

Brentsville - The First Five Years

This is not intended to be a history of the first five years of Brentsville and should not be considered one. It is only an attempt to show a few interesting occurrences out of the hundreds of court cases and transactions.

It had been previously thought that the court house and jail both opened in March of 1823; however, with records now available, we know it was as early as February. The last known court case in Dumfries was December 1822 when John P. Harrison was fined for contempt of court. The first known transaction of the court in Brentsville was the fine imposed on William King on February 3, 1823.

When the court opened in Brentsville it became clear that swearing would no longer be tolerated. Profane swearing or swearing was not acceptable and would be dealt with the same as in the old court house. The fine would be 83 cents per occasion. This fine was seldom enforced in the past, or maybe the people in Dumfries just didn't swear much. William King, while on trial or maybe just in the presence of the court, was to be the first fined but not the last. He was fined \$19.92 and ordered jailed for profane swearing. This fine using the 83 cents as a guideline equates to 25 occasions. We don't know if he was finished after the twenty-fifth time or was still swearing when deputy sheriff William Cundiff removed him.

William G. Alexander was a town doctor and followed the practices of the time. Basically, he thought almost anything from consumption to yellow fever could be cured by one of four actions. Blistering consisted of applying caustic agents to create blisters on the skin that would then be drained to draw out the infection. Bleeding was the cutting of veins or the use of leaches in cleansing of the body. The third and fourth, purging and puking, will go unexplained. In one year alone Dr. Anderson made over 20 visits to the jail to treat prisoners and give advice to the court. In August 1823 he sent a bill to the court for performing 12 purges at a cost of four dollars. He was paid well, and a large percent of his income was provided by the county.

There were at least two jailors in the first five years. Abraham Millam was the first. The second, around 1825, was John Merchant. There is no record of either one receiving a lot of money from the county. We do know, however, that any action performed by them was compensated even if were unlocking the court house or providing wood for the stove.

Selecting a court case to cite is not easy, as there was a very diverse group. Some of the ones considered were: The cases of Hord vs Claytor and Helm vs Claytor for the non-payment of slaves used in building of the court house complex; the Sukey Gray murder trial; the Commonwealth against Bob, a slave; Manassa Russell for a list of felonies; Alfred Arrington & Thomas Arrington for attempted murder, gambling, and selling whiskey; Samuel Davis for racing a horse on the public highway; Commonwealth vs Joseph Burgess for murder; the commitment in 1826 of Betsy Cole for professing to be a free person of color without a copy of her certificate of registry. But, in the end, it had to be Manassa Russell.

Manassa Russell occupied the court in the early 1820's the same way that Lucien "Rhoda" Fewell did in the 1870's. He was definitely a boost to the Brentsville economy as many people benefited from his incarcerations. In an 1824 felony charge, a magistrate, constable, deputy sheriff, sheriff, and jailor were all paid. Walter Keys, acting as a guard transporting him to jail, the rental of a horse and cart to transport Russell, a jury, witness payment to attend court, overnight accommodations for the jury, as well as meals from the tavern for Manassa and the jury all received payment. This was just one of many cases against Russell that would undoubtedly draw a huge crowd on court day.

The first five years saw a building boom that gave economic prosperity to a few. To some of the residents living in the area before the town, one can only imagine what they thought of the invasion. With all the conveniences, also came more than one tavern and unaccustomed problems. These problems, however, only trigger our imaginations.

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