



Farmville - Prince Edward Historical Society

P.O. Box 546

Farmville, Virginia 23901

July, 2011

Robert Gillette Brings the Young Jewish Refugees of Hyde Farmlands to Life

The Virginia Plan
William B. Thalhimer
& a Rescue from Nazi Germany

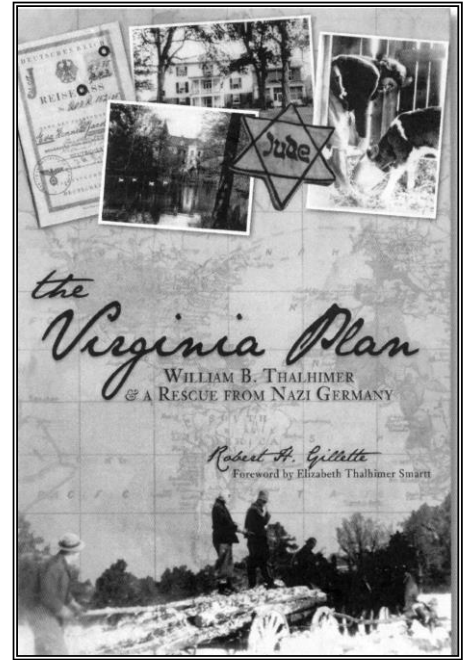
By Robert H. Gillette
book signing following program

Tuesday, July 19, 2011
7:00 p.m.

Farmville Train Station

Executive Board meets at 6:00 p.m.

“Among the Jews attempting to flee Nazi Germany before World War II were the students of Gross Breesen Institute, young men and women who trained in agriculture sciences in hopes of securing visas and a refuge. Across the Atlantic, the Jewish community of Richmond, Virginia, looked to the Third Reich with growing unease, and in a bold plan, department store owner William B. Thalhimer created a safe haven for the students [on Hyde Farmlands] near Burkeville. This is the remarkable history of Thalhimer's heroic rescue mission and the struggle of



the refugees to make a new home in rural America. Robert H. Gillette narrates an untold saga of sacrifice, survival, and hope on two continents,” so reads the jacket of the well researched and informative book *The Virginia Plan William B. Thalhimer & a Rescue from Nazi Germany.*”

Local readers will be able to identify with many of the people and places mentioned. Back in the day, some of our families and others from across the state of Virginia and from the nearby states would make those not too frequent trips to Richmond to shop at Thalhimer's department store for those special occasions. Not only was William Thalhimer an astute businessman, but he and his brother Morton were humanitarians who could read the writing on the walls of Europe during the 1930's.

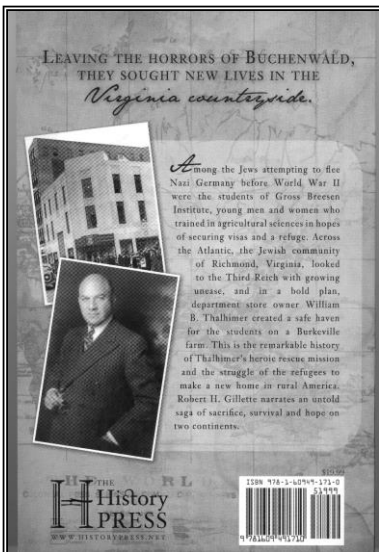
Meet the American and Europeans who worked through the governmental red tape and against time as hate crimes and imprisonments increased. Get to know the young men and women who so wanted a chance to escape the horrors they were facing. Their training at Gross Breesen Institute made them tough both mentally and physically and enabled some of them to survive and make it to Hyde Farmlands just south of Burkeville, which had been purchased by Thalhimer specifically as a home for the young Jewish farmers.

Gillette writes, “By late summer [1939], life at Hyde Farmlands had settled into a comfortable rhythm. The immense manor house accommodated most of the students, but more living space was needed. The slave quarters to the rear of the house had been used to store corn, grain and feed, but now it was transformed into bedrooms. It was cleaned and furnished, but even though it had been converted from a granary, rats, acting out of memory, still visited their old hangouts. That did not deter the new human residents. Other buildings were modified to house students and the tenant farmer's second floor was converted into a girls' dormitory.”

Gillette continues, “Thalhimer continued to discuss his expansive concept for Hyde Farmlands. In addition to focusing on chicken production, he pointed out that workers would be needed for limited vegetable and tobacco farms, orchards, a dairy, pig production, lumbering and continued infrastructure and building projects.”

Gillette discusses the interaction of the Jewish refugees with the local neighbors. “The Hyde Farmlanders occasionally journeyed to the nearby towns of Burkeville, Crewe and Blackstone in the back of the red farm truck....[They] loved to travel to Crewe for a movie and an ice cream cone.... On a Saturday, the town teemed with people doing their weekly shopping. It was also the day to socialize, especially between the young women and young men from the nearby CCC camp. Some of those ice cream dates developed into eventual marriages.”

Read the book and learn more about the trials to reach Hyde Farmlands, the hard work that went into the farm, and what eventually happened to the farm, William Thalhimer, and the young men and women refugees who made America their home.



Gillette Continues Teaching Through his Research on William Thalhimer and Hyde Farmlands

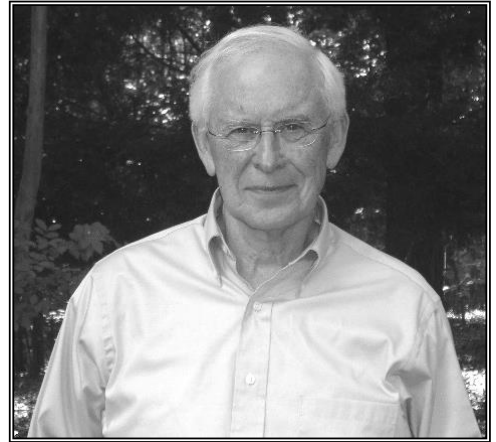
Elizabeth Thalhimer Smart writes in the Foreword for *The Virginia Plan*, “Seven months pregnant, I slowly eased into a chair and listened as Mr. [Robert] Gillette spoke of his own unusual discovery of Hyde Farmlands and of his desire to document the whole story. I felt such joy, delight and relief that someone else, who happened to be a respected former educator, wanted to pursue diligent study of this little-known chapter in our family’s history, as well as the overarching history of American immigration in the 1930’s.”

Robert Gillette acknowledges those who aided him by saying, “ Throughout my research, even people who did not know me opened their doors and welcomed me into their homes, their libraries and their memories....My own family members have been the loudest cheerleaders for my research and writing. Marsha, my wife and computer ‘technician,’ shared my obsession to tell the story right from the beginning.”

Gillette’s entire professional career revolved around young people. For forty years, he was a public school educator. He was recognized for his innovations in education and has spoken and consulted nationally on educational topics.

He is a graduate of Wesleyan University with a BA and MAT. He also studied at the Hebrew Union College, the Reform Jewish rabbinical seminary.

Gillette and his wife Marsha, his canoe paddling partner for fifty-one years, live in Lynchburg, Virginia. They both were smitten with the Hyde Farmlands story and its people. Together they interviewed several of the surviving students. As Connecticut Yankee transplants, they are both committed to discovering their new “southern Jewish roots.”



This Day in July in Prince Edward County History

- 7-1-1900** Leslie Fogus joins Farmville police.
- 7-1-1934** Craddock-Terry commences manufacturing shoes.
- 7-1-2000** Longwood College assumes new designation as Longwood University
- 7-2-1896** Solomon Marable hanged for the murder of Mrs. Pollard
- 7-3-1902** The first automobile makes its appearance in Farmville; it was driven by Mr. A.F. Herman of Richmond on his way to Lynchburg
- 7-4-1776** George Walton (born near Farmville, ca 1741) signs Declaration of Independence as delegate from Georgia
- 7-6-1901** Lightning strikes the Presbyterian Church steeple causing fire and \$300 in damage
- 7-7-1901** Bottling house at Lithia Springs burned
- 7-10-1927** Amandus Cox, livery stable operator, died
- 7-10-1928** First traffic light installed at Third and Main streets
- 7-11-1861** "Hampden-Sydney Boys" military company surrenders after battle of Rich Mountain in present-day West Virginia
- 7-12-1864** Birth of Henry R. McIlwaine at Hampden-Sydney (Virginia State Librarian, 1907-1934)
- 7-13-1781** Notorious British calvaryman, Colonel Banastre Tarleton, raids area around Prince Edward Court House village
- 7-16-1832** Hampden-Sydney literary society requests that Bible be taught as a college course
- 7-17-1825** James T. Gray, Farmville tobacconist, born
- 7-17-1843** First class meets at Farmville Female Seminary, which was founded in 1839
- 7-18-1955** A three-judge Federal Court rules the Prince Edward County will have to desegregate its public schools
- 7-22-1903** Southside Telephone Company chartered
- 7-23-1864** Dr. J.R. Spencer born
- 7-23-1836** The Mineralogical Society of Virginia formed in Worsham
- 7-26-1940** Farmville is the nation's hot spot. Thermometer tops 135° and then explodes!
- 7-27-1896** The Pythians reorganize their lodge here.



Mark calendar for August and September

Bill Graham will discuss the artillery of High Bridge Fort at the August 16 meeting. Graham, an Iraq veteran, is retired military and teaches in the Chesterfield schools.

Bob Flippen, who is working this summer as a volunteer interpreter on the High Bridge Trail near the bridge itself, will talk on September 20 about the AmeriCorps program and his experiences.

Newsletter prepared by
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Farmville-Prince Edward Historical Society