



# Historic Perspectives

Preservation of Prince William County's Historic Resources

## Spring 2022 Contents

- 1 | Brentsville Celebrates 200th Anniversary This Year
- 3 | Collections Corner
- 4 | Image Spotlight
- 5 | History Corner
- 6 | Volunteer Week
- 7 | HPD News
- 8 | Foundation Update

## Brentsville Celebrates 200th Anniversary This Year



HP Staff

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In case you haven't seen our new LOVE sign at Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre, this year Brentsville celebrates its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary! From a simple piece of legislation, a new town of fifty-six acres was established and laid out in lots with convenient streets at the new Prince William County seat. Since the county seat opened in 1822, it has grown and transformed into something much more than simply a town. A community arose around the Public Lot; stores, tradesmen, churches, schools, taverns, and hotels joined the three government buildings.

Brentsville became an important social, recreational, political, and economic center for county residents. While it is a small town, Brentsville is rich in history with over 200 years of stories to tell.

Several families came to settle in the area including the Purcells, Kinchloes, Keys, and Williams just to name a few. One of the first homes built in town was constructed by Jane Williams, widow of county Clerk of Court John Williams, who died in office in 1813 while the court was still at Dumfries. Living with her in the new house was her brother, Philip Dawe, the

then-serving county Clerk of the Court. After serving twenty years, Philip also died in office in 1832 and was replaced by his nephew, also named John Williams. Later known as the White House, this home passed through several more families and still stands today.

The Brentsville courthouse and jail are full of sensational stories of trials and jail escapes.

Perhaps the first major sensation to rock the county was the murder of Stafford County resident Charles Gollyhorn in 1824. Viciously assaulted and stabbed to death in Dumfries, his attacker, Joseph Burgess, was quickly removed from town to the still new jail in Brentsville. Concerned that some attack might be made on his prisoner, Deputy John A. Stangell brought three guards with him and then when local tempers burned highest, had ten men on guard around the jail. Burgess' trial would become the first capital case tried in the new court room.

Leisure activities of all kinds could be found in town as well. In 1859, Brentsville residents had an intriguing idea, though it would be one many came to regret. The general idea was styled on a medieval tournament, with jousting for a ring, dancing, and feasting. A Queen of Love and Beauty was crowned by the victorious knight. A good time was apparently had by all... Until news reached England. The skewering wit of the wags at Punch magazine laid into this 'bumpkin' tournament enough that it raised hackles when news re-crossed the Atlantic. To the best of our knowledge, the event was never repeated.

Community life didn't move



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### *White House*

with the courts to Manassas, although by the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many residents attended church, shopped, and conducted other business in that upstart town. The old court building was used as a private teacher's institute known as the Prince William Academy by the Brethren Church for a decade, then as a public school until 1928 when the new one-room school was completed. Control of the building passed into the hands of the Board of Supervisors appointed Brentsville Courthouse Committee in 1938.

It was used for a variety of functions, including rentals, and was home to the popular Home Demonstration Club for many years. Mrs. Emma Wolfe's mattress made under the club's auspices was exhibited at a fair in Washington, DC! With limited funding, the Committee spearheaded restoration and upkeep efforts until 1974 when the new Prince William County Park Authority purchased the courthouse complex with the

intention of using it as an office facility and historic park. In 2004, the Prince William Office of Historic Preservation took over management of the site to turn it into the 28-acre historic area visitors see today.

The people of Brentsville have breathed life into the fifty-six acres laid off in lots, and it is stories like these that are the center of Brentsville's Bicentennial. Join us throughout the year as we highlight these stories through books, merchandise, programs and more. Mark your calendars for April 30<sup>th</sup> for our "Brentsville Bicentennial Court Day", featuring historic trades, food, vendors, as well as mock trials, debates, and more based on events that took place in the courthouse years ago. For more information, check out the event section in this issue and we cannot wait to see you at Brentsville this year!

Nate McDonald

Historic Interpreter, Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre

# Collections Corner

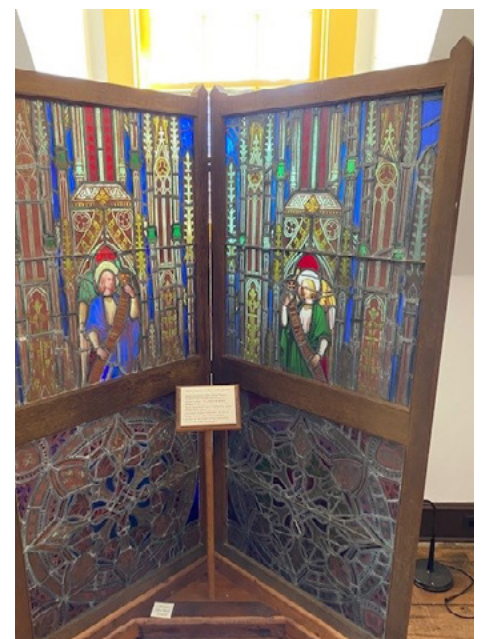
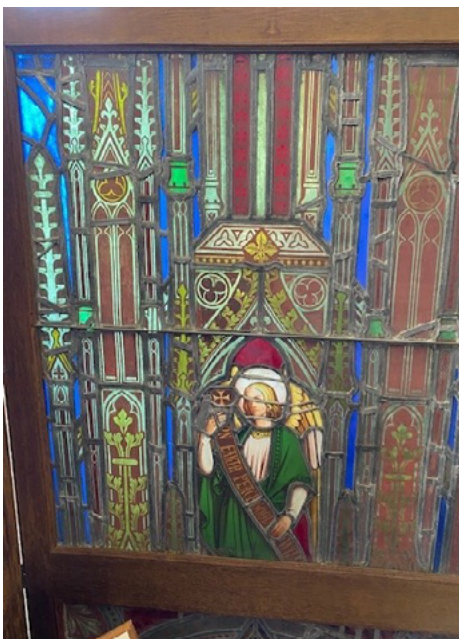
Potentially one of the oldest objects in the Prince William County permanent collection is a frame containing two panels of stained glass. An oral history tradition states that they may date from the 14th century. More likely, they are significantly younger with a date from the late 19th century. What is happening here? In the 1920s the Ellis family, then owners of Rippon Lodge, traveled to Europe, including the namesake of their Virginia home, Ripon England. According to “Judge” Ellis he obtained the panels out of Ripon Cathedral, from Dean of the Cathedral after they were damaged in a World War I bombing raid. Bringing them back to Virginia these panels have been a highlight of Rippon Lodge ever since.

Unfortunately, there are a few problems with this story. Judge Ellis tended to embellish stories, not worrying about the facts getting in the way of a good yarn. Staff have been trying to verify his story with colleagues in the museum field working in Ripon, England. Soon many holes have appeared in the Ellis story. The biggest problem with the Ellis history of the stained glass, the only wartime raid on Ripon England damaged a beet field; the cathedral was never bombed. Even if it was damaged, it is very unlikely that any stained glass from the 14th century would have been willingly given away to an American. During the English reformation many of the old, Catholic sites of worship were damaged or even destroyed. Ripon Cathedral was

no exception. The majority of its interior fabric was destroyed, leaving just a small remnant left. Consequently it is unlikely that the Dean would have given away an incredibly rare piece of his church.

It is highly unlikely that these stain glass windows came from Ripon Cathedral. But could they still be 14th century, but from another location. That is unlikely. While we don't know for sure, the font on both pieces are typical to 19th century designs. Although these panels are not from Ripon Cathedral, we are still left with the question: where did these come from? That is a question that staff will hopefully have an answer to soon!

Bill Backus  
Curator, Office of Historic Preservation



HP Staff



# Image Spotlight



HP Staff

Outside of Rippon Lodge stands a yard bell perched high on a pole. We are not certain of who placed the bell outside, but it was most likely the Ellis' or the Black family. The bell has no makers mark, manufacturers name or other identifiable marks on it. The age of the bell is also not known as there are no documents in our collection that mention the bell, where it came from, who installed it and when it was installed.

Bells like this one were common on farms in Virginia throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. The sturdy metal bell was often mounted on a post, just outside of the kitchen door. It could be rung for meals, sound a fire alarm or be used to sound a prearranged message to the fields. Yard bells were purchased at a general store in town or ordered through a mail-order catalogue.

To our knowledge our bell was most likely for show and never used by the families who lived at Rippon Lodge. Our plan is to have the bell cord replaced, which will enable us to ring the bell with school groups and tours alike. Maybe later this year you might hear the yard bell ring again at Rippon Lodge.

Dan Goldstein  
Historic Interpreter, Rippon Lodge  
Historic Site



# History Corner

**C**elebrating Women's History Month in March, we look back to the Federal period of the United States, from the early 1780s until 1830, for the story of an innovative Prince William County woman named Martha Peyton Graham. Her story did not start here, however. Martha was born February 2, 1766 on Gwynn's Island in Gloucester County to Humphrey and Frances Peyton Gwynn, the sixth of twelve children. Her father was descended from Sir Hugh Gwynn, an early settler of the area and namesake of the island.

In 1782, Martha married Robert Graham of Dumfries. Son of successful Dumfries merchant John Graham, he was heir to the substantial Graham Park plantation and served as County Clerk of Court until his death in 1821. It was after her marriage that she rose to prominence as an artist in textiles and dyes, winning several fair prizes in Washington, Alexandria, and in Maryland to the tune of \$140 in 1810-1811. Her fabric was of diverse types; fine blanket wool, fine blanket cotton, cotton for trousers, and fine cotton suitable for men's coats or women's dresses. She also won premiums for her finished work, for vests, and for her durable dye methods.

It was the last that drew the greatest attention, enough to be published in newspapers across the young country. Martha's colors expensive, hard to make reds (scarlet and crimson) as well as orange. The ingredients could



MESDA Collection

*Martha Peyton Graham's portrait, painted in 1808 by local artist W. Joseph Aldridge*

all be found at or around the home, barring allum water so long as you raised sheep for the wool to dye, utilizing local plants for color. According to her published notes, varying the technique for the scarlet dye would produce a rich brown, while using hard soap instead of soft when preparing the orange would make a nice salmon color.

Martha Graham died in 1828, four years after she moved to Washington, nearer her daughter Francis and son-in-law Dr. John Bronaugh. She may be buried near them in Congressional Cemetery or may have been buried at the now lost family plot in Dumfries.

Nate McDonald  
Historic Interpreter, Brentsville  
Courthouse Historic Centre

## Do you want to leave your mark in history? Join our dedicated team of volunteers!

Volunteers are part of an effort to preserve and enhance the historical and natural resources of Prince William County. They help bring these resources alive for citizens with special programs, events, and daily efforts to maintain and beautify our historic sites. We need volunteers during the week and on the weekends at Ben Lomond Historic Site, Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre, Bristoe Station Battlefield Heritage Park, and Rippon Lodge Historic Site. Pick the site and volunteer work that is best for you!

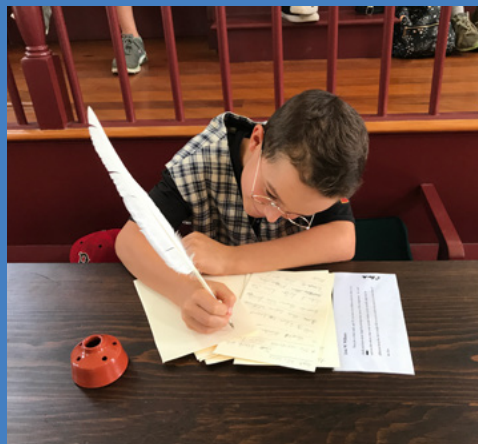
Docents/ Tour Guides  
Junior Preservationists  
Children's Programs Leaders  
Gardeners  
Living History  
Special Events  
Research



For more information and to apply, visit [www.volunteerprincewilliam.org](http://www.volunteerprincewilliam.org) and apply with the Prince William County Office of Historic Preservation.

### Volunteer Week

The Prince William County Board of Supervisors is planning to pass a resolution proclaiming April 17<sup>th</sup> to April 23<sup>rd</sup> Volunteer Week, in conjunction with National Volunteer Week as declared by the President. This proclamation recognizes all the county's volunteers for their many hours of service. We would also like to take this moment to extend our own additional thanks to all of our volunteers; your service makes it possible for us to provide our high quality of events, programs, and facilities. Whether you've been with us for decades or just started, we thank you!



Register Online  
Today  
for Spring  
Programs,  
Events and  
History Themed  
Summer Camps

[pwcparcs.org/historicprograms](http://pwcparcs.org/historicprograms)



## Staff News

HP Staff recently attended the Virginia Association of Museums conference in Richmond, VA. Staff attended many of the workshops offered and met with fellow preservationists to discuss the state of museums in the Commonwealth. This conference is an annual conference and one of the largest museum conferences in the United States. Next year's conference will be in Harrisonburg, VA.



HP Staff

HP staff at the Virginia Association of Museums Conference

**Congratulations** are in order. Rippon Lodge Site Manager Jessica Maria Alicea was recently elected Secretary to the ALHFAM Board (Association for Living History Farm and Agricultural Museums). Her term will run for two years. Congratulations Jessica!

## Supreme Court Visit

Staff from Rippon Lodge visited the United States Supreme Court on a research visit. The court has two paintings of Bushrod Washington and Julia Ann Blackburn Washington that staff were interested in seeing. They

are interested in when the paintings were first painted and who was the artist. Unfortunately, the Court curator had very little information on the paintings. They are owned privately and on loan to the Court.

## Mount Vernon Visit

Staff from Rippon Lodge recently visited George Washington's Mount Vernon to conduct research on the Washington and Blackburn family relationship. Staff were able to look through original correspondence between the families and get a better understanding of the families. Staff plan to return later to get a better understanding of their dynamic.



HP Staff

Library at Mount Vernon

## Berea Work

The Office of Historic Preservation has begun work on the preservation of a county owned cemetery. Prince William resident Sophia Carter lived at Berea now part of Forest Green Golf Course. Sophia Carter was the daughter of Robert "Councilor" Carter and a member of one of the wealthiest families in early Virginia history. Archaeologists have used a radar sled to look for any anomalies which would help us determine the scope and size of the cemetery and if any members of Berea's enslaved community are also buried nearby.



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Archaeologists at work at Berea





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Brentsville Courthouse



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## Brentsville Bicentennial

This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of Brentsville. Historic Preservation staff have programs planned throughout the year to celebrate Brentsville's storied history. Stay tuned for more information on the anniversary events.

## Prince William County Historic Preservation Foundation

The Prince William Historic Preservation Foundation has had a busy first quarter of 2022. Our fundraising efforts this year will focus primarily on Rippon Lodge although there are several other projects on our To-Do list. The proposed Nature Center & Museum at Rippon is a major undertaking many years in the planning and the Foundation is excited to finally start fundraising specifically for this project.

We've also welcomed three new board members to the fold, each bringing a vital skill set to further the mission of the Foundation. Their experience will come in handy because there are two significant events on our Fundraising Calendar.

First, we have a road cycling tour in partnership with the Prince William Trails and Streams Coalition on July 23

([www.tourofprincewilliam.org](http://www.tourofprincewilliam.org)). The route starts and ends at Brentsville Courthouse complex and goes through Ben Lomond Historic Site. Registration opens April 11 so dig out your bike shorts and get the bike in good running order!

Next, we have the foundation's flagship event: a Gala at Rippon Lodge the afternoon of Saturday, September 17. Instead of the usual evening dinner and drinks, we're holding a The Garden Party Gala celebrating the many decades of Rippon with yard games, a one-woman show in honor of women's suffrage, period associated foods and a guided tour. Strolling entertainers and a silent auction will round out the afternoon's festivities. Mark your calendars now so you won't miss this unique experience.

Bill Backus  
Curator, Office of Historic Preservation