

Sparrow, Thomas, II ^[1]

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by W. Keats Sparrow, 1994

19 Apr. 1783–30 Sept. 1852

Thomas Sparrow, II, shipbuilder, was born at Smith's Creek, Craven County ^[2], the son of Thomas, I (1751–1822), and his first wife, Theresa (Rhesa) Delamar Sparrow. Sparrow's career in building commercial sailing vessels helps to illuminate an important but relatively unexamined early North Carolina coastal industry.

Sparrow had much in his background to lead him to shipbuilding ^[3]. In the 1700s his grandfather Smith Sparrow and his great-uncle Peter Sparrow had both been shipwrights in Norfolk, Va., where his own father and his uncle Francis had lived and worked before moving to Craven County. And in his own era, many of his Craven County kinsmen—including Henry Sparrow, Joseph B. Sparrow, Samuel Sparrow, and Smith Sparrow—were shipwrights, too, not to mention his many other relatives—including Captain Robert Sparrow of New Bern and Captain William Sparrow of Smith's Creek—who were mariners. These facts suggest that the maritime industry tended to be a family business passed on from one generation to another.

Quite likely Sparrow learned the craft of building ships from his father while still a boy at Smith's Creek. But by the time he was an adult, he was situated in New Bern and being assigned young men as apprentices "to learn," as the court minutes say, "the art and mystery of shipcarpentering." Among those bound to him for this purpose were Green Copes, John Copes, Elisha Fulshire, and Martin Howard, as well as his kinsman David I. Sparrow.

In late 1828 Sparrow issued a public announcement that suggests the progressiveness and scope of his operations. The notice says that he had built a marine railway or "inclined plane" at his place of business near Union Point, the convergence of the Neuse ^[4] and Trent rivers at New Bern. This railway could handle any vessels traveling the waters of the area, and in August of that year the 120-ton schooner *Proxy* could be seen making use of the new facility. In building his marine railway, Sparrow followed the plan of that at Hallet's Cove, Long Island, N.Y., and boasted that "its advantages over the common mode of careening are generally understood and admitted." Not only did his business reflect the latest technology, but it also involved servicing older vessels as well as building new ones.

Within a few years, Sparrow's business had grown so that he took on a partner, James Howard, and the firm assumed the new name of Sparrow and Howard Shipbuilders. A representative contract dated 5 Oct. 1832 shows the firm building a vessel for Thomas and Monza L. Jarkind. The vessel was to have a 60-foot keel and a 22-foot beam, with prime live oak, red cedar, white oak, and prime pitch pine as the chief materials. The firm promised the completed vessel, "in a good and work-manlike manner," in nine or ten months. The new owners "agree[d] to pay the aforesaid Sparrow & Howard twenty-five dollars per ton for the . . . vessel, one-half at the time of delivery and the other half in a note payable six months after the delivery of the vessel."

The names of early nineteenth-century vessels in the *General Index to Savannah [Ga.] Newspapers* suggest that many may have been built by Craven County firms such as Sparrow and Howard. Among those listed, for example, are the master ship *Craven*, the schooner *Sparrow*, and the sloop *Sparrow*.

The partnership with Howard lasted for only a short time, the dissolution taking place in 1836. But Sparrow, by then in his fifties, continued to prosper with his progressive and well-situated maritime industry. The profits from his scale of shipbuilding were ample, providing a grand style of life for him and his family. The business afforded not only an education at fine schools for his children, but also a mansion for them to live in.

Around 1840 he ostensibly used the master craftsmen employed by his company to build a three-and-a-half story, 4,000-square foot home with several dependencies at 222 East Front Street (Lot 6), adjacent to his shipyard and overlooking both the Neuse and Trent rivers. This carpenter's version of the Greek Revival style is a brick side-hall house, similar to many in Charleston and to several others in New Bern; the robust quality of the Greek Revival elements inside—including mantelpieces, moldings, and doors—are said to have been "unrivaled" in New Bern. This massive landmark, sold by Sparrow's heirs in February 1859, was mythologized by generations who passed it on their way to the coast as "Blackbeard's House" and was thought to have a secret escape tunnel leading to the Neuse River ^[5]. In the late twentieth century it was renovated under the supervision of the New Bern Preservation Foundation ^[6].

Sparrow dedicated much of his time to community activities, serving in such capacities as justice of the peace for Craven County and later as town commissioner for New Bern. He was also an active member of St. John's Masonic Lodge ^[7], a director of the New Bern Marine and Fire Insurance Company, and a member of the Presbyterian church ^[8]. In 1827 he served on the Committee of Correspondence supporting the election of Andrew Jackson ^[9] as president.

Sparrow married a distant cousin, Jane Jennette Sparrow (b. 3 Oct. 1788 at Mattamuskeet; d. 24 May 1856 at New Bern),

the daughter of Paul and Ann Jennette Sparrow. Thomas and Jane Sparrow were survived by six children: Ann (b. 22 Sept. 1811); Stephen D. (b. 25 July 1814); Lucinda (b. June 1817); Thomas, III ^[10] (b. 2 Oct. 1819); William Tucker (b. 21 Aug. 1825); and Mary Eliza (b. 1 Oct. 1827).

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Additional Resources:

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