

# The Thomas Wagon Company of Lititz: Pioneer Motor Truck Manufacturer in Lancaster County.

by Donald J. Summar

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In the first decade of the Twentieth Century the most prosperous and successful industries in the quiet town of Lititz, Pennsylvania, were the Ideal Cocoa and Chocolate Company and the Animal Trap Company of America. There were several firms which manufactured cigars and packed tobacco, two knitting mills, and other small firms. Vehicles were manufactured in the carriage shops of C. W. Grosh and A. C. Pfautz.<sup>1</sup> In 1907 there were just a few automobiles in town and the only automobile agency was that of John F. Longenecker, who sold Jackson automobiles.<sup>2</sup> Through the efforts of a number of businessmen in the community, the Thomas Wagon Company of Vernon, New York, which manufactured wagons and motor trucks, was brought to town in an effort to establish Lititz as a factor in the infant motor truck industry. At that time the industry was ripe for exploitation, for only one thousand trucks were manufactured in the United States in 1907.<sup>3</sup>

E. G. Thomas, founder of the Thomas Wagon Company, had built the first Thomas wagon in 1897, using old mowing machine wheels in the rear and a swiveling wheel like a caster in front. At that time he was living on a farm in rural New York State where he repaired farm machinery and sold bicycles.<sup>4</sup> After making improvements to the wagon and building a few for sale, Thomas moved to Vernon in 1904 and organized the Thomas Wagon Company, which had a working capital of \$4,000.<sup>5</sup>

In the design of his wagon, Thomas had eliminated the pivoting king-bolt front axle used in other wagons and substituted a fixed front axle with steering knuckles which were connected to the wagon tongue with levers. The automotive-type steering apparatus provided a shorter turning radius than that of the usual farm wagon, made distribution of weight on the wheels about even, permitted the wagon body to be built twelve inches lower to reduce

the center of gravity and improve stability, and eliminated side twist of the pole on the breast chains of the team of horses. The wagon required fewer parts for assembly and was therefore less expensive to manufacture. Its ease of operation and low cost made the Thomas wagon popular in central New York state, where it was sold without the use of advertising.<sup>6</sup>

The Thomas Wagon Company began to manufacture motor trucks during 1906. The Thomas motor truck was basically a wagon with the substitution of a cable-operated steering wheel for the wagon tongue and the addition of an angle steel frame which carried the engine and drive gear. Power was supplied by a water-cooled two-cylinder opposed engine fitted with jump spark ignition by dry battery, automatic float feed carburetor, and compression oiler for lubrication. The engine was suspended from the frame beneath the center of the body. Final drive was through a friction disc transmission and side chains to the rear wheels.<sup>7</sup> A vertical lever provided "easy" starting of the engine from the driver's seat. All Thomas trucks were fitted with steel wheels like those used on farm machinery. The rear wheels were ribbed for traction. The maximum speed of the three-ton model was about ten miles per hour.<sup>8</sup>

One two-ton truck was completed and road tested in November 1906.<sup>9</sup> By early 1907 at least two three-ton trucks had been built. Specifications included 108 inch wheelbase, 56 inch tread, and full elliptic springs front and rear. One of the trucks had an engine with bore and stroke of 5 x 5 inches and the other had an engine with bore and stroke of 6 x 7 inches. It is possible that the smaller engine was also used in the two-ton model. The three-ton model, complete with wagon body, was priced at \$1,500, F.O.B. Vernon.<sup>10</sup>

The effort to bring the Thomas Wagon Company to Lititz began in early 1907 when S. J. McFarren of the Auto-Traffic Company of Columbia, Pennsylvania, met E. G. Thomas at a county fair in New York State. When McFarren learned that the Thomas company was suffering from a lack of sufficient working capital, he agreed to help find a location for the firm where investors could provide new capital for the expansion of wagon and motor truck production.<sup>11</sup> McFarren was also interested in purchasing Thomas wagons for use as chassis in the manufacture of motor trucks by the Auto-Traffic Company.<sup>12</sup>

McFarren first tried to establish the Thomas company in his home town, Columbia. He failed because the Board of Trade feared that the new firm would damage the business of the Columbia Wagon Company, which had been manufacturing wagons there since 1889.<sup>13</sup> McFarren visited Lititz on April 30, 1907, to determine if the Thomas company could be established there. He arranged to have a Thomas drayage wagon shipped from Vernon to Lititz for testing by W. H. Muth & Company, coal dealers.<sup>14</sup> The wagon was set up by McFarren and Addison C. Pfautz, proprietor of a small carriage shop, and was tested during mid-May by local teamsters Christian and Levi Yerger. The results of the test runs were completely sat-

isfactory; the Yergers claimed that the Thomas was the easiest running wagon they had ever tried.<sup>15</sup>

With the test results in hand, McFarren attended a meeting of the Lititz Board of Trade on May 24 and gave a talk on the Thomas company's product and prospects. He stated that the company planned to manufacture wagons for a while and then convert to manufacture motor trucks as the market for them increased. He claimed that the company would be an important addition to the community because it would employ 25 to 100 men. On the basis of his report a decision was made to bring the company to Lititz and reorganize it as the Conestoga Wagon Company. A committee of two, Phares B. Bucher and Nathaniel B. Leaman, was appointed to go to Vernon and take an inventory of the Thomas factory and equipment.<sup>16</sup>

A week later the *Lititz Record* reported on the plans of the Board of Trade, and stated:

A big possibility of the new concern is the manufacture of motor trucks. They have built motor trucks that are now running successfully. Mr. Bucher reported that while on his way to Vernon one of the trucks successfully went over 35 miles of muddy roads.

Today there is no automobile truck that has given entire satisfaction. For business purposes more is required of an automobile than for pleasure. There is a fortune awaiting a successful automobile truck.

Thomas and McFarren believe that they have just what is needed. A local machinist who examined the blue prints said that they have a machine built on entirely different principles from any on the market.<sup>17</sup>

Although Thomas and McFarren expressed satisfaction with the design, the Thomas motor truck had a number of serious faults which became more critical as other manufacturers improved their designs. In the early years of the automobile industry almost any kind of vehicle could be built and sold. A machine-tool expert, Fred Colvin, described the situation:

It is undeniable that in its early years the automobile industry was characterized by a state of feverishness so far as manufacturing and standardization were concerned. This was partly due to the fact that the automobile very early in its career developed in a "craze", a freak of fashion, a caprice or whim that caught on far too rapidly for its own good long before it was out of the experimental stage, and before its uses, and consequently its potential market, were thoroughly understood. As a result, manufacturers produced vehicles on a kind of "quickie" basis while there was still a great deal of novelty about them on the part of the public, and the number of different manufacturers who were doing the same thing at the same time multiplied overnight. In the beginning there was little or no research devoted to manufacturing and design problems, no apparent pooling of brains on the engineering involved, and nothing like a series of exhaustive factory tests before the product was passed on to the public.<sup>18</sup>

The Thomas motor truck was certainly a product of inadequate engineering and testing, but no one seemed to realize it at the time.

Efforts to bring the Thomas company to Lititz continued, with emphasis placed on the wagon rather than on the motor truck. The conservative businessmen of Lititz were presumably better able to understand the potential of the Thomas wagon than they were to understand the potential of any motor truck, however good or bad it might be.

Because of a lack of working capital in Vernon, Thomas could not fill anywhere near the number of orders received. In one week in June the company received orders for two wagons from a Delaware college, a two-ton wagon with steel axles, and a motor truck of two-ton capacity from a man in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. The company was not able to fill the order for the motor truck.<sup>19</sup>

In early June the Lititz Board of Trade appointed a committee of seven men to solicit subscriptions to the so-called Conestoga Wagon Company. By late July about \$4,500 worth of stock had been subscribed. A tentative plan to have A. C. Pfautz turn his carriage business over to the new company for stock was proposed but never carried out. A minimum of \$10,000 paid-in-capital was considered necessary before the company would be officially organized in Lititz.<sup>20</sup>

On August 20, 1907, a "permanent" organization of the so-called Conestoga Wagon Company took place at a meeting of the Board of Trade. Officers of the company were to be Dr. J. C. Brobst, president; J. C. Brubaker, secretary; and H. H. Gingrich, treasurer. The company was to have a capital of \$50,000.<sup>21</sup> The Conestoga Wagon Company was never officially chartered. The Thomas Wagon Company was not dissolved as a New York corporation until November 1907, after which E. G. Thomas moved to Lititz and rented a house at 126 East Main Street.<sup>22</sup>

Incorporation of the firm was put off until February 15, 1908, when application for a Pennsylvania charter for the Thomas Wagon Company was made. The original name of the firm was presumably retained for product identification. The company was chartered for the "purpose of manufacturing and selling animal drawn and self-propelled wagons, implements, and vehicles of all kinds," and was capitalized at \$20,000 in 200 shares of \$100 each par value. Directors of the firm, with number of shares purchased and occupation, were:

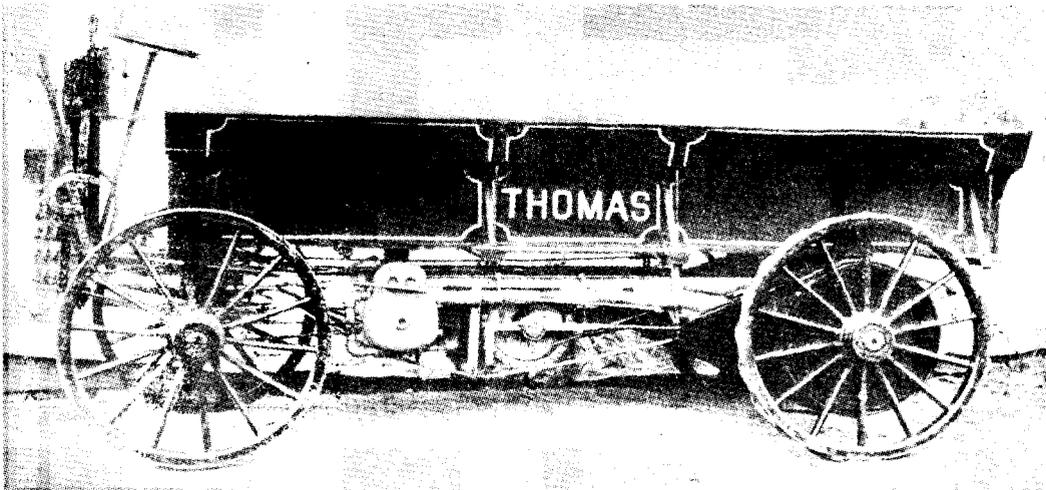
James C. Brobst, physician & druggist,	10 shares
Nathaniel B. Leaman, contractor & builder,	10 shares
J. Clayton Brubaker, farmer,	2 shares
Howard H. Gingrich, cashier, Farmers Bank,	30 shares
Aaron Habecker, dairyman,	5 shares

Other investors from the Lititz area included:

E. G. Thomas, Supt. of firm,	20 shares
Vernon Kline, Foreman of firm,	10 shares
Benj. B. Leaman, grocer,	12 shares

Harry C. Seldomridge, tobacco dealer,	2 shares
Hershey & Gibbel, real estate dealers,	2 shares
Hiram Shriner, _____,	2 shares
S. S. Brubaker, farmer,	1 share
James H. Breitigan, stenographer,	1 share
John M. Miller, bookkeeper,	1 share
William H. Muth, coal dealer,	2 shares
H. E. Moore, _____,	2 shares

The only other subscribers were S. J. McFarren of Columbia (2 shares) and Herr & Company of Lancaster (3 shares). Officers of the company for 1908 were apparently the men named as officers of the Conestoga Wagon Company in August 1907. Officers of the



This 1907 Thomas 3-ton truck was built in Vernon, New York. The truck built in Lititz in 1908 was very similar in design. (Photo courtesy John B. Montville)

firm in 1909 were N. B. Leaman, president; Aaron Habecker, vice-president; J. C. Brubaker, secretary; and James H. Breitigan, treasurer. The company's charter was approved in Harrisburg on March 19, 1908.<sup>23</sup> The total stock subscription of \$9,000 was less than the minimum considered necessary to start the company when plans had been made in 1907.

The former Lititz Shoe Company building, located east of Water Street between Front Street and the Reading & Columbia Railroad tracks, had been secured for use as a factory in January 1908 and E. G. Thomas had purchased needed materials and machinery. Much of the equipment of the old company has been found to be satisfactory and was shipped from Vernon to Lititz. Installation of machinery in the factory was started on February 25.<sup>24</sup> In early March,

Franklin Andrews was hired away from the Pfautz carriage shop to take charge of the Thomas company's wood-working department and blacksmith C. Wallace Souders was hired to take charge of the forge and metal shop.<sup>25</sup>

The first complete Thomas wagons were turned out in mid-April and production was pushed to fill orders which had accumulated while the Thomas factory was being fitted out. A reporter for the *Lititz Record* was given a tour of the factory on April 15 by general manager Vernon K. Kline. The reporter had expected to find superintendent Thomas in the office, but found Thomas in the shop, coat off and sleeves rolled up, adjusting the machinery. Thomas stated that as soon as the factory was in good running order he would begin work on his "auto truck invention."<sup>26</sup> There was no suggestion that S. J. McFarren was using Thomas wagons as chassis for the assembly of motor trucks by the Auto-Traffic Company of Columbia.

Work on the Thomas motor truck was started during the summer with machinist Daniel B. Eberly in charge of construction. On July 30 it was announced that the company was "experimenting in the making of an auto buggy . . . auto trucks turned out by this concern in Vernon have proved very successful."<sup>27</sup> During September a brief news item on the company mentioned that "the motor carriage is under way."<sup>28</sup> In mid-October a reporter for the *Lititz Express* visited the factory after learning that the motor truck was in running condition. After being given a tour by Vernon Kline, he reported:

The motor carriage was on the lower floor and Mr. Thomas started the motor and operated the vehicle back and forth at various speeds. No technical description will be attempted, but what strikes the practical man is the ready response the carriage makes when it is desired to turn or run forward or backwards and the many different speeds at which it can be run. The motor is a friction drive and seems very simple. No figures can be given as to the market price of the carriages and no time can be set when any can be supplied. The company will develop their standard wagon business first and then follow with auto wagons. The machinery needed for their regular wagons will suffice for the making of motor carriages.

At that time the machinery in the factory consisted of a 16-foot lathe with double head, two press drills, a "ponderous" punch and shear, a wood shaper and planer, several swing-type circular saws, and emery grinders and sanders.<sup>29</sup>

In spite of much favorable publicity, the manufacture of Thomas motor trucks in Lititz was never carried out further; only the prototype vehicle was built and it was not offered for sale. The Thomas was a compromise between the wagon and the motor truck and had features which made it inferior to the leading trucks of that period, such as the Hewitt, the Mack, the Rapid, and the Packard. One serious fault was the use of the friction disc transmission, which was not adequate to carry the heavy load required of a two or three-ton truck. It took a "trained and delicate touch" on the

controls to engage the friction wheel without wearing flats on the fiber discs.<sup>30</sup> The use of steel wheels created an extremely rough ride which must have resulted in breakdowns from vibrations; steel wheels had been considered inferior to solid rubber tires on wooden wheels since at least 1903. The position of the engine beneath the body was an open invitation to road dirt and necessitated the use of long control levers which could easily get out of adjustment. The brief demonstration given to the *Express* reporter was made under ideal conditions which permitted the truck's deficiencies to go undetected.

The truck could not have been put into production until sometime in 1909, at which time it would have been a three year old design. Even if it had been a satisfactory design in 1906 it was outdated by late 1908, when motor trucks based on the latest motor car technology were being manufactured by the leading companies. The effort to manufacture the Thomas motor truck was discontinued in January 1909 when E. G. Thomas sold his stock in Thomas Wagon Company and made preparations to move to Washington, D.C. He planned to manufacture the Thomas motor truck there, but apparently was no more successful than he had been in Lititz.<sup>31</sup> The reasons for his departure from Lititz are not known but one possible reason is the directors' apparent reluctance to turn from wagon production to motor truck production.

After the departure of Thomas, Vernon Kline was named superintendent of the wagon works. The company continued to manufacture wagons throughout 1909, turning out an order of 240 special "New York State Style Combination Bed" wagons during the summer.<sup>32</sup> Despite its successful start as a wagon manufacturer (production had reached two wagons per day in late 1908) and its well-designed wagon, the Thomas Wagon Company failed to survive in the stagnating wagon market. If the company could have marketed a well-designed motor truck it might have survived for years in the automotive industry, for the market for trucks expanded rapidly after 1909.

The company was in business long enough to be taxed in 1910, when the factory was appraised at a gross valuation of \$1,700.<sup>33</sup> Newspapers which might reveal the causes of the company's failure are unfortunately not available. It is likely that failure resulted from a lack of working capital. In any event, a series of articles on the industries of Lititz, which appeared in the *Lititz Express* in September 1910, made no mention whatsoever of the Thomas Wagon Company.

The Thomas motor truck built in Lititz in 1908 was not the first "horseless carriage" built in Lancaster County. It was preceded by the 1903 Sensenig gasoline tractor, the 1905 Dodge steamer, the 1906 Kreider gasoline tractor, and the 1908 K & M buggy, completed earlier in the year. However, the Thomas was the first motor truck built in the county. Motor trucks were not successfully manufactured in Lancaster County until the appearance of the Cones-

toga Motor Truck Company and the Rowe Motor Manufacturing Company during World War I.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Zook, John G. *Historical and Pictorial Lititz*. Lititz, Express Printing, 1905. Pages 213-217, 90, 130.
- <sup>2</sup>*Lancaster Semi-Weekly New Era*, June 15, 1907.
- <sup>3</sup>Automobile Manufacturers Association. *Automobiles of America*. Detroit, Wayne State, 1962. Page 104.
- <sup>4</sup>*Lititz Express*, May 24, 1907.
- <sup>5</sup>*Lititz Record*, April 16, 1908.
- <sup>6</sup>*Lititz Express*, June 7, 1907.
- <sup>7</sup>*MoToR*, February 1907, page 70.
- <sup>8</sup>*Commercial Vehicle*, February 1907, page 60.
- <sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, December 1906, page 328.
- <sup>10</sup>*MoToR*, February 1907, page 70; *Commercial Vehicle*, February 1907, page 60.
- <sup>11</sup>*Lititz Record*, June 6, 1907.
- <sup>12</sup>*Lititz Express*, July 26, 1907.
- <sup>13</sup>*Lititz Record*, June 6, 1907.
- <sup>14</sup>*Lititz Express*, May 3, 1907, and May 10, 1907.
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, May 17, 1907.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, May 31, 1907.
- <sup>17</sup>*Lititz Record*, June 6, 1907.
- <sup>18</sup>From *60 Years of Men and Machines* by Fred H. Colvin. Copyright 1947 by McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc. Used with permission of McGraw-Hill Book Company. Page 120.
- <sup>19</sup>*Lititz Express*, June 28, 1907.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, July 26, 1907.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, August 23, 1907.
- <sup>22</sup>*Lititz Record*, November 7, 1907.
- <sup>23</sup>Lancaster County (Pa.) Charter Book Volume 3, page 49; occupations from Zook, *Op. Cit.*, pages 58-160, and Polk's *Lancaster County Directory*, 1909.
- <sup>24</sup>*Lititz Record*, January 9, 1908; February 27, 1908.
- <sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, March 12, 1908.
- <sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, April 16, 1908.
- <sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, July 30, 1908.
- <sup>28</sup>*Lititz Express*, September 11, 1908.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, October 16, 1908.
- <sup>30</sup>Colvin, *Op. Cit.*, page 126.
- <sup>31</sup>*Lititz Express*, January 15, 1909.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, July 16, 1909.
- <sup>33</sup>Lancaster County (Pa.) Commissioner's Office, Assessment Book Number Two for Lititz Borough, 1910. Owners of Property, page 34.