

# BRENTSVILLE

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said Robert Orrison, site manager for the center. "It helps us market the site."

The term Underground Railroad usually brings to mind images of runaway slaves hiding in the homes and businesses of sympathizers as they made their way north to freedom. However, the Underground Railroad designation is also given to sites of resistance to slavery, and it is for those acts of rebellion that Brentsville has been honored.

"They had slave auctions in front of the courthouse and executions of runaway slaves at the courthouse," Orrison said.

## Runaway slaves

There are three particular cases related to African-Americans in Brentsville.

The first involved a runaway slave named Billy who was held at the jail in February 1833 and who was seen by a doctor on three successive days.

The second is the case of William Hyden. Hyden was a free black who was traveling through Prince William in 1833 when he was arrested and held for sale as a runaway. Deputy Sheriff Basil Brawner tried to sell Hyden repeatedly, including during Court Day in Brentsville, but to no avail.

Historical documents state slave traders wouldn't buy Hyden because they said "his colour was too light and that he could by reason thereof too easily escape from slavery and

pass himself for a free man." He was jailed for nearly a year before he escaped from the Brentsville jail.

Nor was he the only one. An historical marker in front of the jail states that "records of numerous escapes are evidence that the building was never fully secure."

The third African-American case involves a slave named Landon who was arrested after running away from William Bowers of Fauquier County in 1839.

Court records state that Landon, "not having the fear of God before his eyes, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil... did with force and maliciously set fire to the Jail of the County of Prince William...."

Landon was sentenced to hang on April 4, 1839.

But whites were also tried at the courthouse for slave-related activities.

## Slave owners and abolitionists

In 1845, a slave owner named Gerard Mason was sentenced to jail after he was found guilty of murdering his slave, Katy, who died of head injuries.

It is not clear how long he served, but he was free five years later when he was murdered by another female slave, Agness.

In addition, two white men were charged and tried for being abolitionists. In August 1857, a county resident named Crawford was charged with declaring "that he was an Abolitionist, that he believed a Negro as good as he was, if he

behaved himself, and maintaining, by speaking, that persons have not the right of property in slaves under the law."

In November of the same year, a man named John Underwood was found guilty of saying that "owners have no rights of property in their slaves."

Underwood was fined the enormous sum of \$312.50.

The most well-known of the Brentsville abolitionists was Dangerfield Newby, the first person killed in John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry.

Newby was a free black whose wife and children were enslaved to Dr. Jennings of Brentsville in the late 1850s. Newby reportedly raised \$742 in an attempt to buy his family's freedom, but Jennings refused to sell.

Unable to free his wife and children, Newby joined the 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry and was killed. It is believed that his family was sold south into Louisiana a short time later.

## The end of Brentsville

The Civil War brought an end to the town's slave auctions and trials and essentially ended the livelihood of the town itself.

The clerk's office was razed and most of the county's records were lost during the war. In addition, the courthouse itself was severely damaged and the majority of the

buildings in the town were destroyed.

The town struggled to recover, but residents and business owners started moving east into Manassas, where the railroad fueled a growing economy. When the court system was moved into Manassas, as well, in 1893, Brentsville was all but abandoned.

Today, the community remains a quiet agricultural village — except for the tourists, who come calling every weekend to experience the town's antebellum and Underground Railroad history.

## Visit

Tours of Brentsville will be

offered this weekend from 11 to 4 p.m. In addition, the site will be a stop on the Battle of Second Manassas bus tour on Saturday, Aug. 30.

The Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre is located at 12229 Bristow Road. Call (703) 365-7895 for details or bus tour reservations.