know where to look for it. **They have been strengthening in a place called Brentsville....**"

Brentsville's strategic location must have been evident to Brig. General W. H. C. Whiting, in Centreville, when he wrote to General Johnson, camped near Dumfries, on November 28, 1861: "I return your sketch (recorded as lost in the OAR) with some slight corrections. The roads are not correctly laid down. **For instance, the county road (Occoquan and Brentsville) should be continued to intersect the Dumfries and Brentsville. It is a broad, good road, and passes by Greenwood Church...**" and General Johnston's reply on December 6, 1861, "...I don't want our communications to be interrupted either by Davis' Ford or Bland's. Should we go to you, it might be well to do so in two

columns....should you have to fall back and it is practicable, it should be towards us by Bland's or Brentsville...."

From Washington, a memoranda dated approximately, December 1, 1861, **President Abraham Lincoln** writes to General George B. McClellan, acknowledging the strategic geographic location of Brentsville: "Suppose then that those southwest of the river 50,000 move forward and menace the enemy at Centreville. The remainder of the movable force on that side move rapidly to the crossing of the Occoquan by the road from Alexandria to Richmond, there to be joined, by the whole movable force from northeast of the river, having landed from the Potomac, just below the mouth of the Occoquan, moved by land up the south side of that stream to the crossing point named, then **the whole move together by road thence to Brentsville**, and beyond to the railroad just south of its crossing of Broad Run, a strong detachment of cavalry having gone rapidly ahead to destroy the railroad bridges south and north of the point."

By March 13, 1862, Confederate forces under the command of Colonel Wade Hampton, were in the process of withdrawing from Manassas, Dumfries and Occoquan towards Fredericksburg. Brig. General W. H. C. Whiting comments "The difficulties surrounding Colonel Hampton were indeed great. **..Balloons had been up every day for some days....**" March 6, 1862 Union correspondence from T. S. C. Lowe, Chief Aeronaut, to Brig. General R. B. Marcy, confirms "I ascended at 5 this p.m. and remained up until 6 o'clock. It was calm and clear, and many of the enemy's camps were visible, and the smoke ascending straight gave a good idea of the enemy's position...**Heavy smokes** (besides those seen in the morning) **at Dumfries, Brentsville, Bradley's and Manassas.**"

In an April 11, 1862 letter written by Levi Fritz of **Company A, 53rd PA**, to the *Montgomery Ledger* (published in *Pottstown, Pennsylvania*) Editors, Fritz recounts: "On Monday, March 24th, several companies of our regiment, and a detachment of the Illinois cavalry, under command of Lieut. Col. McMichael, were sent on a reconnoitering excursion. They proceeded up the railroad to Broad Run, crossing which, **they went down the stream as far as Brentsville**, the county seat of Prince William County, **without seeing the enemy in any force. At Brentsville Col. McMichael raised the national colors of the 53rd over the Court House amid the cheers of the men.**" (This letter, appeared in the April 15, 1862, . . . This reference was provided to the Friends by The Manassas Museum System.)

Late in the battle of 2nd Manassas, on August 30, 1862, at 6:30 PM, by command of Maj. General Pope, Col. George D.

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“Strengthening in a place called Brentsville...”

Ruggles Chief of Staff, orders General Banks to “Destroy the public property at Bristoe and fall back upon Centreville at once. Destroy all the railroad property. Your troops at Bristoe will **withdraw through Brentsville.**” By November 20, 1862, Joseph E. Snyder of the Union 11th Corps, a scout for General Siegel advised Major General Burnside that “All conscripts from the South are sent, upon arrival, to fill up some old regiment in the field. Of new regiments, there has been but two arrived in Richmond (from North Carolina) since Lee’s army has left. They are sent, via Gordonsville, to Rappahannock, and have been the force the rebels boasted of in Winchester, by saying **heavy re-enforcements had arrived from North Carolina and were occupying Brentsville, threatening to outflank General Siegel.**”

On June 12, 1863, Brentsville was once again a concern to the Union forces because of the activity of Mosby’s Rangers. By Command of Maj. General Heintzelman, Major General Stahel, Commander of Union Cavalry was informed “General: It is reported by Colonel Lowell that Mosby disbanded his people near Middleburg. **Have all houses in that vicinity searched for arms and ammunition. Arrest all men known to be disloyal and leave no horses which can be used by guerrillas. Do the same at and in the vicinity of Brentsville.**” Stahel is again directed on June 20, “The major general commanding directs that you **send out a force of cavalry, to go...via Brentsville, Howison’s Ford...500 men in all will answer the purpose...They may pick up information....**” and finally, the report from Brig. General Rufus King, June 20, 1863 “Our cavalry returned to Centreville last evening after visiting Wolf Run, Brentsville and Manassas Junction. **They captured 8 prisoners, among them the Lieutenant Colonel who ordered the draft at Brentsville....**”

October 14, 1863, during the Battle of Bristoe, Union correspondence reveals concern that Confederate forces would discover **a large concentration of supply wagons and trains in Brentsville**, about three miles east of the conflict. **Brig. General John Buford, U.S. Army, Commanding First Cavalry Division was headquartered in Brentsville** and submitted this report at 5:30 PM to Major General Pleasonton, “I feel uneasy about the wagons. I found the Sixth and Third Corps trains here, and all excited. The Cavalry Corps train is still in park here on account of the road being blocked up. I have a regiment that has passed Union Church on the Dumfries road en route to Wolf Run Shoals. Saw nothing. Will do the best I can, but the train is so large and so badly conducted that I apprehend trouble. I do not know even now on what roads the trains are moving, and night is upon us.”

Brentsville also provided the backdrop to **an ambush** on February 14, 1864, when 25 cavalrymen from **13th PA** observed “three rebel soldiers having run from the town into a thicket of pines in the direction of Cedar Run...” Captain James Carle, Provost Marshall at Bristoe Station reported that “two men fell killed and four were wounded by a volley proceeding from the thicket..I deemed it **expedient to return to Brentsville**, where I

posted the men and came into Camp to report to General Crawford, who ordered out two companies of infantry and all the available cavalry force attached to his headquarters to pursue the enemy....” Lt. Commander Edward O’Shea, **13th PA** reported on February 29, 1864, “...I left this camp at 3 a.m. February 28 with a detail of fifty men. By avoiding the road and keeping in the fields I got between Brentsville and the bridge over Cedar Run...**then advanced to Brentsville from the bridge and searched every house**, but found no enemy.”

Subsequently, on a March 8, 1864, **scout from Bristoe Station to Brentsville, Va.** Capt. Andrew H. McHenry, 13th PA Cavalry, reports from Camp near Bristoe Station. “...I proceeded from this camp at 6:40 instant, with a detail of **forty mounted cavalry from various companies** of this (Thirteenth) regiment, with one sergeant from Company H...approached the Cedar Run with caution, reconnoitered the position, then crossed by twos. Came to Brentsville, examined the place, found five houses occupied, including the jail. But two men reside in this town; the court-house has but a part of the roof remaining on; the houses are generally in ruins.”

Yet Brentsville remained stalwart as evidenced by this April 3, 1865 record from Captain Pierson, First Michigan Cavalry who “**went on a scout toward Brentsville yesterday. Today we returned, bringing seven prisoners — guerrillas. The pickets report all quiet.**”

As the Civil War wound to an end, in May 1865, many Union brigades, including those who had served as part of **General Sherman’s Army of Georgia**, marched to Brentsville to rest for the night before advancing to Washington, D.C. for the May 24th troop review before President Lincoln and Generals Grant and Sherman.

In conclusion, passing “by way of Brentsville” seems to have been an order given to many American soldiers who were propelled by the course of history to spend time in Brentsville, Virginia. One day soon, The Friends of Brentsville Court-house Historic Centre hope that you and your family will have the opportunity to do the same.

All quotes from the Official Army Records War of the Rebellion, unless otherwise noted. This article was researched and written by Pamela Myer Sackett with a big thanks to Mr. Terry Connors, Evansville, Indiana, for his special assistance to the Friends.

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**Capt. Andrew H. McHenry,
13th PA Cavalry
March 8, 1864**