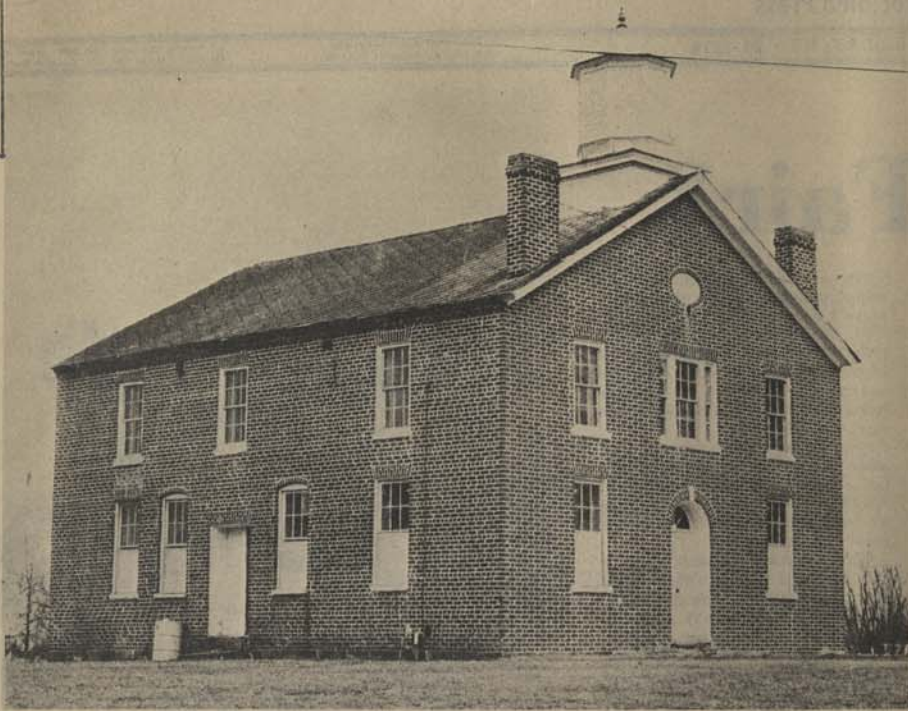


Brentsville Courthouse Has New Role in County



Tommye Burton Photo

Brentsville Courthouse

By TOMMYE S. BURTON

Brentsville's historic past will peacefully coexist with contemporary America when the crumbling courthouse complex is restored as a center for recreational activities.

Built in 1822, the Flemish bond red brick Brentsville Courthouse was the fourth of five Prince William County seats. It stands imposingly on 10 verdant acres with a brick jail of the same era and a quaint, white frame schoolhouse built early in the 1900s.

The buildings have deteriorated with the passage of time, and their use has diminished with the years. But that will all change with a major restoration project begun this spring by the county's department of parks and recreation.

Renovation of the little schoolhouse is nearly complete. Ultimately, it will be the focal point for youth activities. Meanwhile, it is being used as headquarters for a county-sponsored summer day camp.

The courthouse itself has been completely cleaned on the inside and is designated for use as a community meeting house. Interior improvements are still required. An application of waterproof coating on the brick exterior will prevent further interior damage.

The Community Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services (Chapter 10) Board has offices in the old jail. Its renovation is scheduled when the Chapter 10 Board relocates to offices in the new Didlake School under construction near Manassas Park.

A family of black snakes which feeds on roosting birds in the ceiling of the old jail will be relocated when the prison is repaired.

The historic recreation project is estimated to take three to five years to

complete. All three buildings have been reroofed with galvanized metal to prevent further water damage and to perpetuate the sound of singing rain-drops.

In addition to restoring the buildings, parks and recreation plans to regrade an existing ball diamond and replace a backstop. Multi-purpose recreational courts will be constructed. A nature trail will be developed.

The nature path will be constructed in a manner to accommodate wheelchairs. Braille markers will allow the blind to identify flora and historically significant areas.

The old Brentsville well, the public water source, will regain a well house and a swinging bucket. A fence and turnstile once located on the property will be rebuilt. Ghosts may haunt reconstructed gallows.

Brentsville Courthouse was the scene of two recorded hangings. In 1850 Agnes, a county slave woman, was hung for the murder of her master, Gerard Mason of Woodbridge.

Twenty-five years later, history recorded the hanging of Jesse Fouks, a freedman. When he was caught stealing food, Fouks confessed to murdering Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Herndon and a little black boy, Addison Russell.

Parks and recreation would like to acquire property adjacent to the courthouse complex for a small picnic area and wooded buffer zone. Attempts to contact W. H. Breeden, the owner of the property known as Tavern Square, have been futile. He is reportedly in Florida.

Over the years a number of interested persons have attempted to insure the survival of the Brentsville complex, abandoned in 1893 when the county seat was moved to Manassas. A lawsuit produced a \$4,500 main-

tenance fund.

When Judge James Bankhead Thornton died in 1918, he left part of his property for a public swimming hole. Construction of the Lake Jackson Dam ruined the dipping spot. Community ire sparked the lawsuit against the dam owners. The successful litigation produced the maintenance fund.

About 1930 it was rumored that the School Board had plans to sell the old courthouse for scrap. Legend around Brentsville has it that Walter Keys, then a small boy, made a Paul Revere-type ride to Manassas to sound the alarm that saved the building.

At one time Brentsville area citizens raised \$600 to persuade the county supervisors to appropriate additional funds to repair the old structure.

The courthouse building was used for a school between 1893 and 1913. Mattresses were manufactured there in 1941. Periodically, it has been used as a public meeting place. In the 1960s, it was used as Didlake School for Retarded Children.

Through the years the School Board and Boards of Supervisors have appointed committees to oversee the complex.

The current committee members, Maureen Patina, Agnes Webster, LaVerne Flory, Jean Dunn and Gilbert Counts, will advise parks and recreation, which acquired the property by supervisor resolution in April.

This new concept in recreational planning is a bonus for taxpayers. Tax dollars are used to provide recreation while preserving the county's historical heritage. History shows it is unused buildings that collapse.

Only recreation which is compatible with the historic past at Brentsville will be permitted.