

The Friends Of Brentsville Historic Centre

Our Mission

- To encourage community involvement and volunteerism in the Brentsville Historic Center;
- To provide a forum for community outreach for Brentsville Centre visitors and tourists;
- To support educational and historical programs at the Brentsville Historic Center;
- To promote the acquisition and management of artifacts of historic importance to the courthouse, schoolhouse, jail, church, and related structures at the Brentsville Historic Center;
- To support the Brentsville Centre's Historic transportation, community significance and natural resources;
- To conduct, sponsor, or facilitate the holding of conferences, seminars, tours, and other educational and information activities;
- To solicit and accept any gifts, funds, property to support the mission of the Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Center;

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Our Heritage

Brentsville Courthouse and its related properties served as the county seat of Prince William County from 1820 to 1892. The Courthouse and jail were constructed in 1822; the present school was built in 1910 and stands on the site of what was the clerk's office for many years. The Board of Supervisors and the Courts as we know them in Prince William County first functioned here. These structures were used for a variety of purposes over the years after Manassas became the county seat, but fortunately remained in the public domain. The site (nearly 18 acres) is formally designated a Historic Recreation Area. It was open to the public under the County Parks and Recreation Center in October, 1975.

Long before Brentsville became the county seat it was the crossroads of Indian trade paths and rough roads from the Potomac to the Blue Ridge Mountains. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, James Monroe, William Grayson, and many other notables of our colonial period knew the area and had occasion to pass through it.

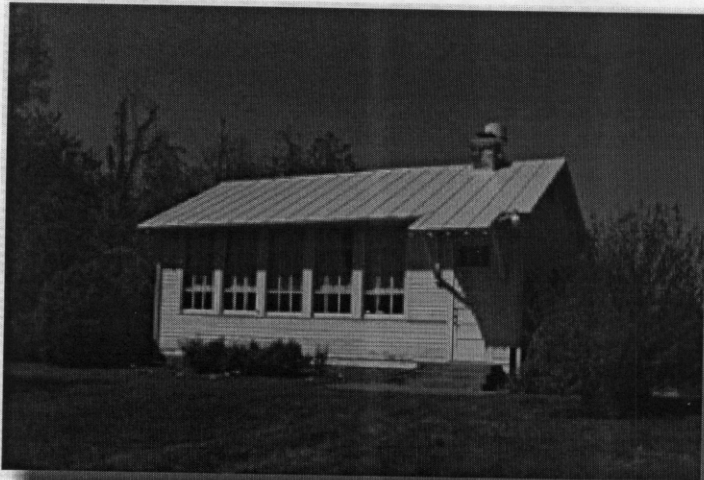
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Brentsville Factoids

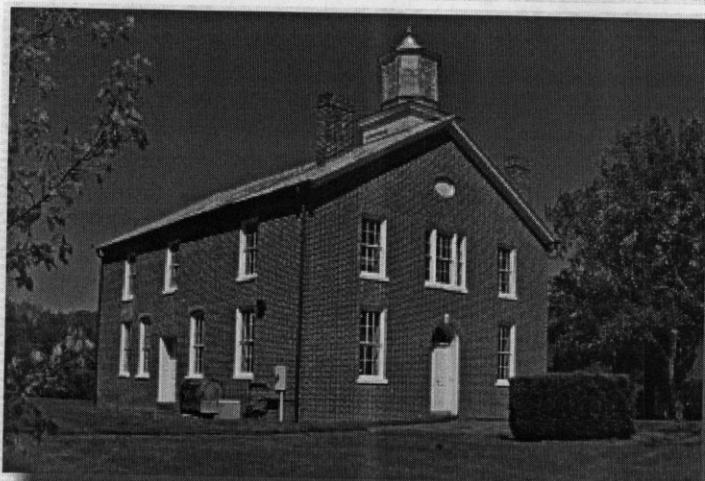
- Part of the Brent Town Grant of 1686/7 was made by King James II of England.
- Native Americans made their way from the mountains to the Potomac via paths/trails through the area.
- This land was first surveyed in 1737.
- The Native Americans and/or settlers used Broad Run as an early means of transportation.
- The Commonwealth of Virginia confiscated the land in 1779 after the Revolutionary War because British supporters owned it.
- Land was rented by VA from 1779-1820 and was heavily farmed and timbered.
- Thomas Jefferson used the road on his inaugural route from Monticello to Washington.
- The six-acre site for Courthouse and Tavern Lots was decided by the General Assembly in 1820.
- Courthouse, Jail and Clerk of Court's office were built in 1821 and opened in 1822.
- The town of Brentsville was first platted in 1822.
- Adjacent former tavern was built somewhere around 1822-24.
- Bristow Road originally was a toll road.
- Confederate soldiers were recruited on the Courthouse Lot.
- Union soldiers raided Brentsville for building materials and raised the Union Flag over the Courthouse in 1862.
- Historic papers bearing the signatures of John Jay, Lord Fairfax, and George Washington were lost/taken from the Clerk's office during the Civil War.
- Several buildings within the town have survived the Civil War and are still in use today.
- First Board of County Supervisors convened their meetings in the Courthouse in 1870.
- Brentsville Union Church was built about 1874 and has been vacant since the 1960's.
- Brentsville School was built in 1929 - one of only a few 1-room schools remaining. It is believed to be on the site of the original Clerk of the Court's office.

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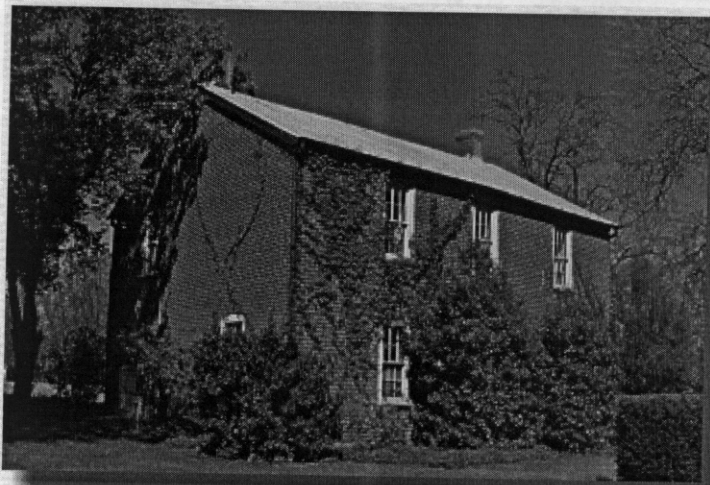
Brentsville Photos



This school was built in 1910 and stands on the site of what was the clerk's office for many years.



The Courthouse was constructed in 1822



The jail was also constructed in 1822. It served as the offices for the Prince William County Park Authority for many years.

IN MY MOTHER'S THINGS

Why Family Genealogy is Helpful to Brentsville

By: Pamela Myer Sackett

The Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre are proud to cosponsor the "Families Remembered" Weekend May 20—21, 2000, with the Prince William County Genealogical Society. The PWGS is celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the organization this year. The Society has planned a weekend full of activities designed to attract families to Prince William County to "find their roots."

The Friends hope that some of the family researchers will find their way to Brentsville on May 20th, either for lunch, or to seek the trail of long lost Brentsville relatives and friends. We've tried to cover all the bases by scheduling our 3rd Annual Chili Cook-off AND OUR 1ST EVER REUNION of all of the teachers and students who attended school in either the Brentsville Courthouse or the One Room School House. As part of our "Brentsville roots search," we hope to capture some of the memories of returning teachers and students on tape and/or video, as part of our ongoing oral history project.

Anyone who has dabbled in family genealogy knows that research can lead search for Brentsville's history is proving to be no different!

So far, via the Internet, we've made contacts with descendants in Virginia, Arizona, Iowa, New Jersey and Michigan. In researching families connected to Brentsville, we're also learning about Brentsville history. Using historic records of land transactions, wills, obituaries, court and census records and property tax rolls available in the Prince William County Bull Run Library Relic Room, Brentsville researchers are beginning to create a picture of the 19th century Town of Brentsville, surrounding farms and inhabitants.

This research has yielded some exciting primary sources for information about Brentsville. Last fall, contact with one Brentsville descendent of the KING family, yielded a copy of an unpublished letter dated "Washington Sept 29th 1842, describing financial hardship in the area. "I am told most of Prince William is broke.. there are several applications for the Bankrupt Law..." This letter was sent to a former Prince William resident who had moved to Ohio.

E. P. Henderson's 1907 book *Autobiography of Arab* (offered for sale by the Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre) was initially obtained through an Internet connection to Joseph Matheson, a re-enactor with the Hampton Legion. The book chronicles Hampton Legion activity in Prince William County during the Civil War and mentions the following Brentsville area families: HOWISON, COOPER, TOWLES, SHEPHERD, FOSTER, WILLIAMS, COCKRELL, DULIN, BODINE, KLINE, MARSTELLER, GIBSON and Prince William County families like SELECTMAN, TRENNIS, MAXWELL, BRADFIELD, CATLETT and DAVIS.

Interestingly, one of the stories of a Prince William County calvary skirmish can also be verified through other sources which have recently been uncovered by the Friends. Brentsville researchers connected via the Internet, with a writer named Keith Kehlbeck, who is researching and writing a book about his wife's family, the Towles, who are mentioned in *Autobiography of Arab*

Mr. Kehlbeck has graciously loaned copies of several unpublished letters and a portion of a diary held by descendants of the TOWLES family to Pam Sackett, of the Friends, for study purposes. These letters reveal some interesting facts about Brentsville during the Civil War.

Reverend John TOWLES served as preacher for 27 years (from 1839 to 1867) at the St. James Episcopal Church in Brentsville (ca. 1847, now present day Hatcher's Memorial Baptist). This connection to the TOWLES family is exciting because Reverend TOWLES was central to many Brentsville families' lives. For example, he performed two marriage ceremonies for two of Dr. James MACRAE's (Trustee of Brentsville) daughters in the MACRAE home. Dr. MACRAE's son, Lee was a best friend of both TOWLES brothers, Robert and Vivian, sons of Reverend TOWLES, according to research compiled by Mr. Kehlbeck.

Robert and Vivian TOWLES and Lee MACRAE joined the 4th VA Cavalry, recruited at the Brentsville Courthouse in

1861. However, during the Civil War, Reverend TOWLES moved his family to Lancaster County, VA where the family had relations. (The TOWLES family is also related to the Lancaster branch of the EWELL family and to the CHOWNING family of Virginia.)

The letters that survive are mostly addressed to the TOWLES' younger sister. As they tried to spare the graphic depictions of the war they witnessed, some of the letters mention news of their neighbors from the brothers who were periodic scouts in the Brentsville area. Sadly, we can only imagine what the TOWLES brothers' letters to their mother expatriated to Lancaster, hungry for news about their old neighborhood and parishioners, must have been like, based upon several references to Brentsville in the sisters' letters.

A May 20, 1863 letter from Vivian states "I have written in Mother's letter an accurate account of the late misdoings of the Enemy in Pr. Wm. In which some of our best friends ladies distinguished for piety, virtue and all goodness have been made to taste almost the last dregs of the bitter cup of War's horrors."

However, the letters that the brothers wrote to Mrs. TOWLES were destroyed by Federal troops in Lancaster, making the letters which did survive even more valuable to Brentsville today.

In one letter dated January 1864, Robert described his life as a bushwhacker around Brentsville. The letter describes a hut he made using a haystack for a shelter located 3 miles from the railroad. He writes "We are convenient to the houses of several friends and suffer for nothing."

Robert TOWLES is also mentioned in Arab as one of the local soldiers who joined the 2nd SC Cavalry as scouts. Robert mentions the death of Sgt. Sparks (2nd SC Cavalry) at the Theodore BODINE farm, outside of the Town of Brentsville (vile) in just one line of another letter, dated January 10th, 1864. These few brief words provide a valuable, second primary source to verify a more lengthy account of Sgt. Sparks' death in the Autobiography of Arab, by E. P. Henderson.

In addition to these priceless letters, Mr. Kehlbeck also provided the Friends with a copy of a picture of Robert TOWLES in his uniform. With this gift, Brentsville researchers discovered what any family genealogist also understands, that a picture IS WORTH a 1000 words! The picture of Robert TOWLES has joined our "Wall of Memories" in the Brentsville One Room School House as a face forever connected to Brentsville.

In another letter written by Vivian TOWLES, Robert's brother, a mere paragraph is chock full of tidbits about Brentsville life during the Civil War: "Yankee Cavalry swept through the old neighborhood and ran the scouts out. They caught three of our Co. in bed at Effingham and took horses from Mr. Howison the third or fourth time. Your friend Bettie H. has grown much and is very pretty and sweet. There are no schools in that Country and the children who have had schooling are not likely to get more and those who have not will go without. How much I hope that that Country will be relieved of its despoilers very soon, and forever."

Mr. Howison and his family is also mentioned in Autobiography of Arab. The Arab account is a moving story about how Mr. Howison tried to keep his home, "Effingham," from being burned down by "the enemy" — who could have been either the Federal or Confederate troops, depending upon which forces were in control of the Brentsville area at the time.

Piece by piece, line by line, story by story, we are painstakingly tracking down leads, information, contacts and primary source documents which help us to tell the story of Brentsville, Virginia. Sometimes the research actually leads us to another state. For example, about 35 families: BODINE, DEATS, GOODE, HIXON, KASE, PETTY, ROSEBERRY, just to mention a few, living near Brentsville in the mid-1800's have a connection to New Jersey. Some families currently being researched hail specifically from Warren County, New Jersey. In the late 18th—early 19th centuries, Prince William County placed advertisements in New Jersey papers to entice farmers to migrate to Prince William County. (PW It's People and Places, p.)

Information about New Jersey born Caleb DEATS came to the Friends from two sources so far: 4th VA, by Kenneth Stiles and an obituary printed in the Manassas Gazette in 18....

Caleb and his younger brother Ellis, despite their Northern birth, enlisted and served in Co. A, 4th Prince William Cavalry. A Towles letter dated July 21, 1863, reports: "Of the young men in our neighborhood, no one has been killed recently except young DEATS of our Co. who was killed fighting bravely."

Caleb survived the Civil War, but died due to a self inflicted gunshot wound due to despondency.

Another obituary yielded some invaluable information about the kind of community Brentsville must have been by the end of the 19th century. In a March 1, 1895 memorial published in the Manassas Gazette obituary, a wonderful description of the Brentsville community was tucked among accolades for Dr. J. Willette Leache. To appreciate the quality of the description, a bit of Dr. Leache's background must be conveyed.

Dr. J. Willette Leache, born in 1809 in Rockville, MD, attended medical school in Philadelphia, worked in top New York City hospitals, and frequently visited his banker father in Georgetown, D.C. When he married his second wife (the daughter of Senator Charles Hunton, of Fauquier County), Dr. Leache gave up his Baltimore practice to move to Fauquier County where, according to the Manassas Gazette, "he lived for many years enjoying a large and very lucrative practice." Unfortunately his second wife died and he moved to Front Royal and remarried.

These moves are important to Brentsville researchers and the life Dr. Leache led become important, because in 1872, according to the memorial, he finally settled in the Town of Brentsville, where he lived for the last 20 years of his life in the home of his daughter and son-in-law, AW SNCLAIR

In Brentsville, Dr. Leache established his office of "Physician and Surgeon, Disease of the Chest a Specialty" according to a November 23, 1872 advertisement in the Manassas Gazette. The 1895 Manassas Gazette memorial noted that: "Dr. Leache had a singular attachment for Brentsville, its scenery and people, and often expressed the opinion and presentiment that should he go elsewhere he would not live long." What a testimony to the Town of Brentsville and inhabitants — a year AFTER the County Seat had moved to Manassas.

Obviously the search for Brentsville's history will take researchers down many different paths for many years to come. Volunteers of The Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre are trying to assemble this research as quickly as possible for release to the public. Some of our historical findings have appeared in past newsletters. We have received copies of over 35 photographs of Brentsville or Brentsville residents which are displayed with pride on our "Wall of Remembrance" in the Old One Room Schoolhouse. In addition, we continue to correspond with genealogists searching for any clue, however seemingly small about Brentsville citizens or history.

As we continue to reconstruct Brentsville's seemingly "lost" history, sometimes we are sometimes privileged to touch an actual historical document, a real part of Prince William's past. As any genealogist knows, this can sometimes be an emotional experience. At our last general membership meeting, one of our members produced a letter — the letter, not a copy—dated 1795, signed by John Williams, Clerk of the Court. She explained, it had simply been "in my mother's things." Forget the 1000 words, we were speechless.

What else is out there that can tell us about Brentsville, her citizens and her way of life?" If you or any member of your family have information, or think you might have any information about Brentsville — even just one line in a family letter or diary — please contact us. Also, if you would like to help us research Brentsville families, or history, we would love to work with you.

As any genealogist knows, often a story about the past somehow gets a life of its own and begs to be told. These connections we've found through seemingly unrelated sources lead us to believe that Brentsville's story will one day be told, thanks in part, to family genealogists who will share information, pictures and resources with us. In turn, we promise to share these stories with future visitors to Brentsville.

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