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ABRAM THOMAS, A WELSH IRONMASTER IN CIVIL WAR KNOXVILLE

by William J. McCoy, Jr.

Abram Thomas, iron moulder, expert in smelting iron ore, or melting of pig iron in a cupola, pouring and forming of iron castings in a mold, had every reason to believe he was skilled in a trade whereby he could always support his family comfortably. Having moved to Knoxville around 1853 from New York, he found himself in the middle of a Civil War less than a decade later, and he was faced with removing his family to a place of safety. What thoughts must have passed through his mind at that time.

For much of the following data and story we are indebted to his daughter, Harriet Anna Thomas, born July 18, 1850 in Springfield, Massachusetts, she died 1938 in Knoxville, Tennessee. She never married and was "Aunt Hattie" to all of the family. She loved to retell the experiences of her life and times to all who would listen. My mother, Bessie Leland McCoy, and Aunt Hattie were both interested in handwork, crocheting, etc. During some of Aunt Hattie's visits my mother wrote notes on the family data.

From my mother's notes, written in the spring of 1931: "Abram Thomas was the son of John William Thomas, born 1801, died May 19, 1864. Came to America from Scotland, 1826 when Abram was 4 years old and his sister Mary was 2 years old. Family originally Welsh--were iron moulders for generations. John William made his wife an iron oven to use over the fire. Invented moulders trays and made armor."

We are also fortunate to have copies of the data in the Thomas Family Bible. Abram Thomas, born October 13, 1822, died July 23, 1871, married January 2, 1845 in Schenectady, New York to Nancy Bradt Kennedy, born June 1, 1824, died February 5, 1915. They made their first home in Springfield, Massachusetts, where their first three children were born:

William H. Thomas, born August 10, 1847
Daughter born 1849 died in infancy
Harriet Anna Thomas, born July 18, 1850

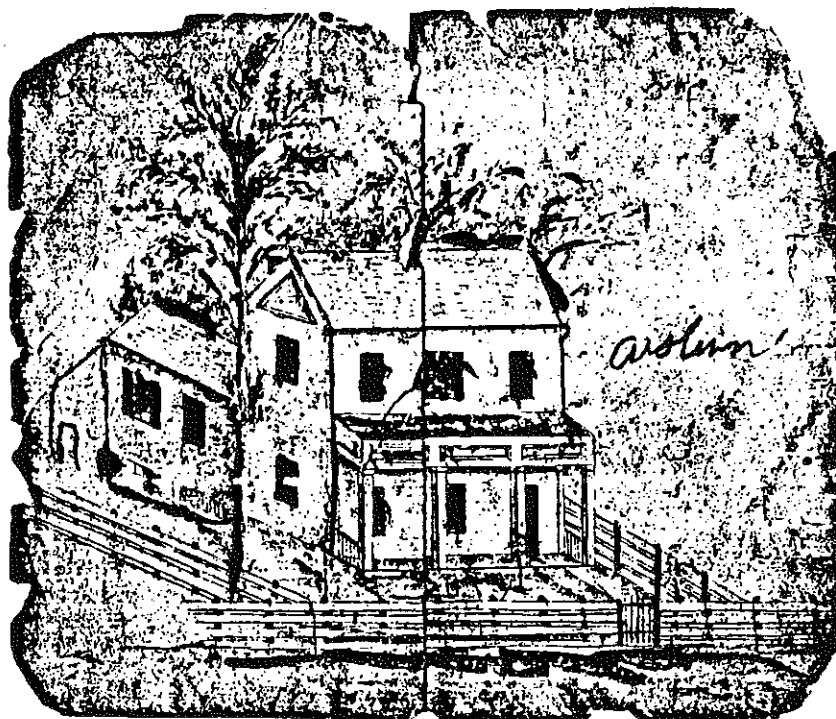
Following his "iron moulder" trade, Abram Thomas and family moved to Knoxville, Tennessee c1852-1853. Three more children were born to Abram and Nancy:

Emma Elizabeth Thomas, born July 7, 1854
Abram Thomas, Jr., born May 5, 1857
Mary Ann, born April 5, 1859

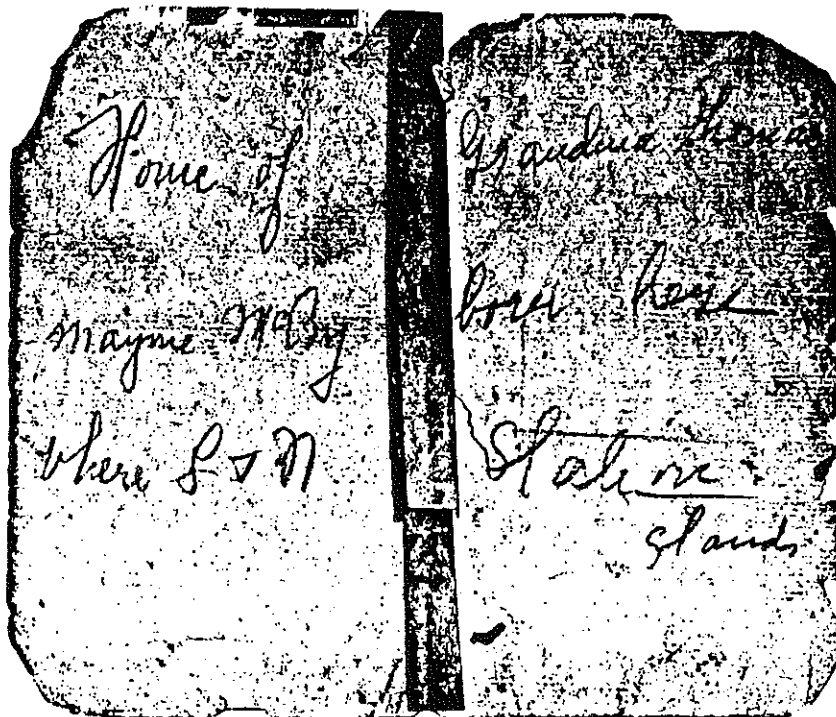
It is of special interest to know that the Thomas home was on Asylum Avenue on the site of the present L&N Railroad Station. The family were in their home during the Civil War Battle of Fort Sanders, November 29, 1863.

Submitted by William J. McCoy, Jr., 1029 Southgate Road, Knoxville, TN 37919

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FRONT



BACK

ABRAM THOMAS HOUSE AS IT LOOKED IN THE 1860s,
ON THE PRESENT SITE OF THE L&N STATION

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The siege of Knoxville began in November 1863 as General Longstreet approached Knoxville up Kingston Pike. This culminated in the November 29, 1863 battle with General Burnside's Union forces at Fort Sanders. The family was in their home during this engagement. Much of the action was in view of the Thomas house.

Aunt Hattie was 13 years old at the time and retained a clear memory of events which occurred during this period. The situation was difficult to say the least--industry at a standstill; little work for an iron moulder since pig iron and other supplies could not get through the lines. In view of this, the decision was made to return to the Thomas family home in Schenectady, New York. Public travel was closed off in virtually all directions, leaving the only route out of Knoxville down the Tennessee River. A stark but simple record is in the Thomas Bible:

"Left Knoxville Apr 9, 1864"

Aunt Hattie related many stories of this trip. Since several families were on this river flatboat only personal baggage was allowed. Two pair of strong shoes were suggested. Foraging soldiers flanked the river--Confederate on one bank, Union on the other. It was considered prudent to travel mostly at night until they were below Chattanooga.

Cooking was done on a small cast iron woodburner. Special care being taken to burn only dry wood to keep smoke to a minimum. A coffee pot was hot most of the time. Beans, potatoes, corn meal mush and salt pork were the staple foods. Someone usually had a hook in the water, and an occasional fish helped out.

When the river depth was suitable, all the men and some of the women "poled" the flatboat, so they were not entirely at the mercy of the river current. When the boat reached Muscle Shoals the river was so low the boat could not get through. They were put ashore with their baggage, and the family started overland to Nashville. They begged rides on farm vehicles and, where possible, hired a horse and wagon, finally reaching Nashville.

In Nashville they arranged stage coach transportation to Cincinnati; then a "freighter" steamboat up the Ohio River to Pittsburgh; then by stage coach to Albany and Schenectady, New York. The trip required a little more than six weeks.

About a week after arriving in Schenectady, Abram, Jr., then 7 years old, was watching the boats pulled through the Erie Canal. He became entangled in the horse-drawn tow rope and was pulled into the canal and drowned.

The Thomas Bible also records: "Abram Thomas died Sunday morning at 4 o'clock July 23, 1871 aged 48 years." Nancy K. Thomas decided to return to Knoxville, together with her daughters Harriet Anna, Emma Elizabeth, and Mary Ann. They made their home in the Thomas house c1872-1873. William H. Thomas had married Josephine Bently September 22, 1869, and decided to remain in Schenectady.

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Emma Elizabeth Thomas first met John McCoy in 1874. Following a two year courtship, they were married March 30, 1876 in the First Baptist Church.

John McCoy, born in Grainger County February 15, 1847, was the first son of Claibourne and Elisabeth Day McCoy. Claibourne McCoy died September 12, 1849. Elizabeth then married Abraham Haynes February 20, 1853. Elisabeth was active in real estate and in 1875 had one of Knoxville's early hotels, called the Haynes House, located on Prince Street, later 506-508 Market Street, now the site of Krutch Park.

John and Emma McCoy lived with his mother for the first years of their married life. Their first child, William J. McCoy, Sr. was born in the Haynes House May 1, 1877. Before the arrival of their second child they moved to the Thomas home on the L&N Station site. Mayme June McCoy was born June 29, 1879 at the Thomas home. (See copy of the sketch of the house and the note on the reverse side.)

The John McCoy family moved c1881-1882 to 29 Asylum Avenue. This portion of Asylum Avenue was renamed 405 Wall Avenue in 1892. The lot is now occupied by TVA West Tower.

In the year 1878, on May 3rd, the youngest daughter, Mary Ann Thomas, died. Shortly after her death, her mother, Nancy K. Thomas and Harriet decided to return to Schenectady to be near her son, William H. Thomas, his wife and family. Nancy K. Thomas died February 5, 1915.

A few years after her mother's death, Harriet Anna Thomas--our Aunt Hattie--returned to Knoxville to make her home with her sister Emma Thomas McCoy. Aunt Hattie enjoyed being with all her Tennessee relations. She died at the John McCoy home, 213 East Fourth Avenue, in 1928, ending the saga of the Abram Thomas family.

ABRAM THOMAS FAMILY BIBLE

[The Holy Bible Containing the Old and the New Testaments..... published in Philadelphia by James A. Bill in 1847.]

MARRIAGES

Married by the revd Andrew Witherspoon, Abram Thomas to Nancy B. Kennedy January 7, 1845, Schenectady.

W^m H. Thomas was married to Miss Josephine C. Bently September 22nd 1869.

BIRTHS

Harriet Anna Thomas was born Thursday July 18th 1850 in Springfield, Mas.

Emma Elizabeth [Thomas] was born on fryday between 10 and 11 o'clock in the morning of the 7th of July 1854 Knoxville, Tenn.

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Abram Thomas was born on tuesday night about two o'clock May the 5th 1857.

Mary Ann Thomas was born on tuesday April 5th 1859 in Knoxville, Tenn.

Emma Thomas the daughter of William and Josephine Thomas was born Saturday July 18th 1870.

Abram Thomas was born in the year of our Lord 1822 on October 13th.

Nancy B. Kennedy was born in Albin NY June 1st 1824.

William Henry Thomas was born on tuesday 10th of August 1847 1:00 o'clock in the fornoon Cabbotville, Mass.

Emma Elizabeth Thomas was born on fryday 6 o'clock in the afternoon on June 15th 1849 Springfield, Mass.

DEATHS

Emma Elizabeth dide on the 18th of August 1850 between 8 and 9 o'clock in the fornoon.

Schenectady Father Thomas [John William, father of Abram] Died on the 14th of May 1864 aged 63 years.

Schenectady June the 3rd little Abram [7 years old] was drowned on fryday June 3rd 1864.

Mother Thomas [mother of Abram] Died August the 3rd 1855 Aged 63 years at Schenectady.

Abram Thomas died Sunday morning at four o'clock July 23rd 1871 aged 48 years.

[flyleaf]

"left Knoxville the 9th of Apr 1864"

Blacksmith.

