

# **Furnishing and Interpretive Plans for the Brentsville Union Church**

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**Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre  
Historic Preservation Division  
Department of Public Works  
Prince William County**

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## **Administrative Information**

### **Relevant Staff**

Brendon Hanafin – Historic Preservation Division Chief

Ray Goodrow – Historic Architect

Heather Goodrow – Historic Preservationist

Rob Orrison – Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre Site Manager

### **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 24 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.

### **Interpretive Objectives**

- **History of religion in Brentsville and Prince William County**
- **Post Civil War recovery period in Brentsville and Prince William County**
- **Community social history**
- **Rural Architecture**

## **Historical Information**

### **Notes on Sources**

Documentary sources on the Brentsville Union Church are scarce. County records allow for a decent record of ownership of the property. Newspaper advertisements in the *Alexandria Gazette* announce the intention to build the church and of local citizens raising funds for construction of the building. Few church bulletins exist from the congregations that used the Union Church; the few that survive do give a nice insight into church programs and issues. The largest wealth of information comes from oral histories of local residents who attended church in the Union Church building. Along with these oral histories, photographs in personal collections are crucial in understanding the structure.

In addition to documentary sources, the structure itself reveals architectural evidence. Construction methods and styles tell a lot about the builders and the initial purpose of the building. Finally, archaeology is an important source of information. Artifacts and structural remains give insight into the structure, the people who used the building and society of the past as a whole.

All of these sources allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the Union Church in lieu of documentary evidence. These varying sources are all utilized in interpreting and furnishing the Brentsville Union Church.

## **History**

### *Architectural Description*

The 22' x 34' wooden frame church rests on a newly constructed block foundation. The original foundation of stone was removed in 2001 as part of the building stabilization. It is covered in 5 ½ inch lap weatherboards painted white, and has a molded cornice, plain white frieze, corner boards and gable returns. Atop the frame built gable roof, sits a belfry having bracketed corners with slight ornamentation. Inside the belfry is the original iron cast bell, returned in 2006 from the Brentsville Presbyterian Church. The large 2 over 2 sliding sash windows across the front and along the side have bracketed hoods and are flanked by green painted shutters. The front entrance likewise has a molded, bracketed cornice or hood on brackets. The double door has two molded panels per door, the upper panel with a circular arch. There is a three light overhead above the door. In 2006, a new stoop was constructed on the front of the building as part of the rehabilitation of the building. Also, a rear ADA ramp was constructed with a new rear entrance to the building.

Inside is a large, high ceiling room with plaster walls painted white and wide, plain, box trim with a single bead, painted brown. Four drop light fixtures hang from the ceiling and side wall sconces. The pews (originally 14) are three feet high and fourteen feet long and are made of pine and walnut. The sides are painted white with the seat and moldings stained a dark walnut color. In the earliest known photograph of the building, there is no evidence of a stove. By the 1940's, a woodstove was installed. This has since been removed during the restoration. In 2006, modern electricity and HVAC systems were installed. The 2006 restoration completely rehabilitated the building and restored original architectural features.

### *Analysis of Occupancy*

#### Chain of Title

- Previously the land of the Union Church was part of the "Tavern Lot"
- 1871 (November 7) – 50' x 50' tract of land granted from George M. Goodwin to the **Trustees of the Union Church** (Aylett Nicol, Austin B. Weedon, A.M. Hershey, James F. Clarke, J.B. Reid and George W. Soxsmith) [Deed Book 48, p. 472]
- ??? – **Commonwealth of Virginia**
- 1995 (February 15) – **Shifflett, Dvorschak and Associates, Ltd.**
- 1995 (July 28) – **Nagmeh Tayebe and Parto Hadian**
- 1997 (January 1) – **Prince William County, BOS**

#### Congregational Occupancy of Church

Brentsville Baptist ca. 1880 – 1897

Brentsville Presbyterian - 1915 – 1952

Pentecostal – ca. mid 1950's – ca. 1965

### *Historical Narrative*

Before the Civil War, Brentsville was the social and political center of Prince William County. The ravages of war were hard on Brentsville. There are many reports of public and private buildings being destroyed by the various armies. The Clerk's Office was totally destroyed and the Courthouse suffered heavy damage. Once the war was over, the region began the long process of rebuilding. Much like the rest of the south, Prince William County was financially devastated. Reconstruction policies were hard on the county and pre-war leaders were not always allowed to take place in the political process of rebuilding the county. Many people in the south turned to their faith and church membership increased in this time of despair. This increased the need for meeting space for churches. With little money, local residents often sought to raise money through fundraisers, sales and festivals. Much like the rest of the south, the residents of Brentsville raised and built their own basic country church.

Brentsville's roots in religion begin in 1686. In that year, King James II granted George Brent and three others a large land grant in northern Virginia. This became the 30,000 acre Brent Town Tract. The Brents were some of the first Catholics to move to America, and the King granted free practice of religion in this area, very different from the rest of the colony at the time. Though the settlement of Brent Town is separate from the site of Brentsville, the current town sits in the original land grant. By the time of the establishment of the town, Brentsville residents were of a variety of religious denominations including Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian. Only St. James Episcopal Church existed in Brentsville prior to the construction of the Brentsville Union Church. Other denominations existed in town and used the courthouse when the courts were not in session. In 1871 George M. Goodwin sold the Trustees of the Union Church in Brentsville a 50' x 50' section of the tavern square for \$25.00. Here a church would be erected "for the use of the Congregation of the Methodist Episcopal Church south, the Presbyterian Episcopalian, the New and both branches of the old school Baptist Churches, worshipping in Brentsville. This church would be for white residents only.

Not much is known about the actual construction of the Union Church. Various oral histories point to a ca. 1880 construction date. Typical of other southern, country churches, it was probably built by local carpenters. Protestant denominations of the south tended to build simple structures that forced the worshipper to focus on the sermon and not ceremony. Much like the Protestant meetinghouses of the colonial era, the Brentsville Union Church consisted only of simple bench style church pews, no elaborate decoration and basic vernacular architecture. Outdoor privies were located near the rear of the building. One of the highest cost items in the church must have been the iron cast church bell located in the belfry. This was returned in 2006 by the Brentsville Presbyterian Church.

The building was advertised in the *Alexandria Gazette* as being a church for various denominations. It was never used by different denominations concurrently as is implied by the advertisement. The first denomination to use the building was a Baptist congregation under the ministries' of Rev. Burr Dulin and Rev. Mr. Smoot. In 1897, the Baptists bought the old St. James Church building, which is now still their home as the Hatcher's Memorial Baptist Church. By 1915, Brentsville's Presbyterian congregation began using the building. The Presbyterian congregation grew in size and by 1950 was looking to build a new building. In 1952 they built the current white cinderblock church that stands to the east of the Jail. After the

departure of the Presbyterians, various civic groups used the building; including an arts group and a Pentecostal congregation. Due to the lack of modern amenities and the building's condition, it was left empty in the mid 1960's. It remained in this condition until Prince William County purchased the building in 1997.

In 2000, Prince William County began a structural analysis of the building. It was decided to restore and rehabilitate the building and incorporate the building in the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre. The structure stabilization began in September of 2001. Work continued on stabilization until 2005 when the major restoration and rehabilitation began. During this process, the entire structure was renovated. Electricity and modern HVAC were added. All deteriorating and missing components were either restored or rebuilt. A second exit was installed on the north wall with an ADA ramp built to provide better access to visitors and renters. The restoration work was featured on the nationally televised History Channel Show "Back to the Blueprint" in the summer of 2006. The future use of the building includes interpretation to visitors, rentals, lecture space, concerts and other education programming.

## **Interpretive Plan**

### **Interpretive Objectives**

- **History of religion in Brentsville and Prince William County**
- **Post Civil War recovery period in Brentsville and Prince William County**
- **Community social history**
- **Rural Architecture**

### **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 four interpretive objectives for the Union Church; tours, exhibits and signage should be written with those objectives in mind. The Brentsville Union Church 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 Union Church 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 church [Historical background of the church and architecture]**

In 1871, George M. Goodwin, owner of the current Tavern Square property, sold a 50 feet x 50 feet portion of this plot to the newly formed Trustees of the Brentsville Union Church. The Trustees ran several ads in the *Alexandria Gazette* to raise funds for construction. Local picnics and bake sales also assisted in raising funds. We do not know the exact date for the construction of the church, but oral histories point to the late 1870's. Most likely local carpenters were used in the construction. No architect is

known, but the building reflects the typical style of a southern, country Protestant church. There are still some architectural details that make the building attractive. There was never any parking for the church (with the mode of travel in the 1880's being horseback and walking) which led to its undesirability to modern congregations. A fence ran along the road side of the church, and this was probably used for worshippers to tie up their horses. *Feel free to point out noticeable architecture features of the building.*

### **Station 2 – Just inside the front door [The congregations and community]**

The church was to be used by various congregations then meeting in town. Most congregations used the courthouse for their worship services while the courts were not in session. Though advertised as a “free church,” the congregations that used the building were a direct reflection of the time and region. Only Protestant denominations would be allowed to use the Union Church. At the time, there were few Catholic congregations in the south and these were usually located in urban areas. Secondly, only whites were allowed to worship here. Segregated churches were not common in the south and the strain of Reconstruction increased racial tensions in Virginia. The church became a center of local society. A newly created Baptist congregation used the building first followed by the Brentsville Presbyterian Church in 1915. Though the removal of the courts in 1893 devastated the town, the residents who remained became a close knit neighborhood. Around the old courthouse and the two churches in town, a rural agricultural community evolved. Most people lived close enough to walk to church. *The exhibit case can provide visuals to church history.*

### **Station 3 – Near the raised platform [Restoration of the Church]**

In 1997, Prince William County purchased the church to include it in the Brentsville Courthouse Historic Centre. To that point, the building had sat empty and unused since the 1960's. Starting in 2001 a major restoration of the church began. The building was on the verge of collapse and the interior had to be totally redone. All window panes were replaced (except four original panes in the north-west front window), the floor was replaced and the whole room replastered. The building was lifted and placed on a new foundation. Only a few church pews remained, so new ones were made from original parts and patterns. Most of the shutters had disappeared, so new shutters were hung. A new copper roof was installed and the original bell was returned by the Brentsville Presbyterian Church. Modern amenities were added such as electricity and heating and cooling. The space is currently used for rentals, lectures, concerts and educational programming. *Use the images on the picture boards to show the restoration process.*

### **Station 4 (if desirable) – Tavern Square with a view of St. James Episcopal Church building (Hatcher's Memorial Baptist Church)**

Freedom of religious practice has deep roots in Brentsville. In 1686, King James II granted the 30,000 Brent Town Tract to George Brent and three others. This tract became the safe haven for various religious groups from Europe. Some of the first

Catholics to settle in America called Brent Town home. The Brent Town settlement is now thought to be somewhere in Fauquier County and the land grant included most of Prince William, Stafford and Fauquier Counties. When the town of Brentsville was founded, religious institutions were already an important component of the local community. Church membership in the south increased during the Reconstruction period of the 1870's. Most of the south was impoverished by the Civil War and the road to recovery was long. Brentsville suffered heavily by the various armies that occupied the town, with many private and public buildings destroyed. With only one house of worship in town, St. James Episcopal Church, the courthouse was used frequently for congregations. St. James Episcopal Church was constructed in the 1840's and was the successor to the colonial Slate Run Church located on Old Church Rd. It was reportedly used during the Civil War as a hospital and barracks. When the courts moved to Manassas in 1893, the Episcopal congregation left too. In 1897, the Baptists that were using the Union Church moved into the St. James Building and became the current Hatcher's Memorial Baptist Church.

## **Furnishings Plan**

### **Definitions of Furnishings and Layout**

Evidence of the church's occupancy points to an unadorned interior with basic furniture to serve the basic functions of the church. Restoration included the replacement or rehabilitation of the church pews. A raised platform was recreated to match the original which had since been removed. No evidence of a substantial lectern or elaborate pulpit has been found. The Protestant denominations that used the building were known for services and spaces that were basic and not ornamental. Though the various congregations that used the church may or may not have used a lectern/podium, the modern reuse of the building requires a podium of some sort. A basic wood podium with a walnut stain will be placed in the front of the room.

During the restoration, modern lighting was included. Inconspicuous fixtures were chosen for the wall sconces and ceiling lights. No working candles or flames will be allowed in the building. Other modern amenities, such as exit signs and occupancy permits will be framed and hung in inconspicuous frames. A carpet runner down the middle aisle will help protect the floor from wear and assist in keeping formal wear from picking up dirt from the wood floor. The carpet will be a high density fiber and a dark brown color to match the floor.

### **Exhibit case plan**

A reuse plan for the Union Church involves using the space for rentals, lectures, historic programming and site tours. Not all of these options allow a personal interpretation of the building. An exhibit case including images, artifacts and interpretive panels will be placed in the rear of the room. The case allows visitors to learn about the building's history when they are not on a site tour. This is important in fulfilling the site's mission for all visitors.

## **Glossary**

belfry - a bell tower, either attached to a church or other building or standing apart.

cornice – any prominent, continuous, horizontally projecting feature surmounting a wall or other construction or dividing it horizontally for compositional purposes.

frieze - any decorative band at the top or beneath the cornice of an interior wall, a piece of furniture, etc.

lectern – (in a church) a reading desk in a church on which the Bible rests and from which the lessons are read during the church service.

pew - (in a church) one of a number of fixed, bench-like seats with backs, accessible by aisles, for the use of the congregation.

podium - a stand with a slanted top, used to hold a book, speech, manuscript, etc., at the proper height for a reader or speaker.

privy - an outbuilding with one or more seats and a pit serving as a toilet; privy.

pulpit - a platform or raised structure in a church from which the sermon is delivered or the service is conducted.

restoration – a return of something to a former, original, normal, or unimpaired condition.

rehabilitation - to restore to a condition of good health, ability to work, or the like.

trustee - a person, usually one of a body of persons, appointed to administer the affairs of a company, institution, etc.

vernacular - a style of architecture exemplifying the commonest techniques, decorative features, and materials of a particular historical period, region, or group of people.

weatherboard (or clapboard) - a long, thin board, thicker along one edge than the other, used in covering the outer walls of buildings, being laid horizontally, the thick edge of each board overlapping the thin edge of the board below it.

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