

## **ALSEN FRANKLIN THOMAS: A MOST INTERESTING CITIZEN**

A Paper Presented to the SpheX Club of Lynchburg, Virginia  
September 9, 2010

**By Thomas C. Tiller**

Tom and his wife, Mary Frances, have two sons, Thomas and Craig, and two grandsons. Following a career at Lynchburg College, Tom retired into a second career as grandpa to Shea and Jacob.

For more than forty years he has supported the Lynchburg City Schools through service on various boards and special committees, including three terms on the School Board and present membership on the Board of Education Foundation. He also served three terms on the Lynchburg Planning Commission.

He was the group facilitator in the recent city-wide race and racism dialogue.

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ALSEN FRANKLIN THOMAS, A MOST INTERESTING CITIZEN

“... on no question and at no time will there be any doubt as to his attitude.”

By the time Alsen Franklin (A. F.) Thomas was forty four years old, his accomplishments were such that he merited a biographical sketch in Men of Mark in Virginia. In that publication he was credited with overcoming severe obstacles in his early life, an admirable work ethic, success and innovations in the international tobacco business, seeking reform in corporate property tax exemptions, service in state office and being a contributor of ideas and publications concerning public affairs. He died suddenly November 21, 1943, just short of his 81st birthday, though seemingly in good health.

The lead paragraph in his obituary in the Lynchburg News, 11-22-1943, noted that he had been a leader for a half century in movements for educational, civic and economic reform in Virginia, one of the founders of First Unitarian Church of Lynchburg, retired export tobacconist, a key official of Thornhill Wagon Works, and member of the Virginia State Senate. The obituary also noted that he was a “founding member of the Sphex Club, local group of limited membership concerned with current affairs” and “was frequently a speaker at its sessions.” Also mentioned was “his diversity of private charities.” An editorial

eulogy, titled “A Community Force,” led with, “Independent in his thinking and provocative in expression of his thoughts, A.F. Thomas made his presence felt in any gathering ....” And continued, “Tolerant of the opinions of others to a degree unusual in a man of such tenacity in holding his own . . . ., [h]e had a reformer’s urge without the accompanying urge to interfere with the personal views or the personal lives of others.” He was a “Democrat, Socialist, independent in politics – always independent . . . .” He was “a business man who castigated what he regarded as evils in business organization and conduct. . . .” “Mr. Thomas leaves many evidences of his existence.” “For a long time to come he will be remembered as a good friend, a courageous opponent, a courteous gentleman.”  
 (News, 11-23-1943)

My research about A.F. Thomas initially concentrated on his legal action concerning the City’s tax exemptions, his being a socialist elected to office from Lynchburg, and the school funding legislation he introduced. Learning more about those aspects and others of his life not only revealed much about him but also provided new perspectives for me about Lynchburg a century ago. I did not attempt to develop a full biography of him and information is presented topically rather than strictly chronologically.

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Alsen Franklin Thomas was born at Oakville in Appomattox County, Virginia, December 1, 1862, the son of Alsen and Virginia Caroline (Whitehead) Thomas. The results of the war left his father, a Baptist preacher, very poor, resulting in young Alsen having no opportunity for high school or college education. When a security debt of

\$500 came against his father, young Alsen at the age of 16 assumed the responsibility of its payment and went to work farming on his own. He planned and worked, including teaching school in the winter months when farm work was less intense, to meet his assumed obligations. "His rule of action was to do exactly what he promised and to meet every engagement at every cost." "Men of Mark in Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 378-382

For five or six years "Mr. Thomas varied his career as a farmer with experience as a teacher, and a clerk in a store at Oakville, and finally tried his hand at saw milling." "... The time not given to actual business, was spent in studying book-keeping, shorthand, French, German, law, and pursuing other literary exercises."

"In 1886 he went to Lynchburg and launched out in the tobacco business, meeting with great success from the first. He soon became one of the leading tobacco dealers and had business relations with the Imperial Tobacco company, of Great Briton and Ireland....

Seeing that the American trust had a decided advantage over the British manufacturers in the method of purchase of raw supplies, Mr. Thomas devised a plan of consolidation, which led to the establishment of direct agencies in America for this purpose." "The move was quite radical and resulted in overturning methods that had been in vogue for many years. The results have demonstrated the practicality of this plan.... He was one of the American managers of the institution, but after getting the constructive work accomplished and not finding the routine labor congenial to his taste, he resigned his position as manager." Mr. Thomas continued his business career as secretary-treasurer of Thornhill Wagon Works, and over the course of approximately 50 years, he was a party in many land transactions throughout the city and in Campbell County.

His early public efforts, focused on the 1901-02 Virginia Constitutional Convention, included an advocacy booklet, a pamphlet on taxation, and a series of letters to the president and other members of the convention “to help get the instrument of government drafted along lines in harmony with democratic principles. His most earnest efforts were devoted to the betterment of the school system and especially ... primary education; and some of the principles for which he contended were embedded in the constitution.” (Men of Mark in Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 378-382) The 1906 biographical notes about him in Men of Mark foretold much about A. F. Thomas’s ideas stating, “As a further evidence of his interest in public matters, Mr. Thomas has in contemplation the publication of a work on political economy. In this work he will attempt to show that the principle of competition in producing a fair level of prices has ceased to be applicable under modern [1906] conditions where the private individual has to contend with great corporations vested by the state with practically sovereign powers. To prevent tyranny on the part of vast aggregations of capital, the power which brought them to life must be invoked to control them. Mr. Thomas will attempt to show that public monopoly must ... supersede private monopoly, and that this economic truth is fully in accord with democratic principles. As rapid transit and transmission extend the common interest, so will interference of government in business affairs become more and more frequent.”

On June 19, 1889, Mr. Thomas married LeVerge “Virgie” Dickerson – they had eight children, six of whom were still living by 1906. One of the sons, Albert Gallatin Thomas, graduated from U.VA. and M.I.T. and became an inventor with more than 100

inventions filed in the U.S. patent office. The most notable one, of interest internationally, was a control system – touted as an “electronic brain” - to provide automatic operation of various types of machinery. Their home address in the US census of 1910 was listed as Brookville. They eventually resided at 503 Westwood Avenue adjacent to the Westover Hotel property which was the founding location of Virginia Christian College, the present day Lynchburg College. A.F. served on the College board of trustees 1907-1909. Thus he and the College’s founding president, Josephus Hopwood were at least acquainted and perhaps friends. It is known that they shared certain outlooks and values: strong moral codes, concern for the larger society, vision for the future and efforts to promote prohibition. Julia Shackelford Hunter, who as a child lived within close sight of the Thomas family, remembers that after her father died Mr. Thomas took a kindly interest toward her family, sometimes visiting across the street to offer advice about their house. She also remembers that one of the daughters liked to dress her up and show her off to friends.

**Who says you can’t beat city hall?**

One of the ways A. F. Thomas “left evidence of his existence” was through a change he caused in corporate property tax practices. In 1900, “finding more than a million dollars was [he believed] being illegally exempted from taxation by the city council of Lynchburg, Virginia, he entered a protest to which no attention was paid.” (Men of Mark in Virginia, Vol. II, p. 380) Subsequently, on August 15, 1900, Thomas petitioned the judge of the circuit court for a writ of mandamus to compel the commissioner of the revenue, William H. Snead, to assess for taxation the capital stock of <sup>eight</sup> ~~seven~~ corporations

and one co-partnership firm, to wit: Hughes Buggy Co, Lynchburg Hardware Co., Lynchburg Diamond Ice Co., Glamorgan Pipe & Foundry Co., Adams-Monroe Mfg. Co., Hubbard Machine Co., Lynchburg Textile Co., Lynchburg Paper Box Co. and John H. Heald & Co. Mr. Thomas was represented by John G. Haythe, the City by N.C. Manson, Jr. and the businesses by Blackford, Horsley and Blackford. (Thomas and Haythe were together again later as charter members of the Sphex Club.) Judge Stafford G. Whittle denied the application for mandamus, dismissed the petition and ruled that the defendant could recover of the plaintiff the cost about his defense. The judge's ruling was based on the opinion that "the revised city charter authorized city council to levy either an ad valorem or a license tax on manufacturing enterprises ...; and that the council has elected to deal with manufacturers by way of a license tax ...; and the constitutional provisions in relation to equality and uniformity of taxation are therefore not applicable to this case." Mr. Thomas signified his intention to apply to the Supreme Court of Appeals for a writ of error and supersedeas to this order. (Law Orders of the Lynchburg Circuit Court, Book 13, pp. 198, 199) The News offered full coverage, much of it verbatim from the Court record, on the following day.

Just over a year later, September 12, 1901, the Supreme Court of Appeals ruled that the Circuit Court ruling was "erroneous..., set aside and annulled... and that the Companies [previously exempted] are liable to and ought to be assessed with a property or ad valorem tax as provided by sections 4,5 and 6 of the ordinances of the City Council imposing a tax on property...." It was "further ordered that the cause be remanded to the said Circuit Court to be further proceeded with in accordance with the views expressed in this opinion." (Law Orders, Book 13, pp. 192,193) The News of September 19, 1901,

explained to readers that the decision "...will affect Lynchburg materially. In the first place it will render any special ordinances exempting manufacturing establishments an impossibility. The value of the property thus exempted in Lynchburg in recent years amounts to over \$500,000, which at the regular rate of \$1.50 will result in material increase in the city's revenue." .... "Another interesting point in this court's decision will bear on the plan adopted by the city of granting a [regressive] scale in taxation by which capital in excess of \$75,000 has received a reduction. .... these scales cannot be maintained and the rate of \$1.50 will have to hold for the entire capital. .... Exactly what amount of property has secured a reduction through this scale is not known."

On November 26, 1901, the Circuit Court in receipt of the Supreme Court ruling did "command and enjoin William H. Snead, Commissioner of the Revenue of the City of Lynchburg, immediately upon receipt of this writ and without delay, to assess a property or ad valorem tax for the year 1900..." (Law Orders of the Circuit Court, Book 13, pp. 208,209) Apparently this decree "denied to the councils of municipalities the power of any exemptions whatever. Mr. Thomas was asked why, having no direct personal interest, he acted as he had, and his answer was: "I hate injustice and discrimination in government, and shall do what I can to make them impossible in Virginia." (Men of Mark, Vol. II, p.380)

### **State Senate and Thomas**

In 1903, A.F. Thomas entered politics and announced himself as a candidate for the senate of Virginia." (Men of Mark in Virginia, Vol. II, pp. 378-382) Reflecting later on his reasons for seeking election and for his support of public education, he said, "I

remembered my own struggles for an education.” And that “It had been his ambition ever since he realized his own disadvantages when a boy, to do what he could to bring about an equal chance for the poor boy and the rich boy.” After his efforts for direct appropriations for public schools were rebuffed in other channels, he determined that he must go into politics to “remedy the great evil.” (News, June 23, 1907)

In Lynchburg-Campbell County politics, as in much of the state at the beginning of the twentieth century, being elected to state office was virtually assured by winning the nomination of the Democratic party. In 1892, an agreement had been made by the local Democratic committee to alternate terms in the state Senate between the Lynchburg city and Campbell County. In the making of arrangements for conducting the 1903 Democratic party state senate primary election, there was much preliminary wrangling about how the standing agreement between Lynchburg and Campbell County to alternate in naming candidates would be accomplished. With the issue resolved for that year, on October 3, 1903, A. F. Thomas defeated William A. O’Brien in the Democratic primary to succeed Don P. Halsey for the state senate from Lynchburg and Campbell County, the 20th senatorial district, by an approximately 126 vote margin of the more than 2600 cast. (News, October 4, 1903) An article in Sunday morning News of November 1 – just before the general election – cited “the close of a remarkably quiet campaign in Virginia.” The post-election report in the News on November 4 noted that the democratic tickets in Lynchburg and Campbell County had no opposition, and consequently a very small vote was cast. An editorial in that same issue of the News opined, “Mr. Thomas is a man of excellent character, considerable self-culture, an interested observer of public affairs, and a believer in clean methods. He was never

before an aspirant for office, but has long been an active participant in local and state politics. In the senate he will creditably represent Lynchburg and Campbell, and it may safely be predicted that on no question and at no time will there be any doubt as to his attitude.”

In his History of Lynchburg Virginia 1786-1946 (p.283), Philip Scruggs wrote that A.F. Thomas “was elected to the State Senate as a Socialist” and that “he was a constructive member..., zealous in forwarding matters he found important.” Though he was a socialist Thomas was a successful capitalist, “because [he said] I live in a capitalist society.” Placing this in the context of stirrings in the country at large, Scruggs also noted that Eugene Debs had run for President in 1904 on the Socialist ticket. Alsen Thomas successfully pushed for additional funding for public education, co-sponsored legislation for the creation of a tubercular sanitorium and another bill to limit cocaine to medical uses only. He attempted legislation to create a tax commission to reform railroad taxation and attempted legislation to make corporation attorneys ineligible to serve in the state senate, but neither effort was successful. More detail on Thomas’s efforts during his term as state senator, is presented in the section on education.

### **A Try For a Second Term**

Sometime after the 1892 agreement between Lynchburg and Campbell County to alternate naming the party’s nominee for state senator, the state Democratic committee decided that the party’s nominees should henceforth be selected by open primaries. A. F. Thomas decided that cleared the way for him to seek nomination for a second consecutive term, and he did so. His opponent, Don P. Halsey, an attorney and future circuit court judge, was his predecessor in the office and was the nephew of prestigious

Democratic U. S. Senator John W. Daniel. Halsey had been selected to complete the state Senate term left vacant when Carter Glass resigned to enter the U.S. House of Representatives. Whether or not the alternating agreement was meant to be still in force in 1907, and whether or not the candidates supported Senator Daniel, were both issues in the campaign. Other issues included the effectiveness of each during their terms as state senator, support for free public schools, pensions for Confederate soldiers and taxation of railroads, among others. Thomas declared that the only original bill that his opponent produced was one to place a statue of Robert E. Lee in the Capitol at Washington. Halsey said that Thomas claimed too much credit concerning schools – that you would think from what he said “that the people of Virginia never had a system of public schools until he went to the Legislature.” “The trouble with my distinguished friend, said Mr. Halsey with a humorous inflection in his tones, is that he is subject to brain storms – a case of exaggerated ego.” (News, June 16, 1907) According to reports in the News, Thomas and Halsey had at least six joint debates between mid-May and early-July. Their hours-long debates on positions and differences were spirited, but their demeanor toward each other was reported as good natured and without personal animosity. Following the debates the candidates would shake hands, and on at least some occasions, hold an informal reception.

During their debate at Hat Creek in Campbell County, Mr. Thomas asserted that the railroads “were going into the pockets of the people of Virginia and getting \$1,800,000 annually through low assessed valuation.” And, to Campbell County “You paid the Lynchburg and Durham Railroad \$100,000 for the privilege of having them rob you.” In that same debate Thomas also said, “ The danger in American politics today is the money

11

power whose influence is undermining both parties, Republican and Democratic, and this power that thrust upon the Democratic party ... Presidential candidates who have no more chance of being ... elected than I have of flying without wings.” (News, June 16, 1907) “In their West End debate held July 6 at the casino shortly before the primary election, Halsey declared, “I have the highest esteem [for my opponent] as a man, but as a politician I regard him as one of the most radical, extreme and most unsafe in the state.” (News, July 7, 1907)

Don P. Halsey won in the primary by approximately 160 votes, with his margin of victory from City voters overcoming Thomas’s majority among County voters. The News, November 5 and 6, 1907, reported that with Halsey running unopposed in the general election, “there was no interest in the election,” so although “the weather was ideal” and the saloons in the city were closed from sundown the day before the election until sun rise the day after the election, only 231 of the potential voting strength of two to three thousand in Lynchburg bothered to cast a vote in the senatorial election. So Halsey, Thomas’s predecessor, became his successor as well.

### **On Public Education**

“Mr. Thomas regards as his greatest public service, the constant effort made by him to arouse the people of Virginia to the appreciation of the fact that primary education in the counties has been woefully neglected and that the state’s policy up to this time [1906] has been unfriendly to a state system that would tax all property and in turn educate all children.” (Men of Mark, vol.II, p. 380) In 1903 he published a 26-page book, Primary Education and the Race Problem: An Address to the People of Virginia, asking people to read it and hand it to a neighbor. The first section traced the history of public school

requirements in Virginia constitutions and codes 1869 through 1896. Then he offered a case for increased funding for schools, including figures from an 1898-99 report showing local revenue per capita for school funding for cities (\$4.47 for a school population of 81,889) and for counties (\$.96 for a school population of 583,976). Thomas's case included the contention that town "negroes" were receiving better state funding than the great mass of county "whites" in the state. He also included other opinions about negroes and whites that will be examined in another section. He closed as follows: "At the next session of the General Assembly I will offer a Bill to appropriate five hundred thousand dollars per annum [three hundred thousand of it new money] for the aid and maintenance of public schools. This money shall be distributed over the State according to school population, but the local school authorities shall be empowered to apply this fund to such class of primary schools as in their judgment may be for the public good; and ... the funds shall be uniformly applied..... If you agree with me see to it that every man who offers for election takes position on this question. Make him declare himself and then vote for or against him as your deliberate judgment may dictate. .... In the final analysis it means freedom and development, or retrogression and peonage for the masses. For which do you stand? I have refrained from introducing into this question any partisan consideration. It rises above party politics into the realm of State policy." (Primary Education, p. 26) He was true to his word: The Daily Index-Appeal of Petersburg reported on January 24, 1904, "Mr. A. F. Thomas, the new Senator from Lynchburg, introduced a bill today ... which will revolutionize the school system in Virginia. No bill this session has created more interest." The effort to increase state funding for schools

was successful, as A.F. “contributed very greatly to ... increasing two-fold the appropriation to the common schools.” (Men of Mark, vol. II, p. 381)

**His Thoughts on Race**

If A. F. Thomas was unique as a socialist elected to state office from Lynchburg/ Campbell County, unfortunately he was not unique in the racial views he held. On that, uncharacteristically for him, he was much in tune with the prevailing culture of his time and place when in his 1903 booklet, Primary Education and the Race Problem, he revealed his ideas on race. He wrote and distributed this at a time when the effects of post civil-war reconstruction policies and constitutional amendments had largely been reversed by de facto and de jure disenfranchisement, discrimination and segregation in the South. “By 1900, the South’s judicial system had been wholly reconfigured to make one of its primary purposes the coercion of African Americans to comply with the social customs and labor demands of whites.” ( Slavery by Another Name, p. 7) First, Thomas presented the strong argument of advocates of racial equality, then rejected it out of hand, and finally presented his ideas of racial differences by nature and the importance of maintaining the “Anglo-Saxon civilization of the South.” He believed that allowing equality in any sphere of life would open the door to equality in all spheres of life. Among other things he argued that since social equality was “not possible,” it was a mistake to educate African Americans as if it were; thus their education should be limited to that for useful and permissible roles open to them.

I don’t know whether Mr. Thomas ever changed his ideas on race relations, though one would like to think he did. His newspaper eulogist said that although he held strong opinions, he might, and did, change his mind about issues, but never because of pressure.

In his education and race book, Thomas claimed that, "Whatever we may undertake to do, whether in social, commercial or political sphere, this old man of the sea, the negro problem, comes up to vex us." None of his later writings that this writer examined repeated the specific racial claims referred to above, but there was reference in at least one later writing to the "old man" problem, which indicated that the racial issue was still on his mind. It is possible that his still later statements about the changing world and the need for men to learn to live together could have included race relations.

We can observe that although Thomas's call for limiting education of African-Americans for assigned useful and socially permissible roles at first glance bears some similarity to Booker T. Washington's concepts about industrial education, Thomas proposed it as an intentional limitation to suppress African Americans whereas Washington advocated it as an intentional opportunity for them to move ahead. We also can observe that Thomas's proposals represent the destructive cycle of oppression of African-Americans, then pointing to lack of achievement to "prove" racial inferiority, used to further justify limiting opportunity, resulting in actual symptoms of inferiority, as later documented in the findings and report of Nobel Laureate Gunnar Myrdal's study of race relations in the U. S., published in 1944 under the title An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy.

### **Thoughts on religion**

As noted earlier A. F. Thomas was the son of a Baptist minister. In 1906 he was not a member of any church, but later was a founding member of First Unitarian Church of Lynchburg, and served terms as its chairman or president 1913-15 and 1939-41. Thomas

included the following thoughts in his 1940 publication, What is Christianity?, which might have been more accurately titled “Some Thoughts on Religion.” “The present is all we have, the past is irrevocable.” “... No authority ... can tell us what the future holds.” Thomas wrote that in looking back in time for God there is no stopping place to be found. He contended that one thing that is found among all people in all ages is a belief in the existence of a supreme being, or even a multiplicity of gods. He reminded that “No man at any time has ever created anything. The limit of his capacity is to discover that which has already been created, change its form and move it about.” He also wrote, “Time devoted to imaginative musings regarding heaven and hell is time lost.” “If he [i.e., man] discharges faithfully the work that comes to him each day, he need not concern himself about the future.” Jesus, he wrote, was the greatest of all religious teachers, whose central thoughts were about the relations of God to man, man to God and man to man - “the need of the hour is to get back to the simple gospel he brought...” Man’s part is to “change from the old sinful way to the new spiritual way. .... Man alone is responsible for the results of his choice.”

**A Sampling of His Ideas From Other Books, Sphex Papers and Addresses**

In 1896, Thomas published an influential pamphlet, A Business View of the Financial Situation, which was credited with providing important assistance to opponents of William Jennings Bryan in the complicated campaign for Democratic votes for the presidency. Those opponents were John M. Palmer and Simon Bolivar Buckner, two 70 some year old “gold democrats” who opposed Bryan’s “silver Democrat” call for a silver backed currency, or at least a return to a bi-metal currency. Most are familiar with

Bryan's famous answer to advocates of the gold standard: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." William McKinley won what was essentially a four party election. Based on other positions Thomas took concerning the common man, I might have guessed that he would have taken Bryan's side on the gold standard issue.

Although he had lost his bid for nomination for a second state senate term the previous July, Senator Thomas did not fade away from the public arena. On Labor Day in 1907, before a large crowd at Rivermont Park, State Senator A. F. Thomas - along with former state senator, then current U.S. congressman, future secretary of the Treasury and future U. S. Senator, Carter Glass, spoke about labor and organization. Both acknowledged both good and bad organizations of capital and called for a time of reckoning for the bad. "Mr. Thomas closed by a discussion of unionism and the points which it should guard. .... I congratulate you [he said] on the good feeling that exists between labor and capital in our city, and the mutual consideration and esteem which are daily shown between employers and employees." (News, Sept. 3, 1907)

In 1922, Thomas published The Way Out: Economic, Industrial, Financial in which he advocated a central bank, an international money system and the nationalization of, for example, telephone, telegraph, coal and railroad services. The proposed international currency system included the following formula: \$1 = 1 unum, 1 pound = 4.8665 unum, 1 mark = .238 unum, 1 franc = .193 unum, etc. Note the absence of valuation of, for example, Chinese, Japanese, Canadian and Mexican currencies, or of petro dollars. A sampling of titles of Mr. Thomas's twenty-nine SpheX papers from 1911 to 1943 demonstrates the wide range of his interests, with many reflecting events at the national

level. The content of some is known because they were also printed in some form. For others, only the topic is known. For example, that he spoke on women's suffrage is recorded in the minutes along with the notation that the presentation was followed by animated discussion.

His first three, given in 1911, included "Is There a Rational Basis for the Christian Religion?," "Woman's Suffrage," and "Thoughts on Criminology."

In 1912, he presented "Socialism a Necessity," in which he wrote: Civilization makes us ever more increasingly interdependent and makes it desirable for governments at the local, state and national levels to take over services which previously private functions. He contrasted communistic government, organized to benefit the state, and socialistic government, constructed to benefit the individuals of the state. Further, he wrote that at present there is no need for communistic organization, except possibly public education and the justice system; all private monopolies such as railroads, coal mines, utilities and insurance should be taken over under the socialistic model. "The time honored objection to concentration of power in the hands of government is no longer tenable since the country is not confronted with a choice between individualism and socialism, nor a selection between decentralization and centralization. ...the only choice left the people is between public socialism with its power and incentive to serve the public, and private socialism with its ownership by the few and its inferior power to render service and its constant incentive to corrupt the government and to fleece the people. Centralization is a present reality and the selection left is between public centralization divorced from the corrupting elements inherent in great private aggregations of wealth and private centralization..." "The Democratic and Republican parties have lived out their allotted

time and change or death now confronts them. .... The Socialist party standing firmly against exploitation in all forms and ready whenever practicable to destroy special privilege proposes to preserve all the advantages that superior knowledge and developed science have brought mankind.”

Other SpheX papers included:

1914, “Public Education and Its Needs”

1916, “A Plea for the Farmer”

1918, “On Bolshevism,” a discussion

1919, “Federal Income Tax Legislation”

1920, “Is Democracy Sufficient” and “Panics”

1921, “Currency and Bank Credits” His SpheX presentations were likely to also appear as print monographs or book chapters, this one in Political Problems.

1930, “The Federal Reserve System and the Control of Credit”

1933, “The Depression and a Sound Money System”

1936, “Shall Congress or the Court Rule? This also appeared in Political

Problems.

1937, “Moral Education in the Public Schools,” in which he argued for more of it.

1940, “Watchman, What of the Night” (On international government), in which he proposes that the U. S. government with legislative, executive and judicial branches furnishes the best example of what the form of international government should be. This central government should have representatives from each country. War by any nation would be ... a revolution, to be suppressed by the forces of the international government. A system of service whenever possible, should replace the profit system. Government

ownership and operation should be introduced whenever the service, under private initiative, approaches private monopoly. "... love must be the motivation of all human right conduct."

1943, "The World Peace," in which, in the final year of his life, he proposed that an international government should control the Army, Navy and Air Forces of the world, and the members of the World Union should only have such police forces left them as might be necessary to preserve law and order within their own bounds. "The old order is passing a new era comes apace. It is a world movement, the Kingdom of God on earth approaches and the reactionary forces of man will not be able to prevail against it."

Mr. Thomas's topics were not idle thought exercises; most tracked very real, major problems such as financial panics and bank runs, management-union relations, gold/silver/paper money policies, tax policies, how the world might be governed to prevent future wars, controlling capitalism, providing a fair shake to workers, support levels for public education, disparity in school funding between richer and poorer districts, race matters, how to keep monopolies from fleecing individuals, etc. Whether or not one agreed with them, he attempted or proposed solutions to the issues he posed. In thinking about his ideas, it is helpful to remember that until 1913 there was no federal reserve bank to lend stability to money and banks; rather, the country was dependent on, for example, someone like Pierpont Morgan to raise capital with which to bail out banks to check runs during panics and even to make loans to the government, and the Glass-Steagall act wasn't to come until twenty years later. His newspaper eulogist wrote, "He made himself felt and insisted on being heard." Taken in the context of the times, his

talks, papers and publications reveal an engaged citizen who gave rigorous attention to local, state and national issues, and attempted to present options for dealing with problems to fellow citizens and to government officials.

It is striking how many of the issues of his time are the issues of our time. Perhaps Mr. Thomas chose to include in one of his publications excerpted lines from Tennyson's "Locksley Hall," the only poetry found in his writings, because they represented aspects of his own views:

"For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,  
Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be.  
Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails,  
Pilots of the purple twilight dropping down with costly bales;  
Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rained a ghastly dew  
From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;  
Far along the world-wide whisper of the south-wind rushing warm,  
With the standards of the peoples plunging thro' the thunder-storm;  
Till the war-drum throbbed no longer, and the battle-flags were furled  
In the Parliament of man, the federation of the world.  
There the common sense of most shall hold a fretful realm in awe,  
And the kindly earth shall slumber, leapt in universal law."

There are no public monuments or plaques recognizing Alsen Franklin Thomas; however, Thomas Road, which runs through some of the property he owned, bears his family name, and there is a large marker in the center of his Thomas family plot in Spring Hill cemetery. The handsome, light colored, sparsely enhanced stone structure is

approximately 7 and 1/2 feet tall, 5 and 1/2 feet wide at the base, with a 3 and 1/2 feet wide vertical shaft, engraved "Thomas," presents a dignified, solid-as-the-ages appearance. The grave sites of A.F., LeVerge, several of their children, and at least two other relatives are marked by low stones simply engraved with names and dates of births and deaths.

Lynchburg is said to have been characterized by Thomas Jefferson as the "most interesting spot." Alsen Franklin Thomas – successful business man, reformer, unique elected official from this community, a gadfly, self-educated idea man - can be characterized as a most interesting citizen of that spot. His half-life biographer quoted the following advice from him on principles and methods of success, "Cultivate noble thoughts, encourage in your heart a deep faith in the people, especially in their ability to govern themselves, and strive to deserve their confidence. Be true, be noble, and don't forget to be a hard worker." (Men of Mark, vol. II, p. 382)

What I have learned and chosen to present only scratches the surface about A.F. Thomas. I readily apologize to his descendants for any errors in facts or interpretations in this paper. However that might be, I feel certain that if he were here he would welcome your discussion of any of his ideas and would be greatly disappointed if you failed to engage in further consideration of them.

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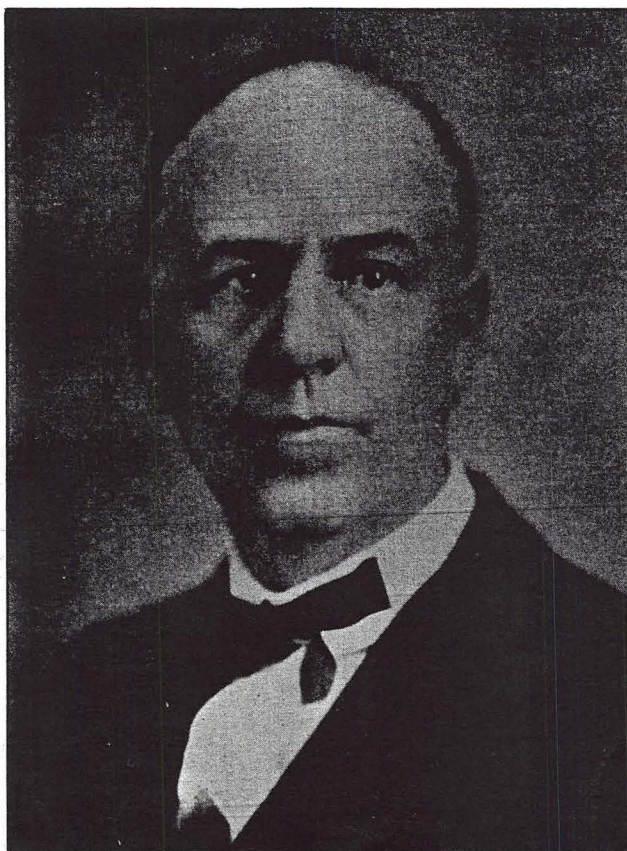
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*A. F. Thomas, first chairman of the church  
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