

*Major Problems in
American Urban and
Suburban History*



DOCUMENTS AND ESSAYS

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Anne-Marie Magley Baldwin (b. 2003)
and
Mildred S. Chudacoff (1916–2002)

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3. New York Pedestrians Confront Reckless Drivers, 1902

Automobile Party Mobbed by Boys . . .

Edward R. Thomas, the last President of the Seventh National Bank and son of Gen. Samuel Thomas, was riding west through East Forty-fourth Street last evening in his immense red automobile with his wife, brother-in-law, Mr. Otter, and chauffeur, when the party was attacked by a mob of one hundred boys between Second and Third Avenues, and severely dealt with.

Tin cans, boilers, pails, stones, and sticks were hurled at the occupants of the vehicle, while the boys yelled themselves hoarse as they surrounded the machine, which had been damaged by one of the gang throwing a boiler between the wheels and brought to a stop.

Mrs. Thomas was struck in the head with the lid of a boiler and rendered unconscious. Even then, however, the gang did not desist, but kept up the fusillade and showered the party with everything they could lay their hands on.

After some time had elapsed, the chauffeur managed to extricate the obstacle from the wheels of the vehicle and Mr. Thomas and his companions were able to escape from the mob.

Mrs. Thomas was bleeding profusely from a cut on the back of her head, and after a policeman arrived on the scene and drove the young rioters away she was taken to her home, 17 West Fifty-seventh Street, where her injury was attended to by the family physician. She is confined to her bed, suffering from a severe scalp wound and shock.

The trouble started when the automobile was going west on Forty-fourth Street, between Second and Third Avenues. In the middle of the block a boy named James Pollock, thirteen years old, of 208 East Forty-fourth Street, the police say, rushed into the street and hurled a tin can at the vehicle as it sped past. The missile struck the chauffeur on the head. At that moment a gang of Pollock's companions came up and joined him in the attack. The lads gathered everything movable and pelted the occupants of the vehicle as it proceeded up the street.

One of the boys threw the boiler which lodged between the wheels and the motor box. It brought the vehicle to a sudden stop, throwing the occupants forward. When the boys saw that something had happened to the machine they crowded around it and renewed their attack with more vigor. Mr. Thomas called to the lads to desist, but his voice was drowned by their jeers and cries, and they kept up the fusillade. Several hundred persons had been attracted to the scene, and they watched the fashionable vehicle being showered with all kinds of missiles.

It was only when Mrs. Thomas uttered a scream as she was struck on the head with the boiler lid that the bystanders took a hand in the affair. A number of men

"Automobile Party Mobbed by Boys," *New York Times*, May 25, 1902, 1; George Henry Knight, "Speed of Motor Vehicles: Legal Checks Suggested," *New York Times*, May 25, 1902, 28; A. L. H., "To Shoot Automobilists," *New York Times*, May 25, 1902, 28; "Public Sentiment as to Automobiles," *New York Times*, May 27, 1902, 8.

attempted to rout the lads, but the youngsters paid no attention to them whatever, and kept up the attack.

Mr. Thomas, Mr. Otter, and the chauffeur were trying in vain to shield Mrs. Thomas from the rain of sticks and stones which descended upon them, but it was soon seen that it would be impossible to remain in the vehicle and escape probably serious injury.

Amid a shower of stones the chauffeur jumped out, and while he was struck on the head and body repeatedly managed, after extreme difficulty, to dislodge the boiler. Then, mounting his seat, he turned the lever on and the machine shot forward up toward Third Avenue.

The crowd of boys followed it, however, and kept up the shower of debris and stones. They were pelting the party with might and main, when Policeman McLane of the East Fifty-first Street Station appeared. He charged the mob of boys and drove them right and left, but many of them were defiant and, dodging from one side of the street to the other, threw what missiles they had left.

Mr. Thomas pointed out Pollock as the instigator of the trouble, and McLane went after him. The boy ran into the hallway of the house at 204 West Forty-fourth Street, dashed into the yard, and attempted to mount a fence and escape. McLane was just in the act of grabbing him when the lad fell from the fence and broke his right ankle. The policeman carried him to the street and an ambulance was summoned from Flower Hospital. Dr. Fobes responded and removed the boy to the hospital a prisoner.

Mr. Thomas, after identifying Pollock as the one who caused the trouble, which he claims was without the slightest provocation, went to the East Fifty-first Street Station and lodged a complaint against him.

Mr. Thomas was highly indignant at the treatment he and his party had received and promised to push the matter in the courts.

It was only last Thursday that Justice Freedman in the Supreme Court handed down a decision against Mr. Thomas, ordering him to pay a verdict of \$3,125 to Frank E. Thies, whose son, Henry, seven years old, was run down and killed by Mr. Thomas's automobile, the White Ghost, on [President] Lincoln's Birthday [February 12]. The boy was playing on Convent Avenue near One Hundred and Thirtieth Street, when Mr. Thomas came dashing along in the vehicle, which he had bought from W. K. Vanderbilt, and before the machine could be stopped young Thies was ground to death under it. The lad's father brought suit for \$25,000 damages.

Speed of Motor Vehicles

Legal Checks Suggested.

To the Editor of The New York Times:

The frequency of such catastrophes as related in Monday's *TIMES*, where, on the 18th inst., in the City of Toledo, Ohio, a girl was run down and killed by a sprinting mobile, inspired, and would seem to justify, a few suggestions from a friend of and firm believer in mechanical, in preference to animal, traction.

The relative cheapness of machine traction, its cleanliness, precision, and efficiency, its conspicuous manageableness in crowded thoroughfares, and—last, but not least—its requirement of smooth, cleanly, and noiseless pavements, assure its

early supremacy. Moreover each movement in the direction of cleanliness uplifting the sanitary standard—the city dog will erewhile follow the horse, and with them will disappear the flea, the housefly, and countless swarms of other vermin. The ubiquitous sparrow even, will be greatly less in evidence unless content to subsist on “a diet of worms.”

But innovations, even the most beneficial, ever involve new difficulties, and the danger—possibly exaggerated, but indisputably real—from incompetence or downright recklessness of some of the drivers has compelled the inquiry whether and in what manner the strong arm of the law should be invoked. It cannot be safely made to compel such a construction of the machine itself as would preclude any velocity above a prescribed maximum, because emergencies sometimes require an extremely high speed, but there may be added to those already in force one or more of such legal requirements as below given:

1. That each vehicle have placed conspicuously upon it a recorded number and a speed indicator properly illuminated in the night time. . . .
2. A penalty for inaccurate speed indication.
3. Equipment of every main thoroughfare with a police signal system.

GEORGE HENRY KNIGHT.

New York, May 19, 1902.

To Shoot Automobilists.

To the Editor of The New York Times:

Is it because this is a “free” country that the automobilists have the privilege of killing and maiming people on payment of a few dollars? Beef is dear and coal is dear, but one has only to read the daily papers to discover that human life is dirt cheap in America.

It will be necessary to take the law into one’s own hands, and for my part I should have no hesitation in shooting any man who injures me or mine in this way. Many of these machines are simply terrifying eyesores, and have no more right on the public thoroughfares than a locomotive.

In England one looks to the press to correct these matters. Over there these fellows would have been brought up with a round turn long ago. But I have come to the conclusion after a long residence here that “the power of the press” is a meaningless phrase in New York City.

A. L. H.

New York, May 23, 1902.

Public Sentiment as to Automobiles.

No person of sensible mind and law-abiding disposition will view the assault upon Mr. EDWARD R. THOMAS’S automobile party in East Forty-fourth Street in any other light than as an outrage which ought not to be possible in a well-policed city. The haunts and gathering places of young street toughs are well known to the police, and in those quarters of the city officers of the law ought never to be out of call.

The assault upon Mr. THOMAS and his party was an atrocious manifestation of the spirit of malice and mischief native to the hoodlum element, whose only

"bringing up" is in the street and with whom respect for law is dormant save when the instrument of its enforcement is near and visible. Mr. THOMAS and his friends were going about their lawful concerns and were entitled to the protection which every citizen expects to receive.

On the other hand, it is to be observed that the outrage and violence from which Mr. THOMAS suffered were the riotous and unlawful reflection of a public sentiment which the reckless drivers and owners of automobiles have themselves created. The dangerous speed at which so many of them drive their vehicles made them at first an object of terror and then of widespread public aversion. Whatever may be said of the street hoodlum, he is at least quick to catch prevailing opinion.

The street arabs who hurled discarded kitchen ware at Mr. THOMAS's automobile are not more obnoxious in the eye of the law and in the general opinion of the community than the owner of a five-thousand-dollar red automobile who drives his vehicle at the rate of twenty-five miles an hour along the public highway, frightening horses, running over children, and imperiling the lives and limbs of the traveling public. In too many cases when arrested and fined for their offenses the men of the automobiles airily pay their fines and then repeat their offense. If the public has come to hate them, it is they themselves who have brought about that state of feeling.

To describe the hoodlums encountered by Mr. THOMAS as the idle and vicious poor and the reckless speeders of ponderous automobiles as the idle and vicious rich would be a just and faithful portrayal of two classes of society who have a good deal in common.

4. Horses, Wagons, and Automobiles, St. Louis, 1902-1920

