

The Taylor Dynasty

by Spencer Grey

It all began in the early 19th century when John Taylor went to sea and quickly became the captain of a vessel. His son, John Taylor, Jr., who also was a mariner and sea captain, had four sons, John III, Simeon, Horace, and Prince, all of whom went to sea early in life and rapidly rose to the rank of captain.

When John Taylor III (1824-1886) married in 1847, he wisely selected a bride, Elizabeth Mayo, who enjoyed sailing with him, ultimately accompanying him on more than 40 voyages and crossing the equator 28 times. It is not surprising that two of their eight children were born at sea: Edgar Rockland Taylor, born aboard the ship Rockland, and Freddie Imperial, who was born on the ship Imperial. When a child was born during a sea voyage, it was the custom to mark the event by including the name of the vessel in part of his or her name.

Early in his career, John Taylor sailed on coastal runs between Boston and Philadelphia for several years. But in November 1877, when the Red Cloud, one of the largest ships ever built in Boston, was launched at the Quincy shipyard, John Taylor assumed command. In the spring of 1879 she was in San Francisco loading cargo for a voyage to Liverpool. Because it was so large, the Red Cloud required a 32-man crew, but during this three-year trip to Liverpool so many men were lost overboard, fell from the rigging, or jumped ship that it was necessary to hire 110 men to replace the vanishing crew. By the time she arrived in Liverpool only three members of the original crew were on board, namely Captain Taylor, his first mate, and the carpenter. This high rate of attrition provides some understanding of the rigors of maritime life.

John Taylor's brother Simeon N. Taylor (1826-1898) also began his career as a mariner in the coastal trade, carrying coal and pig iron from Philadelphia to Boston, but in 1855 he was offered command of the bark Ella that was in the Mediterranean fruit trade. Two years later he was master of the brig Granada that on one occasion carried among other things in its cargo a locomotive on a voyage to Matanzas, Cuba. He was understandably apprehensive about unloading it, but as he told his wife in one of his frequent letters to her, "We have got clear of our locomotive all right and nobody hurt, thank the Lord...Tell Lucy I am afraid she will not get her Bay Rum, for they do not know anything about that kind of rum. I guess they are pretty well posted on the other kind of rum." In 1858 the owners of the Granada ordered Simeon to take her to the Far East and stay there trading as long as he could find cargoes and then sell her and come home. For the next few years Simeon continued in coastal and river trade in China, until in 1862 the owners of the Granada ordered him back to New York to supervise the building of a new steamer, the Kin Kiang, that was launched in September 1863 and immediately embarked for China.

During 1865 and 1866, when Simeon commanded the Kin Kiang on the Canton River between Hong Kong and Canton, he was proud of the fact that his ship was faster than most of the others on the river. On Dec. 16, 1865, he wrote to his wife, Hitty, "We left Shanghai on the third of this month and made the run to Hong Kong in 58 hours, the best time that ever was made, and there was quite an excitement about it. I was taken by the hand and must go and dine with head of the House, and they think that the Kin Kiang and the Captain are all right."

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Atwood House

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Horace Scudder Taylor (1829-1869) married Corrinde Atkins in 1852, when he was 23 years old. In 1855 he became master of the bark Western Sea, owned by Alpheus Hardy, another Chatham native who at the peak of his career owned as many as 12 vessels, most of which had Chatham men as their officers. In December 1856, Corrinde went with her husband on a voyage to West Africa. On the voyage home in the fall of 1857 she died of yellow fever, which she had contracted while in Africa, and was buried at sea. In 1864 when he was captain of the Young Greek, her owner, Alpheus Hardy, ordered him to sail her to Shanghai, where he was to sell her. At that time his brother Simeon, who was Captain of the Wild Rover, arrived in Shanghai and turned over command of her to Horace, who then sailed her to Boston, taking with him his famous passenger Neesima Shimeta, the first Japanese citizen to emigrate. In 1869 when Horace was crossing from Boston to East Boston on the ferry, he slipped and fell between the boat and the dock and was killed at the age of 40.

The youngest of the brothers was Prince Harding Taylor (1835-1879). Before he became master of the Dexter at the age of 32 he had sailed on two brigs, 10 barks, three ships, and four steamships, indicating that he must have gone to sea at a very early age to achieve such a record. When he was about 16 he served under his brother John as chief officer on the bark Sea Bird. Soon after that he became master of the Bark Howland. In 1872 he was captain of the Ship Mountain Wave on a 179-day trip from Boston to San Francisco. While in San Francisco he wrote to the editor of the Chatham Monitor to congratulate him on his position, saying, "I am glad there is one spunky man in town...I had a very long tedious time getting here, but finally arrived safe and well. I do not know where I shall go from here but should be pleased to hear from you; also the railroad, what prospects of getting it to Chatham?"

In the archives at the Atwood House Museum is a photograph dated May 12, 1866, of Simeon, John, and Prince standing behind four seated Chinese men who most likely were the owners of one of the hong, or trading posts, that they dealt with during their years in the Orient.

With six sea captains spanning three generations, it is unlikely that any other family in Chatham, or anywhere, could match the Taylors' record, but the fact that it happened at all gives us an indication of how much seafaring was a part of life in the 19th century in this community.