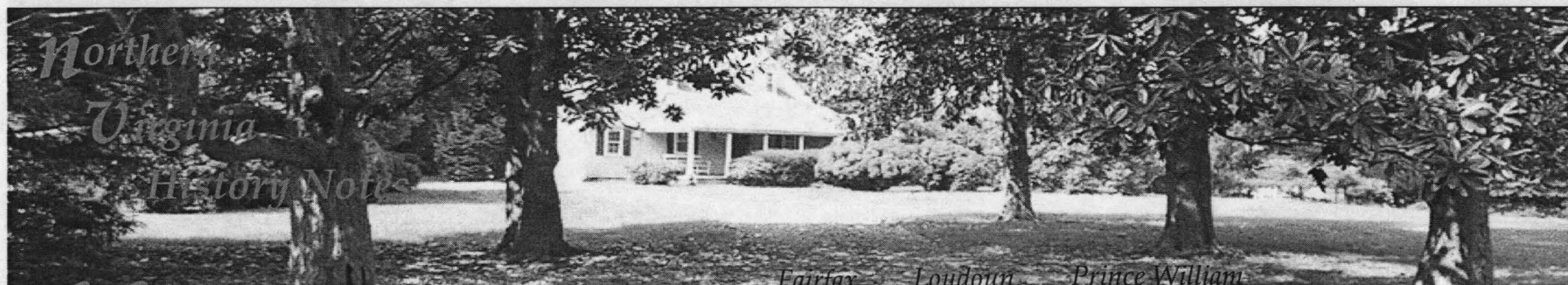


HISTORIC SITE FILE: THOMASSON BARN
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December 2003

Innovation Barn

by Debbie Robison

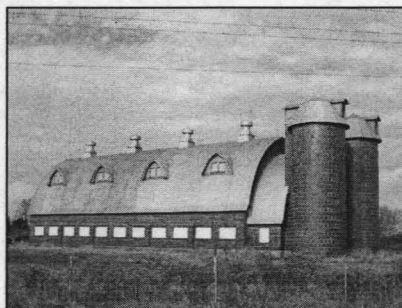
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LOCATION

Innovation Barn is located on a parcel at the northwest quadrant of the intersection of Route 234-bypass and Route 28.

SITE HISTORY



Around the turn of the 20th century, the land on which the Innovation Barn would be built was cultivated with corn by the farm's owner, L.J. Hornbaker.[1] He subsequently sold a small portion of his farm, consisting of 39 ½ acres, to William T. Thomasson on 29 September 1905.[2]

Upon first working the land, Thomasson, known as W.T., was a subsistence farmer growing wheat and corn. After several years, he saved enough money to purchase a Holstein bull and begin dairy farming. Profit from the operation was reinvested in the infrastructure of the dairy farm to allow for additional growth; however, the early dairy barn had poor ventilation, low lighting, and was difficult to keep clean.[3] Therefore, ca. 1929, Thomasson built an improved milking barn that corrected these deficiencies. The assessed value of buildings increased from \$2,200 to \$6,700 in 1929 when land tax records note the reason for an increase due to improvements.[4] Local man, Will Kerlin installed the barn roof. Typically, local professional builders built this type of barn.[5] Mr. Farquhar of Manassas, who built a similar barn in western Fairfax County, may have built the barn.[6] The oak floor planking was obtained from friends in Washington, D.C.

[7]

The milking barn was constructed using Textile hollow-tile terra cotta blocks, which could be purchased from local farm supply stores. The face of the block was finished with a rough surface to resemble brick. Several manufacturers produced hollow-tile terra cotta blocks including The Hollow Tile Building Association of Chicago, which made the MasTerTile brand, Unidilla Silo of Pennsylvania, and the Northwestern Terra Cotta Company of Louisville. Hollow-tile terra cotta blocks were being manufactured in quantity by 1913 but declined in use during the 1940s when they were replaced by cinder block. Dairymen learned of the advantages of terra cotta through promotional materials, salesmen from tile manufacturing companies who marketed their products in the area, and neighboring farmers.[8]

Thomasson's two-story barn utilized the first floor for milking cows and the second floor for hay storage. Two silos stored feed grain. The barn design is typical of plans for milking barns seen in agricultural publications. Hunt, Helm, Ferris and Company designed The Starr Line, available from their catalog. The plans closely resemble the design of Thomasson's barn, though the Thomasson barn was constructed with a round roof rather than a gambrel roof. Like the gambrel roof, the round-roof configuration utilized sawn lumber and eliminated the need for supporting joists, thus increasing the hayloft capacity.[9]

Thomasson, like his neighbors, sold his milk to suppliers in Washington, D.C. causing a milk scarcity in Manassas in 1919. Although dairy-farming operations surrounded Manassas, the region's consumers were concerned that they would be forced to purchase condensed milk.[10]

In support of his dairy farming, Thomasson grew corn and wheat; surplus hay was sold by the carload. He studied farming and dairy techniques in order to use the most advanced production methods. Record keeping was a business tool he used to make management decisions in an effort to optimize production. His four daughters assisted with milking the cows. Daughter Agnes recalled milking 60 cows per day and being able to milk faster than a milking machine.[11] Through the years, Thomasson acquired additional land, increasing his holdings to 452 acres.

After Thomasson's death on March 29 1950, his daughters, Elizabeth Kline, Agnes Huffman, Claudia Compton, and Sallie Ball, sold the farm, livestock, and equipment to George Dickerson. An inventory of personal property sold highlights the types of livestock and equipment used to operate the farm. Both motorized and horse drawn farm equipment reflects industrial advances during the period he operated the farm. The Dickerson family held the farm for ten years before selling the land to development in 1960.[12] The barn has remained vacant since. Except for the barn, all other buildings and structures on the site have been demolished.

THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE DAIRY INDUSTRY IN PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY

The first quarter of the 20th century saw an increase in the number of dairy operations in Prince William County as farmers converted their farms to produce dairy products. The Manassas area, where the Innovation Barn is located, was surrounded by dairy farms that supplied milk to the Washington, D.C. market.[13] Over time, the nationwide dairy industry has seen significant consolidations due to low milk production, low sales relative to investment, poor business knowledge, labor inefficiency, and low quality milk.[14] From 1964 to 1997, the total number of farms with milk cows in Virginia decreased 95%.[15]

In Prince William County, the dairy industry was further reduced as a result of speculative land development acquisitions. As a result, from 1950 to 1997, the number of milk cows decreased 79%.[16] In

1997, the most recently published census of agriculture, Prince William County had only eleven farms with milk cows remaining, down from fourteen farms in 1992.^[17] Only seven farms produced dairy products with sales of \$10,000 or more.^[18]

[1] "Maneuver Grounds Prince William and Fairfax Counties Surveyed Under the Direction of Maj. Edward Burr, Corp. of Engineers," June-July 1904, Prince William County Public Library, Relic Room, Map drawer, Manassas, VA.

[2] Prince William County Deed Book 54, page 266, Prince William County Circuit Court Copy Room, Manassas, VA.

[3] Helen Graves, "Old Barn is Testament to One Man's Commitment to Education for His Four Girls," *The Bull Run Observer*, April 19, 2000, p. 3, Prince William County Public Library, Relic Collection, Diaring folder, Manassas, VA.

[4] Prince William County Land Tax Assessments, Prince William County Circuit Court Copy Room, microfilm, years 1928 and 1929.

[5] Adena Landry and John Vlach, "Terra Cotta Dairy Barns of Western Fairfax County, Virginia," Office of Comprehensive Planning, Fairfax, Virginia, December 2, 1985, p. 20.

[6] *Ibid.* pp. 10, 20.

[7] Graves, p.3.

[8] Landry and Vlach.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] "Milk Scarcity," *The Manassas Journal*, March 21, 1919, p. 1, microfilm, Prince William County Public Library, Relic Collection.

[11] Graves p. 3

[12] Prince William County Deed Book 257, page 479, Prince William County Circuit Court Copy Room, Manassas, VA.

[13] "Milk Scarcity," *The Manassas Journal*, March 21, 1919, p. 1, microfilm, Prince William County Public Library, Relic Collection.

[14] Ken Bailey, "Opportunities for Success on Small Dairy Farms Revisited," paper presented at the 35th Annual Conference of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners, Penn State University, September 26-28, 2002.

[15] USDA, "1997 Census of Agriculture – State Data, Table 1. Historical Highlights: 1997 and Earlier Census Years," National Agricultural Statistics Service.

[16] Steven Manheimer, "Prince William County U.S. Census of Agriculture," Virginia Agricultural Statistics Service, Richmond, VA, Rev. 1999.

[17] USDA, "1997 Census of Agriculture – Virginia County Data, Table 14, Cattle and Calves – Inventory and Sales: 1997 and 1992," National Agricultural Statistics Service.

[18] USDA, "1997 Census of Agriculture – Virginia County Data, Table 12, Farms With Sales of \$10,000 or More: 1997 and 1992," National Agricultural Statistics Service.