

# North Carolina Captain's Cabin Bench

By Schuyler Ritter

In the 1960s while visiting grandparents in Beaufort, NC, I was already interested in old things, their stories, and history. In my grandparents' kitchen at 806 Ann Street, there was a bench made of cherry and covered in faded linoleum. It was used to seat grandchildren between the small kitchen table and the wall. The house stands today with a historical plaque that reads "W. Ramsey House 1827". The bench is 72 inches long, 13 inches wide and 33.5 inches tall (Fig. 1, Captain's Cabin Bench).

My grandfather, Philip Norval Thomas, (September 22, 1894-December 17, 1958) and my grandmother, Irene Neal Thomas, (December 18, 1897 – January 14, 1968) said "the bench came off a family vessel which wrecked nearby and was salvaged by the members of the family". They also mentioned it had a wood bar that could be rotated from front to back to allow people to lean against it as a backrest, depending on the listing of the vessel (see Fig. 1) (Fig. 2, Backrest swivel mechanism).

Figures 3 and 4 show the brass fitting for securing bench to the cabin deck (Fig. 3, Detail of brass fitting) and the carved dolphins on the bench end boards (Fig. 4, Detail of carved dolphins).



Figure 1





Figure 2



Figure 3





Figure 4

When my grandmother asked her grandchildren what they would like from her estate, I asked for the bench.

After my grandmother died in 1968, my mother, Cindy Thomas Woodward, saved the bench and found the back bar and brass attachment devices and placed the items in our summer house at 116 Queen Street. This house is now a B&B called "Pecan Tree Inn".

While visiting my great aunt, Laura E. Thomas, (February 28, 1890 – November 3, 1986) in the 1970s, she laughed and said, "I hear

you got my bench". She was pleased that someone had wanted it and saved it (Fig. 5, Laura Thomas sitting in a sailboat on Front Street, Beaufort, NC, ca. 1930s.



Figure 5



Aunt Laura recounted when she was young one of the family's vessels wrecked in a storm, and her father, uncles, and friends conducted the salvage operation. She was at the dock when the salvaged captain's bench was brought ashore. She informed her father, Murray Thomas, (July 30, 1848 – May 3, 1940) that she was claiming the bench and used her pin knife to carve her name, Laura, into the back bar (Fig. 6, "Laura" carved into the back bar).



Figure 6

In the late 1970s, the bench was restored as close as possible to its original condition. The back bar was reattached and is operational. The linoleum cover was removed. Under several layers of material, there was what appeared to be the original faded and worn red velvet material. A similar covering material was utilized in the 1970s repair. Recently, the seat cover was changed to a cream-

colored material.

### *The Bench's Family History*

It is not known from which vessel the bench was salvaged. Published sources<sup>1</sup> note the Thomas family owned coastal trading and working vessels during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Some of these Vessels were:

Sharpie, *Martha D Thomas*, 7 Tons, 46', built in Smyrna in 1896 and remained in operation until 1907.

Sloop, *Mary Thomas*, 9 Tons, 47', built in Morehead in 1891 and remained in operation until 1907.

Schooner, *T M Thomas*, 73 Tons, 73', built in Beaufort in 1873 and remained in operation until 1889. This vessel wrecked on February 8, 1890 on Ocracoke Island. The crew survived and the cargo was salvaged.

Sharpie, *Thomas Thomas*, 6 Tons, 39', built in Smyrna in 1903 and was in operation until 1907.<sup>2</sup>

The vessels belonged to Captain Thomas Thomas, (February 16, 1816 – January 17, 1898) and his son Murry Thomas. They lived at the Belcher-Fuller House (1851), 301 Front Street, Beaufort, NC.

Laura E. Thomas and my grandfather, her brother, Philip Norval Thomas, were members of the third and last generation who lived at

this residence. It was in my grandparents' Ann Street kitchen where I first saw the bench.

Our four children are sailors and love the water. Our youngest, like her great, great aunt, Laura, has already claimed the bench.

Captain Thomas Thomas and wife, Martha Dudley Murray Thomas, are seen in Fig. 7 (Fig. 7, Photo of Captain and Mrs. Thomas).



Figure 7



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<sup>1</sup> Williamson, Sonny. *Sailing with Grandpa*. Grandma Publications, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Commerce. *Merchant Vessels of the United States (Including Yachts and Government Vessels) Year Ended June 30, 1916-1965*. Government Printing Office, 1917.