

Thomas, James Augustus ^[1]

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by Augustus Merrimon Burns III, 1996

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James Augustus Thomas, tobacco ^[2] merchant, benefactor, and Asian specialist, was born in Lawsonville, Rockingham ^[3] County. His grandfather and his father, Henry Evans Thomas, were both tobacco men; his mother was Cornelia Carolina Jones Thomas. The younger Thomas literally grew up in the tobacco business, having gone to work in a Reidsville tobacco warehouse at age ten; his first wage was twenty-five cents a day. In 1881 he was graduated from Eastman National Business College ^[4], Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

Thomas traveled all over the United States as a tobacco salesman, but his most important position came with the British-American Tobacco Company, Ltd. ^[5], which he joined at its inception in 1902 and represented as managing director in China from 1914 until his retirement in 1922. There Thomas supervised the building of factories that employed thousands of Chinese workers. He was largely responsible for the introduction of American cigarettes into China, as well as Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, Tasmania, and India. He also introduced Western ways into many countries in the Orient.

In all, Thomas spent twenty-six years in China. Very active in that country's commercial and educational life, he founded the Chinese-American Bank of Commerce and two schools for Chinese children. He witnessed a turbulent period in China's history, having been there during the Boxer Rebellion ^[6], the Russo-Japanese War ^[7], and the beginning of the Chinese Revolution ^[8] in 1911. Long afterwards he described his experiences in two books: A Pioneer Tobacco Merchant in the Orient (1928) ^[9] and Trailing Trade a Million Miles (1931) ^[10].

For his varied activities in China, Thomas received numerous awards and recognition. A life member of the Chinese Red Cross, he was decorated in 1905 by the Dalai Lama and the Empress Dowager of China, who made him a Crystal Button Mandarin. He also was decorated 6th and 3rd classes, Order of the Golden Harvest and Order of the Jade, Red Cravat with White and Blue Borders (China), in 1937. Thomas was treasurer of China Famine Relief, U.S.A., Inc., chairman of China Child Welfare, Inc., and a trustee of the Shanghai American School ^[11] and the American Hospital of Istanbul ^[12]. He was a director of the China Society of America and a member of the Church Committee for China Relief and of the Council on Foreign Relations in New York. In addition, he belonged to the American Academy of Political Science ^[13], American Institute of Pacific Relations ^[14], American Museum of Natural History ^[15], English Speaking Union ^[16], Japan Society of New York ^[17], and Omicron Delta Kappa ^[18]. A Presbyterian Mason (32), he was a member of the following clubs: India House, Manursing Island, American Yacht Club, Apawamic, China Club of Seattle, American Club of Shanghai, and Thatched House of London.

On his retirement Thomas moved to White Plains, N.Y., where he lived for the balance of his life. His association with the Duke family had given him a keen interest in Duke University ^[19], to which he donated in 1928 his Far East library, one of the choicest collections of its kind in the world, a result of thirty years of careful selection. He became a member of the Duke University Board of Trustees in 1936 and served as chairman of the Duke Memorial Fund to erect a memorial to Washington Duke ^[20] and his sons Benjamin N. ^[21] and James B. Duke ^[22]. He made repeated purchases of rare books on Oriental life for the university, many of which he bought from Arthur Probsthain, an Oriental bookseller and publisher in London.

Thomas's first wife, Anna Branson of Durham, died in November 1918, only seven months after their marriage. He then married Dorothy Quincy Hancock Read on 21 Nov. 1922, and they had two children, James Augustus, Jr., and Eleanor Lansing.

References:

New York Times, 11 Apr. 1940.

James A. Thomas, *A Pioneer Tobacco Merchant in the Orient* (1928) and *Trailing Trade a Million Miles* (1931).

Introduction to James Augustus Thomas Papers and Thomas Papers (Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham).

Additional Resources:

Inventory of the James Augustus Thomas Papers, circa 1900-1985, Duke University Libraries:
<http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/thomasjamesaug/> ^[23]

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