

Batavia's "Car of the Future"

Nearly 80 years ago, in a small, rented garage on the corner of West Main and Oak streets in Batavia, Charles D. Thomas and Norman Richardson finished building a car that was unlike any other in 1938. Charles dreamt up the advanced design for the Thomas Rocket Car while working on his thesis at the General Motors Institute of Technology in Flint, MI, in 1935.

Designed to be sleek and powerful as well as safe and affordable, the car was equipped with the "Ventriscope," a periscope-type device that was reminiscent of today's back-up cameras. Other features included extra interior padding for passenger safety and four-wheel, independent suspension long before it became available in any mass-produced vehicle.

The Thomas Rocket Car toured dealerships around the country, touted as "the car of the future," attracting big crowds wherever it went. Experts in Detroit agreed that it was at least 10 years ahead of its time. Ford liked the car but ultimately passed on it, along with General Motors and Chrysler. The looming world war and high cost of production were likely contributors to these rejections.

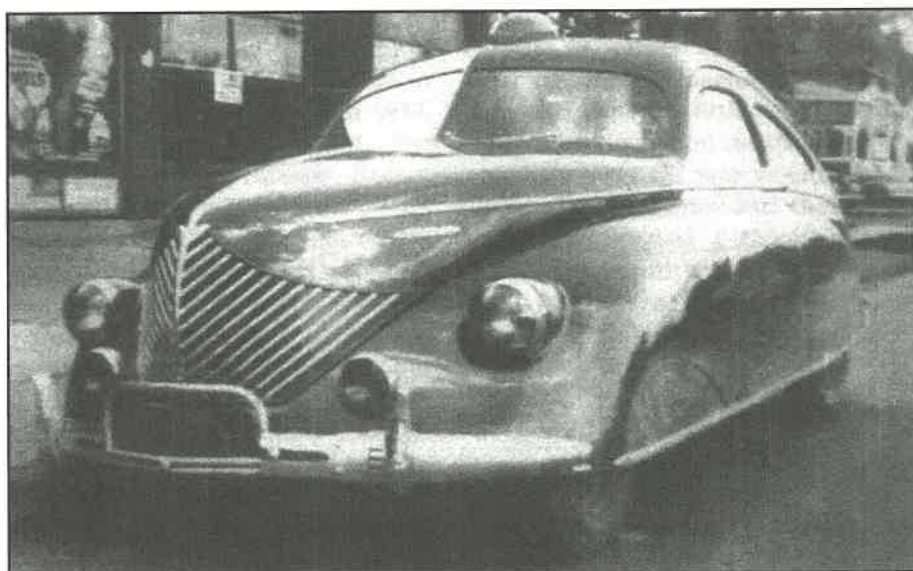
Having failed to convince the "Big Three" in Detroit to produce his car, Charles Thomas went on to have a successful career in Buffalo at the Playboy Motor Car Corporation. [For more on the Playboy Motor Car Corporation, see "The Nation's Newest Car Sensation" in the Summer 2012 issue of *Western New York*

Heritage. Copies still available.] As for the one-and-only Thomas Rocket Car, it returned to Western New York and hit the road as the Thomas family vehicle. That was, until the car stalled while crossing a set of railroad tracks with all three of the Thomas children inside. Fearful that the car would endanger the family again, the Rocket Car was sold.

The new owner attempted to restore the car in the 1950s, but ended up altering the front grill and repainting the car a bright red instead of its original maroon. After that, the car sat empty in a Batavia field until a classic car collector from Lockport picked it up in 1977.

A few years later, a group of car buffs from Batavia became aware of the car, and began devising a plan to bring it back to its hometown. Their ultimate goal was to restore it to its 1938 beauty, following Thomas and Richardson's extensive documentation. Finally, on November 5, 2015, the Thomas Rocket Car returned to Batavia to begin its long road to restoration. Upon completion, it will be presented to the city for public display.

Thanks to a grassroots effort, another piece of Western New York history will be saved and preserved. Stay tuned for updates on the completion of the Thomas Rocket Car's restoration. 📺



The "Ventriscope" can be seen by the small hump on the roof just above the windshield. It was just one of the many features that made the Thomas Rocket Car ahead of its time.
COURTESY WALTER WYMAN