

THOMAS UNDERGROUND

THOMAS, WEST VIRGINIA

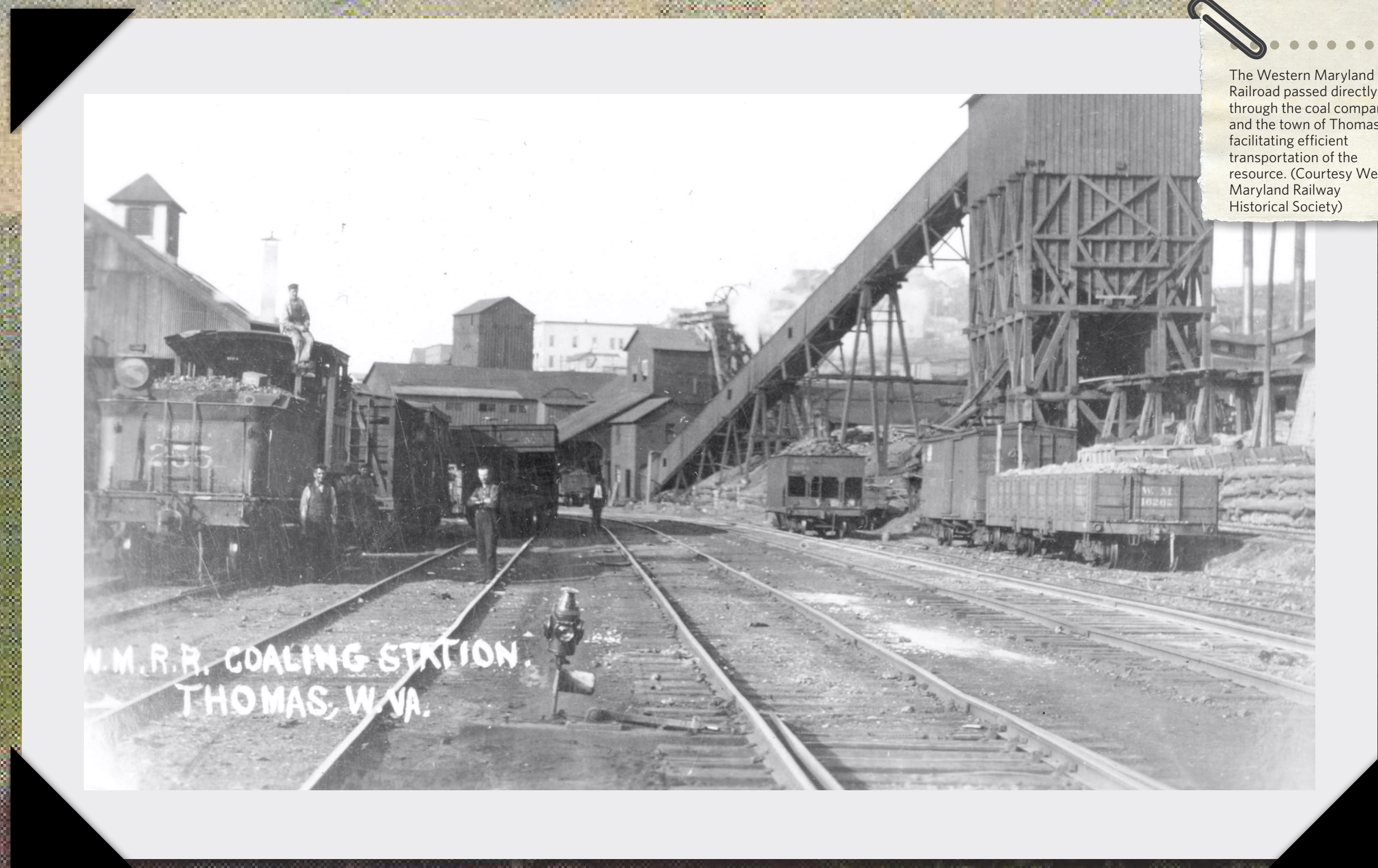
Coal and Its Impact on the Town

THE HISTORY of the coal industry is inextricable from the development of the Thomas Commercial Historic District. If the Davis brothers had not invested in coal mining and transportation in the area, the town and buildings we know today would not exist.

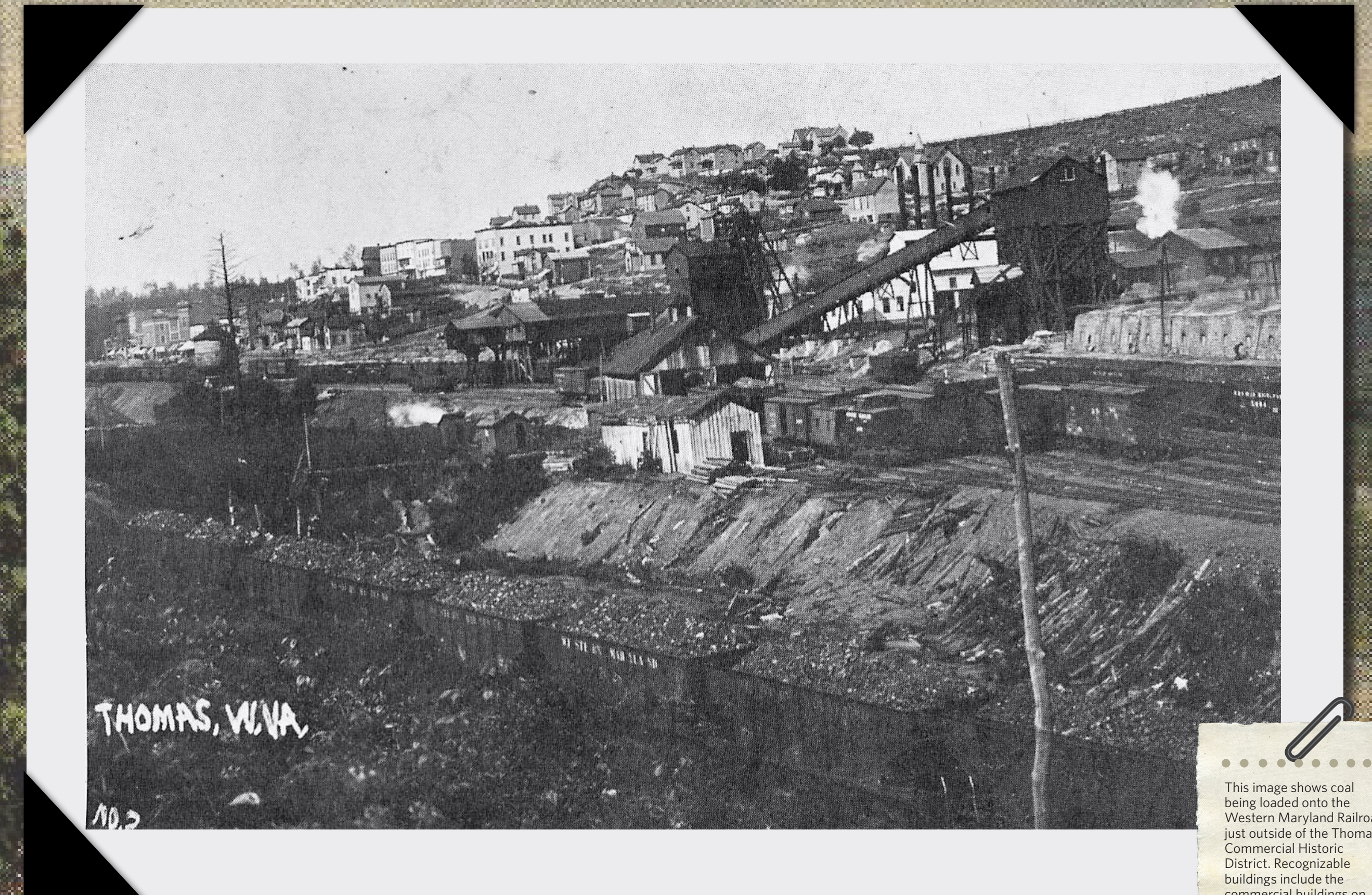
Henry Gassaway Davis was born in Woodstock, Maryland in 1823. He overcame the early death of his father and financial hardships, beginning a successful career with the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad at age 20. By 1858 Davis had saved enough money to begin buying property with potential for coal and timber. Over the years, the Davis Brothers, including William and Thomas, built a powerful empire in railroads, natural resources and politics. In 1884, prospectors for H.G. Davis & Bros. discovered the Kittaning seam of coal between Thomas and Davis and a mine was opened. In 1887, two coke ovens were constructed and the Freeport seam of coal was found to be excellent for making coke. The company, which also included Davis's son-in-law Stephen B. Elkins, was reorganized as the Davis Coal and Coke Company in 1888.

Coking is a process in which coal is burned without oxygen, driving off water and volatile gases. Coke is essential for steel-making, which at the time was one of the largest industries in the United States and was centered in Western Pennsylvania, not far from Thomas. When coal and coke production began in Thomas, the town became a gear in an immense industrial machine, powering steel mills that built America's cities and skyscrapers, building the rails and bridges that connected coasts, and fueling factories, locomotives and steamships. The Davis Coal and Coke Company had over 500 brick beehive coke ovens burning at the height of production. The company town was called Coketon, and was located adjacent to the town of Thomas. Coketon included a company store, employee housing, schools and other structures and services, but because of its proximity to Thomas and the area's sizable population, many coal company employees also shopped, spent time and lived in Thomas.

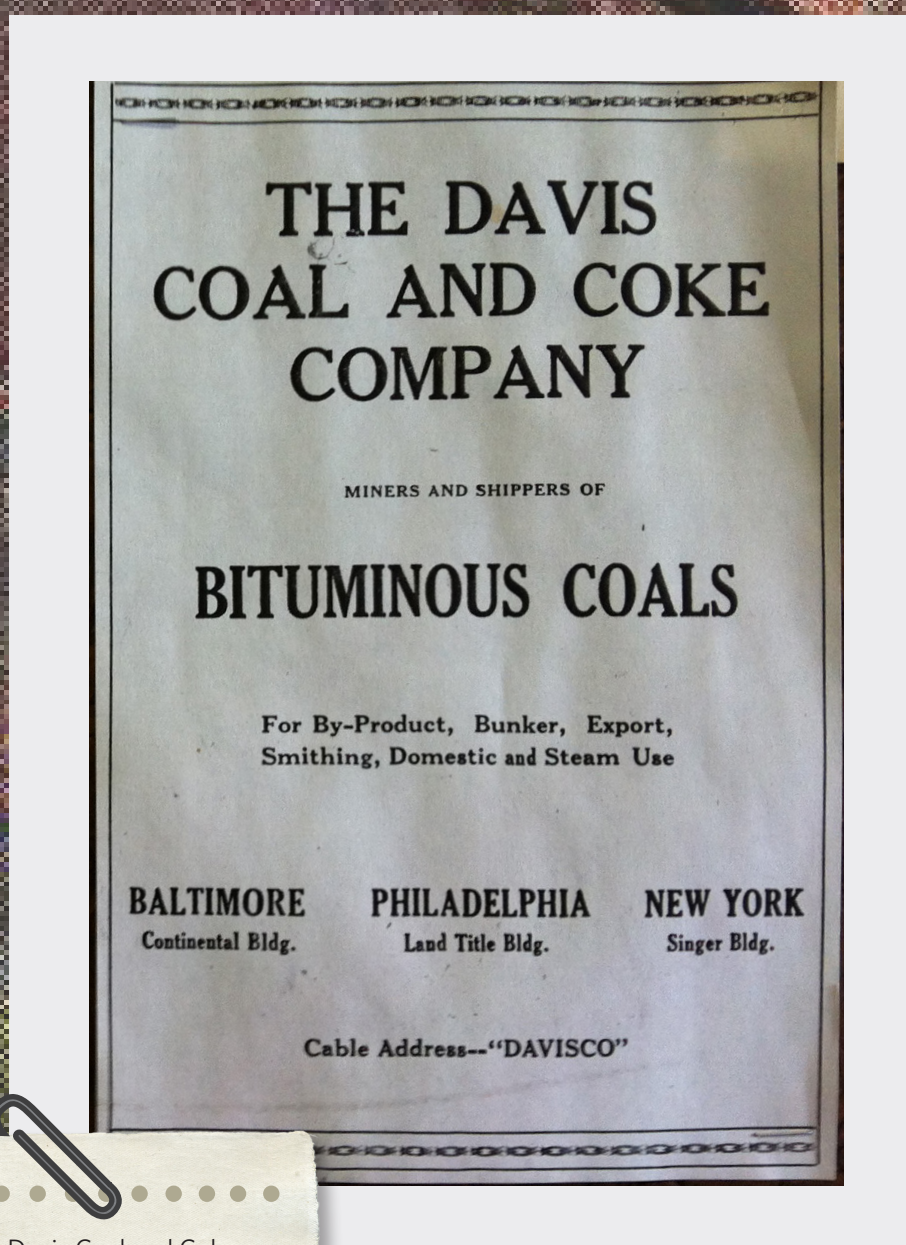
New technologies rendered the coke ovens obsolete in 1915, but coal continued to be mined through the 1940s. Although the 15-mine operation surrounding Thomas was the sixth most productive area in the state, only one mine disaster occurred over the course of its history: an explosion killing 25 on February 4, 1907. From 1915 to 1921, 1 million tons of coal annually were shipped out of the Thomas/Coketon mines. The coal industry started a slow decline through 1950, when only two underground mines were still in operation. The last underground mine closed in 1956.



The Western Maryland Railroad passed directly through the coal company and the town of Thomas, facilitating efficient transportation of the resource. (Courtesy Western Maryland Railway Historical Society)



This image shows coal being loaded onto the Western Maryland Railroad just outside of the Thomas Commercial Historic District. Recognizable buildings include the commercial buildings on Spruce Street (Tour Nos. 20, 21, 22 and 23) and the residential duplex (Tour No. 16) on East Avenue. The coke ovens are seen on the right. (Courtesy Joseph Sagace)



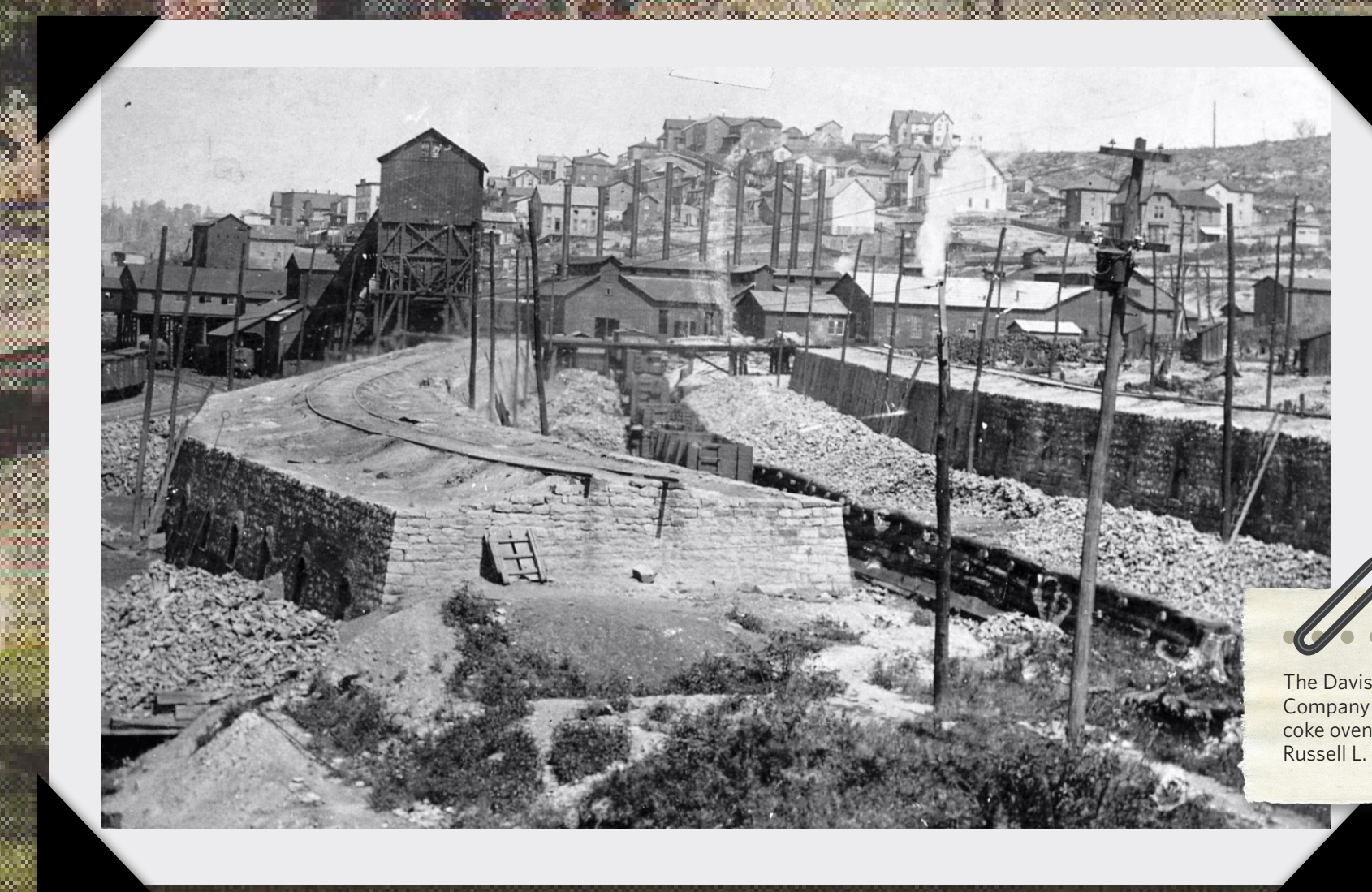
The Davis Coal and Coke Company placed this ad in the 1915 Thomas High School yearbook.

Working the Mines

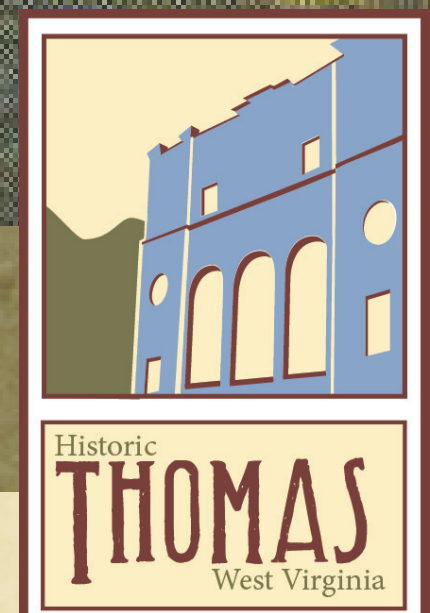
Mining and coking were exhausting jobs, not for the weak or faint of heart. Salvatore DiBacco (associated with Tour Nos. 2, 3 and 4) started work in the coke ovens as a teenager, the day after he arrived in Thomas from Italy in 1889. He described the experience in his autobiography:

"[A]fter a good night a fellow country man told me if I wanted to go to work with him. I did not know where we were going about 1/4 mile we stopped, and it was coke ovens. The front wall of the furnace, he stack a long pipe with water sprinkles on the coal then he turned the water on and this was how they made coke, with big blazes of fire blowing out of each furnace as you put water on the coke. If you did not watch out you could easy get yourself burn. As you got the coke cooled down you began to draw the coke from each oven this was hot and tiresome job but after you get used to this, it was not such a bad job."

Salvatore received 48 cents a day for cleaning one coke oven. Later, when he began working as a merchant, he always kept the memory of the hot, exhausting nights working the ovens as incentive to make his store successful.



The Davis Coal and Coke Company with tipples and coke ovens. (Courtesy Russell L. Cooper)



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