

Henry Falvel Gillette

Educator, Professor of Baylor University, Freemason, Farmer, &
Philanthropist/Superintendent of the Bayland Orphan's Home.

Gillette's Early Life and Arrival in Texas

Henry Falvel Gillette was born July 16, 1816 in Grandby, Hartford County, Connecticut, the son of Almon and Laura Adams Gillette. He was attending Trinity College in Hartford, in January 1838, studying for the Episcopal ministry, when his cousin, Dr. Ashbel Smith, arrived for a few days visit. Smith, a valuable and persuasive talker, took every opportunity to expound about the wonderful opportunities in Texas and invited his relatives to visit with him there. Henry left school in 1839, because of a lung infection and went to Texas to regain his health under the care of his cousin. His health may have been improved by Smith's glowing rhetoric because he was not too ill to make the arduous journey to the new Promised Land. Henry arrived in Houston in January, 1840, and began to tutor the children of William F. and Millie Gray and others. On March 16 I 1840, Henry and thirty-eight residents joined together to form a Protestant Episcopal congregation and Church which later became Christ Church. Henry was a devoted Episcopalian all his life and was still a member of Christ Church at his death. He was said to have been an excellent school master and that his was the first school in the city of Houston.

Teaching and Marriage

In the summer of 1841 at the urging of James L. Farquhar, Henry went to Washington County to take charge of Union Academy. Farquhar, a plantation owner working about twenty hands, was destined to be one of the original trustees of Baylor University. He had five children and provided Henry with free board and lodging. Union Academy was a private school, chartered on February 4, 1840 and operated until early 1843. It was located about three miles from Washington-on-the-Brazos. While there Henry met and married Lucinda Maxey, the daughter of William and Rebecca Maxey. The marriage ceremony- was performed on March 3, 1842, by the Reverend William M. Tryon, a well-known Baptist minister who a few years later was one of the founders of Baylor University. During this time Henry became interested in farming, probably through the influence of his in-laws. After the Academy closed, he moved to the Trinity River, about ten miles from swartwout, to farm.

A son, Charles, was born, March 3, 1843, to Henry and his wife, and by 1844 Henry decided to return to Houston and to educational endeavors. Perhaps this decision was made after his loss of 80 bales of cotton when the steamer, Lady Byron sank on the Brazos River below Richmond in January of 1844. Henry, with his uncle the Reverend Charles Gillette of Christ Episcopal Church, opened a school at Main Street and Preston Avenue, which they called the "Houston Academy". The Academy was an accredited preparatory, co-educational school from which the graduates might enter the colleges of the United States. "It was the

first educational institution to take on aspects of permanency in the city”, stated the Houston Press, April 21, 1936. A statement of educational needs in Texas was printed in the Telegraph and Texas Register on November 19, 1845. Henry Gillette and Judge R. E. B. Baylor's names appeared in the article. A convention of friends of education met in 1846 with Henry Gillette, Dr. F. Moore and A. Cook representing Houston. It was proposed that three leagues of land be set aside by the Republic for each county school fund.

First Professor of Baylor University

Baylor University was chartered by the Republic of Texas on February 1, 1845 and pressure for the immediate opening of a preparatory department led to the appointment in January, 1846, of Henry Gillette as teacher of the school. It was to commence as soon as the Academy Building at Independence could be fitted up. Henry's old friend, James L. Farquhar, was responsible for the appointment. Trustees Baylor, Tryon and Taylor conferred with Henry and offered him a salary of not more than \$800 annually. The preparatory department of Baylor University was opened by Professor Henry F. Gillette on May 18, 1846 in the two-story frame building formerly used by Independence Academy. The initial enrollment number red twenty-four students which increased to seventy by the end of the year. Classes were summoned to start by the melodious tones of a plantation bell furnished by Trustee Aaron Shannon. Henry assumed the teaching responsibilities until the arrival of President Henry Lee Graves in February of 1847. By the end of the 1848 term, financial conditions were precarious and the Institution was indebted to Graves for \$1,200 and to Gillette for \$800. Arrangements were made for payment.

Resigning when his contract expired in 1848, Henry opined that eight years of teaching in Texas had induced him to “let others endure the hardships that I have endured”. The difficulty of collecting his salary, the absence of an expected raise, damage to his new home by a hurricane and finally the request of his father-in-law, William Maxey, to come live with him after the death of his wife in early 1848, led Henry to tender his resignation. The Baylor University Board of Trustees passed a resolution expressing their appreciation and thanks “justly due” to Baylor's first teacher, Professor Henry F. Gillette for his wise and faithful service to our cherished institution during its infancy.

Farming, Teaching and Preaching

Henry, his wife and children moved to the plantation of his father-in-law, William Maxey, near Cold Springs in Polk County (now San Jacinto County), Texas. Maxey was a prosperous planter and owned a number of slaves. In 1850 Maxey was listed as 67 years old, a farmer born in Virginia, whose real estate was valued at \$3,220. Living with him was a 16 year old son named Walter. Enumerated next door was the Henry Gillette family, consisting of his wife and four children and Robert Sherod, the plantation overseer. Henry's occupation was listed as school teacher. By 1860, the Gillette family had increased to nine children, minus the oldest son, Charles, who had apparently died. Henry is listed as an Episcopal Minister whose personal estate was \$125,000 and his real estate was \$11,100.

This sudden increase in wealth was because his wife had inherited a share of her father's estate in 1859. James M. Maxey, the brother-in-law of Gillette, was 41 years of age in 1860 and a District Court Judge.

Henry was farming, teaching and preaching during the years he lived near Cold Springs. He also began his association with the Freemasons, who were avid and early supporters of education. Henry became a Mason and a member of Mt. Moriah Lodge No. on April 7, 1849. He was Master of this Lodge in 1851 thru 1854 and secretary during 1857 and 1858. In 1854 Henry erected a school called the "Gillette Academy" at Coldsprings.

Bell Prairie Plantation

On December 29, 1859, Henry purchased 950 acres of land in the William Scott lower league, in Harris County, on Galveston Bay from the J. Pickney Henderson heirs. Almost immediately he sold the north 550 acres to his cousin, Dr. Ashbel Smith, to enlarge his Evergreen Plantation. Henry retained the balance of the land and this holding became "Bell Prairie Plantation". There are no facts as to how or why the plantation got it's name. Local tradition says that the surrounding prairie was covered with wild flowers much of the year, and that the "blue bells" during the early fall were especially beautiful.

The name has also been spelled "Belle" Prairie, meaning, beautiful prairie, but contemporary accounts use "Bell". A commodious two-story brick home, facing the bay, was begun on the plantation with slave labor in 1859. The house was rectangular with a hipped-roof, and a basement. First and second floor porches adorned the front and back of the house. A matching, two-story, brick carriage-house was also constructed at a right angle to the west end and back of the house. The addition gave an L-shaped appearance to the living quarters. Two, large, under-ground, brick cisterns were constructed to provide water for the plantation. One was on the west side of the main residence. The other cistern, for the slave quarters, can still be seen about 100 yards east of the main house ...Little is known about the actual operations of the plantation except that Henry imported bulls from England. The animals were brought directly by ship and off-loaded at the Bell Prairie Plantation wharf...

The Gillette family moved into their new home sometime after August, 1860, because they were listed in the August 25th, 1860 census for the Coldspring's area. Henry also left the Mt. Moriah Masonic Lodge on August 25, 1860. ... On December 1, 1866, Henry became affiliated with the Sampson Masonic Lodge No. 231 at Lynchburg. He was their Worshipful Master in 1866 and Senior Deacon in 1867.

Bayland Orphan's Home

After the Civil War ended, there had been some discussion among community leaders of Houston and Galveston about the need for an institution to care for orphan children of Confederate veterans. In 1866 C. C. Preston, a school-master in the bay neighborhood, presented a petition to the Legislature of Texas asking for a charter to incorporate an institution for the support and education of the orphan children of Texas, to be located at

Bayland, Harris County, Texas. Apparently this was a way out of financial difficulties for Preston. He had bought land and the large red brick residence of Dr. John L. Bryan for his school, which proved unsuccessful. This property was located on San Jacinto Bay, just o the west of Evergreen Plantation and was to become the physical plant for the orphan's home.

On January 15, 1867, Col. Ashbel Smith, Col. M. s. Munson, H. F. Gillette, Col. J. T. Brady and Dr. John L. Bryan met in the office of Dr. Bryan to make plans for the proposed institution. The board of trustees was to consist of the above named men plus Judge William P. Ballinger, c.c. Preston and Col. F. H. Merriman. Henry was appointed superintendent of Bayland Orphanage and Secretary of the Board at a salary of \$1,800 annually. For the next fourteen years Henry lived and worked at the orphanage. ...The average enrollment was usually about 80 students. In May 1878, the Board was indebted to Henry for \$10,071.82, an account which had been accumulating for the last ten years. To satisfy the debt, they gave Henry 10,000 acres in Stephens county, which had been donated to the home by the state of Texas. Henry turned in his resignation to the Bayland trustees on December 11, 1880. He was 65 years old and said that his physical energies were so impaired that he was no longer able to fulfill his duties. It was a year later before the board released him from his duties as superintendent but he was prevailed upon to continue as secretary of the board.

Henry had found the time to be a founding member, and the first Worshipful Master of the Cedar Bayou Masonic Lodge. Thereafter he was Worshipful Master four times, in 1870, 1871, and 1876 ... [Gillette was named] the "Father" of the Cedar Bayou Lodge. The [lodge's] History stated that it was through Henry's solicitous care the Lodge grew and through his business knowledge it prospered.

...Henry died April 25, 1896, at 1 A. M. at Bell Prairie Plantation, his home on Galveston Bay. He was eighty years old and his death was attributed to Bright's disease and his advanced age. The La Porte Chronicle called him Colonel Gillette, but that was an honorary title. He was a Royal Arch Mason and Knight Templar. A staunch Episcopalian, Henry was still a member of Christ Episcopal Church in Houston. He was interred in the family plot in Cedar Bayou Methodist Cemetery.