

Historians tell stories about the 190-year-old Brentsville Jail during hard hat tours

By E. BRUCE DAVIS
Observer staff

If the walls of the Brentsville Jail could talk, they would scream of hardship and injustice from a time foreign to modern day America. But, they cannot. Actually, the interior walls have been stripped as the jail undergoes a thorough restoration.

However, the voice of the jail is heard through the history and tales told by two local men of history—Mike Riley, site manager, and Robert Krause, preservationist with the Prince William Historic Preservation Division. On April 14 and 15

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from 1-3 p.m., they hosted Brentsville Historic Preservation Talk and Hard Hat Jail Tours.

Nearly 20 people, eager to understand the Brentsville Jail's preservation-worthy history, participated in the weekend tours, which started in front of the fenced-off brick jail.

The structure was built in 1822, as was the Brentsville Courthouse on the 6.5 acre Bristow Tract, each serving in its capacity until the county seat was moved from Brentsville to Manassas in 1894. Debtors, runaway slaves, thieves and murderers were detained while awaiting trial. Although many original buildings were lost during the Civil War, five historic buildings, the jail, courthouse, church (1874), log house (1850) and one-room schoolhouse (1928) are currently on the 25+ acre site.

Despite early county attempts to borrow money to shore up the jail, many escapes were made from a building needing repair due to Civil War damage.

Krause mentioned there was national significance in the jail preservation, due to racial inequities from the jail's inception until 1865.

Many slaves had tried to escape. At one point, there were 12 inmates being held for execution for arson and murder with only one being Caucasian.

In 1831, Nat Turner led a rebellion of black slaves in Southampton County, Virginia, that left 57 whites and more than 100 blacks dead. In early 1833, an overcrowded Brentsville Jail held 23 inmates, 20 of whom were black. As a result of Nat Turner's rebellion, white executions were taken away from the counties and handled by the states.

On an average, the jail housed seven inmates. The jail had four cells for felons and two cells for debtors and a side of the building for the warden. A fireplace and wood stove were added to his quarters in 1850. He had a side door to a privy. From 1890 through 1905, the jail served as a dormitory for girls who attended school at the courthouse.

The current historic preservation of the jail was started in 2009. It will take two more years to complete the project, which is being funded with tax dollars and by the

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HISTORIC SITE FILE: BRENTSVILLE JAIL
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Tours of Brentsville Jail offered during its for

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Prince William Historic Preservation Foundation.

One step in historic preservation is to determine if the structure is sound enough to warrant moving forward. The jail's interior walls have been stripped, exposing a slipshod laying of the outer brick wall. The brickwork improved on the warden's side of the jail.

Although there had been concern about the brick, the structure is solid. The building's exterior has been modified over time, but it has held up well. Further confirmation came with the August 23, 2011, Virginia-based earthquake. "There were some cracks in the plaster [still hanging, at the time], but there was no structural damage," said Riley. When fully restored, two-inch plank oak will provide the cells' finishes with plaster walls on the warden's side.

"We are trying to use the same materials of the time," he said, explaining another important element in preservation. "We are milling our own timber and building a barn to dry out the wood. This is saving us a lot of money. We are using used bricks from a former chimney in the jail."

The structure was made of large oak beams, designed to keep prisoners in their cells, and plaster finished the walls. Some of the beams have been attacked by termites, Riley said small windows in the jail, designed to remove the threat of escape, had been enlarged and others were added during renovations.

The most significant past restoration was the construction of a staircase in the center hallway. A concrete floor added in 1970 is being removed; on the warden's side of the jail, further excavation was done to determine whether there had been a cellar below his quarters. Only discarded litter was found.

Riley told of a runaway slave slated for execution for murders he probably did not commit, bolting down the stairs, wrestling with the warden's wife and escaping only to leave a bloody trail left by his bare feet in the icy snow that led to his recapture. Some inmates set fires to try to "burn" their way out of jail. The warden and others frequently patronized local taverns, sometimes with gaming facilities, near the jail.

The jail's building has served as a residence, dormitory and attorney's office. There were gallows set behind the courthouse and a kitchen in the parking lot behind the jail. Often, the warden made a larger salary by feeding the inmates.

Riley referred to the jail as, "an ongoing research piece."

Krause indicated modern methods have helped them analyze the structure. "We have used thermal energy testing to see if water

and air are escaping," he said. "We will be using GPR (Ground Penetrating Radar) to test heat energy data. We will use a boroscope."

There must be value in a restoration project to make it worthwhile. For those who took the jail tour, the projected four-year preservation of the Brentsville Jail seemed worth the blood, sweat, tears and money it requires. Barbara Janay, who lives across from the historical site, learned history of the area in which she lives. Adrienne Brooks from The Plains enjoyed hearing about the Brentsville Jail's Civil War history.

"I was impressed with the knowledge they knew about the building," said Tina, from Manassas.

"We are hoping for another tour in early June," Riley said. Information is available at 703 365-7895, and the website for the Prince William Historic Preservation Foundation is www.pwhpf.org.

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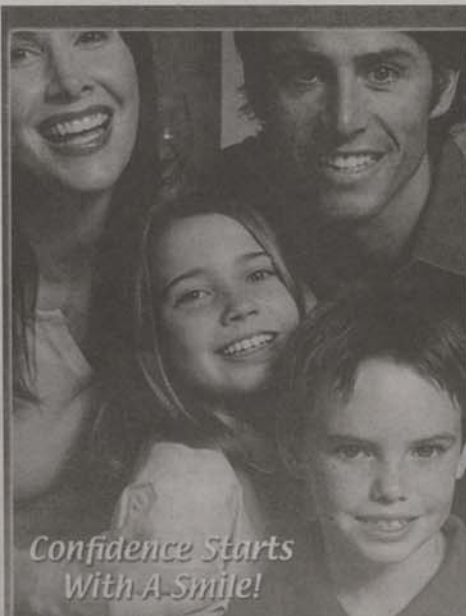
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