

Brief Biography of Thomas Day

Thomas Day (1801 to ca.1861) is considered one of the greatest furniture makers of the antebellum period. He made a variety of furniture from cradles to coffins and also made mantels, stair railings, newel posts, and decorative trim for the interiors of many grand homes and buildings in the North Carolina Piedmont and southern Virginia. By the mid-19th century, his furniture-making shop in Milton, North Carolina, was the largest in the state. It employed white, as well as enslaved and free blacks. His accomplishments would be impressive for any man, but because Day was a free African American who lived during the slavery era in a racist society, his achievements are especially noteworthy.

Thomas Day was born in Dinwiddie County, Virginia. His parents, John and Mourning Stewart Day, were born with free status in 1766. According to law, since his mother was free, Thomas inherited her free status. John Day was a skilled cabinetmaker, who apprenticed both Thomas and his older brother, John Jr. in the cabinetmaking craft. The brothers received an education from Baptist tutors when the family was living in southern Virginia in the early 19th century, in an area heavily populated by Baptists and sympathetic Quakers. By the early 1820s, the family was living in North Carolina, and by 1827 Thomas Day had opened a furniture shop in Milton, a tobacco market town on the Dan River bordering Virginia. John Jr. studied to become a Baptist preacher in Milton but after a few years emigrated to Liberia, a colony established for freed American slaves and free blacks on the west coast of Africa. There, John Day Jr. became a towering religious and political figure.

In 1830, Thomas Day married Aquilla Wilson, a free black woman from Virginia who resided just across the state line from Milton. A North Carolina law prohibited free blacks from migrating into North Carolina, so Aquilla was prohibited from moving to Milton to live with her husband. Sixty-one leading white Milton citizens signed a petition to the state legislature requesting that Aquilla Wilson be exempted from the migration law. Romulus Saunders, the state attorney general who was a Milton resident and acquaintance of Day attached an affidavit to the petition stating that Thomas Day was “of very fair character—an excellent mechanic, industrious, honest, and sober in his habits”—and noted that “in the event of any disturbance amongst the Blacks, I should rely with confidence upon a disclosure from him as he is the owner of slaves himself as well as real estate.” The legislature accepted the petition and Aquilla was able to reside with Thomas in North Carolina.

Thomas and Aquilla made Milton their home for three decades. They had three children: Devereux, Mary Ann Day, and Thomas Day Jr. Based on how he was characterized by Attorney General Romulus Saunders, Thomas Day appeared to accept Southern society and its major institution, slavery. However, as a young man of only 34 in 1835 he secretly attended the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of Free People of Colour in the United States in Philadelphia. There he associated with black businessmen and national black leaders, many of whom would become leading abolitionists and anti-slavery activists. It was very dangerous for Thomas Day to attend this convention: in the South abolitionists were considered traitors and even criminals. The delegates at the convention proclaimed their belief in universal liberty and racial equality. Day’s attendance at this meeting as well as other ties to anti-slavery activists have led many leading historians to deem him an opponent of the institution of slavery, even though he owned slaves throughout his career. Increasingly, scholars believe that Day’s “ownership” of slaves was to a large extent a “cover” or “camouflage” for his anti-slavery activities. The best way for a free black to demonstrate support and solidarity with the pro-slavery, white supremacist

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norms of the South was to own slaves oneself.

In 1848, Day bought the Union Tavern, one of the most significant examples of Federal architecture and one of the most prominent landmarks in the North Carolina piedmont. He converted it to his home and shop. In the early nineteenth century it had been a stage stop on the road to Petersburg, a major regional center. Soon after buying the Tavern, Day sent his three children to Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts. Founded by Methodists, Wesleyan Academy was a religious preparatory institution that was known to be ardently anti-slavery. The abolitionist leaders of Wesleyan were personal friends of Thomas Day, whom he likely met at anti-slavery meetings. Letters Thomas Day wrote Mary Ann while she was at Wilbraham provide a rare window into his personal beliefs and philosophy.

In 1857 there was a national financial crisis and one in three businesses went under. Day's furniture shop was affected and it was in receivership by the end of the decade. Thomas Day Jr., executed a note for his father's debts, which allowed the property to be returned to him until he could work off the debt. He was able to pay it off by 1864. In 1861, Thomas Day disappeared from public records. It is believed he died in that year although no obituary or record of his death date has yet to be found.

Thomas Day's legacy lives on in the furniture and interior architecture he created and also in the Tavern, which has been restored as a monument to his life and work. Today it is a National Historic Landmark and also a hands-on furniture museum.

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