

DATE: 3-3-2000

THE Daily Journal

Publication=Prince_William_Journal; Date=05.03.2000; Section=Front_Page; Page=1; Book=A;

Historic buildings to get

new look, inside and out

Local historic buildings to get makeovers

Plans are under way to revamp the decaying Brentsville Courthouse.

By CHRISTINE RODRIGO Journal staff writer

The Brentsville Courthouse survived occupation during the Civil War and the demands of hosting school-age children, but it is slowly losing its battle with the elements.

To stem the damage and restore the historic structure, plans are underway to revamp the building's exterior and install new heating and cooling systems. Once the building is stabilized and more funding is available, the two-story brick structure will be restored to its original appearance - both inside and out.

Those efforts got a huge boost several years ago when an area resident discovered an interior plan for the building. The undated, detailed layout shows the location of the judge's bench, jury box, court reporter and double staircase to the balcony.

"It was a very lucky find," said W. Douglas Gilpin, a partner with Dalgliesh, Eichman, Gilpin, Paxton, the Charlottesville architectural firm that is restoring the Brentsville Courthouse.

The Brentsville project is not Gilpin's first foray into the area. He is restoring another 19th century courthouse in Manassas and in the 1990s helped revitalize the Manassas train station - converting it from a leaky, abandoned freight office to its existing highly visible trio of roles as the headquarters for Historic Manassas Inc., the Manassas Visitors Center and the waiting area for train passengers.

The train station on Prince William Street had been abandoned for at least six years when the city purchased it and began renovation, Gilpin said. The \$300,000 project included removing partitions from the building's interior and replacing the roof with a custom-made clay tile roof that replicated the original. Old photos were reviewed and paint chips were analyzed to return the structure to its appearance in 1914 when it was first built, Gilpin said.

Elements included in the restoration of the train station will soon be reflected in another Manassas project - the Loy E. Harris Pavilion. After months of debate, city officials in December agreed on the pavilion's design. Its two-tier roof will resemble a typical train station, and triangle-shaped brackets between its columns and roofline will be similar to those at the city's train depot.

Those details were incorporated into the pavilion design at the request of local residents, said project architect Robert Loveless. Locals wanted the embellishments to tie together the two buildings that will be separated by just a few blocks when the \$1.32 million pavilion, at Center and West streets, is complete late this year.

Building alterations

In any historical renovation, the structure must be assessed and necessary repairs made before the hard work begins: determining the building's original appearance.

That's the big challenge at the one-room Brentsville Courthouse - a virtual shell of a building that has undergone many alterations through the years.

For example, during the 1900s, a second floor was added between the existing floor and high ceiling, Gilpin said. The existing arch-top windows were likely added at the same time. And at some point two sets of stairs on opposite sides of the room were taken out and a new set of stairs was added in a different location, he added.

"You get a sixth sense" for where things were and why something was changed, Gilpin said.

The Brentsville Courthouse has undergone many alterations because it has had a variety of uses since being constructed in 1822. Built in the exact geographic center of the county, the two-story structure started off as a courthouse and witnessed encampments of Confederate and Union troops during the Civil War. Federal soldiers supposedly burned many county records, Gilpin said.

Many courthouses didn't survive occupation because troops would use bricks to build fireplaces for heat and cooking facilities near their tents, said Wilkie Smith Leith, vice chairwoman of the Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre.

Brentsville served as Prince William's county seat until 1892, when residents voted to move the county seat to Manassas. In an interesting parallel, that vote spurred the construction of the courthouse on Lee Avenue, which Gilpin is also restoring.

When the county government relocated, the Brentsville Courthouse was converted to a school, and when a new school was built in 1928 the Courthouse's resume was padded with uses including a mattress factory and offices for the Prince William County Park Authority.

All those alterations have left their mark on the building - literally. A concrete floor - possibly poured to replace uneven wooden planks - is forcing moisture up through the walls and causing plaster to deteriorate, Gilpin said. To limit that damage, preservationists will revamp the heating and ventilation systems and add air conditioning. On the exterior, plans are underway for some brick work and restoring the cupola.

The budget for the Brentsville project has not yet been established, but funding is tight so work will be done only as money is available, said Lou Ann Purkins, an architect with Prince William County's Public Works Department.

The Brentsville restoration is a joint project between Prince William County, the Park Authority and the Brentsville Historic Centre Trust. The restoration involves more than just the Courthouse. Officials also want to revamp other nearby structures, including a jail also built in 1822; a one-room schoolhouse built in 1928; and the Brentsville Union Church, built between 1870 and 1874.

"It's an example of a rural town square," Leith said of the 23-acre property. "As luck would have it, no one tore those buildings down."

A master plan for the area, which includes a lot where a tavern served travelers a century ago, will be prepared to help determine the best use for the complex and how much money must be budgeted for restoration, Purkins said.

Budgeting for a restoration project can be tricky, and Purkins has learned to always expect the unexpected. She once worked on a renovation project in a historic Charlottesville home that involved tearing down a 2-foot-thick brick wall to enlarge a room. She and her co-workers were surprised to find bricks behind the outer layer were not held together with mortar.

When the group broke through the outside layer of bricks and got to the middle of the wall, "bricks just dropped," she said.

"You think one way, and reason tells you they would do it that way, and you get in and find out it's not that way at all," Purkins added.

Preservationists want to open a restored Brentsville Courthouse as a public space in keeping with its history of hosting regional events, said Pam Sackett, secretary of Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre.

The Courthouse also will be the centerpiece for instructing people about life in the 19th century.

"It's preserving bricks and mortar, but the ultimate goal is to tell the stories of the people who passed by, who lived there," Leith said.

Preserving identities

Along with the challenge of restoring a building to its original condition, historical architects must also bring the structures up to code.

The Old Prince William Courthouse in Manassas, for example, will be open to the public, but it doesn't meet fire codes, have adequate bathrooms or access for the disabled.

The challenge, Gilpin said, is to provide access for everyone without having a -mile ramp in front of a historic building.

The Courthouse, at the corner of Lee and Grant avenues in Manassas, is a two-story Romanesque Revival structure topped by a large clock tower. Tall, narrow windows slice through the red brick building that hosted court proceedings from 1893 until 1984 when a new courthouse was built just down the road.

The former courthouse is being restored in two phases and when complete will accommodate Prince William County Court Services on its first floor and the general public with an expansive meeting area on the second floor. The second floor courtroom will be reproduced as it appeared in the late 1800s or early 1900s and will provide some needed meeting space in the area, Purkins said.

Work is now underway to update its electrical, mechanical and safety systems, "more or less the guts of the building," Gilpin said.

The timetable for completing the project is dependent upon funding, Gilpin said.

Prince William County has budgeted \$840,427 for the project, and will do as much as possible with those funds, Purkins said.

The electrical and mechanical systems will be complete in late February, allowing work to begin on the interior. If the project is still in the black financially after interior renovations are complete, some minor work will be done to the building's exterior, Purkins said.

It would be easier to tear these old buildings down rather than spending so many months and even years doing research and finding funding to restore them, but in doing so communities would lose their identities, Purkins said.

"It's preserving our cultural resources," she said. "How do you put a price on a historic building?"

Copyright - The Journal Newspapers

Byline=CHRISTINE_RODRIGO; Aspect=CHRISTINE_RODRIGO;
Aspect=Prince_William_Journal; Aspect=05.03.2000;
Aspect=Front_Page; Aspect=1; Aspect=A;