

The Sperry Family and Cranford

By Vic Bary

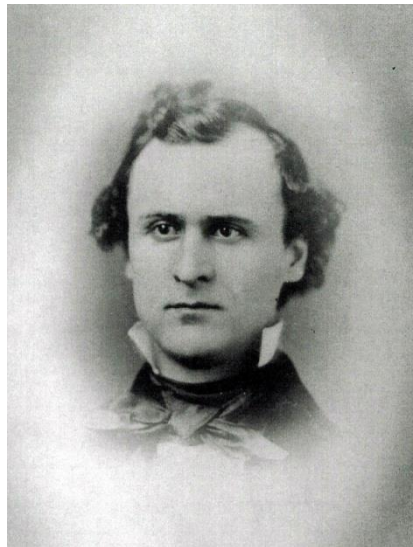
A walk around Cranford today will find lingering reminders of the Sperry's and their prominence in Cranford – Sperry Park along Riverside Drive, the iron fencing and sunken garden at English Village (left from the Thomas A. Sperry mansion), Sperry Observatory at Union County College, and the William Sperry Building at the corner of Alden Street and North Avenue – are some of those reminders.

From previous “Mill Wheel” articles, you probably know of the Sperry's involvement with the Cranford Trust Building (successor to the Opera House claimed by fire in 1912 and similar in appearance), the first Cranford Casino, Roosevelt Manor, and Osceola Farm (much of the acreage of which today comprises “Sunny Acres”). And all of us of a certain age remember “S&H Green Stamps” (the “S” in which stood for Sperry). But did you know that the Sperry family had a much older American history pre-dating Cranford?

Early Southern Roots

The Spiry (as it was then spelled) family first appears in the American colonies in Virginia. Jacob Sperry (1751-1808) changed the name to its current spelling and served during the Revolutionary War with Morgan's Company of the Virginia Militia. The family was living in the western mountain region of Virginia by that time.

Jacob Austin Sperry (1823 – 1896)



Jacob Austin Sperry

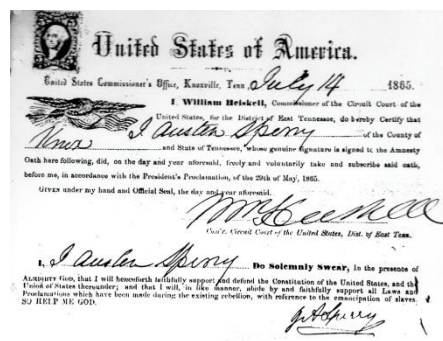
We know a great deal about Jacob Austin Sperry, father of Cranford's Thomas A. and William M. Sperry (of S&H Green Stamps fame) who was born in 1823 and quite a character in his own right. Born in Winchester, Virginia, he was educated as a medical doctor, receiving his MD degree from the University of Maryland in 1847. Discovering that he did not enjoy practicing medicine, and having written fiction extensively as a youth, he soon redirected his efforts as a writer, playwright, and as a newspaper editor and publisher. His play "Extremes" was among those receiving favorable reviews and a successful run in New York.

Sperry's newspaper career began in the early 1840's when he edited *The Baltimore Monthly Budget* and co-published the *Baltimore Daily Whig*. In 1857 he began publishing Bristol Tennessee's first newspaper, *The Bristol News*. (He supplemented his meager newspaper earnings by teaching students, for 50 cents per month per student, at a school he set up in the newspaper building.) In 1861 he took over the reins of *The Knoxville Register*, chosen by pro-Southern supporters who wished the paper to be the Secessionist mouthpiece in Unionist East Tennessee. It was to be published in opposition to Parson William G. Brownlow's staunchly Unionist *Knoxville Whig*.

Of Knoxville and Sperry, Brownlow said "It has three banks and at present one but *one* newspaper, and that vile Secessionist journal, edited by a scoundrel, debauchee, and coward named *Sperry*, selected by a more unprincipled set of men than he himself, because of his *adaptation*, to the dirty work he is employed to do."

Sperry published the *Register* from early 1861 until April, 1864, when Burnside's Union troops occupied Knoxville, seized *The Register* and destroyed the presses. Sperry fled with Confederate forces to Atlanta (he had joined the 14th Georgia Infantry in 1863). There he resumed publication as *The Atlanta Register* (printed on the only available paper – wallpaper), until Atlanta later fell to Union forces. Sperry escaped Atlanta, but was subsequently captured December 14, 1864 in Bristol, Tennessee by Major-General George Stoneman's forces, and was jailed for the duration of the Civil War and beyond at Camp Chase in Knoxville. (His wife went to live with family in Michigan.).

Sperry swore an oath of allegiance to the U.S. government on July 4, 1865 as part of the process of seeking a pardon from his imprisonment at Camp Chase. He was subsequently pardoned.



Amnesty Oath

Sperry had married Susan Butler Langley of Germantown, PA in 1853. They would have six children together, including Thomas A. and William Miller, who would play important roles in Cranford's development.



Sperry Children

(Back: Thomas A., William M., Washington E. L.
Front: Louis L., Regina Marie, Joseph A.)

His imprisonment may have left an indelible mark on Sperry, as after his release he led an itinerant life about which little is known. He appears to have been occasionally employed in newspaper publishing and printing without enjoying any lasting success. His lifestyle is known to have taken a toll on his marriage, and he and his wife separated. Ultimately Sperry came to reside at the Union Printers Retirement Home in Colorado, Springs, CO where he died June 13, 1896 and is buried there. (His widow, Susan Langley Sperry, would survive him by 26 years, dying in New Rochelle, NY in 1922.)

Next issue we will delve into the careers of brothers Thomas Alexander and William Miller Sperry, who would have a major impact on Cranford's development as a late 19th century/early 20th century upscale suburban community.

(The author wishes to recognize a major indebtedness to the Sperry family files Steven Glazer assembled for a separate project and left to CHS. I used those files extensively in preparing this article.)

Sources:

1. Ainsworth, Fred C. & Kirkley, Joseph W., The War of Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series II- Volume III, Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1890.
2. *Baltimore Saturday Visitor*, February 1, 1847.
3. Bary, Vic "J. Walter Thompson and Cranford's Development", *The Mill Wheel*, Holiday, 2018.
4. Brownlow, W. G. SKETCHES of the RISE, PROGRESS AND DECLINE of SECESSION, George W. Childs, Philadelphia and Applegate & Company, Cincinnati, OG, 1882.
5. Conners, Terry, letter dated 2/16/1979 to Mr. William S. Beinecke, Chairman of the Board, Sperry & Hutchinson, NYC, NY.
6. Cordell, Eugene F, MD, Historical Sketch of the University of Maryland School of Medicine (1807-1890), Press of Isaac Freidenwald, Baltimore, MD, 1891.

7. Engel, Ron & Miller, Tice L., The American Stage: Social and Economic Issues from the Colonial Period To, 1993, p.82.
8. Goodspeed's History of Sullivan County (Tennessee), The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887.
9. "The Literary Papers of J. Austin Sperry", Carmen D. Valentino Rare Books & Manuscripts, Philadelphia, PA.
10. "Morgan Bibliography of Ohio Imprints: 1796-1850: Sperry, J. Austin.
11. Neely, Jack, "The Weirdest December", *Metropost.com*, 12/13/2007.
12. Overmountain Press, Johnson City, TN, 1992.
13. Rule, William, Chapter XV – The Press, Standard History of Knoxville Tennessee, The Lewis Publishing Company, Chicago, 1900, p. 317.
14. "Stoneman's Great Raid", *The New York Times*, 1/08/1865.
15. Tyler, Lyon G., "Jacob Austen Sperry", Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography, Lewis Historical Publishing Company, New York, 1915, pp. 931-932.
16. "U.S. Civil War Soldiers 1861 – 1865, Confederate, J. A. Sperry", The Generations Network, Inc., 2010,
17. Wagenblast, Bernie, *Cranford Uncensored.com*, October 10, 2018