

The Brentsville School

Source: "Yesterday's Schools" by Lucy Walsh Phinney

Brentsville District School #1

1871-1944

White

The Brentsville District School Board held its first meeting on December 12, 1870. Superintendent of Schools Thornton explained the duties of the Board which immediately moved to pay Mr. John Sinclair \$20 to take a census of all the district's children between the ages of five and twenty-one. At that first meeting, the Board also contracted with Mr. P. G. Slaughter to take over the Brentsville Village schoolhouse for the then princely sum of \$50 a month. That change of a private school into a public school marks the first venture of the District into public education. It became known as District School #1, a designation which remained unchanged throughout the school's existence. It must have been the largest of the early Brentsville District schools because it was insured in 1877 for \$300, twice the amount for the other schoolhouses.

By 1878, enrollment at the Brentsville Village School warranted the hiring of an assistant teacher. The records of August 1880 show that Mr. R. H. Stewart was hired to teach at Brentsville but no assistant was taken on. Mr. Stewart had taught the last two months of the previous school year at the Bristoe School.

By 1886, when W. T. Woodyard was the teacher at Brentsville, the school was badly in need of repair. Whether or not the repairs were made is not recorded, but we do know that Miss Ida Nicol replaced W. T. Woodyard as teacher the following year. Miss Nicol remained at Brentsville for several years.

In 1908 an assistant teacher was hired to relieve the overworked Miss Ella Garth. Miss Garth was paid a salary of \$30 a month; the assistant received \$25. At that time, the School Board also urged the teachers to find a suitable two-room school building while maintaining the legal daily average attendance which would warrant a larger schoolhouse and the second teacher.

When Manassas became the center of the government for the county in 1893, the Brentsville Courthouse was no longer needed as a courthouse. It became the Prince William Academy, a private school, until 1905. In September of 1907, it was offered to the Brentsville District School Board for use as a public school. The sale price was \$800 but the matter was tabled and no further action was taken for two years. Then in 1910, the Board re-opened negotiations to purchase the old Courthouse and two acres of surrounding land. An agreement was reached with Dr. W. J. Bell to buy the building, the land and all slates, desks and other equipment for \$900. The plan was to remodel it into a two-room school.

When the remodeling plans were submitted to the State Board of Education, however, they were rejected because the first floor ceiling in the old Courthouse was too low. Plans were redrawn and on July 13, 1912, the Board agreed to architect I. A. Cannon's plan to remodel the Courthouse by removing the upper floor and putting in a false ceiling, higher than the original one but eliminating the second floor. The lower floor would then be divided into the two rooms the School Board felt were necessary. The Board agreed to pay \$900 for both the old Courthouse and the two acres. The remodeling work was done by citizens of the community who had subscribed to provide labor. All was under the supervision of the architect. In August of that summer, the Board agreed also to erect a solid board fence between the Courthouse, now the schoolhouse, and the old jail building.

After the remodeling was complete and the building accepted into the District School System, the old Courthouse continued life as the Brentsville School for another fifteen years. On

June 30, 1916 the School Board agreed to rent the pasture at the school lot to Mrs. Bowen "to pasture one cow at \$1.50 per month. They also agreed to allow the Presbyterian Church to erect a tent for a meeting during August in the pasture "provided satisfactory arrangements can be made with the renter of the pasture. In 1919, the Board agreed to appropriate \$150 for a metal ceiling and to recruit citizens to do the work.

The teachers continued to handle grades 1-7 at the Brentsville School. In 1921 a group of citizens petitioned the School Board for a high school and the Board did hire a third teacher to provide high school subjects for students who desired them. In 1923-25, Mr. George W. Beahm, a well known educator who had most recently taught at the Woodlawn School, was principal teacher at Brentsville. Mr. Beahm's son, Robert, remembers his father's years there as follows: *My father made the six miles trek (from his home in Nokesville) by either buggy or horseback and on occasion was marooned in Brentsville by high water. Several times as a three year old I accompanied him and had to tolerate the older girl students who wanted to "mother" me.*

The rest of the faculty during that time consisted of Miss Shields and Miss Naomi C. Pearson. Miss Pearson stayed on at Brentsville after Mr. Beahm left and filed the 1925-26 yearend report. She was at that time, a young-twenty year's old-high school graduate ending her second year of teaching the primary grades at Brentsville. Only eighteen children were enrolled but the daily attendance averaged seventeen. Two pupils failed that year. Miss Pearson was paid \$80 a month, the highest salary known to be paid any teacher that year in the county, for the eight months' school year. She had to pay room and board of \$28 monthly, which was also the highest in the county.

Then, in 1926, Anne Ross Keys came from Greenwich to teach reading, writing, arithmetic and geography to the lower grades. She was twenty-one years old, a high school graduate in her first year of teaching. Twenty-one children were enrolled in first, second, third and fourth grades but only fourteen attended on an average day. Miss Keys was paid \$65 a month for the eight month term. The school library had 125 volumes that year although the previous year Miss Pearson reported that there were only forty books. Perhaps she counted only those suitable for her primary children and the larger figure represents what was available to the school as a whole. It is unlikely that any school would have the resources to purchase sixty-five books over one summer!

In 1928, the District Board agreed to build a new schoolhouse to serve the white children of Brentsville. The Courthouse, by that time, was over one hundred years old and in need of replacement. The new high school in Nokesville had been built and the older Brentsville students were bused there. A smaller building would suffice.

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. Hanging lamps provided light on dark days and black-boards lined two walls. Coats, lunch pails and the wash bucket were kept in the cloakroom by the front door. The gable roof was metal covered. The teacher in the new schoolhouse was Lucy Mae Motley.

From superintendent of Schools Richard Haydon's report at the end of the 1933-34 school years, we know that the enrollment at the Brentsville School stood at thirty-nine with an average daily attendance of ten less than that. There were twenty-three promotions that year, eight failures and eight dropouts. The next fall, thirty pupils were enrolled and an average of nearly twenty-nine attended on a daily basis. At that time, first through fifth grades were housed at Brentsville. The sixth graders were bused to the Woodlawn School, the seventh grade students

went to Greenwich and the high school students went to Nokesville. The seating capacity of the schoolhouse was forty-five, but attendance during its lifetime generally ranged from twenty to thirty pupils.

Until 1941, first through fifth grades were taught at the Brentsville School. That year, only grades 1-4 were housed there. The teacher was Miss Mary Senseney, who had attended Cannon Branch, Bennett Elementary and Manassas High School in the Manassas District before going off to college to earn her teaching degree. She returned to Prince William County to begin a long career as a teacher, and Brentsville was her first assignment. She was paid \$80 per month that first year and \$85 the second year. From that salary, Mary paid Mr. and Mrs. Seymour \$25 a month for room and board during the week. She went home to Manassas on weekends. The Seymours also boarded two children in their house and the teacher and pupils walked a mile each way to school. On really bad days, Mrs. Seymour drove them.

Mary's description of those first two years of teaching tell so well what it must have been like for most beginning teachers in the early years of public education. She says,

Student teaching had not been in a one-room school, and I was poorly prepared for such an assignment. It was very hard not to have anyone to turn to for advice. . . . I tried to rely on my memories of the one room school that I attended as a child.

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).

Mary's description of outside play at recess time brings back those days of fifty years ago as if they were yesterday. There was a fifteen minute recess in the morning, another in the afternoon and an hour long lunch break. Most of the students brought their lunch to school, although a few walked home to eat. Mostly the bigger boys and an occasional girl played baseball. The previous teacher had often joined in those games but Mary preferred the circle games and jump rope twirling with the little children. Mary goes on:

The former teacher had bought two pairs of boxing gloves (for the school). The biggest boys kept begging me to let them put on the gloves and box. . . . Although I didn't approve of boxing. At last one day I let them have the gloves and almost precipitated a family feud. The boys got very angry and fought madly. That was the end of the boxing as long as I was there.

Also I did not know that I should stay on the playground at recess. In my school experience the teachers had always stayed inside at recess to plan or help an individual pupil. I found that I had to stay outside to try and settle fight. Later "supervised play" became mandatory.

By the 1940s, people had become more aware of the importance of sanitation. Each child in Mary's classroom had his or her own cup for drinking just as each had his own clean basin of water in which to wash hands before lunch. Water came from the school's own well via a pump in the front yard. Mary had to sweep the schoolroom floor herself but Mr. James (Cookie) Wolfe made the fire in the coal stove every morning in the winter. As the term went on, Mary again sets the scene. She says,

The first year [I taught] I tried to have a very ambitious Christmas program with a play and lots of carol singing. I had no accompaniment and I wasn't a good singer. The actors in the play got a little rowdy, but we muddled through. One parent, Mr. Spicer Keys, told me how much he enjoyed the singing.

Things became a little easier for me [about Christmas time] and I became engaged to be married in June. The mothers of the children got together and made me a quilt (Dresden Plate). Each lady pierced a square and embroidered her name on it, then they quilted it. I still treasure this keepsake. They also gave us sheets and pillowcases for a wedding gift.

After her marriage, Mary, now Mrs. Kline, lived in Manassas and drove to Brentsville to teach each day. As is the case with most teachers, she found the second year easier.

I approached my second year with much more confidence. I felt that I knew how to help the children. There was only one fifth grader that year so he was allowed to go to Nokesville. Also there was only one first grader, but she was very bright and received help at home so she got along fine. I remember most of the parents with fondness and found them helpful and understanding.

The next year, Mary went to teach at Nokesville Elementary School and later to Baldwin Elementary in Manassas for a teaching career which covered more than twenty-five years.

The Brentsville School remained open for two more years under the tutelage of Mrs. Wilma Tomlinson and then, at the end of the 1943-44 school year, the school closed and the children were bused to Nokesville and Manassas. It was the last of the one-room schoolhouses to close and it marked the end of an era. In the 1953 Prince William County School inventory, the building is listed as a dwelling with heat being supplied by a stove. Later, it became a storage and then a working area for the County Parks and Recreation Department. It is now part of the Brentsville Historic Recreation area located in the village along the Bristow Road.

The Brentsville Village schoolhouse is today one of the best preserved of the old county schools in its original state. The blackboards are still on the wall inside and the pressed tin ceiling is in fine condition. The fixtures for the old hanging lamps are even in place though now florescent lights are used. The narrow tongue-and-groove maple floors are covered with serviceable linoleum. The old cloakroom is now a storage area and a 1960s addition along the back of the building houses a small kitchen and office as well as a rest room.

Lucy Phinney's book "YESTERDAY'S SCHOOLS" as well as other publications, can be purchased from the Prince William County Historical Commission.

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