

## Brentsville Friends

An Update from the Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre, Inc.  
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### A Brief History of Brentsville Lot #16 Site of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Brentsville Township Hall

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Historical interpretation of the Town of Brentsville has long featured its role as the county seat for Prince William from 1822 until 1894. Indeed, the town was created for the very purpose of serving as such. Little has been written on the details of daily life in the town, with the bulk of published research focusing on events and people associated with the public buildings. By virtue of the need for the public to travel to court, the town's population and commerce expanded throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The town even had its own "Township Hall" from which the business of the magisterial district of Brentsville was conducted.

Brentsville's Township Hall was built on Brentsville Lot #16. This lot was located at the intersection of Main Street (today Bristow Road/Rte. 619) and Bristow Street. This lot is directly across Main Street from the location of the former Clerk's Office and the Courthouse. Ownership of the lot can be traced back as far as 1687, to the Bristow era, when this land was part of 7500 acres granted by James II to Robert Bristow. The land remained in the Bristow family and was tenanted by farmers until 1776, when the land was escheated because the fifth Robert Bristow resided in London at the time of the Revolution (*Virginia Reports, Annotated*, Vol. 6). The Commonwealth of Virginia administered the confiscated land until creation of the 50-acre Town of Brentsville. The land surrounding the town continued to be managed by the State's agents until the 1830s and 1840s when the lots were finally sold (Calendar of State Papers, March 10, 1794).

A map of the Bristow Tract, showing the lots therein with associated tenants, was created in 1823 (PWC Map Book). This map confirms that it was from Bristow Tract lands that Brentsville was created by an Act of the General Assembly (Acts of the General Assembly, Chapter 93, Jan. 23, 1822). The new town was built upon the fifty acres that were known as Bristow Lot #27 and Bristow Unleased Lot #6. The town was laid out, and newly created lots were sold by the Trustees. It is important to differentiate between Bristow Tract lots and Brentsville town lots as confusion can be seen in previous publications.

On April 8, 1823, the Trustees sold to John D. Harrison Brentsville Lots 3, 5, 6, 16, 18, 29, 30, 31 and 32 (PWC Deed Books). Brentsville Lot #16 was on that portion of land originally part of the 114-acre Bristow Lot #27, at that time under lease to James Purcell

(Library of Virginia, APA 660). Purcell's transfer of the lease on his former Bristow lands to Harrison was recorded on June 3, 1823 (PWC Deed Books). Purcell's rents were thereby reduced as seen in the Bristow Tract agent's records. (Library of Virginia, APA 660). The Purcell family had been tenants of the Bristow Tract for many years at the time of the town's creation (Library of Virginia, APA 660).

John D. Harrison appears to have been an early, volume purchaser, but by 1825 his finances became unsound. He was confined in the Brentsville jail for debts to several men, including John Maddox, whose tavern was the site of the historic meeting during which the location of the Town of Brentsville was determined. Harrison apparently leased land on at least two farms, Maddox's and Humphrey Peake's (PWC Deed Books and Clerks Loose Papers, 1826). Brentsville Lot #16 was sold, or at least a deed in trust was executed, on October 25, 1825. At the time of this business deal, the Prince William County Land Tax Books indicate the lots were "unimproved," meaning that they had not yet been built upon. The purchasers were partners Ezra Lunt and Zinas Kinsey.

Lunt and Kinsey were residents of Alexandria. "Lunt & Kinsey Grocers" leased a store and dwelling on the corner of King and Alfred Streets in Alexandria in 1825 (Miller's *Portrait of Alexandria*). Lunt was a member of the Board of Health and served as an axe man and commander of hose for the Star Fire Company. Kinsey was also known to be a currier, one who prepares and dresses leather for use in other trades (Miller, *Artisans & Merchants of Alexandria*, 1780 - 1820, Vol. 2). It appears that it was not unusual for successful merchants in Alexandria to supply loans or purchase and sell property in Brentsville, as other transactions on different lots in the town have been noted (PWC Deed Books).

Despite the date of the Harrison to Lunt and Kinsey transaction for 1825, Harrison continued to be assessed for the lot until 1832. Another oddity in the Land Tax Books relates to the amount Harrison was assessed for the nine lots he purchased of the Trustees. Each lot in Brentsville was valued at \$50 for the land, and then an additional sum was added for improvements. From 1824 until 1832, Harrison was assessed at \$112.50 for all nine lots which were labeled as unimproved. The Deed Books do not shed light on the specifics for Lot #16, since record of the transaction from Harrison to Lunt & Kinsey is not extant, but rather elaborated upon in the next deed in the chain of title to the lot.

Lunt and Kinsey sold Lot #16 to James H. Reid and Robert Alexander on October 1, 1831 (PWC Deed Books). The Land Tax Books for 1832 confirm this transaction, stating, "Reid, Jas. H & Robert Alexander, #16, \$100, By deed from Lunt & Kinsey." This ownership of Lot #16 and the value of the property with improvements, remained unchanged in the Land Tax Books until 1856. Reid and Alexander were merchant partners in at least one firm in Dumfries and possibly another elsewhere (PWC Deed Books). Alexander is noted to have purchased a merchant's license in 1827 and Alexander and Reid were granted several licenses in 1832, possibly indicative of multiple business locations. Throughout the next ten years, various Reid, Alexander and Reid family members held such licenses (PWC Fee Books and Personal Property Tax Books).

These licenses include those for merchants, a store, and a milliner, making it likely that Brentsville Lot #16 was an important location for commerce in the town.

James H. Reid was born in 1804 and married to Amia Ann. The Alexandria Gazette reported on June 11, 1833, that James H. Reid was named Clerk of the Circuit Superior Court of Law and Chancery for Prince William County. Reid later served as treasurer for the Orange and Alexandria Railroad from 1861 – 1865 ([www.csa-railroads.com](http://www.csa-railroads.com)). He died in 1869 (Miller, *Alexandria, Virginia Census for 1860* and *Artisans and Merchants of Alexandria, Virginia, 1780-1820*, Vol. 2). The exact nature of his and his partner's Brentsville businesses remains unclear, but a review of existing maps indicates there were at least two structures on Lot #16.

While some structures across the street from the courthouse are included on the 1822 plats for Brentsville, no structures are noted for Lot #16 (PWC Plat Book). It is interesting to note that by 1834 there appear to be two structures on the lot (Library of Virginia, Board of Public Works Survey for the Warrenton and Occoquan Turnpike). One is on Main Street at the corner of Lot #16 that articulates with adjacent Lot #15. The other structure is approximately halfway down the lot fronting Bristow Street. Neither of these structures was very substantial when a comparison is made to the assessed values for other known structures in the town (PWC Land Tax Books). The 1857 and 1858 land tax assessments actually indicate a decrease in value for the buildings to \$80 with the note "Buildings destroyed." This lower assessment remained the same until 1870 when the value increased to \$100 again.

During the 1870s, another Reid relative, Joseph B., rose to greater prominence in the town. Reid was also a merchant and operated at different times an ordinary, house of private entertainment, bar room, bowling saloon, boarding house and hotel. The Supervisor's Minute Books for 1870 – 1907 indicate he was appointed as a commissioner to make repairs to the upper floor of the jail in December of 1870. In 1871, he was appointed as Commissioner of the Public Lot. The 1870 Census reported Joseph B. Reid, son of William and Lydia Reid, was 36 years of age, an "innkeeper" assessed for property worth \$2500. He was married to Margaret, daughter of William and Harriet Keys, aged 32, who was "keeping house." They had, in 1870, one child, Henry W. aged 1 year. On May 25, 1871, Reid's bond to the Commonwealth of Virginia for his election as Supervisor of the Brentsville Township was recorded (PWC Deed Books). Several years after the death of James H. Reid, Joseph B. Reid purchased Lot #16 from the elder Reid's heirs (PWC Land Tax Books).

While no deed for the Reid to Reid transaction was found, the Land Tax Books indicate it occurred in 1875. It may be that the deal occurred slightly earlier but inconsistencies in the records exist for the period around the Civil War. Regardless, a deed dated April 23, 1874 between Joseph B. Reid and Margaret his wife to the Brentsville Township for "a certain lot or parcel of ground in the town of Brentsville, County of Prince William, bounded and described as follows: beginning at the North West corner of Lot No. 16 in the plan of the said Town on Main Street, at the North West corner of Mordecai B. Sinclair's lot thence along the line of the said Sinclair's lot nearly south 28 feet thence

nearly West 30 feet, thence back to Main Street 30 feet west of the starting point thence along Main Street East to the beginning making a lot of ground 28 by 30 feet and containing 840 square feet..." (PWC Deed Books). By this conveyance, the Supervisor of the Brentsville Township had a town hall from which to conduct business. The transaction followed an "Act to provide the manner in which Property may be held and disposed of for the benefit of the magisterial Districts in which such Property is situated," which was approved by the General Assembly on March 26, 1873 (Virginia General Assembly, Chap. 254). Statement of the provisions for Virginia town halls were:

*"1. Be it enacted by the general assembly, That in every county in this state, where any township shall have, heretofore, at the exclusive expense of such township, erected town halls or acquired other property necessary and convenient for the use of the citizens of such townships, it shall be the duty of the county judge to appoint three trustees, citizens of the magisterial district in which such property may be situated, in whom the title to such property shall be vested, and whose duty it shall be to preserve such property for the use of the citizens of said magisterial district, or sell the same if, in the judgment of said trustees, it should be deemed necessary, for the benefit of the citizens of said magisterial district.*

*2. In the event of the sale of any such property, by the trustees appointed under the provisions of the first section, the proceeds of such sale shall be applied, by an order of the county court, to the use and benefit of the public free schools of the magisterial district in which the property so sold is situated.*

*3. This act shall be in force from its passage."*

The remainder of Lot #16 was charged to Joseph B. Reid until 1881 (PWC Land Tax Books). At that time, the assessed value dropped from \$100 to \$50. This reduction may be attributed to Reid's no longer being responsible for that portion of the lot, while another structure remained elsewhere on the property. The Township Hall portion of Lot #16 represents that part of the lot on which the 1834 survey depicted a structure. It is possible the Township Hall was the same building that previously housed a business, based on its prime location fronting Main Street. The question could also be entertained as to whether or not the building was in use as a town hall prior to the Act of 1873.

After a mere five years, the Township Hall portion of Lot #16 was sold. On June 2, 1879, William A. Bryant and Arthur H. Woodyard, Trustees appointed by Prince William County, sold the Township Hall and lot to Charles E. Nicol (PWC Deed Books). This was done in pursuance to the Act of the General Assembly to provide the manner in which property could be disposed of for the benefit of the magisterial district. The Land Tax Book for 1879 clearly shows Nicol as responsible for land taxes on one lot valued at \$125 with its improvements with the note reading, "By deed from Township Trustees formerly Township Hall."

Later, on February 11, 1882, the Virginia General Assembly, recorded "An ACT to Incorporate the Town of Brentsville in the County of Prince William: The said town of Brentsville is hereby authorized to use the county jail of Prince William County as a place of confinement or imprisonment for all persons ordered to be confined or

imprisoned by the proper authority.” Apparently not all of the Town’s residents were law abiding at that time. Clearly the town was still functioning as such, but was now using the county jail. Where was the business of the town being conducted? A single, far fetched piece of evidence was revealed in the Land Tax Books. In 1883, the Estate of James F. Clark was assessed for \$175 for the land and \$200 for the land including improvements for a lease on “Part Town Hall.” In all of the previous years Clarke/Clark’s Estate was assessed, the location of the property was referred to as “Tavern Lot.” But Clark’s assessment for a “Tavern Lot” only muddies the waters, since Brentsville was home to many taverns throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including ones immediately adjacent to Lot #16 and at least one for which the Reid family were proprietors. Clark, a former District Attorney for Prince William County, was killed in 1872 while being held in the Brentsville jail for alleged inappropriateness with a young woman from Manassas.

A conveyance dated April 27, 1883 was recorded from Joseph B, Reid to Charles E. Nicol for \$125. This deed was for that part of Lot #16 described as 6.3 poles fronting Main Street and 9.7 poles on Bristow Street, also adjoining the Episcopal Church lot and that of M.B. Sinclair. The deed further stated it was known as the Poplar Corner lot. On the same day Reid conveyed the larger portion of Lot #16 to Nicol, the latter conveyed it to French J. Davis for \$150 (PWC Deed Books). The Land Tax Books are perhaps a little less confusing than the recorded deeds. In 1884, Nicol’s assessed value of the land and improvements for lot 16 was \$350, with a note added, “By deed Joseph B. Reid, \$300 added for building.” In 1885, strangely, the assessed value dropped to \$175. Then, in 1886, French J. Davis was assessed for the value of \$800 and the accompanying note stated, “From Reid to Reid, Reid to Nicol, Nicol to Davis.” A period of construction on the lot is thus documented.

When real estate agents today repeat the litany, “location, location, location,” they would have been happy to broker Brentsville Lot #16. It was an excellent location for a business, right across the street from the busy courthouse and at the intersection of two of the town’s few main roads, providing easy access. There were also many businesses on other lots nearby, increasing prospective clientele. The lot’s owners, over time, included men not only engaged in business, but heavily involved in the county and Brentsville town governments. When one visits the town of Brentsville today, it can be hard to imagine that Lot #16 and those nearby were bustling with activity. Lot #16 was important not only as a location in the center of the county seat, but for doing the business of running the town itself.

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