

A Day at the Brentsville Court

Lightning rods have been widely used in Virginia, both on public and private buildings since colonial times. Some were even installed with a touch of controversy as public buildings in the United States were outfitted with the design, selected by Ben Franklin, over the ones approved by England.

It is not known if the Brentsville Court House had any lightning protection when it was built. However, the county, finally having some extra money after the Civil War, decided it was time to have lightning rods installed. Commissioners were appointed to do a study, advertise for bids and select a contractor. The local firm of Ash, Finch, Wolverton and Company was selected. Both Ash and Finch were well known and had successfully accomplished work for the county in the past. In 1873, this was the only company in Prince William County that had a business license to install lightning rods.

This should have been a small job with little or no complications; however, no one gave the firm a list of dates to work or not to work on this project. Therefore, on a court day in May of 1873 as the court had just started to hear the first case, the noise commenced from the roof of the building. The Commonwealth's Attorney had just started his opening statement and was straining his voice to be heard by the jury, paused and looked at the Judge for help. Judge Nicol, whose court had the reputation of being on the quiet side, was in charge. In fact D. W. Whiting, the past editor, of the Brentsville newspaper once said of Nicol that he would not allow any disruption that was not of his own making. The always controversial Whiting, would say in the next addition of the Manassas Gazette "the jury of course could hear nothing even if they had desired to do so, which is doubtful, and the court could hear less. This bedlam of voices and rattling of hammers went on, until patience ceased to be a virtue, when Judge Nicol called out to the Sheriff to stop that Noise."

The sheriff, after some time, was able to get the attention of Finch, who seemed to be the main source of the noise. According to the sheriff, he ordered Finch and the others to exit the roof until court ended. Finch, however, understood the sheriff wanted him and the others to come down for drinks at the tavern. They were at the tavern long enough to have a drink; the sheriff, however, said he would pay for only one drink. Finch, not being happy, ignored the sheriff and went back to work on the roof of the courthouse. Only this time the noise was intentional and much louder than previously. At this time, the judge, even on a good day was not a patient man, ordered the sheriff to produce every worker from the roof. This order presented an unusual dilemma for the sheriff. Finch was perched on the top of the steeple; the sheriff, wanting him down but unable to climb, made the decision to lie to Finch. He said that he had changed his mind and would buy the drinks at the tavern. Instead of returning to the tavern, the sheriff notified Finch he was wanted in court by Judge Nicol. The exact words from the judge and Finch were not published, but Finch was held in contempt of court and 10 dollars was deducted from the job as a fine.