

THOMAS WORKER HOUSING
Birmingham Industrial District
Thomas
Jefferson County
Alabama

HAER No. AL-121

HAER
ALA
37-THOS,
7-

PHOTOGRAPHS
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
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Location: The Thomas community is located within the city limits of Birmingham, in Jefferson County, Alabama. It is in the western section of the city, north of Interstate 20/59, and west of U.S. Highway 78. The historic residential area of the community stretches from First Street through Eight Street, and is bounded to the east by the tracks of the Birmingham Southern Railroad and to the west by New York Avenue. Access to the site is restricted to Second Street which connects with U.S. Highway 78 and through the former Republic Steel and Iron Company site, currently owned by the Wade Sand and Gravel Company, via the plant entrance located on Florida Avenue.

Present Owners: The structures, principally residences and churches, which now comprise the community of Thomas, are individually and privately owned.

Present Use: Largely residential

Significance: One of the Birmingham District's best examples of a late nineteenth and early twentieth century company town, the Thomas community presents a fine collection of early industrial housing types. The only industrial community in the District modeled directly on Pennsylvania prototypes, it represents an outstanding example of the direct transfer of company town planning, as well as housing types, from its American center in Pennsylvania to the South.

The community is also significant because it shows a clear division in the planning of Southern industrial communities. Thomas' social geography demonstrates not only management-worker and black-white divisions, but also segregation by country of origin with immigrants from southern Europe housed along a different street than non-immigrants. House types include shotgun, pyramidal roof cottage and brick gable-front.

Project

Information: This recording project is part of the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a long range program to document the engineering, industrial and transportation heritage of the United States. The Birmingham District Recording Project was cosponsored during the summer of 1992 by HAER and by the Birmingham Historical Society, Marjorie L. White, Director.

Historian: J. Lewis Shannon, Summer 1992

HISTORY

The community of Thomas, Alabama was built as worker housing for the Pioneer Mining and Manufacturing Company and its successor corporation Republic Steel and Iron Company. Beginning in 1888, the development of this community, and of the Pioneer company in general, illustrated the fully integrated structure of industrial operations during the development of the Birmingham Industrial District.

Thomas was named for David Thomas, founder of the Pioneer Company. A native of Wales, Thomas achieved prominence in the iron industry of eastern Pennsylvania. Arriving in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley in 1839, Thomas initiated construction of a technologically-advanced furnace in Catasaugua for the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company. By 1859 Thomas had established the Thomas Iron Company and was developing the town of Hokendauqua to house that company's labor force. At Hokendauqua, Thomas established patterns of industrial housing that his sons would later emulate in Alabama.¹

Following the Civil War, early Birmingham entrepreneurs actively recruited Thomas' involvement in the industrial development of the Alabama mineral belt. Building on Thomas' successes in Pennsylvania, he focused attention on the undeveloped mineral resources of this region. In 1869 Thomas, along with his sons Samuel and Edwin Thomas and his associate Robert Sayre, founded the Pioneer Mining and Manufacturing Company, a Pennsylvania based corporation. Initially the Pioneer Company was a landholding company, which acquired valuable mineral lands at bargain prices for future development. In July 1881, after the viability of iron production had been well established in the Birmingham District, the Pioneer Company purchased the William Hawkins plantation site near the Birmingham city center. On this site the company built its blast furnaces and, to house laborers to support those furnaces, the community of Thomas.²

When the Pioneer Company began operations in Alabama, the skilled labor needed to operate an iron-making complex was not locally available. In this then undeveloped industrial region most labor came from area farms and Southern plantations. To provide the essential skills workers needed to operate a modern furnace, the Pioneer Company induced experienced furnace workers to come to the District. Bernard Keiser, the superintendent of the Pioneer

¹Ethel Armes, The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama (Birmingham: Chamber of Commerce, 1910), 353.

²Armes, 353-354.

works, came from Pennsylvania. To comfortably house Keiser and other industrial elites, the company erected houses far superior to the average working-class dwellings erected near the furnaces. This first phase of building in the current Thomas community consisted of fifty houses similar in style and materials to those found in the industrial districts of eastern Pennsylvania. These narrow, two-story, gable-front houses represented a departure from typical Birmingham District industrial housing of the era. Thirty-five are of brick construction, the only known masonry worker houses built in the District and most display refined features such as segmented arches over doors and windows. The frame houses had either clapboard or shiplap siding, high-pitched roofs with dormers, and gable ends ornamented with fish scale or diamond shingles. All houses had broad front porches and the front yards were enclosed with picket fences.³

This first phase of housing construction, in 1888, coincides with the blowing in of the first furnace at Thomas. As the facility expanded, so did worker housing. With only one furnace in operation, unskilled workers were able to find housing nearby, but as additional furnaces were built, the size of the unskilled labor force dramatically increased. As the second furnace was "blown in" in 1890, a second phase of housing was completed. These shotgun houses, one room wide and either two or three rooms deep, were more typical of worker housing in both the District and throughout the region in both rural and urban settings. At Thomas, these took the form of gable-front frame structures with hipped-roof front porches. This building phase added roughly 180 shotgun houses to the community.⁴

During these initial phases of construction the town of Thomas took its current form. Patterned after the layout of Hokendauqua, the new town was structured similarly to many industrial towns of Pennsylvania. Houses lined streets running

³Armes, 353; Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Housing by Employers in the United States ([Washington, D.C.]: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1920) 71; Republic Steel and Iron Co., 1921 site plan of Thomas, Alabama, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama; Morris Knowles, "Water and Waste," The Survey 27 (6 January 1912): 1487, 1532; Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form: Thomas Historic District," by Marjorie White, George McDaniel III, Maurie Van Buren, Betsy Hunter, and Madge Barefield 22 (Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Historical Society, 1988).

⁴Armes, 353-355; Department of Labor, 74.

east and west, situated to the north of the furnace plant. Housing was stratified according to class, with skilled workers and management residing along First and Second Streets. Southward, toward the plant, homes became progressively smaller, as did the lots which they occupied. Fourth and Fifth Streets were lined exclusively with two-room shotgun houses on tiny lots. The system of locating higher ranked employees farther from the furnaces may have stemmed from the location of thirteen double banks of beehive coke ovens along the northern edge of the plant site, a feature which would have thoroughly fouled the air for those in closest proximity.

A civic corridor ran north and south along Pennsylvania Avenue, forming the spine of the residential community. This corridor originally contained churches for both blacks and whites, the commissary, and the doctor's office. By the 1920s First and Third Street had broad medians planted with flowers from the company greenhouse. North of First Street stood the schools and the superintendent's residence. The entire community was surrounded by railroad tracks.⁵

In 1899 the Republic Iron and Steel Company purchased the Pioneer Company and initiated another period of expansion. Republic added a third and larger blast furnace and enlarged and modernized the two existing furnaces. The Thomas community also expanded with the addition of approximately 120 pyramid-roof cottages, a popular duplex house type. The company rented these houses to one or more workers, depending upon the demand for housing. To provide space for these houses, existing streets were lengthened toward the railroad tracks at either end and shorter streets were added in the remaining space available in the southeast corner of the community. At completion of these houses, the community had expanded to fill the entire area enclosed by the railroad tracks. Further growth was not possible.⁶

Throughout its history Thomas was noted as a progressive industrial community. Not only were the structures characterized as examples of "good" worker housing, but the amenities provided by the company could be regarded as "generous." In addition to providing schools and churches, company crews maintained high standards of sanitation. Initially, all houses had dry closets along the alleys at the rear of the lots, which the company regularly cleaned. Water for washing was supplied at faucets

⁵Armes, 353-355; Republic Steel, 1921 site plan of Thomas.

⁶Armes, 354-355; Republic Steel, 1921 site plan of Thomas; Department of Labor, 74.

along the streets, and drinking water was available outside the commissary as well as at a nearby spring. In 1917 the city installed water mains and sewer lines throughout the community, and replaced dry closets with flush toilets in the same locations. Thomas was one of the first industrial towns in the Birmingham District to offer this convenience.⁷

In the 1920s the company improved the housing. By 1928 nearly half of the two-story, gable-front houses had been modified with a two-story addition, consisting of a sleeping porch above and a large screened porch below. This modification responded to the warm southern climate and prevailing attitudes of the era favoring sleeping in the open air. At the same time, company builders replaced many of the smaller shotgun houses with Craftsman-style bungalows.⁸

The company ended its housing ownership in 1949. At this time the company sold all houses, making sure that all employees occupying company houses had first option to purchase them. In September of that year the City of Birmingham annexed the Thomas community and assumed municipal responsibilities for streets, garbage pick-up, and police and fire protection, all formerly provided by the Republic company.⁹

Since that time private owners have added various modifications to many of the houses. Some have been removed and replaced by newer structures. All have been modified to accommodate indoor plumbing. Shotgun houses and the pyramid roof cottages have generally taken a shed addition at the rear. Over 160 historic houses, two churches, and the commissary building remain and were listed as a National Register Historic District in 1988. The street system remains virtually intact and unmodified.

DESCRIPTION

This study records three houses, representing three types of worker housing. City of Birmingham records on these properties

⁷Knowles, 1487.

⁸Department of the Interior, National Park Service, "National Register of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form: Thomas Historic District," by Marjorie White, George McDaniel III, Maurie Van Buren, Betsy Hunter, and Madge Barefield 22 (Birmingham, Alabama: Birmingham Historical Society, 1988; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Birmingham, Alabama, 1928.

⁹City of Birmingham, Board of Equalization records.

date from 1949, when the area was annexed by the City.

214 Second Street

The house at 214 Second Street is a two-story brick gable-front structure.¹⁰ It contains seven rooms including porches and a bathroom. The front porch is wooden, covered by a metal shed roof. The first floor front room is a living room, with an enclosed stairway leading to the second floor. The second room on the first floor is currently used as a den, and has a side door leading to a large screened porch. Behind the den is a kitchen, followed by the bathroom. The bathroom floor is elevated, possibly to provide for drainage to distant sewage lines, and does not extend the full width of the house. A short hall beside the bathroom leads to the rear entry. The second floor of the house contains two bedrooms located above the living room and the den, and a sleeping porch located above the side screened porch. The sleeping porch is surrounded on three exterior sides by pocket windows that drop into the wall beneath. The porches and bathrooms represent additions to the original structure.

The main structure of the house is of brick, laid in common bond, with segmented arches ornamenting all door and window openings. Windows in the original structure are double-hung sash. The house is elevated over a crawl space, also enclosed in brick.

The sleeping porch and bathroom additions are frame construction with clapboard siding, now covered with vinyl siding. A shed roof covers the sleeping porch. An extension of the kitchen gable roof covers the bathroom. All roofing is metal.

Behind the house, a cast iron sewage pipe exits at floor level, sloping down into the back yard to intersect the underground sewer line located at the alley behind the property. Near the alley at the rear of the property is a small concrete slab, a remnant of the water closet.

This house type was constructed in 1888, during the first phase of company construction. Census records indicate that in 1910 the house was occupied by George Burgess, a thirty year old engineer born in Alabama, along with his wife, Blanch, and his in-laws, William and Martha Crosby.¹¹ The house was purchased in

¹⁰For a discussion of this classification, see Virginia and Lee McAlester, A Field Guide to American Houses (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, and Toronto: Random House of Canada, 1984), 88-91.

¹¹Census records from the "Thomas National Register Historic District Project," Birmingham Historical Society.

1949 by Charles Edward Fowler, an employee of Republic Steel, and is currently owned by his daughter, Mrs. Montriel Pitts. This property is identified in Birmingham city records as parcel number 22-28-2-010-016.000¹²

355 Third Street

The house at 355 Third Street is a shotgun house, built around 1890. Census records indicate that it was occupied in 1910 by Thomas Speed, an Alabama born furnace worker, and his wife, Carrie, and daughter, Bessie.¹³ The house was purchased in 1949 by Z.P. and Evelyn C. Helm, and has had various owners since. It is currently owned by Raymond and Doris Hamilton. Birmingham city records identify this property as parcel number 22-28-2-019-002.000.¹⁴

This frame structure is finished with clapboard siding and double-hung sash windows. The gable-front design features a hipped front porch roof of corrugated metal. Floors are of pine board, elevated above a crawl space on brick piers. The structure contains four rooms: a living room, a central bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom addition. In 1949 this house was equipped with a water closet at the rear of the property. In 1958 a bathroom addition measuring 6' deep by 10' wide was appended to the rear of the house. This addition was finished with shiplap siding.

303 Third Street

The house located at 303 Third Street is a pyramidal roof cottage, built around 1900. In 1910 it was occupied by Ciscero Fifer, a Mississippi born wagon driver, his wife, Martha, and daughter, Sarah.¹⁵ In 1949 W.H. and Ila Mae Robertson purchased the house, which has had several subsequent owners. Birmingham city records identify this property as parcel number 22-28-2-021-

¹²City of Birmingham, Board of Equalization records; Montriel Pitts, interview by author, 25 August 1992; census records from the "Thomas National Register Historic District Project," Birmingham Historical Society.

¹³Census records from the "Thomas National Register Historic District Project," Birmingham Historical Society.

¹⁴City of Birmingham, Board of Equalization records; census records from the "Thomas National Register Historic District Project," Birmingham Historical Society.

¹⁵Census records from the "Thomas National Register Historic District Project," Birmingham Historical Society.

002.000.¹⁶

The frame structure is finished with clapboard siding. It was originally built as a four-room duplex measuring 28' square, with a porch extending across the front measuring 27' wide by 7' deep. In 1949 it was equipped with a water closet at the alley behind the house, but in 1952 an addition to the rear of the house added a bathroom and a bedroom. This addition was replaced in 1965 with a new addition which spanned the width of the house and extended 10' in depth. At this time a side porch was also added measuring 6' by 12'.

This structure is elevated above a crawl space on brick piers. The hipped or pyramid roof, covered with sheet metal roofing, rises to a central chimney containing four flues, one for each room.

SIGNIFICANCE

An excellent example of the planned worker community, Thomas is the only known industrial community in Birmingham modelled directly on Pennsylvania prototypes, including architectural types as well as planning concepts. The diffusion of the architectural types found at Thomas -- a contrast to the shotgun and pyramidal styles commonly used for worker houses in the South -- reflects the Pennsylvania roots of the community's corporate developer. Thomas remains a fine example of a worker community in the Birmingham District.

The lifestyle represented by the worker community at Thomas was typical of the Birmingham Industrial District. Here workers lived, worked, and raised their families within the planned, structured society created by the employer. These and other workers in similar industrial communities, on whom the prosperity of the region depended, represented a large population within the Birmingham District.

The Thomas community reflects then prevailing socio-cultural attitudes. Following standard practice within the region, Thomas was segregated by race and occupation. These two systems of segregation did not conflict, as common practice in the region prevented black workers from rising to skilled positions in the workplace.

¹⁶City of Birmingham, Board of Equalization records; census records from the "Thomas National Register Historic District Project," Birmingham Historical Society.

Republic Steel also employed a large number of Italian workers, and the community became home to a sizeable Italian population. In 1906 the Republic company donated land for the construction of the first Italian Catholic Church in north Alabama. Many of the current leaders of Birmingham's Italian community came from Thomas, including Joseph S. Bruno, a prominent Birmingham businessman and philanthropist. The son of an immigrant furnace worker, "Mr. Joe" was born in a three-room shotgun house on Third Street. This house, removed in the 1920s, was replaced by a Craftsman-style bungalow.¹⁷

The Thomas community is also significant within the Birmingham District for its support to industry. The Pioneer Mining and Manufacturing Company was a major influence in the development of the District, both in economic terms and in the effect it had in setting standards of technological sophistication. This company also helped establish the worker community as a standard feature of the region's vertically-integrated iron production systems. The Republic Steel and Iron Company remained a strong iron producer well into the twentieth century.

Thomas is also an excellent example of a paternalistic industrial community. It reflects the period when industrial companies provided workers with the necessities of life, and several amenities. Well constructed and carefully maintained homes were built in orderly communities and kept clean and sanitary by the company. The company also landscaped streets and provided schools, churches, and recreation for the workers and their families. The standard of living enjoyed by workers at Thomas far exceeded that available in the rural Southern countryside from which many had come. The workers at Thomas responded with strong company loyalty.

This industrial utopia extended company control over the workers' lives. Besides living in close proximity to the workplace, the workers' social lives were completely circumscribed by their employer. Residents of Thomas relaxed, socialized, shopped, and worshipped with their neighbors, all of whom were coworkers or families of coworkers at the furnaces. Beyond company loyalty, this system fostered total dependence on the employer, a condition that persisted until the unionization of the industry in the 1930s and the eventual end of paternalism.

The Thomas community clearly illustrates the concept of the well-contained and stratified industrial community. The layout of the streets and houses turns activity inward while railroads surround and isolate the community. Geographic stratification of housing

¹⁷Joseph S. Bruno, interview by the author, 25 August 1992.

according to company rank is clearly evident. Although there have been changes in many structures, the character of the community remains intact. Sufficient numbers of historic structures retain the standardization that was synonymous with company-built communities and company maintained housing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

FURTHER STUDY

Archival sources are abundant. Census records could provide information relating to stratification within the community based on race, skill level, and ethnic background, and how this varied with time. Although Birmingham City records do not include Thomas prior to 1949, city directories document the community as early as 1938 and provide information describing migration patterns within the community, as well as the transient nature of the labor force.

The most valuable archival sources are the Republic Company records recently donated to the Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts. This large collection -- sixty-five boxes of not-yet-processed documents-- contains extensive information pertaining to worker housing and to workers.

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THOMAS WORKER HOUSING

This report is an addendum to a 12 page report previously transmitted to the Library of Congress.

Location: Circumscribed by railroad tracks, the Thomas National Register Historic District lies four miles west of the Birmingham city center in Jefferson County and is bounded on the southwest by the Pioneer-Republic Thomas industrial plants, on the north by 1950s housing along Thomas and Ohio Circles, on the southeast by 1950s housing along 14th Street and on the east by the Birmingham Southern and Burlington-Northern Railroad tracks. As the community remains surrounded by railroads, access is limited to one principal entrance from US 78-Bankhead Highway at Second Street. It is possible to enter the community from Florida Avenue through the Wade Sand and Gravel site, but impractical.

Ownership: Multiple private owners

Date of Construction: 1880s to 1910

Project Information: This report is based upon written documentation donated by the Birmingham Historical Society, reformatted to HABS/HAER guidelines.

Period of Significance: 1887-1920s

Significance: The Birmingham District's finest example of a New South company town presents a fine collection of early industrial housing types in the District. The only industrial community modeled directly on Pennsylvania prototypes, it represents an outstanding example of the direct transfer of company town planning, as well as housing types, from its American center in Pennsylvania to the South. Thomas Furnace Community is also significant because it shows a clear division in the planning of worker housing. Thomas' social geography demonstrates not only management-worker and black-

white divisions but also segregation by country of origin, with immigrants from southern Europe housed along a different street.

DESCRIPTION

This late 19th-early 20th century company town consists of 216 historic structures (one and two-story frame and brick houses, two churches, a one-story frame commissary and three brick industrial buildings) situated along eight streets of a densely-developed grid plan. Streets are tree-lined, with houses situated close to the streets with small front yards and larger backyards. Most houses have hedges and fences that define property lines. There are five historic types of houses: Brick Victorian (13%), Victorian (7%), Pyramidal (28%), Shotgun (21%), and Craftsman Bungalow (8%).

The town consists of two geographic sections: housing for white workers (i.e. for management and workers) and housing for black workers. Historically, white managers and workers lived along First and Second Streets. Blacks and immigrants (principally Italians) lived along Third. After 1900, blacks lived in the geographically-separate section from Fourth to Eighth Avenues. The two areas differ slightly in density, landscape features and materials. Houses in the black area, modeled on southern industrial town plans, are more densely situated. The roads are narrower and the houses sit closer to the road with few trees. All houses are frame. In the white area, the largest houses are located the greatest distance from the furnaces and railroad tracks. These two-story, brick and frame houses, based on Pennsylvania prototypes, are located on First and Second Streets. They have more decorative detail and sit on larger lots with hardwood trees.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The town of Thomas was laid out in the late 1880s and closely modeled on the Pennsylvania industrial communities of Hokendauqua and Alburdis, headquarters of the Thomas Iron Company. Frank B. Keiser, company engineer, supervised town building as well as construction of the adjacent industrial facilities. Serving as plant manager, mayor and school administrator, Keiser remained in charge of both the town and the works until 1909. The town was operated as a company town until 1948 when houses were sold to occupants and other private owners. From 1888 to 1971, the Pioneer Mining and Manufacturing Company

of Pennsylvania, later Republic Iron and Steel and Republic Steel operated an iron producing facility with coke works, limestone quarry and coal mines on adjoining portions of the 2,000 acre Thomas site. The Thomas Coke Works continued in operation until the 1980s under the management of LTV. Wade Sand and Gravel operates limestone and dolomite quarries and other operations to this day.

CONDITION

- . Due to its physical isolation and lack of development pressures, this company town, with its early street system, landscape features, foreman and worker houses, commissary and company buildings, remains remarkably intact.
- . Upkeep of the houses varies from poor to good. Some houses were deteriorating due to inadequate maintenance as a result of the low income level and/or age of residents.

Sources Consulted

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