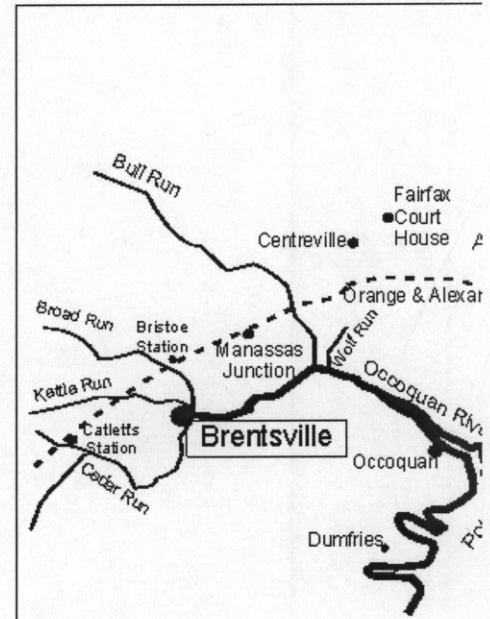


Brentsville Courthouse - Witness to history.

By Paul Spencer



Few areas of Virginia were as much involved during the Civil War as Prince William County. Although destined to be part of the Confederacy when Virginia seceded from the Union it is only a short distance from the northern capital Washington DC. Being so near the border separating North and South ensured that there was almost constant action within its boundaries, at least for the first three years of the war. Two of the largest battles, First and Second Bull Run were fought on the rolling plains of Manassas within the County.

An integral part of both these battles was the railroad siding known as Manassas Junction. The battlefields are about 5 miles northeast of the siding. Brentsville, at that time the County Seat of Prince William County, is only some four miles southeast.

Much of Prince William County was farmland, which for decades till the 1840's had been devoted to the growing of tobacco, a crop that was notoriously harsh on the land. Up until 1822 the County Seat had been at Dumfries, but when Quantico Creek silted up due to soil erosion caused by continuous tobacco farming, the "...prosperity and population of Dumfries declined."(1)

The County Seat was shifted to Brentsville, which became the 4th

seat of the Prince William County government. Brentsville is literally at the geographic center of the County, and is also at the confluence of three major runs – Broad, Cedar and Kettle. (2) At that time one of the main roads connecting the Potomac River to the Shenandoah Valley passed through the town, increasing its strategic importance. (3)

The Orange and Alexandria Railroad passes through the County but bypassed Brentsville no doubt due to the hilly terrain. Although Manassas Junction is not far away, in fact the closest point on the railroad from the main street of Brentsville is Bristoe Station, less than 3 miles distant. In the 18th century the area towards Bristoe was heavily timbered, but the forests had been cleared and replaced by rolling farmlands. (4)



Brentsville Courthouse

Part of the land in the town of Brentsville had been confiscated by the State of Virginia from a British supporter, Robert Bristow, in 1779 during the Revolutionary War. In 1822 a Courthouse, County Clerk's office, Jail, Church, tavern and a house, known locally as the White House, were built on this land. (5) A description of Brentsville in 1835 is provided from the Virginia General Assembly Joseph Martin's Gazetteer – "...The Courthouse, Clerk's office and jail are handsomely situated on the main street, in a public square of 3 acres. Besides them the village contains 19 dwelling houses, 3 miscellaneous stores, 2 handsome taverns built of brick and stocked, 1 house of entertainment, 1 house of public worship, free for all denominations, a bible society, a Sunday School, a temperance and a tract society. There is in the vicinity a common school in which the rudiments of the English education are taught... population 130 people of whom 3 are attorneys and 3 regular physicians."(6)

Farming remained the main occupation of the area. With the deterioration of the soil due to continual tobacco cropping, many farmers decided to try their luck in the newly developing territories

to the west where the land was untouched and the future seemed brighter. This was a problem throughout Virginia. The population of Prince William County declined from a peak of 12,733 in 1800 to just 8,129 in 1850. (7)

During the 1830's and 1840's a marked change came over the use of the land. Back in the early 1820's several farmers in Virginia began experimenting with fertilizers to re-energize the fields. One of the pioneers was Edmund Ruffin. (In 1861 in the eyes of many he fired the first shot at Fort Sumter.) Ruffin also advocated a change in crops, and the planting of corn and wheat gradually became more prevalent. (8) The effect of fertilizers on the fields was described as "...like magic" and soon the change was becoming widespread. (9) By the end of the antebellum period, corn had become the major crop in the South. (10) (An archaeological study done in 1999 on the Brentsville Courthouse grounds by staff of Mary Washington College discovered that corn had been grown on the site. (11))

Another advantage was that whilst a slave could only tend 2-3 acres of tobacco (so labor orientated was the growing process), with the new crops a single man could tend 20 acres. (12) A lot of farms retained a small tobacco crop, but the impetus had changed. Most of the farms in the Brentsville area had slaves. In fact 61.7% of slaves in the Upper South were owned by men with less than 20 slaves, as against the national average of 47%. (13) This was primarily because farmers owned on average less than 200 acres. In the Deep South, plantations (more than 500 acres) were more common.

The shift to grain crops meant that the need for slaves was reduced. As a result many were sold to slave dealers from the Deep South, where cotton planting was ever increasing as the push to the west opened up new land in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas.

One of the slaves in the Brentsville area was Harriet Newby who was married to a free mulatto, Dangerfield Newby. They had seven children. Dangerfield's father, a Scot, who was also his master, had at one time freed Dangerfield and his brothers and sisters. (14) Dangerfield then spent the rest of his life trying to earn sufficient money to earn the freedom of his wife and family. His mission was made more difficult because Harriet's owner was intent on selling her to a Louisiana slave dealer. (15)

Realizing the difficulty of his problem, in 1859 while in Cleveland,

Ohio Dangerfield fell in with John Brown and his scheme for a slave insurrection in Virginia, perhaps seeing this as his last salvation. He joined Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. Dangerfield was the first of the raiders to be killed, shot by a sniper, his body lying in the street. As Brown and the rest of his followers found shelter in the nearby Arsenal the enraged crowd fired bullet after bullet into the mulatto's body. Later both of his ears were cut off. (16)

After the capture of Brown, the following letter from Harriet was found in Dangerfield's pocket dated 11 April 1859. "Oh dear Dangerfield, com this fall without fail, monny or no Monney. I want to see you so much - that is the one bright hope I have before me." (17) Not only did Harriet Newby lose her husband, she was shortly after sold to the slave dealer. (18)

Another slave in the Brentsville area named Agnes reportedly was hanged for murdering her master who had threatened to drop her infant into a vat of oil. (19)

One of the leading citizens of the town prior to the Civil War was undoubtedly Eppa Hunton who had been born in nearby Fauquier County in 1822. Hunton sat for the bar in 1843 and sometime afterwards went to live in Brentsville, becoming for a time Commonwealth Attorney for Prince William County. It is not known at this time exactly when Hunton arrived although he was certainly there in 1859 as is evidenced by the following letter to him from Francis H. Smith, Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington. The letter is dated June 26th 1859.

"Col. Eppa Hunton

Brentsville, VA.

Your esteemed favor of 11 inst. has been rec'd, and it will give me much pleasure to lay the testimonials of young Latimer before the Board of Visitors..." (20)

"Young Latimer" was Joseph White Latimer, born in Oak Ridge, Virginia in 1843 but a Brentsville resident with his parents later. He enrolled at the VMI the month after the above letter was sent and amongst his studies was artillery tactics under Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. (21) Latimer was head of his class by the end of his second year at the Institute and was one of the students chosen to serve as a drill instructor at the Camp of Instruction in Richmond after the war broke out. (22) In July 1861 when the

training camps disbanded Joseph returned to his home at Brentsville, undecided whether to return to the Institute which was now destitute of most of the best teachers, or to enlist when he turned eighteen. Shortly after his birthday he decided on the latter and was appointed a Lieutenant in Captain AR Courtney's Hampden Artillery. This was one of the batteries he had instructed and Courtney was his cousin. In September he was "unanimously elected" as the senior second Lieutenant of the battery, and by April 1863 was a major - though still only nineteen. He was often referred to as the "Boy Major." This also appears on his headstone. (23)

Severely wounded by shrapnel at the Battle of Gettysburg, his right arm was immediately amputated. He joined Lee's long convoy of wounded back to Virginia where he was hospitalized at Winchester, but when the Union soon after threatened the town he was shifted to the Warren household in Harrisonburg. The constant movement did little for his recovery and despite the attention of the Warren family gangrene set in and his condition worsened rapidly. Joseph White Latimer, "Boy Major", died on the 1st of August 1863 still three weeks short of his twentieth birthday. He was buried in the Woodbine Cemetery at Harrisonburg, his grave marked by a small board placed by Kate Warren, young daughter of the household. Fifty one years later, largely due to Kate Warren's efforts, a monument was placed at his gravesite. (24)



Eppa Hunton

Eppa Hunton's rank of Colonel was in the Virginia Militia and prior to the outbreak of war he was promoted to Brigadier General. (25) When war did break out Hunton was appointed by the Virginia Governor as Colonel of the 8th Virginia Infantry and was "warmly commended" for his role at 1st Manassas. (26) Ill health plagued his career but he was back in the action at Gettysburg where he was wounded during Pickett's charge. (27) Shortly after, on August 9

1863 he was promoted to Brigadier General. In April 1865 he was conspicuous at Five Forks and then was one of the eight Confederate Generals captured at Sayler's Creek in the last days of the war. (28)

Following John Brown's raid a company of militia cavalry was formed in Prince William County under the command of W.W Thornton who was appointed captain. Monthly drills were held at Brentsville, perhaps at the Courthouse Square. (29)

Not all of the Brentsville area was in favor of secession. During the 1850's a campaign was run to encourage emigrants to the area and over 30 families from New Jersey had arrived over a period of time. Most settled in an area between Brentsville and Catlett's Station which came to be known as either "Yankee settlement," or "Jersey settlement." The conflicts between North and South had been raging all during this period and there certainly would have been pro Union sentiments amongst many of these people. (30) During the 1840's a number of Northerners from New Hampshire and Connecticut had settled in nearby Fairfax County during a similar push for emigration. The success of that experiment presumably inspired Prince William County in their effort. (31) The Yankees worked their own farms without slaves, and were generally more "...industrious and thrifty..." than their southern neighbors according to author Clement Eaton, thus increasing the value of their property. (32)

One can well imagine the feelings of the townspeople after the firing on Ft Sumter on April 12, 1861. Virginia remained for the time being in the Union - but feelings and tensions in the area must have been high between the pro Union and pro Confederate groups. However, there should be no doubt that that the secessionists were well and truly in the majority.

Eppa Hunton was sent as one of the County's voting members to the Virginia Secession Convention that met on April 17 1861 at Richmond. (33) The Convention adopted an Ordinance of Secession, 88 votes to 55, (34) with a general referendum by the people of the State on May 23 to decide the issue. Realistically there was little doubt as to which way the vote would go. Finally referendum day arrived and secession was approved, 96,750 to 32,134. (35) Most of the minority vote was from the far west of the State, soon to become West Virginia, but it is likely that many of the ex New Jerseyites also voted against.

Enlistments for service with the Confederacy had already begun in many places. At Brentsville Courthouse, on 23rd of April recruiting began for what became part of the 4th Virginia Cavalry and at least 65 that had drilled under Captain Thornton signed on for what must have seemed the adventure of a lifetime. Eventually this Prince William company was named as Company A. The roster for the entire war shows strong family involvement - Colvin, Towles, Cushing and Selecman all appear four times, Shirley and Holmes five, Weedon six, Williams seven, and Davis no less than nine. But the most numerous was the Lynn surname which appears twelve times, five of those enlisting on the 23rd of April. (36) As well there are several instances of names appearing two and three times. They were not all necessarily related, but obviously many would have been brothers and cousins.

Although enlistment records are incomplete for various reasons (e.g. Brentsville's records were destroyed by the Yankees during the war) altogether during the war there were about 210 members of Company A. It was not entirely composed of residents of Prince William County - some enlisted at Fairfax, others Culpeper etc. A review of the roster in Kenneth Stiles "4th Virginia Cavalry" shows seventy-three were captured, seven more than once. In the early stages of the war, many were exchanged in just a few days, usually from the Old Capitol Prison in Washington where 33 saw time. Those not so fortunate were interred at various prison camps - 18 were sent to Point Lookout Prison in Maryland and 17 to Fort Delaware, the rest elsewhere.

Thirteen were killed in action, 11 died of disease, 20 were wounded (one 7 times) and 9 were discharged through disability, although only one of these (who had been badly wounded) was after May. From that time on the shortage of manpower was a problem that the Confederacy never overcame and it was apparently much more difficult to get an honorable discharge. Seven were classified as AWOL at various times, but of these three were on March 25th 1865 when the war was all but over. Eighteen were missing for various amounts of time trying to find replacement horses - the Cavalry owned their own horses and were responsible for replacements. Three were classified as deserters. I found most interesting that both Samuel Davis and John Arundell were killed by Negro prisoners at Dumfries within 9 days of one another in

February 1864. However no details are available of these incidents.

Due to its semi-strategic location and proximity to the northern capital, war was never going to be easy for the town of Brentsville. It is apparent that by the time of the Battle of 1st Bull Run in July 1861 just a few miles away, the impact of constant reconnaissance by both sides was already having an effect.

Following the battle the first long-term usage of the town occurred. This was when the Hampton Legion from South Carolina was detailed to the town, establishing Camp Johnson nearby. The camp was named for Col. B.J. Johnson of the Legion, killed at Manassas. (37) It was from this camp that James B. Griffin of Hampton's Legion wrote a letter to his wife dated 3 August 1861. (Some of the Legion had not arrived in time for the Battle and was a little disgruntled to have missed out.)

"We are camped on the bank of Broad Run - a large, muddy ugly stream. Our drinking water is scarce and very bad. Can't get any clear water to wash in or to drink. I hope we will be moved from here soon. This is a very poor country. And there have been so many troops about here that the resources of the country are well nigh exhausted. We have a good deal of sickness in camp already, mostly measles. One man by name of Gary ...died here this evening, very suddenly. (Sic) I suppose he died of heart disease."(38) A footnote states - "William Dellie Gary, aged 35, died of epilepsy on 3 August at Brentsville". (39) Continuing Griffin's letter -"The artillery of the Legion arrived here together. We now have the whole Legion together except one Cavalry Company which I left at Ashland and will be here in a few days. Oh, if the artillery (which is a superb company) and the Cavalry had only been in the fight of the 21st - The Legion would have made a reputation indeed." (40)

Another member of the Legion wrote home -" We camped two or three days near Brentsville, a small town, and while there, the boys, not having had any meat for several days killed a hog. The owner came to Capt. Lee about it, and he told them he was very sorry but the men had not had meat to eat for four or five days, and in one sense he could not blame them for killing it. Capt. Lee paid him for the hog." (41)

The sickness mentioned by Griffin was widespread, and Brentsville residents nursed many of the soldiers. The following letter dated 9 September 1861 was headed "Measles Lodge" which in reality was

the home of the Cockrell family, tells one soldier's story of the care received.

"The Dr. and Lt. Broughton have both gone to camp and left me by myself, and as the family are generally busy, I have to pass the time principally in reading and writing... I hardly know how I shall get along with the fat pork and hard biscuits, after staying here and living on the fat of the land for four weeks... the people are exceedingly kind and I have all the attention I need. ... The long expected paymaster made his appearance... That will be sufficient to pay Mr Cockrell and have a little balance for pocket money. Mr Cockrell charges me twenty dollars - eighteen for myself and two for horse, which was very reasonable considering the scarcity and high price of provisions. The family were very kind indeed and I lingered there as long as possible." (42)

Another case was E. Prioleau Henderson of the 2nd South Carolina Cavalry who took ill from typhoid fever, probably from drinking the muddy water of Bull Run. He, along with his brother who was designated to nurse him, their Negro servant and three horses were all cared for by Mrs. Foster and her two nieces near Brentsville. The husband of one of the nieces was in the 4th Virginia Cavalry. (43) Sometime after the war Henderson wrote a book on his war experiences through the eyes of his horse "Arab", although the thoughts are obviously Henderson's own. "Oh! Those Virginia people who bore the brunt of the war, how hospitable and kind you were to the Confederate soldiers, man and horse ... I don't believe a Virginian ever refused a Southern soldier a meal or victuals, or his horse a feed of corn and hay." (44)

Henderson eventually recovered but others were not so fortunate. William Acker of the Gist Riflemen, Co. D, Hampton Legion tells us - "August 10th comrade DA Hamilton died from relapse of measles, and on the 24th James A. Simpson died from relapse of same." (45)

The members of the Legion cavalry did regular scouting of the area. At the same time Union cavalry were intent on finding out the Confederate's plans. On October 6, 1861 Union Colonel Randolph B. Marcy (George B. McClellan's father in law) was advised by a scout named Buxton - "...The movement of (rebel) troops in Virginia are numerous and uncertain ... They have been strengthening in a place called Brentsville..." Buxton closed his report with -"Please authorize Major General Banks to pay me what you think I am

entitled for 16 days service and risk." (46)

President Lincoln, ever the military strategist was not averse to giving his advice to his Generals especially at this early stage of the war. Around the first of December 1861, concerned about the lack of forward movement by the Union armies near Washington he wrote to General McClellan. "...Suppose then that of those S/W of the river 50,000 move forward and menace the enemy at Centerville. 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 moveable force from N/E 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 army together by road thence to Brentsville, and beyond the RR 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." (47)

McClellan, never hurried in formulating his own plans ignored the advice. As winter set in both armies settled into camp for a break. It would be months before McClellan was ready to move. Any previous thoughts of a short war were by now long gone.

It was not until March as the weather improved that activity started being reported again in Prince William County. On March 6th, 1862 the head of the Union Air Corps, Professor Thaddeus S.C. Lowe, reported to Randolph Marcy, recently promoted to Brigadier General (although the Senate did not ratify the appointment) - "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 at Dumfries, Brentsville, Bradley's and Manassas." (48)

Around this time Joseph E. Johnston, in charge of the Confederate army in this area, decided to withdraw his forces from the lines around Manassas towards Fredericksburg to provide greater protection for Richmond. Johnston had wanted the move kept secret so as to prevent the chance of a simultaneous Union advance but this proved difficult as Lowe's balloons were in regular use. Brigadier General W.H.C. Whiting, a Division commander in Johnston's Army of Northern Virginia noted the problems faced by the Hampton Legion in keeping the Union forces unaware of the withdrawal, writing on March 13 "...The difficulties surrounding Col.

Hampton were indeed great. Balloons had been up every day for some days." (49)

Johnston's withdrawal was eventually completed and McClellan now embarked on the so-called Peninsular Campaign. However Lincoln insisted on maintaining a force around Washington as protection and the lack of rebel presence in the area soon spelt bad news for the people of Brentsville. Confederate Major General Theophilus H. Holmes reported to Robert E. Lee in Richmond on the 15th of March - "There appears no doubt that Hooker's Division has crossed the river at Evansport and that a column of 5,000 or 6,000 have reached Brentsville from the direction of Manassas... (50)

On April 11, 1862 Levi Fritz of Co. A, 53rd Pennsylvania had a letter published in his hometown newspaper. "On Monday March 24th several companies of our regiment, and a detachment of the Illinois cavalry, under command of Lieut. Col. McMichael, were sent out 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." (51)

With the armies engaged on the Peninsula there may have been some thoughts of a lasting period of quiet for the area, but this was short lived. McClellan's campaign ended in failure and by the end of August the Battle of Second Bull Run was fought just a few miles away. The resounding Confederate victory gave a temporary respite to the people of Brentsville as all Union forces in the area were recalled closer to the Washington fortifications. On 30 August Major General Nathaniel Banks at Bristoe Station was ordered "...to destroy the public property at Bristoe and fall back upon Centreville at once. Destroy all RR (railroad) property. Your troops at Bristoe will withdraw through Brentsville." (52)

John Gould of the 1st Maine Volunteer Infantry was involved on picket duty for the march. "I got me a load of hard bread, a bridle, two Springfield rifles and started on across the RR towards Brentsville and Occoquan ... the roads were muddy and swollen streams had to be forded ...We passed through Brentsville and turned east and finally recrossed the RR again about 3 miles below Manassas Junction." (53)

With the area again open for Confederate scouts life may have been a little easier for the people remaining in Brentsville. Still times were tough for all. Food had been in short supply just after the war started and that situation could not have improved much if at all. Many of the men were away with the army and with the constant troop movement crop farming would be difficult at best. Although the Union forces had withdrawn to the safety of the Washington defences they sent constant scouting parties through Prince William County and soon after advanced again. On the 27th of September 1862 General Stahel had sent 600 cavalry from Centreville to Brentsville (54) and on November 12 Brigadier General Daniel Sickles reported that "...Major Stedman's squadron of the 6th Ohio Cavalry ... has a post at Brentsville and his camp is between Broad Run and Kettle Run." (55)

The Hampton Legion found itself back scouting in the area. Sgt. WA (Bill) Mickler led the scouts, and included among their number were E. Prioleau Henderson and Jack Shoolbred. They mostly boarded at differing homes in Prince William County and obviously had some system for regular gatherings and reporting. Robert Towles was a Brentsville local who had joined the 4th Virginia Cavalry, but was now a scout for the Legion. For a time he lived in a haystack which apparently was not as difficult as some may imagine. "We were convenient to the homes of several friends and wanted for nothing." (56) Mickler's headquarters was at the Cooper home near Brentsville.

Winter provided no respite this year however. On the last day of 1862 Captain Charles Chauncey of the 2nd Pennsylvania Cavalry reported that his squadron was badly surprised between Wolf Run Shoals and Brentsville. "Of our loss I cannot speak with certainty. Our men were scattered in every direction, and I hope some who are among the missing may come in. Losses at least two dead, three wounded, upward of fifty prisoners." (57)

On the ninth of January 1863 Mickler's group cemented their reputation when they ambushed a Union cavalry squad in the main street of Brentsville. Henderson claimed that five enemy were killed and the other three captured. (58)

Soon after, Robert E. Lee now in charge of the Confederate forces in Virginia wrote to Major General J.E.B. Stuart. "General, I have read with great pleasure the report of Colonel Butler commanding the

Second South Carolina cavalry of the gallant conduct of Sgt. Mickler and his party in the streets of Brentsville, on the 9th instant... I have forwarded the report to the Secretary of War, with the recommendation that these men be promoted for ‘...gallantry and skill’ when the opportunity offers.” (59)

The day after the attack Union Brigadier General William W. Averell commanding the First Cavalry Brigade, Centre Grand Division, sent another group to the area which was now infested with Federal cavalry trying to find some trace of the rebels. Averell’s report highlights the problems facing the Union cavalry. “ The scouting party sent to Brentsville reported that they were at Brentsville at 2pm... and found Colonel Davis, 12th Illinois Cavalry also there with 150 men. Also a party of seventy scouts of our cavalry on the road from Dumfries to Brentsville.” However, not one rebel was found. Averell went on to note of “...many young rebels who assemble, scout and form scouting parties at the shortest notice. Upon the approach of any superior force they are suddenly transformed into idle, loitering citizens, without arms, and professing great ignorance of the country. If the Major General commanding approve, I will cause the arrest of all such that can be found between Brentsville and the Rappahannock. If I had 1,000 more cavalry I could keep a column constantly in motion on our right flank which would have a tendency, together with the arrests referred to above, to render rebel raids less certain of success. I have about 600 men on picket duty and 500 scouting.” (60) Mickler and the scouts continued to make life difficult for their Yankee counterparts with the 1st Michigan Cavalry “...making daily scouts to Brentsville, Occoquan and other places nearby.” (61) Some of the Union cavalry dubbed Mickler and his men “Iron scouts.” (62)

As for the people of “Yankee settlement” the war was no better than for their neighbors. Usually being in Confederate held territory would have meant that their crops and goods were in constant danger of being taken. Also E. Prioleau Henderson tells us that the rebel scouts often stayed overnight at houses in the settlement “... much to these good Union people’s disgust.” (63) The Deats family was one who lived here. The two youngest sons of the family are known to have signed on for the 4th Virginia Cavalry with one giving his life for his adopted country. However Henderson’s testimony tells us that most of these families remained true to the Union and at least one served as a temporary Union scout later in the war.

Soon after, Mickler's scouts managed to trap a squad of the 1st Michigan at Deep Run near the Occoquan, killing and wounding several and capturing the rest. The squad had been left as rearguard while the main force had gone on to Brentsville. Mickler immediately set up an ambush about three miles out of Brentsville in which several more of the Yankees were killed and wounded and a "...goodly number of prisoners taken." (64) Henderson reported that the prisoners were paraded back through the street of Brentsville, "...the ladies and old men flocking to see us pass." Only an hour before they had been telling the townspeople what they would do to the rebels when they caught them. (65)

But the good days were nearly over for the Hampton Legion scouts. The constant problems they caused saw the 1st Michigan replaced by the 8th Illinois Cavalry, probably the best cavalry unit in the Army of the Potomac during the entire war. They were given the task of breaking up the "Iron scouts" and driving them out of Prince William County. A year later they were given a similar job with Mosby. One of Mosby's rangers, John Alexander, later wrote that the 8th Illinois were "...by considerable odds the best fighters we ever tackled." (66)

Still it did not take long for the rebels to welcome them to the area. On the 15th of March 1863 a patrol of the 8th was captured between Dumfries and Occoquan. Brigadier General Alfred Pleasanton reported -"It is recommended that the rebel partisans and bushwackers be cleared out from the vicinity of Occoquan and Brentsville." (67)

Perhaps in response to this, on the 30th March 1863 members of the 8th Illinois began a house to house search of the area between Brentsville and Catlett's Station. Mickler was soon alerted to the search but now the widespread nature of their hiding places counted against the scouts. Many had narrow escapes and Jack Shoolbred was captured at Mrs. Kline's house at Catlett's Station and sent to the Old Capitol Prison in Washington. (68)



Jack Shoolbred

The scouts, usually referred to as guerrillas by the Yankees, did not wear Confederate uniforms and may have been perhaps thought of as spies in some cases which would probably have warranted the death penalty. Fortunately after a few days of debate Shoolbred was classified as a prisoner of war and sent to City Point, Virginia from where he was soon exchanged and back in the action. However he had lost his favorite horse in the incident and on his return to the Legion would often secretly enter the Union lines at night looking for it, but without success. (69)

Widows or women whose husbands were in the Confederate Army ran most of the houses and farms used by the scouts. Retaliation for those caught harboring them was common. In one case, that of a Mrs. Mayfield, the Union troops had taken everything they could – “...chickens, geese and ducks, ... food and linen.” Mickler’s scouts ambushed the Union raiders and were able to retrieve the goods. (70) But the incident stands as testimony to the fate that awaited many.

Further evidence is provided by two letters from Vivian Towles of Company A, 4th Virginia Cavalry. Firstly May 20, 1863 – “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.” (71) Later in another letter he added – “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...How much I hope that that Country will be relieved of its despoilers very soon and forever.” (72)

James Howison was a plantation owner in the Brentsville area and his house “Effingham” was another safe haven for the scouts. In an

incident on New Years Day 1864, two Union cavalry had been captured at Howison's who feared for the safety of his house. Howison told E. Prioleau Henderson and Barney Hennegan of the Hampton Legion, the two who had captured the Yankees, that they must kill their captives because the Yankee commanding officer had previously "...promised, threatened or perhaps published an order, that if any member of his command was captured at a citizen's home, the house shall immediately be burnt."(73)

They did not have the heart to carry out Howison's request, but did ensure that the prisoners were securely on their way to prison camp and thus the house survived. (74) (Effingham still stands today.) (75)

However the constant pressure and fighting skills of the 8th Illinois proved too much and shortly Mickler and his scouts were forced to take to the Blue Ridge Mountains. (76) This was the base for Mosby's Rangers and for a while the "Iron scouts" joined forces, making only occasional forays back into Prince William County. Even then so strong was the Union presence that these forays would last only a day or two at most. (77)

Another Union presence in the area was the XXII Corps of the Department of Washington commanded by Major General Samuel Heintzleman, with Major General Julius Stahel in charge of the cavalry. Heintzleman wrote to Stahel on June 12, 1863 -"It is reported 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 that can be used by guerrillas." Although about 35 miles by road from Middleburg the reputation that Brentsville had established as a base for Confederate scouts was apparent as Heintzleman added - "Do the same at and in the vicinity of Brentsville." (78)

On the 17th of June, Ellis A. Deats, youngest of the "Yankee settlement" brothers who had joined the 4th Virginia Cavalry was killed near Aldie. He was described in the regiment roster as "a minor."(79)

One of the previously mentioned Towles brothers wrote home -"Of the young men in our neighborhood, no-one has been killed recently except young Deats of our Co. who was killed fighting bravely." (80)

Meanwhile, Robert E. Lee had pulled the Army of Northern Virginia out of Chancellorsville where they had won a crushing victory in May and was heading north. This was the start of the campaign that

would culminate at Gettysburg but the Union high command had no idea of Lee's destination. As a result of this, on June 20th Heintzleman again ordered Stahel –“...that you send out a force of cavalry, to go ... via Brentsville, Harrison's Ford ... 500 men in all will answer the purpose... they may pick up information.” (81)

That same day Union Brigadier General Rufus King commanding the 1st Division, 4th Corps, Army of Virginia which must have also been operating in the area reported –“ our cavalry returned to Centreville last evening after visiting Wolf Run, Brentsville and Manassas Junction. They captured 8 prisoners including the Lieutenant Colonel who ordered the draft at Brentsville.” (82)

As Lee's army pushed north the cavalry under Major General J.E.B. Stuart became detached. He elected to ride around the Union army to rejoin the Army of Northern Virginia. Attempting to rejoin Lee he found Union forces in the way necessitating another sweep to the east. Here is part of Robert E. Lee's report on the march to Gettysburg written some months after. “In the exercise of the discretion given him, General J.E.B. Stuart determined to pass around the rear of the Federal army with 3 brigades and cross the Potomac between it & Washington believing that by that route ... to place himself on our right flank in time to keep us properly advised of the enemy's movements. He marched from Salem on the night of June 24, intending to pass west of Centreville, but found the enemy's forces so distributed as to render that route impracticable. Adhering to his original plan he was forced to make a wide detour through Buckland and Brentsville, and crossed the Occoquan at Wolf Run Shoals on the morning of the 27th.” (83)

Following the defeat at Gettysburg in early July, Lee's army started back to Virginia with Meade's Army of the Potomac positioning itself between Washington and its adversary. The following memorandum from Major General Meade is dated August 1, 1863.

“To Major General Halleck
General in Chief.

In compliance with your instructions to occupy the line of the Upper Rappahannock this army has been placed in position from Waterloo Crossing on the right to Ellis Ford on the left. Warrenton, New Baltimore, Brentsville and Morrisville are all occupied and connected with the forces on the river by pickets and patrols.

Geo. G. Meade" (84)

Still the rebel attacks in Prince William County continued. On 27 July a patrol from the New York Cavalry was attacked near Brentsville. Pennock Huey, Colonel of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade reported that a squadron had been immediately dispatched to catch the culprits. "Every possible effort has been made to discover these men. Houses were searched, and all citizens and negroes minutely interrogated, but no information obtained ... the impression prevails ... that the rendezvous of these guerrillas is some point in the vicinity of Brentsville." (85)

Both armies had suffered horrific casualties at Gettysburg, and both were weakened further. Lee was forced to send Longstreet's corps to Bragg at Chickamauga, and Meade sent a detachment to South Carolina and another to New York to quell the Draft riots. (86) Still Meade held nearly a two to one advantage in manpower and he now pushed forward on a wide front toward Culpeper, using the Orange and Alexandria Railroad as part of his supply line.

The 2nd Rhode Island Volunteers had been left in camp at Bristoe Station to help protect the railroad. The effect of war on Brentsville is apparent in this letter dated Oct. 7th, 1863 from Elisha Hunt Rhodes of the 2nd Rhode Island. "I have got the best hotel that a soldier ever lived in. Last Monday morning I took my company and a six-mule team and went into the country on a foraging expedition. After marching about 3 miles we came to the village of Brentsville. I placed guards about the town to prevent being surprised by guerrillas and then marched down the main street ... The town is deserted by all the white people and left to the care of the Negroes. One house in the process of building is owned by the Rebel General Hunting." (Note: Rhodes means Eppa Hunton.) "Here I loaded our wagon with boards, doors and windows and started back to camp. Since then the men have built me a house ... eighteen feet long, ten feet wide and the peak is 12 feet high ... so I am living in style." (87)

Hunton's original house is believed to have been burnt by Yankee troops, along with other homes in the area. (88)

Meade was ordered to transfer the XI and XII Corps to Chattanooga and Lee decided to take the initiative, despite being now outnumbered 8 to 5. (89) For a period of nearly a month he slowly forced Meade back towards Centreville and the safety of the

Washington defenses. In the latter stages of the move the Confederates did their best to bring on a fight before the Army of the Potomac was safe, causing things to become more than a little hectic for Meade's army.

The only major infantry fight during the retreat was near Bristoe Station, not 3 miles from Brentsville, when AP Hill attacked what he thought was the rear of Meade's retreating army on October 14th. Unfortunately for Hill the railroad embankment hid the Union II corps under the command of Gouverneur K. Warren. As a result Hill's men were badly defeated.

During the latter stages of the withdrawal the lengthy Union wagon train was making its way back to Centreville, but as Hill and Warren fought just to the north the supply line retreat was anything but organized. Theodore Lyman, a volunteer aide on Meade's staff, saw the problem. "...We saw a spectacle such as few even of the old officers had ever beheld; namely, 2,500 wagons, all parked on a great, open prairie like piece of ground, hundreds of acres in extent. ...They were here got together, to be sent off to the right, by Brentsville, to Fairfax Station..." (90) Brigadier General John Buford commanding the 1st Cavalry Division was trying to protect the wagons that had ground to a halt again at Brentsville as darkness approached.

The Eighth Illinois Cavalry was part of Buford's command and regimental historian Abner Hard, M.D. noted - "As was predicted the enemy made an attempt to molest the wagon train, and just at night were seen advancing through the woods. Our boys at once undertook to dislodge them which was successfully accomplished. In this skirmish Sergeant Sewell Flag ... was shot in the head and instantly killed." (91)

Later that night from his temporary headquarters at Brentsville, Buford wrote - "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. ...Will do the best I can, but the train is so large and so badly conducted that I apprehend trouble. I do not even know on what roads the trains are moving, and night is upon us." (92)

Buford, one of the real heroes of Gettysburg, was as tenacious as ever. Despite the wagon train having taken a wrong road that led dangerously close to Stuart's cavalry, his men managed to see the

train to safety after a sharp engagement. (93) However, Buford's triumph was to be his last. Struck down by typhoid fever soon after, he lingered for some weeks before dying in Washington on December 16, 1863. (94)

Shortly after the Battle at Bristoe Station the famed Union Iron Brigade was sent forward to Thoroughfare Gap skirmishing regularly with the rebels. On the 24th of October they were recalled. Rufus R. Dawes of the 6th Wisconsin Volunteers tells us -"We left Thoroughfare Gap yesterday in a cold rain storm. We marched all day, the men wading three creeks waist deep. We went to Brentsville and then after night countermarched to this point (Bristoe Station) fording another creek on the way. Yesterday was one of the hardest days of all our service, and its effect upon the question of veteran enlistment was decidedly unhealthy." (95)

It was while at Brentsville that someone stole hogs and chickens from the farm of Mrs. Mitchell Rosebury and on November 2 this information was reported to Brigade Commander Lysander Cutler. He was outraged as Mitchell Rosebury was a good Union man and was currently being held in Richmond awaiting trial "...for voicing Union sentiments," and his wife was seriously ill. (96) Cutler demanded that the guilty be handed up for punishment, or else "...proceedings will be instituted against the officers to whose command the men are known to belong." (97)

Finally Edwin C. Jones of Company E confessed to knowledge of the incident. After much provocation to tell all he knew or beware the consequences, said he "...saw it going to his (Cutler's) own headquarters." (98) One of the guilty was in fact Cutler's Negro servant and the General had partaken of some of the stolen goods for his own supper! Cutler immediately "...abandoned his investigation..." no one was punished and no compensation was paid to Mrs. Rosebury. (99)

Meade moved forward again to Culpeper on November 26, this time in the so-called Mine Run campaign. Unable to find a way past Lee and with the weather worsening he made his winter camp there. The 1st Pennsylvania Cavalry scouted to Brentsville on both November 26 and 29 as the army advanced. (100)

The last real skirmish of the war in Brentsville happened on February 14, 1864. Again it was scouts from the Hampton Legion involved, this time led by George D. Shadbourne. The scouts were

observing the Orange and Alexandria Railroad but as they passed through Brentsville found Union cavalry near the town. Shadbourne sent a scout named Scott and two others to investigate. Breakfast was provided for them by a lady in the town, and then fearing that the Union cavalry who were only three in number at that stage would try to cut them off they returned to their camp.

Shadbourne set up an ambush in the nearby woods and in the afternoon sent Scott back to the town, again with two others, one named Bolick. This time they found a squad of about twenty-five members of the 13th Pennsylvania, and as they hoped a chase soon developed to the site of the ambush. Scott claimed that 17 of the Yankees were killed. (101) However the 13th Pa. claimed losses of three killed and four wounded, (102), which seems more credible. Bolick was also shot and being presumed dead his body was hidden in the woods.

The 13th returned to their camp near Brentsville and reported the incident to Brigadier General Samuel Crawford commanding the Third Division of Sykes' V Corps. Crawford ordered out "...two companies of infantry & all available cavalry ... to pursue the enemy." (103)

Two days later when things were quieter Scott took a two-horse wagon and coffin back for Bolick's body. He had apparently been still alive when left there as he "...had his hands clasped around a small sapling..." (104) On the morning of the skirmish his girlfriend who lived at nearby Arrington Crossroads had jilted him. Bolick had said - "I am going to be killed the first fight I get into." (105) His body was taken to the crossroads and buried next to his former girlfriend's house. (106)

The 13th Pa. stayed in the area and Brentsville's reputation as a haven for Confederate guerrillas continued. On February 29, 1864 Lt. Edward O'Shea of the 13th reported -" I left this camp at 3am 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 & searched every house, but found no enemy." (107)

The impact of the war on Brentsville is again highlighted by another report from the 13th Pa.; this time by Capt. Andrew H. McHenry dated March 8, 1864. "...I proceeded from this camp at 6:40 instant

with a detail of forty mounted cavalry from various companies of this regiment ... approached Cedar Run with caution, reconnoitered the position, then crossed by two's. 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 part of the roof remaining on; the houses generally are in ruin." (108) War obviously had not been kind to Brentsville.

Just one day after this incident, March 9 1864, Ulysses S. Grant was confirmed as the first Lieutenant General of the United States Army since George Washington. The focus of the war was to change with Lee's army now becoming the objective of the Army of the Potomac. Commencing from its winter quarters at Culpeper the Union army pushed south, attacking Lee's army all the way. With each step the armies moved further away from Brentsville.

Soon after the "Iron scouts" of the Hampton Legion were transferred back to South Carolina. E. Prioleau Henderson recalled –"We bade a sorrowful adieu to our old and tried friends in Prince William County, who had always stood by us and shared with us in times of plenty and in times of want. Could any people do more?" (109)

The area became part of Mosby's Confederacy, but with the sphere of action ever further to the south a strange quietness fell over Brentsville. Still, there was occasional scouting by both sides, such as on September 14, 1864 by the 1st West Virginia Cavalry. (110)

On February 6, 1865 125 men and two officers of the 8th Illinois Cavalry made a scout... "under the guidance of a Mr. Jacob Kline of the Jersey Settlement near Brentsville." They passed through Brentsville on a two-day scout – unfortunately at one stage... "owing to the ignorance of the guide..." they took a wrong turn but got back to Fairfax safely. (111)

Near the end of the war the old foe of the "Iron scouts", the 1st Michigan Cavalry returned to Prince William County. On April 2, 1865 as the Confederate authorities were evacuating Richmond, Brentsville was still being used as a base by Confederate scouts. The same day Capt. Pierson of the 1st Michigan reported –"...went on a scout toward Brentsville... we returned bringing seven prisoners, guerrillas. The pickets reported all quiet." (112.)

On April 9 Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Ulysses. S. Grant, and peace came at last to Virginia. However for

Brentsville the signs of war had not ended. Prior to the Grand Reviews of the Union armies in Washington on May 23 and 24, many of William Tecumseh Sherman's armies from the west and remnants of the other Union armies were directed to the capital from North Carolina by way of Richmond. Many went by way of Fredericksburg, but the others were directed via Ashland, Spotsylvania, Chancellorsville, Brentsville, Fairfax and Alexandria, generally marching thirteen miles a day or until a suitable camping area was found.

Brentsville as things panned out was perfectly placed for camping on the march. From the Official Records it appears that nearly every Brigade that was ordered that way camped near the town between May 17 and 19 - generally they left their previous camps between 4.30 am and 6 am, arriving at Brentsville in the early afternoon, most about 2pm. They then camped until the next morning before moving on. One of these regiments was the 154th New York State Infantry Volunteers. On May 17, 1865 "...they marched through excessive heat and scarcity of water to Brentsville." (113) Being the confluence of three runs would have added to the attraction of stopping there. For the residents of the town, it must have seemed that the sight of men in blue would never end. Finally, the last of the Union troops disappeared down the road to the capital. Peace at last had come to Brentsville.

The war had not been kind. The Courthouse and much of the town were in ruin, and many of the Courthouse records had been destroyed. The surviving menfolk returned home and crops could be planted. Those in the cavalry were able to keep their horses after generous peace terms given by Grant. However, it would take many years for things to be returned to the state they were in prior to the war.

Eppa Hunton had been one of eight Confederate Generals captured at Saylor's Creek in the last week of the war in Virginia. Released from Fortress Warren in Boston Harbor in June, his return to Brentsville could not have been pleasant. His original house burnt and his new house destroyed by the Yankees he decided to move to nearby Warrenton, where he resumed his law practice. Entering politics he soon became a prominent member of the Democratic Party serving in Congress between 1873 and 1881, and in the Senate between 1892 and 1895. (114) During his term in Congress in 1877, he was the only Southern member of the electoral

commission appointed to settle the disputed presidential election between Hayes and Tilden. (115)

Whilst Brentsville remained the County Seat of Prince William County its prominence in the community was assured. But nearby Manassas aided by the railroad started to rival Brentsville for its position. Until 1858 Manassas Junction was just another small railroad siding on the Orange and Alexandria line. Another line to the Shenandoah Valley known as the Manassas Gap Railroad was being built. When this ran out of funds, it was decided to share the existing line to Washington between Manassas and Alexandria, substantially increasing the importance of the town. (116) In 1872 and again in 1888 attempts to move the county seat were defeated. However in 1888 it appeared that the main reason for retaining Brentsville was that many of the prominent men of the County resided there. (117) George S. Round was one of the main persons responsible for the push by Manassas. He was in fact an ex Yankee soldier, who had settled there. (118) Manassas continued to grow, and a third election in 1892 saw a popular mandate for the transfer to take place. When a new Courthouse was completed, on New Years Day 1894 the county seat of Prince William County was officially changed to Manassas. This signaled the end of Brentsville's prominence. Without the regular influx of visitors for Courthouse business the town slowly fell into decay.

Today Brentsville has something magical about it. Many places that witnessed action during the War are now unrecognizable as scenes of the conflict. The population of many of these places has doubled once, then twice, and often more again. Towns have grown accordingly and become cities. Highways, car parks, shopping centers, businesses and houses crowd out the past historical significance, which is usually barely recognizable at best.

But as one drives along the Bristoe Road today, there on a hill still stands the Brentsville Courthouse. To one side is the County Jail now used by the Park authority. On the other side near the site of the demolished County Clerk's office is the 1929 Schoolhouse, no longer in use today. At Brentsville there is no multi-laned freeway, no taverns, no stores, nor hotels or motels. Rolling farmland and woods still greet the eye and nearby Broad Run, still as muddy as ever, meanders along. Several of the wartime homes survive included the Cockrell, Foster and Howison's. (119)

Yet it is the Courthouse that stirs the imagination. It saw a small

Virginia town become the center of activity for Prince William County and prosper accordingly. Stores, taverns and other buildings were built, the population increased, and visitors were drawn by Courthouse business. Those were the good years – but then came four tragic years of Civil War. The Courthouse became an enlistment center for the Confederacy, then was later ransacked by Yankee soldiers. It saw reconnaissances and skirmishes; Thaddeus Lowe's balloons hovering in the distance and J.E.B. Stuart ride by on his way to Gettysburg. Then finally after four long years it saw the return of peace to the land. Left in partial ruin, its roof and the Courthouse records destroyed, it watched a proud Southern people struggle to return to their pre-war lives. It was then restored back to its place as the seat of the Prince William County government only to lose this to Manassas.

Then came the sad years of decline – the taverns and stores that kept it company for so many years have long since disappeared. The Courthouse remains standing today as a monument to Prince William County's past, but is sadly in need of repair. "The Friends of Historic Brentsville Courthouse" are to be commended for their ongoing plans for restoration. I am proud to call them all "my friends."

To stand on the Courthouse steps today one needs little imagination to see and feel the War. Standing as serene and elegant as it has for nearly one hundred and eighty years, Historic Brentsville Courthouse continues to dominate its surroundings. It has seen it all - the rise and fall of a small Virginia town and the devastating impact of Civil War. Indeed, it has truly been a witness to history.

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