

School gives window to Brentsville's past

By LUCY PHINNEY

With great anticipation, I opened the Dec. 28 *Potomac News* to read the story on the Focus On Community page titled "Brentsville Schoolhouse offers history lesson." Imagine my disappointment when I soon realized that what I was reading wasn't history but one of those English-usage tests asking you to find the sentences that belong together to form the most sensible paragraph. It turned out to be quite an exercise.

Researching the early schools of Prince William County has been an interest of mine for the last two years. I have read every scrap of information that still exists; I have interviewed residents who attended some of the nearly 90 little schools that, at different times between 1870 and 1960, once dotted the county. Soon I hope to publish my findings. In the meantime, maybe I can at least begin to set the record straight about the Brentsville Schoolhouse.

When Manassas became the center of government for the county in 1893, the Brentsville Courthouse (which still stands as the centerpiece of the Brentsville Historic Recreation Area) was no longer needed as a courthouse. Soon thereafter, a public school was opened in the empty courthouse.

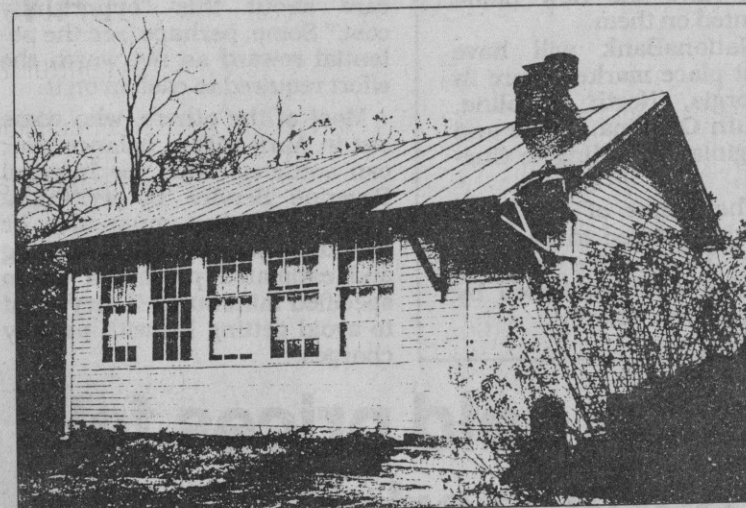
Around 1910, the School Board began negotiations with the county to purchase the building and remodel it into a proper, two-room schoolhouse. When the remodeling plans were submitted to the State Board of Education, however, they were rejected because the ceiling was too low. The courthouse had an upper level then, which it does not have now. In the summer of 1912, new plans that called for removal of that upper floor and putting up

a false ceiling of acceptable height were approved.

At this point, records fail us, and it is not clear whether the remodeling took place and the courthouse continued life as a schoolhouse for another 15 years or so or whether the School Board decided, in 1912, to build a "real" schoolhouse on an adjoining lot. Several sources refer to a Brentsville Schoolhouse being built that year; others tell of a school being built in 1928. In both cases, the schoolhouse is clearly the one standing today next to the old Brentsville Courthouse, the one pictured in the *Potomac News* article.

Sometime in the mid-1940s, the Brentsville Schoolhouse was closed for good, and children were bused to Nokesville. Since that time, the building has been used as a local meeting place, and until recently, it housed temporary offices for the Prince William Park Authority. The Historical Commission would someday like to renovate the old school as part of a living-history park.

The White House across Bristow Road from the courthouse complex was built in 1822 as the residence for Jane Williams, widow of the clerk of court. Ms. Williams became clerk herself when Brentsville became the county seat. In 1879, the White House became a female academy, and it remained such for several years. By 1939,



after being vacant for 10 years, the current owners bought it and restored it to its present beauty.

Brentsville has a very interesting history. At least four of its most prominent buildings — the courthouse, the old jail, the little white schoolhouse and the White House across the road — are well worth preserving. Both the Historical Commission and Historic Prince William Inc. are dedicated to that preservation.

Please do not stop your publishing articles about our county's history. They are fun to read, interesting and important. Sometimes we must see where we have been in order to understand where we are going.

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