

# Potomac News & <sup>Epna</sup> Manassas Journal Messenger

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## Bye-bye Bobby Bonds

Baseball great, father of Barry Bonds dies / B1



## Crisis in Iraq

Three British soldiers killed in fighting / A5



## Love lizards?

At Northern Virginia

For most of the 19th Century, Brentsville was the seat of Prince William. When landmark buildings were in danger of falling apart, a group of residents took action to save what makes the town distinct.

# Restoring historic roots



## Love lizards?

At Northern Virginia Reptile Expo, little ones can be a handful / A3



## Baby crazy

New baby boutique Two Girls and a Boy opens in Occoquan / C1

## Trek to D.C.

Tips and tales from a family vacation to the nation's capital / E1

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## Tomorrow

New buildings feature old charm in downtown Manassas

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Photos by Amy Rossetti/News & Messenger

Wilkie Leith, chairwoman of the Brentsville Historic Centre Trust, oversees the contracts for the historic preservation and interpretive site on Bristow Road. The site now includes the old courthouse built in 1822, behind her, a schoolhouse, church and jail.

By JONATHAN BREECE  
For the News & Messenger

Work stopped around the base of the Brentsville Courthouse. Plowing ahead with an excavation schedule, expecting to find a rumble base supporting the structure two decades shy of 200, archaeologists instead discovered a four-foot foundation.

Foundations tend to run deep in Brentsville. It is a place where past beauty queens are still beauty queens no matter how many years, or decades, have dribbled by. Homemade taters and cabbage are still sold at country stores and any "progress," a hazy term used by some who say it is inevitable, is going to have to come down a two-lane road. Last year, Bristow Road was designated a state scenic byway.

"This building is not going anywhere," pronounced Brendan Hanafin, the county's Historic Preservation manager, last week. Hanafin has for the past two years helped preside over the Brentsville renovation project and other county restoration efforts.

Born out of a groundswell of local activism in the mid-1990s, the renovation of the 1822 courthouse has since become the story of the awakening of a community to a history and site whose importance one supporter said extends beyond just the county.

Brentsville Courthouse, the supporter said, is "a state treasure."

### REVISITING, REBUILDING, REDISCOVERING

Since work began nearly two years ago, for those along historic Bristow Road, excavation and restoration efforts have been a sweeping of cobwebs off a forgotten past with shovels and finely bristled toothbrushes.

Work on the 24-acre site, once the center of life in the county, has entered its second phase. Renovation work on the site's other structures including a circa 1928 one-room schoolhouse, 1822 jail, and 1874 Brentsville Union Church.

According to project organizers, restoration work should be completed by spring 2005. Under existing plans, the finished site will feature a visitors' center, public restrooms, hiking trails and living history exhibits, and will be made available for weddings and community events.

During the first phase and the ongoing second, to be completed next month, the church cupola was replaced, as was the building's siding. The courthouse's roof, scorched by fire during the Civil War, was repainted.

The previous concrete slab floor installed when the building was used as a community center in the 1950s and '60s

has also been removed, and a crawl space to place future air-conditioning equipment has been dug out.

During the excavation of the courthouse floor, work was stopped for two weeks when archaeologists discovered a slate floor. Originally, officials thought the structure had a wood floor as indicated by joints in the wall.

"The history that surrounds it is getting more fascinating every day," said Wilkie Leith, chair of the Brentsville Historic Centre Trust, of the courthouse which served as the county seat of government from 1822 to 1894, surviving both the Civil War and Reconstruction.

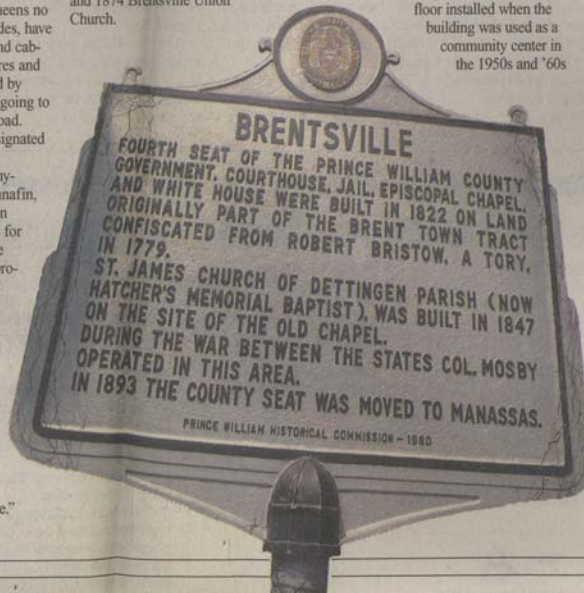
"It's an extraordinary place not just in terms of dates, but once we started doing research on the names and the centuries it had been through," said Leith, who for the past half century has lived on the same property across from another circa 1819 building. In Brentsville, roots still run deep.

### A CROWN JEWEL OF THE COUNTY

The Friends of the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre have spearheaded the effort to restore the site after forming in 1997.

"Brentsville is my town," Gladys Eanes, a Friend dubbed the "unofficial mayor of Brentsville," said definitely through a creaky screen door. Eanes is one of several of the group's 100 members who attended school in the one-room schoolhouse and was married in the Union Church.

"It's the biggest historic site we have," said Pam Sackett, assistant to



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The Brentsville Union Church, built in 1874, is where Gladys Eanes, 74, was married in 1948. Eanes has lived in Brentsville her whole life and resides across from the church where she was married.

Photos by Amy Rossetti/News & Messenger



A log cabin from the early 1800s is covered by siding to protect the wood. It will be moved to a new wooded plot.



The old jail built in 1822 now houses the park rangers.

## BRENTSVILLE

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Brentsville Supervisor L. Ben Thompson. Leith, who is secretary of the Friends, wrote to the Virginia Department of Transportation that the project is "the single most important restoration project in the all of Prince William County" because of the size and diversity of the buildings on site.

Rep. Tom Davis, in a commemoration entered into the Congressional Record, wrote, "The Courthouse is a national treasure and a source of pride."

Advertising homemade chili and country ham biscuits on cardboard signs, the Brentsville Superette is

## Brentsville buildings full of history

By JONATHAN BREECE  
For the News & Messenger

In a day and age when county life revolves around interstates, roadway expansion and new subdivisions, county history is often reduced to a handful of sentences smattered onto road signs. And road signs are awful hard to read when zipping by at 60 mph.

But the tale of the county's fourth courthouse in Brentsville, the county seat during some of the most defining years in the nation's history, is receiving an extended epilogue. Extensive restoration efforts are ongoing on the 24-acre site almost lost to dilapidation

In 1822, a new courthouse and jail were erected on land confiscated in 1779 during the American Revolution from Robert Bristow, a British loyalist.

The courthouse remained at Brentsville until Jan. 1, 1894, when after three referendums, the county seat moved to Manassas.

According to Pam Sackett, assistant to Brentsville Supervisor L. Ben Thompson, during its tenure as county seat, the courthouse was the focal point of life in the county. Slave auctions were held on the site as were major social events.

At the onset of the Civil War in April 1861, Confederate soldiers

and used a fuel.

Because of activity by the famed Confederate Col. John Mosby in the area during the war, the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre has also been designated a Mosby Heritage site.

The county's first Board of Supervisors first convened at the courthouse in 1870.

Even after the courthouse moved to Manassas, the site remained central to life in the Brentsville community.

Brentsville Union Church, erected in the early 1870s, remained in use until well into the 20th Century. The one-room



The old one-room schoolhouse built in 1928.

and a source of pride."

Advertising homemade chili and country ham biscuits on cardboard signs, the Brentsville Superette is not more than a stone's throw away from the site. Owner George Reeves has seen the county balloon with growth and swell with road projects in the 45 years he has lived in the area.

Now he says he believes it important to preserve "some of the old things to remember where grandpa and grandma used to go," to safeguard slices of history as one would section off a place on a fire-place mantel for a family heirloom.

"It shows the old and where we've come from," Reeves said, "where we've come from and where we're going."

Reeves said he is also hopeful the restored site will become a draw for county residents and tourists who in turn would provide business for his country store.

"We need it," he lamented. "We need it badly."

Bee Fletcher, a Brentsville resident for only 20 years, said the site would be a nice gathering place for the community.

"It is something for people to go to, isn't it?" Fletcher asked rhetorically, emerging from her tool shed shaking dirt off her hands.

Other community members said they are also anxious to see the structures become useful and vital to area life again.

history, is being extended epilogue. Extensive restoration efforts are ongoing on the 24-acre site almost lost to dilapidation.

"It has been sort of this hidden treasure for so many years," said Wilkie Leith, the chair of the Brentsville Historic District Trust.

In 1820, after then-county seat, Dumfries, once rivaling New York City as a seaport, fell into decline, county justices moved the courthouse to Brentsville.

That year, the General Assembly also voted to recognize Brentsville, the geographic center of the county, as the county seat.

#### DISCOVERING FOUNDATIONS

In 1998, the Prince William Board of County Supervisors established the Brentsville Historic Centre Trust to oversee the site which is presently being transferred by deed from the Prince William County Park Authority to the county. The trust consists of the county, the Park Authority, the Friends and the Historic Commission.

According to the county preservation office, the estimated cost of the project is \$2.5 million. To date, the project has received \$1.8 million in funding, over a third of which has come through VDOT and Department of Historical Resources grants. The project has also received \$100,000 in private donations.

The multi-million dollar

held on the site as well as major social events.

At the onset of the Civil War in April 1861, Confederate recruiters enlisted area men for service in the Confederate Army on the courthouse lawn. The local men drilled on the site and formed parts of the 4th Va. Calvary and 49th Va. Infantry.

In 1862, during a raid on Brentsville by Union troops, the courthouse's roof was set afire and, according to accounts acquired by the Brentsville Historic Centre Project, court papers were flung into the streets

Williams Center settlement, a legal settlement with the federal government over compensation for the expansion of Manassas National Battlefield, has allowed the county to bolster preservation efforts at Rippon Lodge, Ben Lomond and the Brentsville project.

"I think it's going to be a great tourist site, and it's going to be a great interpretative site," Leith said. "But, the most important purpose it's going to serve is for school children and families to come learn about a rural Virginia courthouse town," a town refusing to have its colorful history go quietly into that good night.

The Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre has signed a formal agreement with Prince William

erected in the early 1870s, remained in use until well into the 20th Century. The one-room schoolhouse was built in 1928 and the former courthouse structure was used as a community center and a schoolhouse.

"The site is important and not just for 74 years as courthouse but as part as the entire 300 year history of Prince William County," Sackett said.

In 1974, the Park Authority acquired the 18-acre Historical Recreation Area. Park Authority offices were located in the former jail until the late 1980s.

County Public Schools to make the site available to school groups and archaeology students.

Having made the startling discovery, on final assessment, Hanafin said in order to maintain the "historic fabric" of the structure, excavation crews chose to only reinforce the foundation of the courthouse with retaining walls instead of pouring a new base.

It is fitting, some would say along Bristow Road, that despite the structural dilapidation, the foundation remained firm in the Virginia clay.

As if nailed to the ground with stainless steel nails, things in Brentsville, whether a community, courthouse or otherwise, generally stay standing on their own.

#### The old one-room schoolhouse built in 1928.



An old smokehouse which is being restored.

## Corrections and clarifications

The Potomac News and Manassas Journal Messenger wishes to present a fair and accurate news report each day. It is the policy of this newspaper to correct all errors. If you have a concern about a story or photo published, please contact the editor of the department concerned. Phone numbers and e-mail addresses are listed below.

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