

**Furnishing and Interpretive Plan for the
Brentsville One-Room Schoolhouse at
Brentsville, VA**

**Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre
12229 Bristow Rd., Bristow, VA 20136
Prince William County
Historic Preservation Division, Department of Public Works**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Administrative Information

Mission Statement.....	3
Staff.....	3
Interpretive Objectives.....	3

Historical Information

Time Period.....	4
History	5
Analysis of Occupancy.....	5
Historical Narrative.....	5
Oral Histories of Past Students	
Prince William County School Board Information	
Prince William County in Early-Mid 20 th Century	

Interpretive Plan.....	7
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Furnishings Plan.....	8
-----------------------	---

Bibliography.....	10
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Administrative Information

Mission Statement

The town of Brentsville served as the county seat of Prince William County from 1822-1893 and was the political and social center of the county. Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre consists of five historic structures, several significant archaeological sites and natural resources consisting of woodlands, diverse wildlife and Broad Run. These varied resources exist on 28 acres that are managed by the Prince William County Historic Preservation Division.

The mission of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre is to preserve, protect and educate the public about these diverse cultural and natural resources. Supported by on-going research and professional standards, the site's programs, events and collections create a diverse learning environment that addresses the needs and interests of the community's residents, visitors and tourists. The site serves as an educational resource interpreting life as it was at a government center and rural village during key periods of our national growth.

Staff

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Interpretive Objectives

Efforts to restore the Brentsville Schoolhouse began in 2012 and were completed with the help of local historians and residents in October of that year to return it to its 1941 appearance. Using documentary and physical evidence, the school interior resembles the most historically accurate re-creation of the structure that was possible through current standards and information.

It is the objective of Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre to interpret the schoolhouse to a circa 1941 date. The date falls within the WWII period of American history and coincides with the historic photographs and oral histories we have collected over the years. Many of the students that attended the school, and who are featured in the photographs, still reside in the area and distinctly remember the schoolhouse during this period of American history.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Brentsville was a small village in the geographical center of Prince William County. The children came from small farming families all who lived within 2 miles of the school. The school will be interpreted as it was ca. 1941; as a school for the white children of Brentsville, educating grades 1-5. The building will also serve as meeting space as needed, and can serve as a multipurpose room during special events and programs.

Historical Information

Time Period

The building was used as a schoolhouse from when it was constructed in 1929 until 1944. After closing its door to the students of Brentsville the structure was used as a private residence, community center and recreation space, arcade and offices until 2000.

Key events in history during the period of interpretation.

- The murder of seven Chicago mob associates is dubbed, “The Valentine’s Day Massacre.” (February 14, 1929)
- The Great Depression begins. (October 29, 1929)
- The Empire State Building is completed in New York City. (May 1, 1931)
- Franklin D. Roosevelt was the 32nd President of the United States. (1933-45)
- Adolf Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany. (January 30, 1933)
- Italy invades Ethiopia. (October 30, 1935)
- Nylon was patented. (February 16, 1937)
- Germany invades Poland. (September 16, 1939)
- Vice Presidents John N. Garner (until Jan. 20, 1941) Henry A. Wallace (after Jan. 20) held office.
- The first Series E "War Bonds" and Defense Savings Stamps go on sale in the United States. Helping to fund the production of military equipment. (May 1, 1941)
- The United States Army Air Forces is created from the United States Army Air Corps. (June 20, 1941)
- The P38E Lightning Fighter is produced by Lockheed. (September 1941)
- Walt Disney’s *Dumbo* comes out in theaters. (October 23, 1941)
- Mount Rushmore is completed after 14 years of work. (October 31, 1941)
- The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Navy, launches America into WWII. (December 7, 1941)
- Germany and Italy declare war on the United States, and the U.S. responds in kind. (December 11, 1941)
- Hungary and Romania declare war on the United States, and the U.S. responds in kind. (December 12, 1941)
- Operation Overlord commences. (June 6, 1944)

Notes on Sources

Documentary sources on the Brentsville Schoolhouse are abundant. School Board minutes, report cards, books and oral histories are just a few of the resources used to help validate changes made to the building during the restoration and furnishing process. Along with these sources, photographs in the county’s collection and personal collections are crucial in understanding the structure.

In addition to documentary sources, the structure itself reveals architectural evidence. Construction methods and styles bring to light information once only known to the builders and contractors.

Archaeology is also another source of information, as artifacts and structural remains give insight into the structure, the people who used the building, and society as a whole.

History

Architectural Description

As the book, Yesterday's Schools states, "the new building was a one-room school with a white weatherboard exterior and five large sash windows, as well as a door across the front to let in light. The floors were narrow tongue-and-groove maple and the ceiling was made of pressed tin... The gable roof was metal covered".¹

Analysis of Occupancy

June 5, 1929 Miss Lucy Mae Motley

July 10, 1929- June 4, 1930 Elizabeth E. Bradley

June 4, 1930- July 23, 1930 Margaret Chaplin (requested replacement)

1930-1938 Miss Dorothy Woodhouse

1938-1941 Miss Mary Buckley and/or Mrs. Helen (nee Newland) Hammond

1941-1942 Miss Mary Senseny [sic], became Mrs. Kline.

1942-1944 Mrs. Wilma Tomlinson.

Historical Narrative

During the 19th century, Brentsville had been the fourth county seat and remained the center of government until 1893 when the courthouse was moved to Manassas. During this time, a small frame school building was utilized for the education of white children of the town. After the government moved to Manassas, the courthouse was adapted to be used as the Brentsville Academy; a teachers' college from 1897-1910. From 1910- 1929 a two-room public school was located in the courthouse. "In 1928, the District Board agreed to build a new schoolhouse to serve the white children of Brentsville".² The first teacher in this new schoolhouse was Miss Lucy Mae Motley. Her job was not only to educate the children of Brentsville, but to also act as complete caretaker of the schoolhouse. Everything from lesson plans to custodial work fell onto her shoulders.

The average attendance varied, but from most accounts, 25 students attended school regularly. During the 1930s, "...first through fifth grades were housed at Brentsville. The sixth graders were bused to

¹ Lucy Walsh Phinney, *Yesterday's Schools, Public Elementary Education in Prince William County, Virginia 1869-1969*. (R. E. F. Typesetting & Publishing, Inc., 1993), 88-90.

² Phinney, *Yesterday's Schools*, 88.

Woodlawn School, the seventh grade students went to Greenwich and the high school students went to Nokesville”.³

Although the schoolhouse accommodated grades one through five, not all grades (or students) were taught during all the years Brentsville School was in existence due to lack of enrollment. As stated earlier, only the white children were able to attend Brentsville School. Prince William County Schools were not desegregated until 1966. African American children in the area went to other schools nearby such as Lucasville and Bristow.

In 1941, only grades one through four were educated at Brentsville due to lack of students in the fifth grade. The teacher during the 1941-42 school year was Miss Mary Senseney. Her detailed description of the schoolhouse is one of the main reasons the Prince William County Historic Preservation Division has decided to furnish the school and interpret the building to the 1941 date.

The school had a coal and wood stove in the middle of the room. There was a desk for each child with larger ones for the big children. There was an old piano which served no purpose except to hold the two coal oil lamps for night meetings. We had a little wind-up record player and a few records. There was no “recitation bench” as I had in my former school [Cannon Branch]. I didn’t think I could do without one, but I put the first grade desks together and the same way for each grade. I went from one group to the other. I had ten first graders and they were my favorites because I could see that they actually did learn to read and count. The children in the other grades had no idea of phonics [which made teaching them more difficult].⁴

As mentioned in the above quote, the schoolhouse had a coal and wood burning stove to heat the room. Prior to WWII, the fires were lit in the morning by James “Cookie” Wolfe; a student of the school. According to his brother John “Freddy” Wolfe and sister Gladys (nee Wolfe) Eanes, he was paid an unknown amount by the teacher for his help during the colder months of the school year.⁵

Just as today, the students looked forward to their two fifteen minute recesses; one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Lunchtime is also another favorite, but compared with school lunches today, much is different. Lunchtime for the Brentsville School students lasted an hour, with most bringing something from home. Students lucky enough to live close by or have friends near, were able to go home for a hot meal during their lunch. Also, during the chilly days of winter, many of the student’s mothers were known to bring in soup and heat it on the stove in the classroom so that students could have a hot meal.

According to past-student and resident John “Freddy” Wolfe, “Mrs. Hazel Saunders would come one afternoon a month for Bible study.” He continued to say that Mrs. Saunders would come prepared with a story to tell the children and on occasion bring a cake of soap and teach the students to whittle. The students would whittle representations of the buildings featured in the Bible out of the soap. Teaching religion is something that is frowned upon in schools now, but during the early 20th century it was just a part of life. Mr. Wolfe said that when he was attending Brentsville District High School from 1944 on;

³ Phinney, *Yesterday’s Schools*, 88.

⁴ Phinney, *Yesterday’s Schools*, 89.

⁵ John “Freddy” Wolfe and Gladys (nee Wolfe) Eanes, interview by Amy Shiflett, November 7, 2013.

Mrs. Saunders was still educating the elementary grades in Bible study. He does not believe she ever taught the older students.⁶

Brentsville School remained open until the end of the 1943-1944 school year. With the increased use of motor transport and the tight economy, many schools were consolidated nationwide. The children were either bused to Nokesville or Manassas. As Mrs. Phinney states, “it was the last of the one-room schoolhouses to close and it marked the end of an era”.⁷

Once the school was no longer in use, the building has served many purposes. A community and recreation center, private residence, arcade, and office were all part of its changing past, until in October of 2012, when the building was formally restored to its 1928 architectural appearance.

Interpretive Plan

Interpretive Objectives

**History of education in Brentsville and Prince William County
Pre WWII period in Brentsville and Prince William County
Community Social History**

Interpretive/Tour Outline

Visitors to the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre should be presented with a clear and objective interpretation of Brentsville and Prince William County’s history within the larger context of Virginia and US history. Using the three interpretive objectives for the Brentsville One-Room Schoolhouse; tours, exhibits and signage should be written with those objectives in mind. The Brentsville Schoolhouse Interpretive Plan coincides with Prince William County Historic Preservation Division Interpretive Plan and the overall site interpretive plan of the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre.

Tours of the Brentsville Schoolhouse will reflect the individual who is leading the tour but should touch on each of the interpretive objectives. Individual interests are encouraged as a means to give diverse tours. A basic tour outline should be as follows:

Station 1- Outside, next to the interpretive wayside sign for the schoolhouse [Historical background of the school and architecture]

The Brentsville One-Room Schoolhouse is indicative of country school houses of the period and is a blend of the Craftsman/Colonial Revival styles. Starting from the top down, the structure has a side-gabled, metal roof. The building consists of white weatherboard siding with five large single sash windows along with a door on the front of the building to maximize natural lighting. The floors are the original tongue and groove maple with minimum replacement. The ceiling is the original pressed tin that occupied the structure in 1929. The building has seen minimal changes during the 84 years since its construction. The schoolhouse also had outdoor privies for the students. These were located behind the

⁶ John “Freddy” Wolfe, interview by Amy Shiflett, Oct. 31, 2013.

⁷ Phinney, *Yesterday’s Schools*, 90.

schoolhouse and consisted of a girl's restroom with two enclosed stalls on the left and boy's restroom with a communal urinal and two stalls on the right.⁸ Unfortunately, these two privies no longer exist. In front of the schoolhouse, a hand pump also existed to allow access for water. The original well has been sealed, but a reconstructed well cap sits above the well.

Station 2- Inside [The students and the community pre-WWII and during]

The students educated in this building came from within 2 miles of the school. All of them had to walk to school. The students came from rural, farming families. During this time in history, the Great Depression had hit, and many of the children came to school in hand-me-down clothing, as money and resources were tight. Unfortunately, as the Great Depression ended, World War II was beginning and resources continued to stay slim, as fabrics, and other materials were needed for the war effort. This never seemed to bother the children of Brentsville, as many of them did not like having to wear hand-me-downs, but as former student John "Freddy" Wolfe stated, "we were poor, but we were thankful for what we had".⁹ Sadly, as WWII came to an end, so did the one-room schoolhouse. Brentsville closed its door in 1945, as larger schools and bussing came into fashion. Children who formerly attended the Brentsville School went for education in Nokesville or Manassas.

Station 3- Inside [Restoration and present uses of schoolhouse]

As you can see when you first step inside the school, the interior is very minimal to maximize space. The ceiling is the original pressed tin, and the floors are the original maple except for a few areas where replacement was necessary. Nearly all the blackboards and wainscoting is original to the building. Luckily, for Prince William County's Historic Preservation Division, most of the original material was still in the schoolhouse. The larger "meat and bones" of the building remained. Modern lighting in the entry way and coat closet was installed for safety and maintenance issues. No working candles or flames will be allowed in the building. Inconspicuous electrical outlets were added in the floor to allow for more lighting when needed and other amenities when using the space for meetings and gatherings. Today, the building serves as a museum on the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre's property that visitors can visit while on tour.

Furnishings Plan

Definitions of Furnishings and Layout

Much evidence of the schoolhouse's occupancy points to a simple interior with multiple styles of school desks and other furniture for an eclectic look. The schoolhouse will be furnished to a limited extent; as the structure will also be used for meetings and event functions. The school will house ten school desks dating to the period of significance (ca. 1939-1941) and a teacher's desk dating to the same period. A small bookcase lines the south wall, with a wicker trash can next to it. In the bookcase sit period books as well as reproduction readers' for school groups and children to handle. A rectangular, flat-topped stove that burns both wood and coal will sit in the middle of the room, reproducing the picture of the

⁸ John "Freddy" Wolfe, interview by Amy Shiflett, November 9, 2013.

⁹ Heidi Baumstark, "It all started in Virginia: Why Thanksgiving is the 4th Thursday of November, Giving thanks all started here- in Virginia." *Bull Run Observer*, November 16, 2012, 1.

classroom in 1941. The list below details the items which are to be in the schoolhouse and their corresponding source.

The following are items listed in documented sources:

- Shelf built in closet
- Non-working piano
- Two oil-lamps
- Various sized desks, separated by grade
- Rectangular heating stove
- Wind-up record player, and a few records
- Baseball equipment
- Two pairs of boxing gloves
- Jump rope
- Circle games
- 39 cups and basin

Mary Senseney Kline correspondence 1991-92

- Globe
- Maps
- Scissors
- Rulers
- Paste

Haydon 1936 survey

- Large green bookcase *Courtesy Gladys (nee Wolfe) Eanes*

The following are items to furnish (period approximately ca. 1941):

- Teacher's desk
- Bookshelves
- Shelf built in closet
- Non-working piano
- Two oil-lamps
- Various sized desks, separated by grade
- Rectangular heating stove
- Wind-up record player, and a few records
- Baseball equipment
- Two pairs of boxing gloves
- Jump rope
- Circle games
- 39 cups and basin
- Globe
- Maps
- Scissors
- Rulers

- Paste

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*Photographs were also used to establish a furnishing and interpretive plan. These photographs are property of Prince William County and can be found located in the Brentsville One-Room Schoolhouse.