

# History of Early Aviation in Ithaca

The Finger Lakes Region of New York, and Ithaca in particular, became a center for the newborn aviation industry almost as soon as the Wright Brothers had flown at Kitty Hawk in 1903. Glenn H. Curtiss of Hammondsport began tinkering with airplanes after successful ventures with bicycles and motorcycles. Having developed powerful lightweight motorcycle engines, Curtiss was well-positioned to supply the power needed to propel man into the air.

In 1910, Curtiss hired William T. Thomas, an Englishman educated in fledgling field of aeronautical engineering, to assist in the development of more advanced aircraft. William's brother Oliver soon joined Curtiss as well. Interested in producing their own airplanes, the Thomas Brothers left Curtiss and started their own firm, first in Hammondsport and then moving to Bath, New York. The Thomas Brothers' success as airplane manufacturers became widely known.

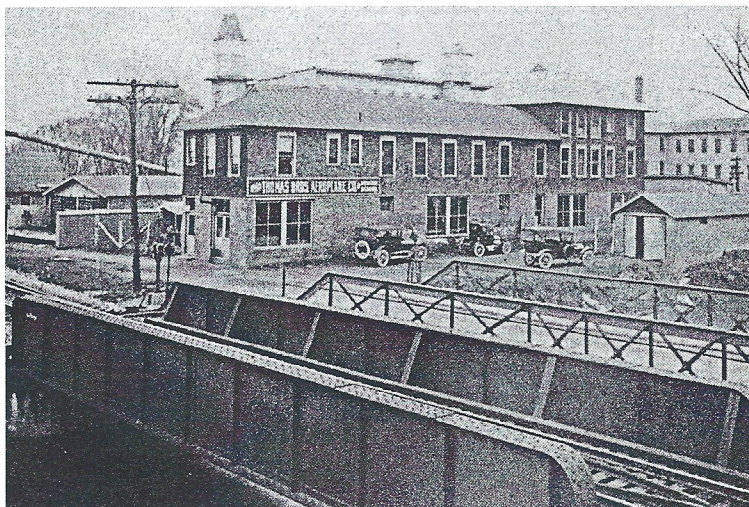
Ithaca's city fathers recognized the potential for the airplane industry and invited the Thomas Brothers to move their operations to Ithaca in 1914. Ithaca was soon home not only to an airplane factory (which building is still prominent in Ithaca's West

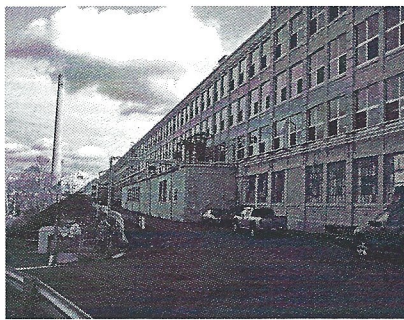
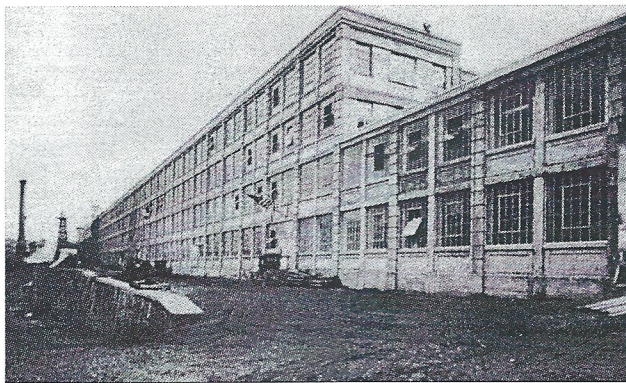
## THEN AND NOW

*Below: Original Plant on Brindley Street, Ithaca, NY*

*Above, right: Expanded Factory on South Aurora Street, Ithaca, NY*

*Below, right: Research and Development Facility on Center Street, Ithaca, NY*





End), but also to a flying school – one of the first in America – and an aircraft engine design and manufacturing plant, all under the name of the Thomas Brothers.

As World War I escalated in Europe, airplanes were used for the first time in military applications. Aircraft manufacturers such as the Thomas Brothers realized the potential for expanding production for these purposes. To provide additional resources for such expansion, the Thomas Brothers entered into an alliance with Frank Morse of Ithaca's Morse Chain to form the Thomas-Morse Aircraft Corporation. To assist in designing more sophisticated airplanes, the new firm was able to hire B. Douglas Thomas (no relation to the Thomas Brothers), who had previous experience designing military aircraft for the Sopwith firm in England.

Thomas-Morse soon had a contract with the U.S Army – the Air Force had not yet come into existence – for 100 planes to be used as pursuit trainers for pilots heading to Europe. The success of this model, the S4 Scout, affectionately known as “Tommy,” led to orders for several hundred more airplanes, making Thomas-Morse the fourth largest supplier of airplanes in the U.S. during World War I.

Tommy's career did not end when the hostilities in Europe were over. During the post-war years, Tommys were used throughout the country in barnstorming shows, and Tommy became a movie star, playing leading roles in such early motion pictures as Howard Hughes' “Hell's Angels.”

The IAHF has brought a Tommy home to Ithaca to be restored and displayed in order to preserve the rich heritage of the early aviation industry in Ithaca, New York.

