



Photo from 1931 Derrydale Print

“Uncle Thad” is considered the Father of American Fly Fishing



Stream Blazer Thaddeus Norris, Jr.

1811-1878

Culpeper, Virginia

Early-American Split Bamboo Rod-Maker

In his classic 1963 book, *The Treasure of Angling*, Larry Koller called Thaddeus Norris “the greatest American fisherman of the century.” Norris was one of the earliest American fishing authors: he penned the *American Angler’s Book* (1864) and later *American Fish Culture* (1868).

In a 2003 article in the *Art of Angling Journal* titled “Thaddeus Norris, Jr.: America’s Greatest Fly Fisherman.” Written by Jerry Girard, a fly-angling artifact collector, he states: “Thaddeus Norris Jr. was born in Culpeper, Virginia, near Washington, on August 15, 1811, and at the age of 18 moved to Philadelphia to join with other relatives. The Philadelphia Norrises were a wealthy family and Thaddeus was gentleman angler, and by virtue of his occupation, a well-dressed one too . . . He gained the reputation as the *Father of American Fly-Fishing* and as a pioneer in the evolution of fly-fishing and the development of the American split bamboo rod.”

Theodore Gordon, whom he called, “Uncle Thad” was greatly influenced by Norris and by Norris’s book, *American Angler’s Book*. Thaddeus Norris influenced many 19th-century anglers and fly tiers.

Reference:

Valla, Mike. *The Founding Flies: 43 American Masters, Their Patterns and Influences*, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, 2013.



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Early-American Fly Fishing Author

Norris is known for his *American Angler's Book*, a highly regarded and influential book. Norris examined and presented everything from fish species and breeding to angling tackle. For the early fly tiers there was an entire chapter devoted to "fly-making." Theodore Gordon reinforced Norris's book with his writings in the late-1800s and early-1900s. Gordon, who tied his trout flies along Catskill waters in New York State, described Norris's work as his "book of books for many years" in his February 27, 1892, *Gazette* notes. In a March 19, 1910, *Forest and Stream* article titled "Little Talks about Fly Fishing," Gordon wrote "Uncle Thad's easily comprehended instructions enabled me to tie flies for myself" that he had learned "fly-making" and how to tie trout flies, and his bait-fishing days were no more.

In March 1909 in a letter to noted British fly angler G. E. M. Sues, Gordon sent in which he said, "I first learned to make flies at the age of 13 years from Norris. Body first, hackle next, and wings tied last. This, I suppose, is the oldest method of tying flies."

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An Angler Who Respected British Contributions

Norris was fishing the Beaverkill and Willowemoc well before Gordon used dry-flies on those streams. In a chapter on trout fly fishing in his *American Angler's Book*, he described fishing dry flies such as Grannom and Jenny Spinner – two old British patterns – on the Willowemoc, patterns that proved effective when wet flies failed. Norris wrote that “a brace (pair) of trout would take them at almost every cast, and before they sank or were drawn away.” He often fished both flies with the Jenny as a dropper.

Norris divided his preferred patterns into two groups of patterns that proved effective in his fishing: wingless hackle/palmer flies, such as Jenny Spinner, and winged flies, such as the Grannom. The patterns were simple and crude by modern standards. Norris believed that only a reasonable assortment of patterns was necessary.

In *Pennsylvania Angler* magazine, Charles M. Wetzel stated that Norris “clung to the hackle and palmer flies that had been used successfully in the past.” He also noted that even 80 years after its publication, Norris’s book “has been gaining popularity, and is in a way a landmark, due to its accurate portrayal of the then existing conditions, and the homely philosophy of the author.”

Norris was pragmatic about the best flies to tie and fish on American waters that require different approaches, yet

he respected British contributions to the sport. “Uncle Thad” favored flies now mostly forgotten. His wingless group included the Dotterel, Ginger Hackle, and Grouse Hackle. Winged flies included the Alder Fly, Yellow Sally, Governor, Black Gnat, and Gray Drake.



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Norris the “Fly-Maker”

British influences were present in Norris’s work. Most all of the trout flies Norris were common patterns during his time. Thomas C. Hofland’s *The British Angler’s Manual* (1848), Alfred Ronalds’s *The Fly-Fisher’s Entomology* (1839), and Francis Francis’s *A Book on Angling* (1867) presented many of the same flies. These three British authors influenced Norris. Norris believed there was no need to clutter his American fly book with large numbers of patterns as he felt that a collection of half a dozen imitative patterns would suffice.

Thaddeus Norris sought a substitute for the dotterel feathers, which were then unavailable, winging the Dotterelfly with barred feathers from partridge or snipe and tying it on a small Kirby hook. Norris described it as “killing on well-shaded waters, especially toward sunset.” The Dotterel was described by Hofland, who called it “one of the surest flies that can be used in the north of England, where it has long been a first rate favorite.”

The Coachman was a favorite Norris fly, tied in four shades from white to dark. Norris’s Coachman fly wings varied in shade and materials. He used an unnamed feather for his white-winged Coachman, a “tame pigeon” feather for his light lead-shaded Coachman, a gull’s feather for a darker version, and a blue heronfeather for the darkest of the series.

In his 2003 article, Jerry Girard said that Norris’s work “was the first book by an American author that provided detailed instructions and illustrations for fly-tying and discussed the various furs and feathers and materials that were available.” Norris materials list covered all the necessities for fly-making. He included notes offering insights into the use of tinsels, dubbing

materials, hackles, winging feathers, and tying silks. It was an era of simple tools and materials, and the flies that emerged from Norris's vise reflected that simplicity.

Norris suggested that fly-makers not be concerned about thread color: "If the silk is fine and strong it matters little about the color, for the only place it is visible after the fly is finished is at the fastening off of the head." Fly Tyers today are saying the same.

Mixed in among the simple winged patterns in Norris's trout fly arsenal were wingless "hackle" palmer flies. In describing tying the palmer flies, Norris delved into a controversy still discussed among modern fly tiers: hackle barb fiber length relative to hook size and the hotly debated word *proportions*. His hackle barb length arguments were so compelling it is a wonder his words are not quoted more often: "In choosing your feathers," he said, "the length of the fibres should be in proportion to the size of the hook, or rather the length of the shank." If the protruding hackle barbs are too short, once wound on the hook, more hook than hackle would be offered to a curious trout's eye – "like a long legged boy in a bobtail coat" – making the fly less attractive to the fish. The converse situation, where the hackle barbs extended too far below the hook bend, presented a fly likened to "a short legged boy dressed in his daddy's long coat." In this case, a trout approaching the fly would have to open its mouth very wide to engulf its perceived prey, or else that strike would be short and the fish would "go off with a few hair-like fibres between his teeth."

Norris stated that hackle length should never extend much below the bottom of the hook. He said that even winged flies

should be tied with hackle not more than half the length of the hook shank, which he used as a guide.

Norris's thoughts pertaining to such matters as hackle size and proportions demonstrated his willingness to look at artificial flies from the trout's perspective. He tied and sought flies that would catch fish. His tying suggestions were helpful yet often flexible. He recognized that "there are several ways of tying flies; nearly every fly maker has something peculiar in his method."

Norris gave these comforting words to the novice fly tier: "Do not throw away all your first attempts that appear big-headed or wild in their habiliments, for a much rougher-looking fly than you suppose will kill."

Thaddeus Norris loved his fly tying craft, writing, "To those who have not leisure, or fish but seldom, it does not pay for the trouble and patience bestowed on learning it; such persons had better buy their flies than make them. But to one who has time, and is anxious to become conversant with all that pertains to our gentle craft, there is no in-door occupation so absorbing and time-killing, and one forgets in it little annoyances or heavier cares, and almost finds at home a substitute for the pleasures of the stream."

Gordon wrote in an article titled "Letters from a Recluse," published April 28, 1906, in *Forest and Stream*, "If one has leisure, fly making is an absorbing occupation and there is considerable satisfaction in taking trout with the work of one's own hands."



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"Uncle Thad" Flies

Early-American wet flies were stored in a vintage fly wallet where the attached gut tippet could remain moist.

The **Jenny** was tied with a white floss body palmered with light dun or white hackle and was labeled a “hackle” pattern.

Black Palmer “Hackle” fly. Norris frequently fished simple patterns such as the palmers, consisting of a simple body with hackle wrapped from the hook bend to the hook eye.

The **Dotterel** came from Hofland’s British angler’s Manual (1848). Norris did not have access to dotterel feathers, so he substituted partridge or snipe.

The **Alder** was tied with a black mohair body, picked out at the head to simulate legs. Norris fished two together in low water, one as a dropper.

Norris’ **Grouse Hackle** was good on clear water.

Ginger Hackle. Norris used this pattern as a dropper fly, not a “stretcher” (terminal fly) on a gut leader.

Red Spinner was tied with hog’s wool dyed reddish brown and starling wings, and nothing like today’s spinner.

Palmer. Norris liked peacock herl or floss bodies on his palmer patterns and ribbed the fly body with gold thread (likened to tinsel) for added durability.

