

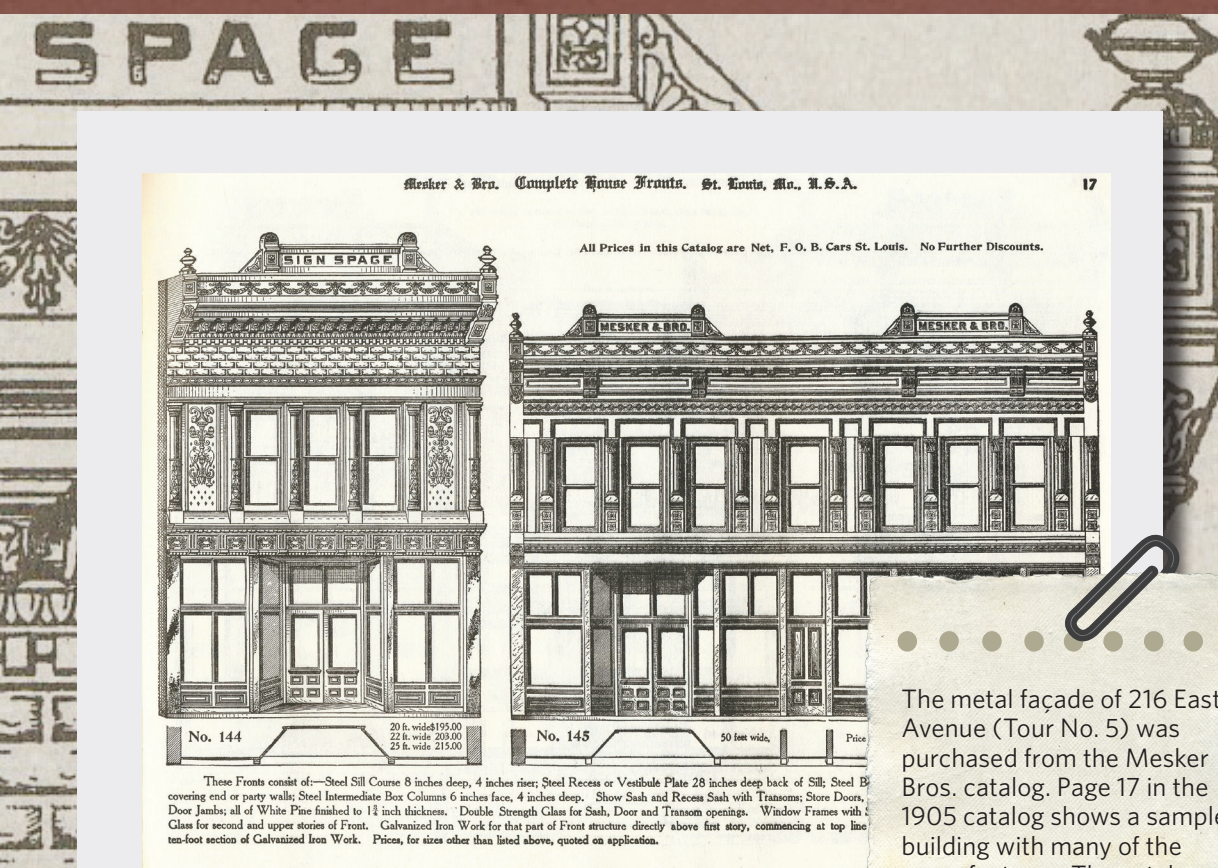
“ALL THAT HUMANITY COULD DESIRE...”

THOMAS, WEST VIRGINIA

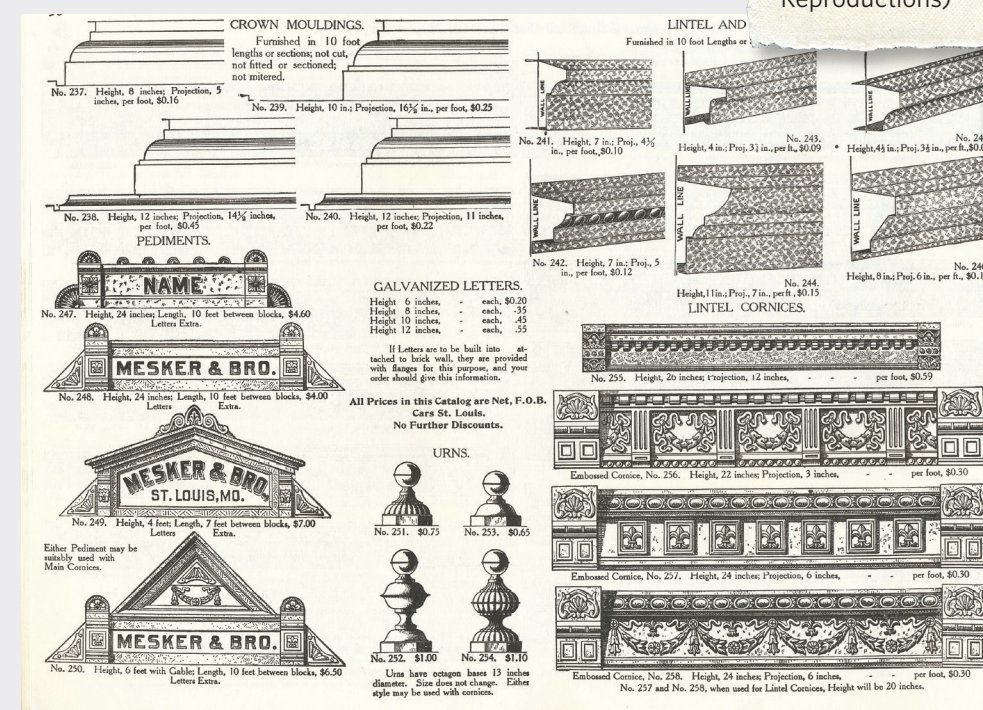
Commerce in Thomas

ALTHOUGH the Davis Coal and Coke Company operated its Buxton and Landstreet company store, private industry flourished in Thomas. People from surrounding towns visited Thomas for their shopping needs. Many business owners were immigrants who started as laborers in the mines or as pack peddlers, and patiently saved until they could build buildings and open their own businesses. The population of Thomas at the turn of the century truly represents the classic American Dream of prosperity through hard work.

Thomas grew quickly between 1884 and 1900. However, the appearance of the town drastically changed in 1901 due to a destructive fire that broke out in the early hours of November 12. 83 buildings were destroyed in two hours due to the 50mph winds that spread the fire quickly. Thanks to the wealth of trees located in the hills around Thomas, most of the buildings had originally been constructed of wood. After the fire, most property owners decided to take no chances and rebuilt using brick.

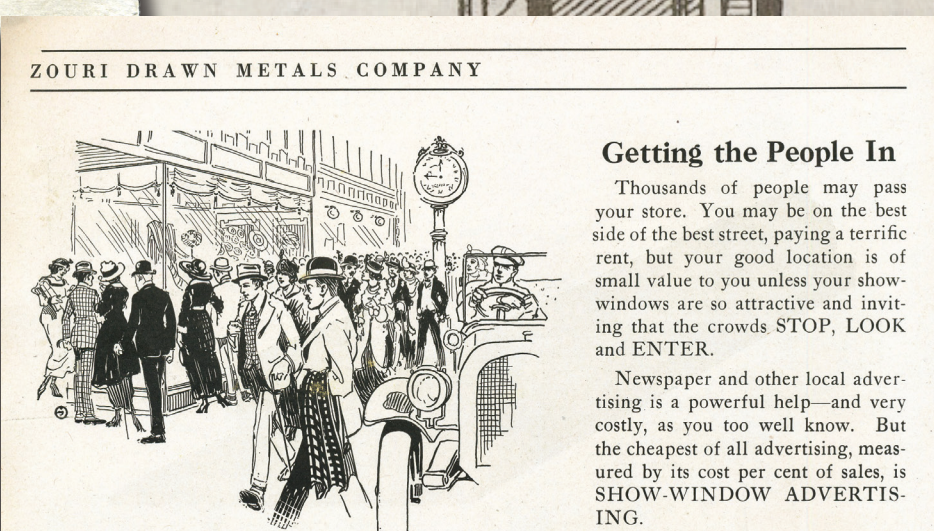


The metal facade of 216 East Avenue (Tour No. 5) was purchased from the Mesker Bros. catalog. Page 17 in the 1905 catalog shows a sample building with many of the same features. The catalogs contained a variety of building materials with various options so the buyer could customize his structure. Page 30 of the 1905 catalog shows a sampling of cornice and sign choices. (Source: Vintage Literature Reproductions)



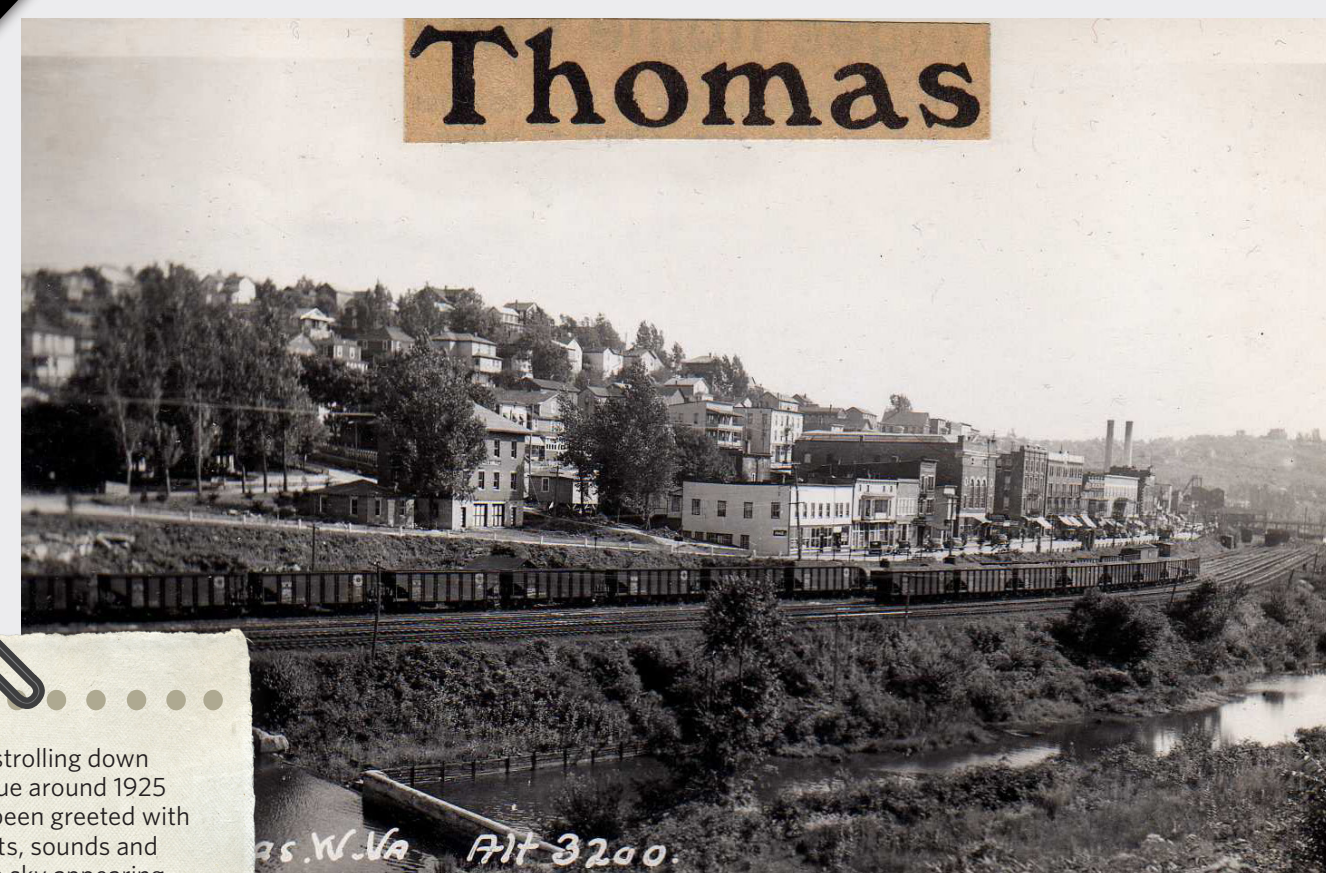
Buildings as Ads

In the era before television and radio advertising, the building was the business owner's way of communicating with customers. One of the best ways to entice passersby into a shop was to display goods in large glass storefronts, which can be seen in almost every building on East Avenue. Commercial architecture of the early 20th century referenced architectural styles of the past using new materials in an economical way. For example, most of Thomas's buildings have symmetrical window patterns on their front facades and at least a simple cornice at the top, which reflect principles of ancient Greek architecture. Brick, an inexpensive material, was laid in decorative patterns to resemble columns, cornices, arches and other architectural features. Though constructing a blank brick wall would surely have been less expensive, it was smarter marketing to put one's best face forward. The rise of factory manufacturing also allowed affordable production of decorative materials such as pressed tin ceilings, machine-carved woodwork, metal facades and concrete cast to look like stone. These items could be ordered from catalogs and shipped by train in modular pieces so that a shop owner could easily "dress up" his building.



"The town is well equipped with store and shops, and for its population, of unusual size and attractiveness. In them can be found all that humanity could desire in the way of merchandise." — T. Nutter, Thomas, WV: History, Progress and Development, 1906

Thomas



A person strolling down East Avenue around 1925 would've been greeted with many sights, sounds and smells: the sky appearing and disappearing above the awnings; friendly greetings from merchant through their open doors; the aroma of roasted peanuts; a loud train whistle; conversations in Italian from balconies above; and a procession of storefronts containing all manner of goods and services. (Courtesy Joseph Sagace)



This view of the Miners and Merchants Bank (Tour No. 8) shows the building prior to modern alterations. Customers originally entered through the prominent corner (chamfered) doors. The Cooper Building next door also displays its parapet wall, sign plate and spire. (Courtesy Joseph Sagace)

Joseph DePollo, Shopkeeper

Joseph DePollo immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1891. He was recruited in New York to come to Coketon as a worker for the Davis Coal and Coke Company. He visited his wife and 5 children in Italy every year until he could bring them back to Thomas around 1903, the same year he opened his general store on Front Street, which was a small wooden building. The present building (No. 15) was constructed in 1915-16 and the family of 10 lived on the upper floors. Joe's son John began working at age 14 as a delivery boy and went on to help his father manage the store. He became owner when his father died and tended the store for over 50 years, even as the coal industry faltered and the population declined. DePollo's store features expansive glass storefronts and plenty of shelves to display merchandise. The store also served as a kind of clubhouse, where men would gather for a beer and the latest news. The current roof over the sidewalk replaced the original overhanging enclosed porch which was supported on slender metal columns.



John DePollo's store (Tour No. 15) anchored the southern end of East Avenue, known locally as Front Street. Although ornamentation was kept to a minimum, the symmetry and mass of the building relays a message of organization and substance. For simple brick commercial buildings such as this, attractive and clear signage was key. (Courtesy Joseph Sagace)

