

Churches In and Around Brentsville

Robin Landes, 2005

Over the years, several houses of worship were built in and around the Town of Brentsville. Broad Run Church, nearby, was built in 1752. It was the parish church for Dettingen Parish for western Prince William County. It was a large, brick building (30' X 60'). For unknown reasons, Broad Run Church was in ruins by 1857, and a new church was built in the town of Brentsville in 1847. It was called St. James Episcopal Church. Following the Civil War, this church was used to hold court while the Brentsville Courthouse was undergoing repairs. The Prince William County Minute books for May 10, 1866 stated, "Ordered that William E. Goodwin be appointed Commissioner to have the following repairs put upon the church now occupied as a courthouse..." These repairs included the addition of windows and dividers so that the building could function as a court. This church is known as Hatchers Memorial Baptist Church today.

By 1871, there appears to have been a need for another church. We know this from data recorded on a small slip of paper, recently found in Judgments for 1871 at the Circuit Court Archives. According to this document, the courthouse was in use for Sunday services.

The several denominations worshipping at this place having been granted the privilege of the use of the Courthouse for religious services, and as the same is liable to abuse and injury during such time, and as the Jailor who has the care of the Court House is put to trouble in opening the doors and seeing after the same upon much [illegible], It is ordered that such privilege be granted such denominations only as shall compensate said Jailor for his trouble commenced thereby and it is further ordered that the doors and windows of the Court House except when opened upon such occasions or for the purposes of court be kept closed.

Apparently coordinating space on Sundays was enough of a problem, that in 1871, the Union Church was constructed on land sold by George M. Goodwin (land formerly part of the 3-acre tavern square lot). The original trustees included Aylett Nicol, Austin B. Weedon, A.M. Hershey, James F. Clarke, J.B. Reid and George Sexsmith. An article from the Alexandria Gazette about the new "Church at Brentsville" read:

You are requested to inform your readers that a delegation of ladies from this village will visit your city some day this week fully authorized to solicit contributions from your liberal people to aid in the erection of a church proposed to be built here. A festival will be held on the Court Green, here Monday next, by the ladies, the proceeds of which will be appropriated to the above named purpose. The Hotel proprietors in the place have generously declined furnishing any dinner on that day, so that the ample repast spread by the ladies may be enjoyed by all. Every delicacy the season affords will be procured. It is hoped your merchants and citizens generally will lend these ladies a helping hand and contribute liberally to the object they have in view. The church will be free for white ministers of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, Presbyterian, Episcopal, the New and both branches of the Old School Baptist churches.
Signed: Tyrone (Brentsville, June 27, 1871)

It seems fitting that the new Union Church at Brentsville was open to all denominations since the original 1680s land granted to Brent, Bristow, Hayward and Foote by James II granted religious freedom in this tract. However, it must also be emphasized that the church was for whites only, making it seem decidedly less “free” to all for worship.