

The Sperry Family in Cranford Part II: Thomas & William

By Vic Bary

In the last issue we introduced Jacob Austin Sperry, newspaper editor and playwright, two of whose six children would find considerable wealth and share it with Cranford. Let's meet them in turn.

Thomas A. Sperry and the S&H Company



Thomas Alexander Sperry

Thomas Alexander Sperry was born July 6, 1864, two and one half months before Atlanta fell during the Civil War. When it did, his mother fled with him and his siblings to her family home in Michigan.

At age 17 Thomas went to Bridgeport, CT where he was a salesman for a silverware company. In 1891, while back in Michigan, he pioneered the idea of trading stamp premiums, eventually founding the Sperry and Hutchinson Company in 1896 (with Shelly Byron Hutchinson, who provided the venture capital). Trading stamps rewarded those customers who paid cash for items. Retailers would buy the stamps from S&H and issue them to customers at a rate of their own choosing. Customers would redeem the stamps for items at S&H redemption centers (the first of which was opened in 1897). The S&H Company would make Thomas Sperry and his extended family quite wealthy.

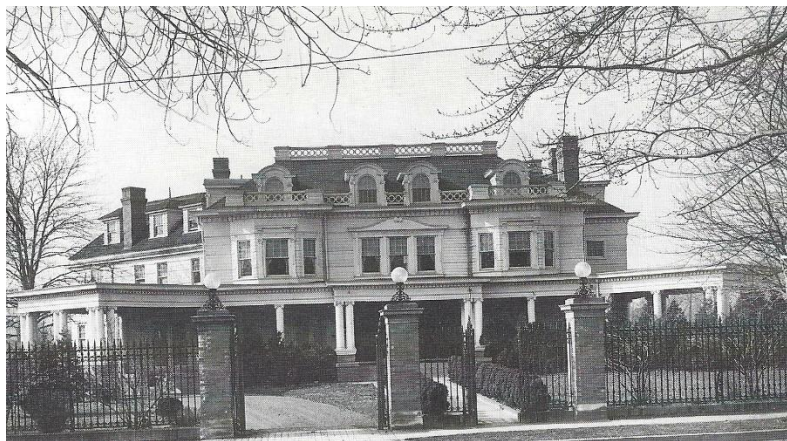
The first Cranford City Directory was published in 1901, and recorded Thomas residing at 319 Union Avenue North, while brother William resided at 604 Linden Place and brother Joseph resided at 5 Hamilton Avenue. Three years later, William would buy out Shelly Hutchinson's

stock in S&H and become a co-shareholder with Thomas. (Brother Joseph held senior positions in S&H but does not appear to have been a shareholder.)



319 Union Avenue

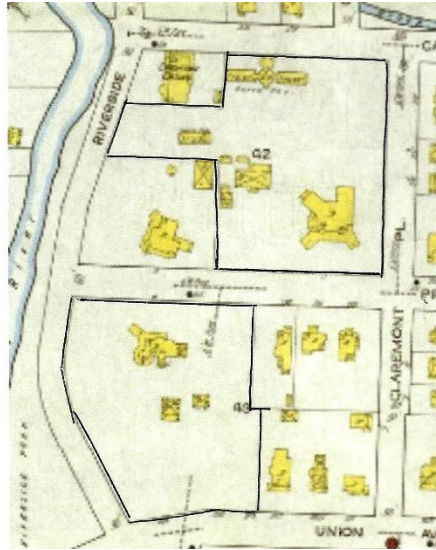
Thomas Sperry's not insubstantial 319 Union Avenue house was probably a temporary lodging while he completed his spectacular residence at 317 Prospect Avenue, where he would live from 1902 until his death in 1913. He and his wife, Katherine Major Sperry, who were married in 1891, would raise five children there (one of whom, Louis, sadly died at age three).



T. A. Sperry Mansion 317 Prospect Avenue

The Sperry mansion's original sunken garden and 1910 iron fence (installed at a cost of \$20,000 1910 dollars) still stand today on this three-acre property, which is now the site of the English Village condominiums.

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In 1906, brother William Sperry built himself a mansion at the corner of Prospect Avenue and Riverside Avenue (later renamed Riverside Drive). The relationship of the brothers' estates (Thomas' at the top and William's at the bottom) can be seen on this extract from the 1915 Sanborn fire map of Cranford.



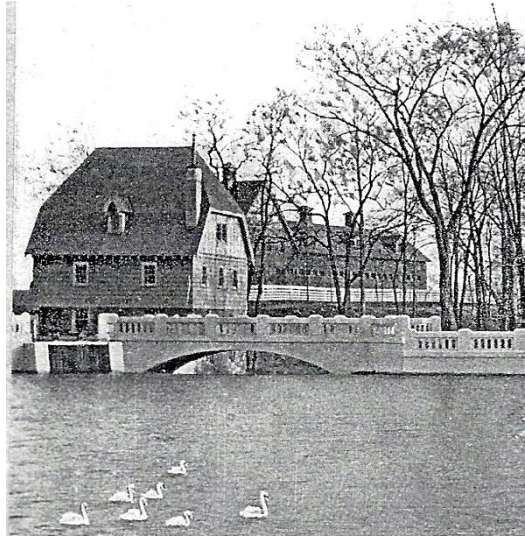
1915 Sanborn Map

T. A Sperry's Cranford Activities

Thomas Sperry would cast a wide shadow across Cranford, involving himself locally in far more than in just the S&H Company. He joined forces with brother William and with advertising magnate J. Walter Thompson to build the first Cranford Casino in 1892. Two years later, in 1894, the same three launched the upscale Roosevelt Manor development above Riverside Avenue. In 1903, Thomas and William would be instrumental in erecting the Masonic Building at the corner of Union Avenue and Alden Street. Built for the Masonic Azure Lodge, the building also housed the Cranford National Bank (see Winter 2019 issue of *The Mill Wheel*), of which Thomas was President and William was a Director. When the Cranford Opera House (erected by J Walter Thompson in 1892, but owned by William Sperry since 1908) burned to the ground in February, 1912, William Sperry built a near-identical replacement Cranford Trust Company Building on the spot. The Trust Company was the 1911 successor to the Cranford National Bank. The President of the Cranford Trust Company was, of course, Thomas A. Sperry.

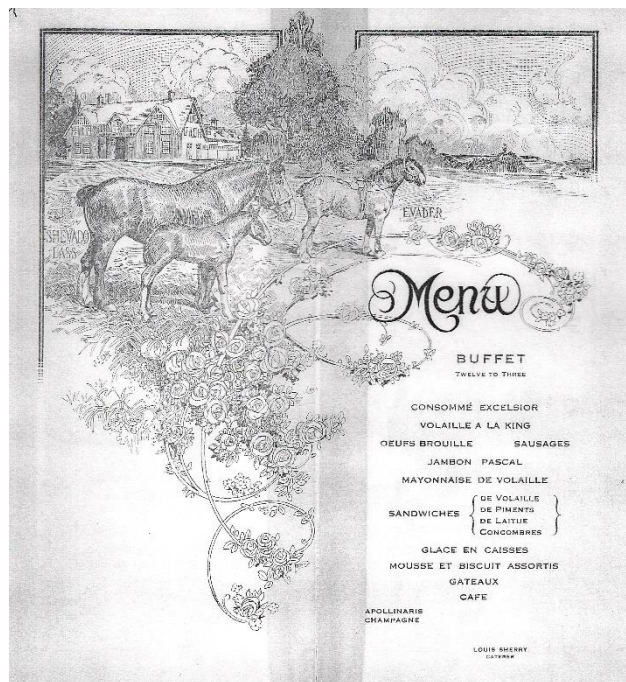
Osceola Farm

Thomas Sperry had a number of interests and was not a man to live on a small and self-effacing scale. One of his passions was animal husbandry, specifically breeding Clydesdale horses and brown Swiss cattle. To pursue these interests, in 1906 he built the 200 acre Osceola Farm on Cranford's southern border. At that time, it was the largest stock farm in New Jersey. (His heirs would later sell much of the land to Sears Roebuck and Company. Sears would build the Sunny Acres development there starting in 1940 – see Winter issue, 2016 of *The Mill Wheel*.)



Osceola Pond and Barn

Osceola Farm was a working farm which sold milk and butter to the Cranford Dairy, but was also a rich man's toy. In late May, 1913 Sperry invited 300 guests to a barn dance at Osceola Farm in honor of his daughter Katherine. Here is the menu from the dinner preceding the dance.



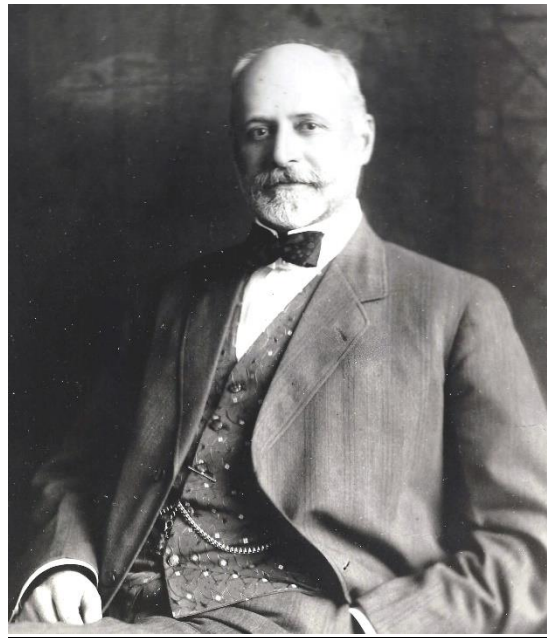
Katherine's Barn Dance Menu

The Death of Thomas Sperry

Shortly after Katherine's barn dance, Thomas Sperry took his family on a two-month tour of Europe. On the return voyage he was stricken with ptomaine poisoning and was carried off the

ship on a stretcher in New York. He was too ill to make the trip to Cranford, so the family adjourned to their Central Park West residence at the Langham Apartments. Thomas' death there was reported in the September 3, 1913 *New York Times*. Thomas Sperry left an estate of \$2 million (\$51 million in 2019 dollars), split evenly between his wife and four children in a trust managed by her.

William Miller Sperry (1859 – 1927)



William Miller Sperry

Born in Bristol, TN September 14, 1859, William Miller Sperry was educated in the Plainfield, NJ public school system. At age 15 he began a 3-year clerkship on Wall Street, but soon afterward involved himself in the wholesale hardware business. He was a salesman in that business from 1876-1893, when he co-founded the Sperry and Alexander Company hardware business. He remained active in that company even after joining Sperry and Hutchinson in 1896. In 1904, when Shelly Hutchinson became concerned that the trading stamp business had peaked and sought a buyer for his half ownership of S&H Company, William Sperry bought him out. He succeeded Thomas as President after Thomas' death in 1913.

William Sperry was a resident of Cranford starting in 1892, although he would also maintain a New York City address, and later a Jupiter City, FL winter home. In 1906 he built a mansion across Prospect Avenue from his brother Thomas.



William Sperry Mansion - Prospect and Riverside

William seems to have embraced a less flamboyant life style than his brother Thomas, but he was a benefactor to his town. During his lifetime he gave 1.6 acres on the Northeast side of the Rahway River across from his home to the Township as Sperry Park. Forty years after his death in 1927, his heirs gave the William Miller Sperry Observatory to the then Union Junior College in his name.

(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.)

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