Howard Major Thomas was born in 1918. He grew up on a farm in Nebraska, graduating from eighth grade at the age of 12. He spent the next three years out of school because he was needed on the farm and they couldn’t afford to send the children to town to high school until one of them was old enough to drive. He graduated from high school in 1937. He then enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps and spent almost a year on building projects in Nebraska and South Dakota. Then he went to Kearney State Teacher’s College, graduating in 1942. He taught high school in Edison, Nebraska for several months before being called up. He enlisted in the 14th Army Air Corp and became a pilot. He was sent overseas and flew a B-24 bomber in China with the Flying Tigers, participating in actions against Japan. Before being sent overseas, he married a young woman he had met in college, Mary Elizabeth Porter.

After being discharged, Howard decided to go on to school and attended the University of Iowa and was awarded a PhD in chemistry in 1949, taking his orals the day after the birth of his third daughter. He had joined the National Guard in graduate school to help support his growing family and was called up for the Korean conflict. He spent a little over a year in Korea with army intelligence with
the 4th National Guard Division of Illinois. On his return he and his family moved to Vermillion, South Dakota where he taught for five years at the University of South Dakota.

Dr. Thomas came to University of Wisconsin - Superior in 1958 and taught General Chemistry and Physical Chemistry, as well as Organic Chemistry and a course on the history of chemistry. He liked this place and rejected a number of job offers he got from elsewhere.

Dr. Thomas authored a number of research and pedagogical papers. He initiated a research project on gathering data on air pollution (by particulate matter) for the state. For this project, he set up sampling stations on a number of buildings around Superior. Dr. Thomas was secretly depositing his stipend for this research into a scholarship fund for chemistry students.

While at UWS, Dr. Thomas took time to teach in Madison for one year and Cape Coast, Ghana (on a Fulbright scholarship) in 1968-69. Upon their return from Ghana, Dr. and Mrs. Thomas decided to repay their debt to their cook and housekeeper in Ghana by helping him to come to the US and go to school. They treated him like a son and helped him with room and board, gave him driving lessons to get his driver’s license and many other things. He was originally from Nigeria and this started a connection with the Nigerian community on campus. Dr. and Mrs. Thomas also rented rooms to Taiwanese students. There was a case where something arrived at the post office from Taiwan and the addressee could not be determined. So they sent it to Dr. Thomas since he seemed to know all the Taiwanese students in town.

He often spent his summers away for teaching and study and ran a summer program for high school students for many years. On his retirement in 1982, Dr. Thomas set up a scholarship for UWS chemistry majors.