

# Prince William

EXTRA

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## Brentsville Courthouse Looks Like a Million Bucks

### Restoration Returns Luster to Historic Gem

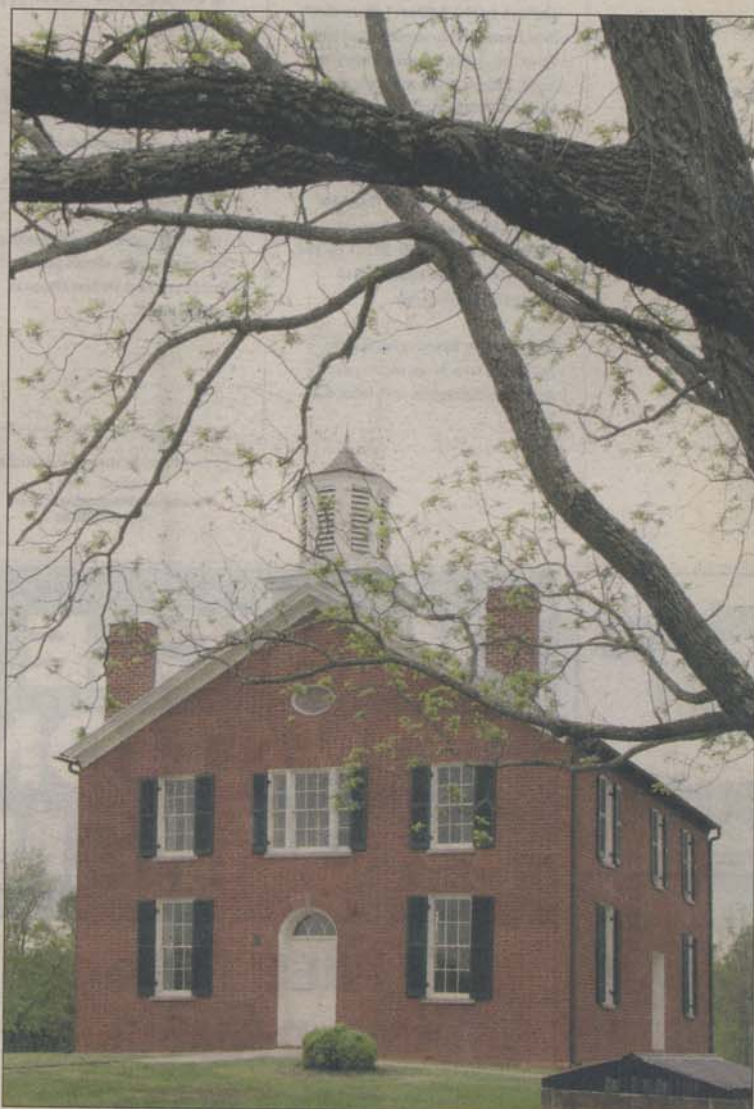
By NICK MIROFF  
Washington Post Staff Writer

Residents looking for a diversion from the 9-to-5, the grueling commute — the whole 21st century, really — might consider a trip to the historic Brentsville Courthouse, a short drive and nearly 200 years removed from the bustle of the new Prince William County.

Activities celebrating the grand opening of the recently refurbished 1822 courthouse will continue today in Brentsville from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. with demonstrations of Civil War-era life. But the main draw is the redbrick courthouse, fresh from a \$1.2 million makeover.

"It's a state-of-the-art restoration project," said Brendon Hanafin, director of the county's Historic Preservation Division. "It will really give folks a chance to understand how the court worked and how the community lived during that time period. Back then, you didn't go to Tysons Corner. The courthouse was the center of the community," Hanafin said.

The building is one of several on the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre site, which preservation officials plan to



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The Brentsville Courthouse on Bristow Road recently underwent a \$1.2 million makeover. Above left, the building's original plaque. (Spell check was not included in the restoration.)

continue developing as a tourism attraction and educational center. The 25-acre site on Bristow Road includes an 1822 jail, an 1870s church and a one-room schoolhouse built in 1928. About a dozen

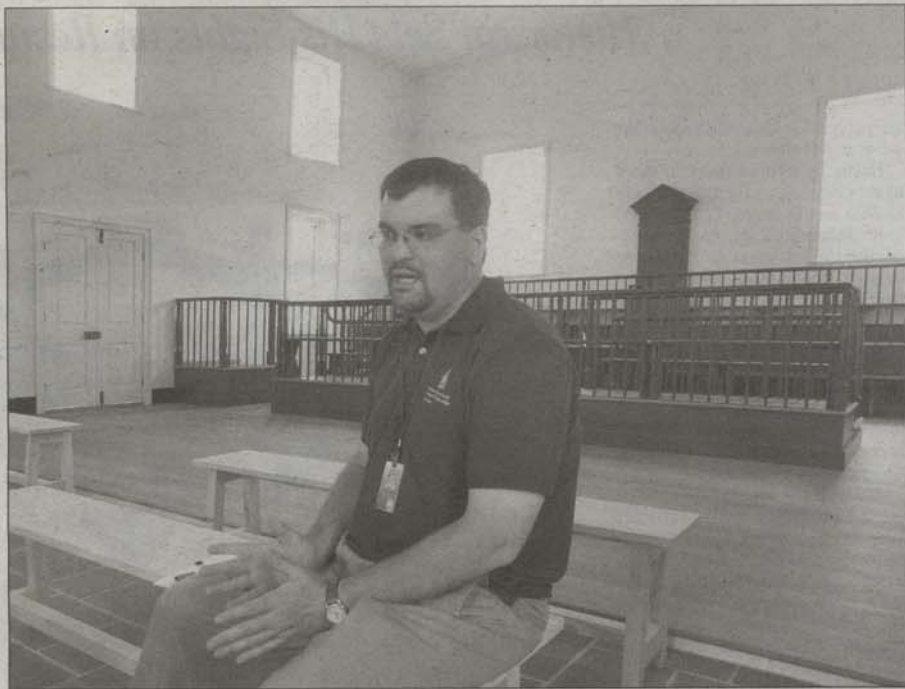
people live in a scattering of homes nearby. Restoration of the church is complete, but work is only beginning on the jail and

See COURTHOUSE, Page 5

**3 Piedmont Stories**  
A historian hopes to secure funding to reconstruct Fort Loudoun in Winchester.

**4 Murder-for-Hire Plot**  
A would-be killer in a Culpeper conspiracy is to serve six years before deportation.

**11 Girls' Tennis**  
Potomac's Raheela Fazal is helping break stereotypes as a Muslim player.



PHOTOS BY JAMES M. THRESHER — THE WASHINGTON POST

"This is a green historic building," site manager Rob Orrison says of the courthouse's heating and cooling system.

## Courthouse's Original Layout Revealed

COURTHOUSE, From Page 1

other facilities.

"It's a really well-rounded site," Hanafin said. "You can catch a glimpse of the past all the way from the 1820s to the 1930s."

In its heyday, Brentsville was a busy market town: the Sudley Road of its era. The courthouse opened the same year the town supplanted Dumfries as Prince William's county seat. The Virginia Gazetteer described Brentsville in 1835 as a village with "19 dwelling houses, 3 miscellaneous stores, 2 handsome taverns built of brick and stock, 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 . . . population 130 persons, of whom 3 are attorneys and 3 are regular physicians."

During the Civil War, the town and the courthouse sustained extensive damage, and in 1893, the county seat was moved to Manassas, which had eclipsed Brentsville as a booming commercial center with superior railway access. Brentsville began to fade.

The Prince William County Park Authority took possession of the courthouse and the area's other aging structures in the 1970s, and the courthouse operated mostly as a community center. Friends of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre Inc., a



An original key to the 1822 courthouse. The county hired design consultants from Colonial Williamsburg to work on the building's interior.

preservation group, formed in 1996 to raise funds and lobby Prince William officials to reclaim the area for public use and education.

The county hired design consultants from Colonial Williamsburg to work on the courthouse's interior, which features the same rigid wooden jury benches and mahogany banisters as the original, with much of the furnishing painted in true-to-period "ox blood" red. By stripping away the plaster on the walls, restoration experts were able to determine the original layout.

Fortunately for the visiting public, the same level of attention to historical accuracy was not applied to the courthouse's heating and cooling system. Instead, preservation staff installed a quiet \$100,000 geothermal system that uses far less electricity than a conventional unit.

"This is a green historic building," site manager Rob Orrison said.

Orrison said asphalt-weary visitors can enjoy the site's one-mile interpretive nature trail, which leads to the banks of Broad Run. "There's always a breeze out here," he said.

The courthouse's grand opening is an especially sweet moment for lifelong Brentsville resident Gladys Eames, 78, who lives across from the church. She attended the one-room schoolhouse as a child and got married in the Union Church, with a reception in the old courthouse.

After years of neglect, the Brentsville of her childhood has reappeared.

"I'm thrilled beyond words," she said. "They made a park out of a bunch of trashy woods, and everything is looking really spiffy."