

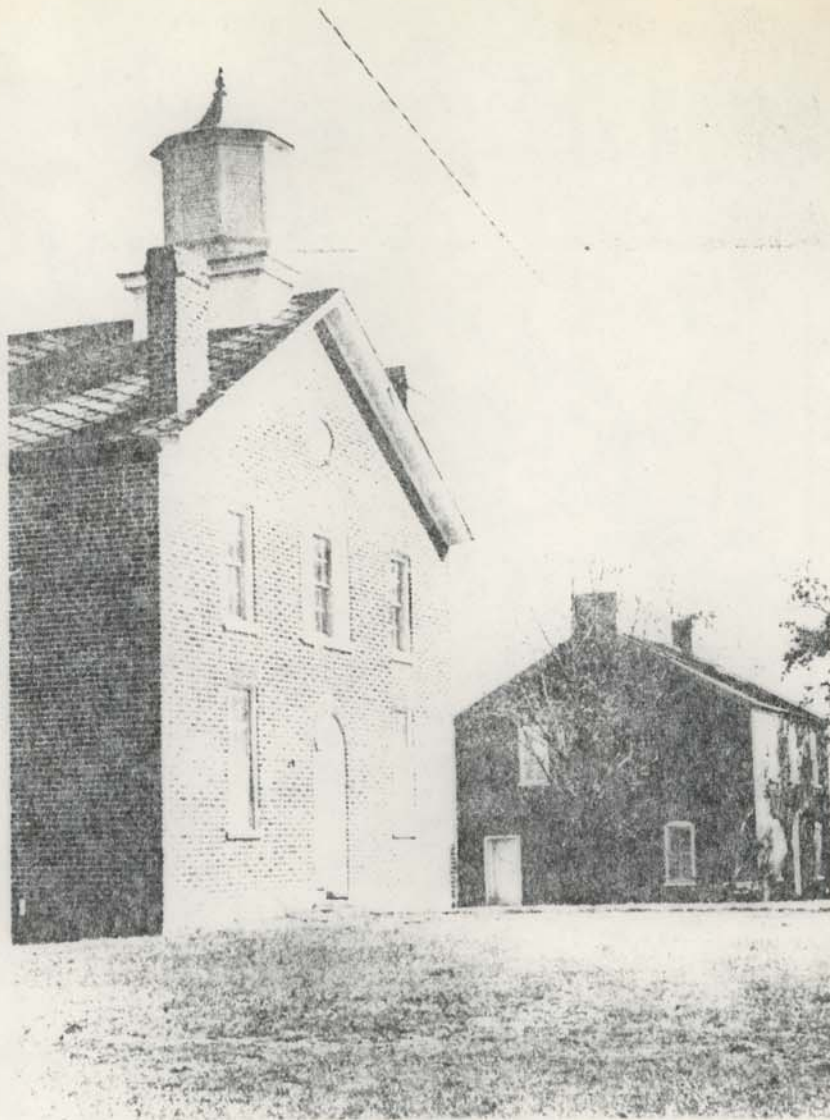
VIRGINIANA FILE

Prince William County
Courthouse - Brentsville

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BRENTSVILLE COURTHOUSE AND JAIL. These two red brick structures were finished in 1822 and served the county for 73 years. In 1892 the county voted to move the courthouse to Manassas. Recently these buildings housed the Didlake School for Retarded children. The jail has now been converted into the office for the Deputy of Social Services, Gerald Gregory. He has been assigned full responsibility for the preservation and use of the courthouse complex. A cable gate has been placed across the access road leading behind the jail to keep people off the premises at night. A maintenance man will be hired to police the grounds and keep the buildings in repair.

Prince William Aide Operates in J

By LEE FLOR
Star Staff Writer

For the last eight months, the Prince William County government has had its assistant executive secretary in jail.

The official, Gerald H. Gregory, is good-natured about the situation. He claims to like his jail, even though "it is a bit drafty in the winter" and has had blacksnakes in the attic.

Numerous birds have been busy building nests in the walls of the jail this spring and the chirping has been "a most pleasing sound," Gregory said.

Constructed in 1822

The old jail at Brentsville, Va., was built in 1822, apparently its bricks being baked on the site. Because the bricks were not kiln-baked at a high temperature, woodpeckers and other birds apparently have an easy time boring holes through them. There are many bird nests near almost every window frame.

Gregory, a lover of fine old buildings, managed to get permission last summer from the county to move his offices into the old jail building. "We didn't have the office space at the courthouse in Manassas," he said.

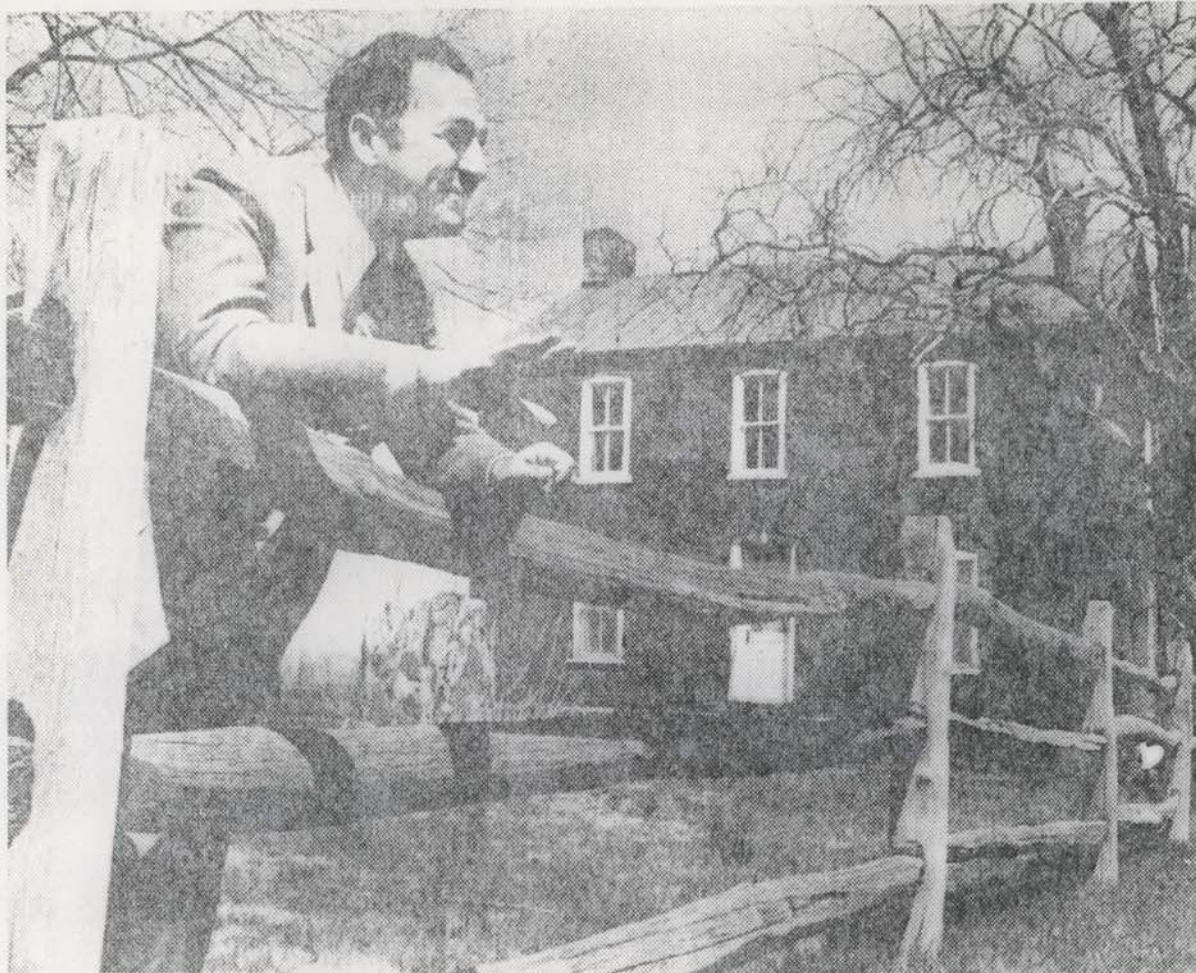
The old jail was built when the county decided to move its courthouse complex from Dumfries, along the Potomac River, to a more central location in the county.

The jail and courthouse were in service through the Civil War and the Reconstruction era. Union soldiers, who burned many of the South's courthouses, ignored the complex at Brentsville.

The roads by the old courthouse and jail were not major ones and there was no railroad line, so Brentsville never prospered. By 1893 the town of Manassas, or Manassas Junction as it was sometimes called, five miles north, had grown more important because it was at the junction of two railroad lines and some key roads. It became the county seat.

Jail Becomes Private Home

The Brentsville court complex then went out of use. The courthouse was used as a seminary and the jail became a private residence. Later the buildings were used for school purposes and then, finally, fell



— Star Photographer Francis Routh

Gerald H. Gregory relaxes near his office, a 19th century jail, in the background.

vacant, uncared for in their old age.

Then a few years ago the county got funds to repair the old courthouse and later appropriated more money to maintain the old buildings.

The jail, however, was vacant and in danger of being destroyed by vandals when Gregory saw his opportunity and occupied it.

Soon after he moved in, part of the ceiling in one old cell suddenly collapsed one day under the weight of a nest of some 12 black snakes.

Gregory can not be absolutely certain the old jail is not haunted by its past — some old-timers recall hangings there. Last winter, harsh winds came whistling through the holes and cracks in the old jail, producing some eerie shrieks.

But Gregory loves his old jail, noting "it has a personality all its own."



Parks and Rec intern Benjamin Rhodes and Mrs. Maureen Patina of Brentsville survey courthouse



Rhodes, Mrs. Patina and intern Steven Alldrege outside courthouse

Risen from the 'dead'

Brentsville courthouse complex being revitalized

By HERALD GRANDSTAFF

The Brentsville courthouse complex, which faced death from neglect and abuse, is being preserved for its priceless historic value.

The old courthouse area is simultaneously being transformed into a tasteful recreational complex for Brentsville and Prince William youth and adults to use and enjoy.

The buildings in the complex—the courthouse, jail and school house—are being restored. New, sparkling metal roofs now cover the buildings which were rotting away because water had seeped in for years. Now that the buildings' interiors are protected, the restoration work begins where Prince William had its county seat from 1822 to 1893.

In addition to the building restorations, the county's Parks and Recreation Department is also in the process of materializing recreational facility plans. The recreational plans were developed by Parks and Recreation canvassing the neighborhood to learn what the taxpayers want at the Brentsville courthouse complex. Accordingly, Parks and Recreation is materializing those taxpayers' wishes into reality. Presently, a day camp is being provided for children at the old school building, but that's just the beginning.

THE RECREATIONAL area will be nestled in trees behind the courthouse complex and will not be visible from Brentsville's former "Main Street"—Bristow Road. There are several recreational features, along with the restoration of the buildings, that are to be complete by July, 1975—a children's playground with equipment

reminiscent of bygone years; a croquet lot and horse shoe pitching lane in the west-northwest area of the three-acre parcel; a softball field will be moved from behind the courthouse to the northwest corner of the tract; a quarter-mile historic nature trail will be behind the complex and cedar grove.

The trail, which will begin at the new, paved parking lot will weave through the cedar grove and past two Civil War bunkers. Along the nature trail, markers (including braille) will be provided to describe the flora and the historic significance of that particular place.

Since there were two public hangings at Brentsville in the 1800s, the gallows will be put back between two trees in the cedar grove. However, rope will not be used on the gallows; metal is to be shaped into a rope so that children can play without danger of being strangled. In the far, northeast corner of the recreation tract a canoe launch onto Broad Run is planned.

Two tennis courts, which will cost \$12.00 apiece, are to be built by 1976; they will be located west of the cedar grove along with a multi-purpose court for basketball, volleyball and the like.

The frontage for the Brentsville courthouse complex belonging to the county is 240 feet wide and 636 feet deep. The county Historical Commission would like to see the parcel zoned historic.

A parcel belonging to W.J. Breeden of almost identical size is to the left of the complex grounds. If permission can be obtained, 20 picnic tables will be located amid the existing tree mass on the Breeden property; one cooker would be provided for every three tables. There had been a tavern and a church on

the Breeden property. All of the land directly behind the complex and Breeden property belongs to the county and is 1,176 feet deep.

COST ESTIMATES for restoration of the complex and the installation of a recreation area were \$42,500. By contrast, though, Harry French, Parks and Recreation's director, states that the work can be done for "\$20,000 and under" with the exception of the tennis courts.

Mortar between brickwork and bricks in the former jail has to be replaced. Waterproof coatings will then be spread on the outside of the jail and courthouse buildings. (The school house is a wood building with wood exterior.) An old well, which has since been plugged and grown over with trees, will be re-built but made safe so that no one can fall in. The jail is to be used for adult activities and the old school is to be used for youth activities.

The courthouse will be used as a recreation-community meeting place and will have pool and ping pong tables and air hockey—all can be folded up and moved to the side for storage.

Brentsville residents Mrs. Maureen Patina and Mrs. Agnes Webster are two of the prime movers in trying to get new life breathed into the complex and grounds.

A plaque inside the courthouse was placed to the "memory of James Bankhead Taylor Thornton," who was born in Brentsville in 1856 and died in 1918. He was superintendent of schools from 1888 to 1892, com-

monwealth's attorney from 1892 to 1907, a member of the Virginia Constitutional Convention from 1901 to 1902 and judge of the 16th Judicial Circuit from 1907 to his death. The plaque reports Thornton's "kindly thought and generosity (for which the public is indebted for the preservation of this place of recreation and repose."

ACCORDING TO Mrs. Patina, Thornton willed for the Brentsville white community's use a swimming hole that was subsequently dammed by Veeco and turned into Lake Jackson. Citizens sued Veeco and were awarded \$4,600 by the court. The court stated that the money was to be doled out by the court for the restoration of the Brentsville courthouse, as would have been Thornton's wish.

The money, which was scattered in several banks, however, has been depleted to \$1,500 from bank charges for the money's sitting there, untouched. The remaining money is now to be used.

Mrs. Patina observed that for 12 years citizens and committees have been unsuccessful in getting the county government to maintain the Brentsville complex structures. Vandals in the past have wrought some destruction.

Approximately 150 residents petitioned the Board of Supervisors to turn the responsibility for the Brentsville parcel over to Parks and Recreation, which the board did last March.

Two hangings—both of Negro slaves—were held in


the 1800s at the courthouse. A slave woman who was listed only as "Agnes," with no last name reported was hanged in 1850 for murdering her master, Gerard Mason of Woodbridge, because she felt that she was mistreated. Jesse Fouks was hanged in 1875 for murdering Mr. and Mrs. Jeremiah Herndon.

On the suggestion of historian R. Jackson Ratcliffe of Manassas, Mrs. Patina found a transcript of Fouks' confession of the murder and his subsequent escape and re-capture. The transcript makes fascinating reading and will be available for public view.

But the courthouse obviously was not used just for hangings; it was the hub of county government and court activities. A wealth of information about the bygone days of the courthouse complex has been found and is being prepared so that generations to come can learn about a part of Prince William's history.

Once the restoration is complete, with all the attention to historic detail and care being taken to have outdoor recreational facilities compatible with the historic buildings, the result should be strikingly handsome.

French, enthused over the prospect of preserving the courthouse complex and also providing recreational needs, pondered: "How could you let something like this fall apart?"

 For classified ads think 221-2116

Brentsville News 7/3/774.