

## Historic Thomas, West Virginia Self-Guided Walking Tour



Photo Courtesy of Joseph Sagace

Welcome to the City of Thomas Commercial Historic District. The downtown area along Front Street and Spruce Street was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1997 based on its significance in industry, commerce, immigration and architecture.

The history of Thomas includes the stories of senators, coal miners, loggers, rail men, immigrants, businessmen (and women) and many others who contributed to the growth of this 20th century boom town.

### THE TAP ROOM



Photo Courtesy of Jane Barb



Photo Courtesy of Miners and Merchants Bank

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Tucker County, West Virginia

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Photo Courtesy of Joseph Sagace

# A Brief History of Thomas

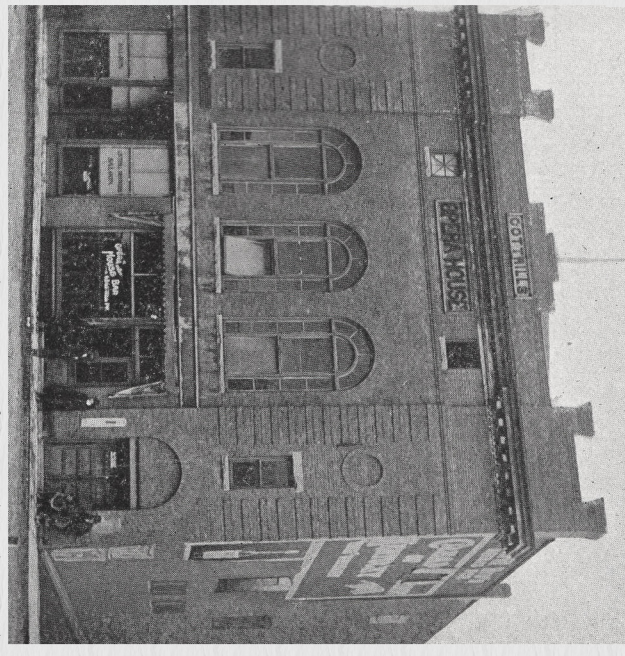


Photo Courtesy of Miners and Merchants Bank

Although explorers visited the region that would become Tucker County in the 1700s, the area around Thomas was not settled until the 1880s due to the rugged and mountainous terrain. The future of the town was secured on August 10, 1884, with the arrival of the West Virginia Central and Pittsburgh Railway.

The arrival of the railroad allowed the coal and timber industries to prosper. Workers and their families flooded to Thomas from all over the world. When Thomas was incorporated as a town in 1892, the census counted 892 residents. By 1920, that number had grown to over 2,000.

A wide variety of nationalities and ethnicities was represented, including Italian, Polish, Russian, Jewish and Austrian.

In contrast to other coal towns in West Virginia, the City of Thomas was not a company-built town. The buildings and homes seen today in the historic district were the investments of the residents living here. Some of the most unique features in Thomas are the balconies and overhanging porches on many buildings, which reflect the architecture and culture of Europe.



Photo Courtesy of Tucker Co. Historical Society

## Facts about the walking tour:

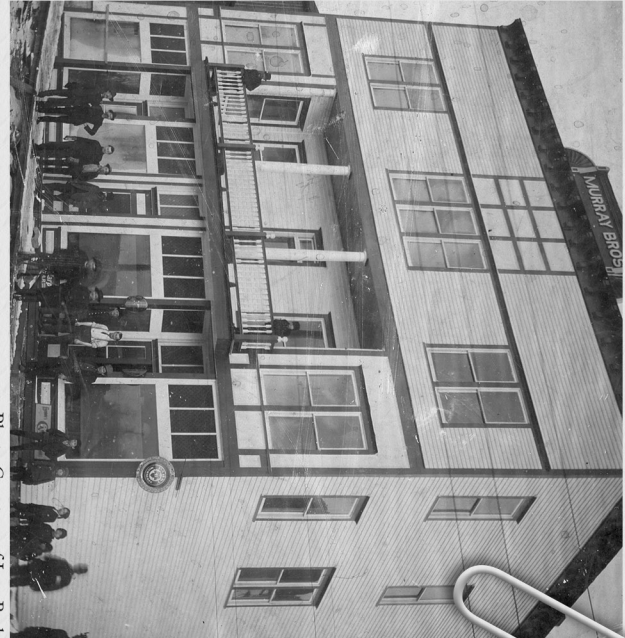


Photo Courtesy of Jane Barb

- 0.7 miles, approximately 45 minutes at an easy pace.
- Accessible for those with limited mobility.
- All of the streets are open to vehicular traffic. Be safe and exercise caution when crossing streets.
- The walking tour focuses on the exteriors of the buildings. Please visit our local businesses, but do not enter private residences or other buildings and properties without permission.
- Keep an eye out for the informational signs that are part of this tour.
- Cortrill's Opera House is Building 1 on the map and building numbers proceed counter-clockwise around the loop. However, the tour can be walked in either direction starting at any building.



# THOMAS WALKING TOUR MAP

## 33. Milkint's Garage, 344 Spruce Street, 1921

The Milkint brothers from Russia opened an auto garage and dealership in 1920, selling REO, Hudson, Essex, Desoto and Plymouth vehicles. The garage's utilitarian design, with extensive floor space accessible to autos on both stories, was well-suited to the business. Unfortunately, the building partially collapsed due to snow in 2010, a testament to Tucker County's harsh winters.

## 29. Residence, 310 Spruce Street, 1920 30. Residence, 316 Spruce Street, 1900 31. Residence, 322 Spruce Street, ca. 1925 32. Residence, 330 Spruce Street, ca. 1900

These four houses on Spruce Street represent typical single-family homes of the early 20th century. Greater prosperity during this time made home ownership achievable for more people and led to the idea that a house could express one's personality and individualism. In contrast to the standardized designs of company housing in nearby Coketon and other similar coal camps, each of these houses is different, yet they also express popular architectural styles of the time.

## 27. Residence, Spruce Street, ca 1890

This was the home of Senator Abraham Lincoln Helmick, who served in the WV legislature from 1921-44. In 1925, Helmick succeeded in obtaining a charter for Thomas as a city, despite its declining population. (Non-contributing)

## 28. Residence, 290 Spruce Street, 1909

This large home was originally constructed by the Schatz family, one of the first Jewish families to settle in Thomas. From them it went to Joseph Schilansky, who enclosed the porch in 1929, then to the Thayer family in 1933.

## 26. 248 Spruce Street, ca. 1920

The railroad brought not only imported food from Europe, the latest fashions from New York and the newest technological appliances to Thomas, but entire houses. This home is said to be a Sears & Roebuck catalog kit house. Between 1908 and 1940, a quality house of almost any popular architectural style could be ordered from a the Sears Modern Homes catalog and the entire construction kit would be shipped to the site by rail.

## 25. The Tap Room, 242 Spruce Street, 1903

This three story building was built after the fire of 1901. To imagine the building as it originally looked, peel off the faux brick siding to reveal white painted clapboard. Replace the brick storefronts and cornice with something similar to what you see today on 172 Spruce Street (No. 21). Restore the two small balconies with turned spindle rails and paint the window and door trim a dark contrasting color. Now check the historic photo on the back of this brochure... Is it what you imagined?

## 7. WPA Retaining Wall, 1938

The large stone retaining wall visible above the parking lot was built by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and defines Thomas's signature terraced layout. It replaced an earth slope supported by minimal wood shoring, and helped to stabilize Spruce Street. The WPA was established by the federal government in 1935 as part of the New Deal program to provide jobs during the Great Depression. The agency funded construction projects throughout the nation, including roads, bridges and state parks. This lot was also the site of the upscale Imperial Hotel, built by Mary Geisberger (as the Hotel Metropolitan) after the fire of 1901. The hotel was demolished in 1961.

## 24. 196 Spruce Street, ca. 1905

This house was most likely built by James Daughenbaugh, who was postmaster and a prominent citizen of Thomas in its early days. Early photos show a storefront with awning at street level with the house above. Later, the Bane sisters gave piano lessons to many Thomas children here.

## 23. 182 Spruce Street, 1917

For rental and commercial structures, more square footage equals more property value and revenue. Like many Thomas buildings, this commercial structure takes advantage of the space over the sidewalk to add more square footage.

## 22. 180 Spruce Street, ca. 1920

21. Milkint Building, 172 Spruce Street, ca. 1900  
Note the nicely preserved wooden storefront with decorative brackets on this commercial structure. Russian immigrant Charles Milkint operated a general store here and sold mining equipment, tools, boots, patent medicines and other items. His sons Peter and Charles owned an auto garage.

## 20. 160 Spruce Street, ca. 1905

The size of a commercial building is influenced by both lot size and the building technology of the day. These commercial buildings (20, 21, 22, 23) on Spruce Street all take up the entire width of their standard lots in order to maximize the property. Brick and wood construction at the turn of the century did not allow building heights above 4 or 5 stories; thus, these four buildings are all very similar in size.

## 19. Ash Alley buildings ca 1910-1930

Due to the steep topography of Thomas, Spruce Street is significantly higher than East Avenue. Ash Alley serves as an intermediary and provides access to the backs of the buildings on Front Street. Here people could build useful garages and even small houses. The back yards lining Ash Alley also served as a community gathering place for apartment dwellers. Stairs and buildings connect the different street levels. The alley was graded and improved in 1938 during the Great Depression when the stone retaining wall was built by the Works Progress Administration.

## 18. 122 Spruce Street ca. 1905

The front porch is an essential element of American domestic architecture. Like the balcony, it is a bridge between private and public life. This home's porch is the perfect vantage point for observing town events, visiting with passers-by and relaxing with family. It is protected, yet open to the surrounding environment.

## 17. 106 Spruce Street, ca. 1905

As you go up the hill, Thomas gradually transitions from mostly commercial buildings to mostly single-family houses. Spruce Street is a mix of houses, apartments and businesses. Note the brick pavement on First Street. The first brick street in the United States was laid in 1870 in Charleston, WV and brick streets can be found in many towns in the state.

## 16. 80-82 East Avenue, 1910

The multiple steep gables of this duplex are influenced by the Gothic Revival style of architecture.

## 15. DePollo Building, 96 East Avenue, 1916

Joseph DePollo opened his general store on Front Street in 1903. The present building was constructed in 1915-16 and the family of 10 lived on the upper floors. The store functioned as a gathering place for miners on the way to and from work. The DePollo store still features many of its original features, inside and out, including the counters, shelves, ceiling and storefronts.

## 34. City Hall, 307 Spruce Street, 1927

In addition to housing the city offices and fire station, City Hall was a USO location for troops during World War II, when Tucker County served as a training area for the Army. The original garage door opening (now filled in with brick) for the town's fire truck is still visible.

## 35. Thomas Central Power Plant Dam, 1911

The Davis Coal and Coke Company supplied power to its mines and the town of Thomas with its own power plant. This dam was constructed as part of upgrades to the power system.

## 36. West Virginia Central and Pittsburg/Western Maryland Railway Rail Yard

The West Virginia Central and Pittsburg Railway (WVC&P) sent its first train to Thomas on August 10, 1884. The area between East Avenue and the Blackwater River contained row upon row of train tracks. The railroad provided an extremely important connection for travel and commerce that linked Thomas to Cumberland and Elkins, and from there, the entire East Coast. (Non-contributing)

## 37. Thayer Building, 300 East Avenue, ca. 1902

The Thayer family lost 4 buildings in the fire of 1901, but built more and larger buildings, including this commercial building on Front Street, which has housed a variety of bars, a bakery, rooming house and the Thayer residence. Family members recall vaudeville performers from the Opera House filling the entryway to check into their rooms. This lot and the businesses on it have been continuously owned by the Thayer family since the property was purchased from the Davis Coal and Coke Company in 1893.

## 38. Duncan Funeral Home, 290 East Avenue, 1901

The Duncan family operated their funeral home business and lived in the apartment above. Later occupants included O.S. Collins Sporting Goods and Jeweler.

## 39. Colabrese Brothers General Store, 284 East Avenue, ca. 1905

This building once contained the Dilettoso family's Roma Restaurant and a dance hall upstairs.

## 40. Santangelo Building, 278 East Avenue, ca. 1905

This building was the location of Pasquale "Patsy" Santangelo's shoemaking and repair shop. He was a virtuoso musician and gave music lessons in his home above the store.

## 41. UMWA Building, 276 East Avenue, 1955

This building contained the local UMWA headquarters and the American Legion. It was originally red brick with glass block windows. (Non-contributing)

## 1. Cottrill's Opera House, 1902

Hiram Cottrill's Opera House featured primarily vaudeville shows and movies, and had an "elegant saloon" on the first floor. This architectural style is called "Renaissance Revival". The two-story arched window openings and the rectangular brick pattern ("quoins") on the corners of the building are reminiscent of an Italian Renaissance palace.

## 2. 250-258 East Avenue, 1930 & 1942

These two brick buildings contained S. DiBacco and Sons, meat market and groceries (left) and the Varsity Restaurant (right), a favorite hangout for local young people. The Varsity had the first juke box in town. The DiBaccos expanded into these lots from next door.

## 3. Salvatore and Venanzio DiBacco Building, 242 East Avenue ca. 1910

This is a well-preserved Renaissance Revival commercial structure. Note the decorative brickwork and intact original storefronts. The only missing elements are the balconies. The DiBacco brothers operated stores on the ground floor and lived upstairs with their families.

## 4. R.D. Benedetto Building/The Flats, 234 East Avenue, 1908

Rocco Benedetto built this Renaissance Revival style building in 1908, expanding an earlier structure; notable features include arched windows on the fourth floor, decorative brickwork and unique fan-shaped balconies.

The apartments on the upper floors opened onto a rear yard (The Flats) with a spring house that was a bustling gathering place for residents. Many popular businesses were located on the ground floor, including Mike Ferruso's butcher shop and DiMaio's Confectionary. Nick DiMaio had a peanut roasting machine that filled the street with delicious smells.

## 5. 216 East Avenue, ca. 1902

This two-story commercial building is the only example of a metal façade in Thomas. As technology for manufacturing sheet metal improved in the early 20th century, it became easier and cheaper to stamp ornamental detail in metal than to carve it from wood or stone. An entire façade could be ordered from a catalog and shipped in pieces to any location.

This façade was produced by the Mesker Brothers Iron Works of St. Louis, Missouri, one of the most prominent iron façade companies of the time. The level of Renaissance Revival detail, including columns, capitols, brackets, swags, medallions and rosettes, is not seen on any other building in Thomas.

This building served as Schilansky's dress shop and later the state liquor store.

## 6. Schilansky-Rubenstein Building, 212-214 East Avenue, ca. 1905

This building contained the Schilansky clothing and general store and Ruby Rubenstein's butcher shop. The Schilansky family lived on the second floor and their home was the central gathering place for the Jewish community of Thomas.

They kept a handwritten copy of the Torah in a special room just for religious services. Unique architectural features include a stepped-brick ("corbelled") cornice at the top of the building and a second story overhanging porch with turned rails. Each doorway upstairs still has the outline of a mezuzah, which are small decorative metal objects that contain protective blessings for the home.

## 8. Miners and Merchants Bank, 172 East Avenue, 1902

Before the era of television and radio, a company or institution's building was its main method of advertising. The classical stone and brick façade of the Miners and Merchants building sends a message of stability, wealth and professionalism, exactly what a customer would seek in a bank. The building was designed by architects Holmboe and Lafferty of Clarksburg.

## 9. Cooper Building, 168 East Avenue, 1906

This commercial building was constructed by J.G. O'Conner and originally had an ornate parapet (wall extending above the roof at the top of the building) with a spire. Jim Cooper, Jr. began operating a men's clothing shop in the Opera House Building (No. 1) in 1925 and later moved to this building. He continued selling fine suits until his death in 1993. Local children loved Mr. Cooper's selection of toys.

## 10. Rubenstein Building, 154 East Avenue, ca. 1902

The large expanses of glass in vintage storefronts allow passers-by to view the wares inside the shop with the hope of enticing them inside. These well-preserved storefronts once contained the Rubenstein/Schilansky grocery store and Carmie Pinto's Beauty Shop. Local residents remember walking by in the 1950s and seeing women connected by wires to hair curling machines.

## 11. 142 East Avenue, ca. 1905

This commercial building has been altered, but the original projecting bays are still apparent at the second story. A wooden building formerly located next door to this site housed Erhard Brothers Jewelry Store and "Hospital for sick watches", according to a 1917 advertisement.

## 12. 130 East Avenue, 1923

This brick commercial structure was originally the A&P Grocery store. Though at first glance it looks like a plain brick structure, decorative brickwork reveals that the original owner did value architectural details. Commercial buildings often must strike a balance between economy and aesthetics.

## 13. Hoffman Drug Store, 122 East Avenue, ca. 1895 14. Hoffman/Cooper Residence, 114 East Avenue, ca. 1895

This commercial building (#13) housed Dr. O.H. Hoffman's pharmacy. Though it has a simple design, details such as carved wooden brackets over the storefront and cornice create visual interest. This building has also contained the Masonic Lodge, Jack Evans' beauty shop and Curry's Drugstore. Dr. John Miller bought both buildings in 1917.

Dr. Hoffman's residence (#14) was conveniently located next door to his drugstore. The house's Gothic Revival architectural elements include a steeply-pitched central gable and pointed arch window. The house originally had an open front porch with gingerbread (ornately carved) molding. The Cooper family bought the house around 1940 and lived here for several decades.



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