



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SSS AND ITS FOUNDER



This 668 square foot bungalow was built in 1938 by Mr. & Mrs. Walter G. Sparkman. The Sparkman Property is made up of Lots 1, 2, 20, and 21 located in the Palm Grove Subdivision, comprising .62 acres. The Sparkman house typifies the Frame Vernacular homes constructed throughout Florida during the 1930's, and is a well-preserved example of simple Depression Era architecture. The property contains planting beds and plant material planted by Mr. Sparkman, as well as other plantings that have been added over the past 60 years. The house and gardens have been in continual use by the Sarasota Succulent Society since it began in 1950. We are said to be the only succulent society in the country to actually own our own property and gardens. Mr. Sparkman was responsible for and prominently figured in the founding of the Sarasota Succulent Society in 1950. In 1954, a portion of the property was transferred to the society and the balance, including his house, was transferred in 1964. After Mrs. Sparkman passed away in approximately 1965, Mr. Sparkman lived in it until his death on Jun 22, 1968.

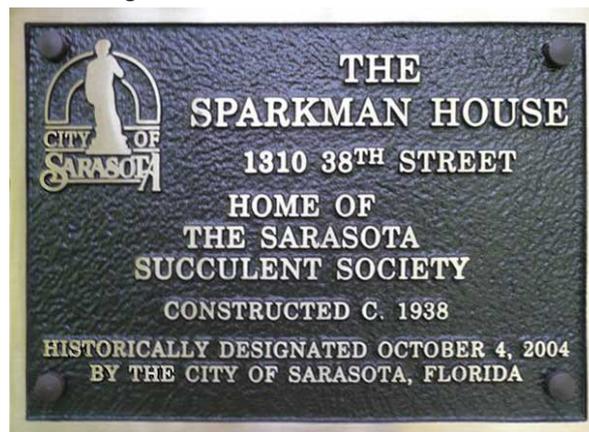
Walter Gwynne Sparkman (1884 – 1968) was a very remarkable man. He was a visionary, a journalist, a minister, and a botanist. He was one of eight children born in Nocatee, Florida on March 28, 1884 to Thomas Jefferson (1841 – 1916) and Susan Elizabeth (1858 – 1917) Sparkman. He was married to Mary Olive Howes (1888 – ?), and had two children, Joann Elizabeth Sparkman (1911 – ?) and Enid Gwynne Sparkman (1913 – ?). His father

attended college and came to Florida to farm. The Elder Sparkman was a shrewd and honest businessman, a successful farmer, citrus grower, and school superintendent. His son, Walter Sparkman, was a leader as a teenager, but he spent most of his time hiking and investigating nature. He loved native plants and kept records of when and where he found special plant specimens. Mr. Sparkman was mechanical in nature and had little use for the formalities of society. He possessed a deep inner personal faith that his natural reserve prevented him from easily expressing. He attended Stetson University where he was quite active in the Glee Club. He spent his senior year at the University of North Carolina, majoring in ministry, and he became the pastor of a Baptist Church in Florida, and also worked as newspaperman in Pennsylvania. He had a keen intellect, high morals, and an inner reserve that hid those qualities from others. Mr. Sparkman spent most of his life in Florida and came to Sarasota from Manatee County in 1934 with plans to enter into commercial printing, and in July of that year he took over a printing business on Lemon Avenue. However, his main interest was focused on growing things. He was attracted most to the gardening of cacti and succulents. Upon purchasing the property and building his home, he set out to plant extended gardens around his home. He cultivated a number of varieties of lilies and made bulbs available for sale. Not long after he bought the property, the county decided to extend Whitaker Bayou up to the Dolomite mines. The new canal was called Pierce Canal. The spoil bank consisted of large boulders, clay and marl and was filled with fossils. Mr. Sparkman requested that the county leave what had been piled onto his property because he visualized a beautiful rock garden addition to what was already in his flourishing garden. Since the bank was sunny, he chose to experiment with succulents other than those native to the area. He ordered his specimens from California. For a number of years, Mr. Sparkman wrote about succulents and other plant life in the Sarasota Herald Tribune. He exhibited succulents and was instrumental in apprising local nurseries of the interest and value in succulents. In 1950 he entered his first flower show, and was such a sensation with his succulents, he was invited back to give a presentation on them. He immediately recognized the need for a more formal institution to study, research, and educate people about his succulents. and he started a group with 6 charter members to do just that. Through his efforts, this group of six women became the nucleus of his experimentation, education, and research, and a society was formed in 1950 — The Sarasota

Succulent Society. At first the group met in member's homes, but soon Mr. Sparkman offered the group two of his four lots, those bordering Coconut and Myrtle Streets, where he at one time had grown perennial bulbs for sale. The group committed to buying the property from Mr. Sparkman for \$3,000 for the two lots. Within a few years, the society purchased the other two lots from Mr. Sparkman, but provided a life estate to him, which allowed him to live there as long as he wanted, or until his death. Mr. Sparkman died in 1968. In 1975 the land across Myrtle Street on the southwest corner of Myrtle and Coconut was purchased to hold rare species or those threatened with extinction. It has since been returned to the City of Sarasota.

Phyllis Turner, the last remaining charter member said in 1979: "I feel so completely dedicated, it's almost like a religion with me. My own yard and housework is neglected." She goes on to say "Walter Sparkman originated the Succulent Gardens on his private property. He had a vision to create a small botanical garden, and that's what we're trying to improve and preserve. It takes tremendous effort to keep his dream going. It's a very tiny garden, but we continue studying and experimenting."

In 2004 his house, the land, and one of the outlying buildings received a historic designation by the City of Sarasota.



The house and the .62 acres it sits on are owned by the Sarasota Succulent Society, a non-profit, all volunteer organization. In 2008 the Society received a grant from the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, Inc, which will be used to refurbish the bathroom and the library.