

## Thomas, John Warwick <sup>[1]</sup>

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## Thomas, John Warwick

by Mary G. Matthews, 1996

**27 June 1800–17 May 1871**



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<sup>[2]</sup>John Warwick Thomas, founder of Thomasville, politician, and educator, was born in [Caswell County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, the son of Robert and Margaret Warwick Thomas. Because many in Margaret's family spelled their name Warrick, following the popular English pronunciation, numerous descendants continue to use the phonetic spelling. Robert Thomas died in 1810 leaving his widow with six children. John matured young and in late 1817 pursued his interest in [mining](#) <sup>[4]</sup> to Davidson County, where gold, silver, and other valuable minerals were found. He engaged in mining, both personally and in business partnerships, for many years. At the home of Moses Lambeth, who lived on large landholdings in the place much later called Cedar Ledge, he fell in love with the daughter Mary (Polly) with whom he eloped on 25 Jan. 1818. Earlier the same month his mother became the second wife of Daniel Merrill, a [Revolutionary War](#) <sup>[5]</sup> veteran who lived a few miles southeast in [Randolph County](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. In 1823 Moses Lambeth ceded to Thomas a large tract of his home place for the consideration of love and affection. Soon Thomas erected a substantial frame house there for his growing family; the house with remodelings was occupied until 1976.

Active in public affairs, Thomas was named one of nine trustees of Fair Grove Methodist Church, which was less than a mile from his home. In 1830 he entered politics and was elected a county representative in the 1831 [General Assembly](#) <sup>[7]</sup>. He was returned as a senator in 1842, 1848, 1854, and 1860. An outspoken [Whig](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, he strongly supported his party's promotion of [internal improvements](#) <sup>[9]</sup>. In 1849 he voted for the bill obligating the state to build [arailroad](#) <sup>[10]</sup> from Goldsboro to [Charlotte](#) <sup>[11]</sup> via [Raleigh](#) <sup>[12]</sup>, [Greensboro](#) <sup>[13]</sup>, and Salisbury. He was chairman of a committee that sold more stock in Davidson than was sold in any other county. Because the survey passed two miles north of his home, he purchased a large piece of land centered by the proposed route and with his sons contracted to construct three railroad sections towards Lexington. He soon had started a town with a large frame store in the center and a mill near the east edge where

both grist and lumber were produced. On 23 Oct. 1852 the *Greensborough Patriot*<sup>[14]</sup> announced the gathering at Thomas Depot on Saturday, 30 October, to be addressed by six named leading North Carolina Whigs promoting the candidacy of General Winfield Scott for president and William A. Graham<sup>[15]</sup>, a recent state governor, for vice-president. From this first printed naming, the town counts 1852 as its founding date.

Workers came from all around to clear the heavily wooded area, prepare the roadbed, build houses for their families, and provide necessary services. The Thomasville post office was established in 1853 with mail distribution from a desk in the Thomas store. In 1857 the town was incorporated by the General Assembly<sup>[7]</sup>. Other events that year included the erection of a large house for the Thomas family west of the store on Main Street, the arrival of two shoe manufacturing firms from Bush Hill (Archdale) so as to be better served by the newly completed railroad, and the relocation of the Glen Anna Female Seminary from its place two miles south to the large brick building on East Main Street north of the railroad.

Families moved to the town to provide schooling for their children. Thomas's continuing interest in education dated to his youth, when schooling for those without means was hard to get. But from his many speeches published in the *Greensborough Patriot* during his political years, one finds him well read and using excellent English. When Davidson County<sup>[16]</sup> first established public schools in 1843, Thomas was one of ten men named to the school board and elected their chairman the first two years. As president of Glen Anna in its new town location, he secured a faculty of highly trained Northern teachers. Both the culture and the prosperity of the area benefited from the seminary's activities and programs.

As a Methodist<sup>[17]</sup> from Fair Grove, he gave his church a lot north of the railroad for a building and was equally generous to the few Baptists, who received a lot on Randolph Street south of the railroad. Thomas became a member of Richland Lodge No. 214, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons<sup>[18]</sup>, when it was organized in 1860. He and his sons were active in this strong lodge. He soon gave it a lot on Randolph Street on which they erected a large meeting place also used for many other community purposes. Following Thomas's death a tribute of respect from this Thomasville lodge was published in the *Raleigh Sentinel*<sup>[19]</sup>. The white-clad students of the seminary followed his bier from the nearby Methodist church to the Thomasville Cemetery. He had given this large cemetery tract to the town in 1860, when the need arose. A portrait was hung in the city council room in the Thomasville municipal building. Six sons and three daughters grew up in the Main Street house.

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History, Thomasville Tourism: <http://www.thomasvilletourism.com/historic%20sites/Historic.html><sup>[22]</sup>

John W. Thomas Papers, 1848-1893, Collection Number: 01784-z, UNC Libraries: [http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/t/Thomas,John\\_W.html](http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/t/Thomas,John_W.html)<sup>[23]</sup>

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#### Subjects:

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Educators<sup>[25]</sup>

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