

Thomas Day



Lesson Plan

OBJECTIVE: *To better understand the impact of Thomas Day on the history of North Carolina and the United States.*

Social Studies Objectives: 3.04, 9.02

Social Studies Skills: 1, 2, 3

Language Arts Objectives: 1.04, 2.01, 5.01, 6.01, 6.02

Resources / Materials

- Biographical sketch of Thomas Day
- *Activities* page
- Internet access for Activity I

Procedures

- Students will read and discuss the biographical sketch of Thomas Day either as a whole class or in groups. Reading can also be done independently.
- Students will complete the *Activities* page as designated by the teacher.

Evaluation

- Student participation in reading and discussion of Thomas Day
- Student performance on the *Activities* page

Bibliography

Livingston, Beth. "The Legacy of Thomas Day." *The Independent Weekly*. 26 Jan. 2000.
Independent Online. 28 Feb. 2003.
<http://www.indyweek.com/durham/2000-01-26/casa5.html>

"Spotlight on the North Carolina Museum of History." *North Carolina Museum of History*. Feb. 2000. 28 Feb. 2003.
<http://www.thomasday.net>

"Thomas Day House to Receive 'Save America's Treasures' Grant." *News from Senator John Edwards North Carolina*. 7 July 2000. 28 Feb. 2003.
<http://edwards.senate.gov/press/2000/jul07-pr.html>

Thomas Day



Biographical Sketch

Thomas Day is North Carolina's most famous furniture craftsman and cabinetmaker. During his lifetime, his work was acclaimed from Georgia to Virginia, and he became one of the largest furniture manufacturers in North Carolina. In recognition of his talent, he was commissioned to furnish the interior woodwork in one of the original buildings of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His classically inspired furniture was built by hand and his wealthy clients included two North Carolina governors.

Born in 1801 in Dinwiddie County in southern Virginia, Thomas Day came from a fortunate family that had been free African Americans for several generations. Thomas was educated by private tutors and apprenticed with his father John Day, Sr., who was a moderately successful cabinetmaker. The Day family moved to Warren County, North Carolina in 1817, because of increasing restrictions against free African Americans in the early nineteenth century in Virginia. Fortunately for the Days, they moved just prior to a law forbidding relocation. In 1825, at the age of 24, Thomas moved to Milton in Caswell County, where he established a cabinetmaking business. The business quickly grew, and in 1827, he advertised "a handsome supply of mahogany, walnut and stained furniture" in the *Milton Gazette and Roanoke Advertiser*.

In antebellum North Carolina, many state laws and cultural norms restricted the activities of free African Americans. However, Thomas Day achieved success both socially and professionally. He was highly admired and respected in his community of Milton and contributed to its prosperity. Although he owned slaves himself, he challenged deeply entrenched racial and social injustices of the antebellum South. When he married a free African American woman, Aquilla Wilson of Virginia, Day confronted an 1826 law that barred free African Americans from migrating to North Carolina. With the support of North Carolina's

attorney general and more than 60 prominent whites in Milton who petitioned the General Assembly on his behalf, Day and his wife were granted an exemption. Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Day were later accepted as members of the Milton Presbyterian Church. They worshiped with the white congregation in beautifully crafted pine, poplar; and walnut pews that Day had crafted.

By 1850, Thomas Day's furniture business was the largest of its kind in North Carolina. As his business thrived, he employed white apprentices seeking to break down racial barriers. He expanded his business to coincide with the growth and changing tastes of antebellum society. Day added his own stamp of creativity to a variety of styles including Federal, Gothic, Late Classical and Empire. His inventive decorative motifs and impeccable craftsmanship characterize his furniture, the quality of which eventually won him nationwide recognition. As the Civil War loomed in the late 1850s, North Carolina enacted more restrictive laws against African American business owners. Consequently, Day's business faltered and went bankrupt before he died in 1860 or 1861.

The legacy of Thomas Day can be seen across North Carolina today. The North Carolina Museum of History exhibited their collection of his furniture in 1975 and again from 1996-1998. The Craftique Furniture Company in Alamance County has introduced a line of reproduction furniture featuring Day's designs. In 1975, Union Tavern, the site of Day's business from 1848 until his death, became a National Historic Landmark. The Thomas Day House and Union Tavern received a federal grant to restore the home and workshop in 2000. In response to the grant, North Carolina Senator John Edwards said, "Preserving the Thomas Day House will help future generations remember an important figure in the history of our state and nation."

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Activities

Personal Response

In your opinion, explain why Thomas Day was so successful both socially and professionally.

Analyzing Biographical Information

1. Explain why Thomas Day's family was considered to be a fortunate African American family.
2. Describe why Thomas Day was successful in confronting the 1826 law barring free blacks from migrating to North Carolina.
3. What are characteristics of Day's furniture?
4. Why did Thomas Day's business go bankrupt?
5. Construct a graphic organizer that describes the ways Thomas Day has been honored since his death.

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Copy the sentence that contains the term. Explain the term by using context clues and/or a dictionary.

1. acclaimed
2. commissioned
3. entrenched
4. barred
5. petitioned
6. exemption
7. coincide
8. motifs
9. impeccable
10. legacy

Creative Responses

Select one of the activities to complete.

■ Activity 1

Directions: Research the furniture created by Thomas Day. Create a collage or poster showing pictures of his craftsmanship. Give your collage or poster a title.

■ Activity 2

Directions: Thomas Day used techniques typical of Southern cabinetmaking, but he also used decorative motifs found in African art, such as exaggerated curves, circles, and graceful scrolls. Create a motif that could be incorporated in the design of a piece of furniture. Use colored pencils, markers, other media, or a computer generated design to create your motif. Include a brief description and a name for your motif.

■ Activity 3: NCFMP

Directions: How would you portray the gifts and contributions of Thomas Day as part of the Freedom Monument? What medium or material would you use? What would be the best symbolic representation of Day's craft? Sketch or make a model of your best idea.

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Activities ■ Answer Key for Teachers

Personal Response

In your opinion, explain why Thomas Day was so successful both socially and professionally.

Answers will vary and can serve as a springboard for discussion.

Analyzing Biographical Information

1. Explain why Thomas Day's family was considered to be a fortunate African American family.

Thomas Day's family was considered a fortunate African American family because they had been free for several generations.

2. Describe why Thomas Day was successful in confronting the 1826 law barring free blacks from migrating to North Carolina.

Thomas Day was successful in confronting the 1826 law because the whites respected him both socially and professionally. His prominent white friends, including North Carolina's attorney general, were influential in persuading the state of Virginia to exempt Mrs. Day from the law of 1826.

3. What are characteristics of Day's furniture?

Day's furniture is characterized by his decorative motifs and impeccable craftsmanship.

4. Why did Thomas Day's business go bankrupt?

Thomas Day's business went bankrupt because North Carolina enacted more restrictive laws against African American business owners.

5. Construct a graphic organizer that describes the ways Thomas Day has been honored since his death.

THOMAS DAY SALUTED
The North Carolina Museum of History has exhibited a collection of his furniture.
The Craftique Furniture Company has introduced a line of reproduction furniture featuring the designs of Day.
Union Tavern has become a National Historic Landmark.
The Thomas Day House and Union Tavern received a federal grant to restore the landmark home and workshop.
National recognition of Day's talented craftsmanship.

Interpreting Meaning

Directions: Find the term in the passage. Copy the sentence that contains the term. Explain the term by using context clues and/or a dictionary.

1. During his lifetime, his work was acclaimed from Georgia to Virginia, and he became one of the largest furniture manufacturers in North Carolina.

(Acclaimed: announced with approval)

2. In recognition of his talent, he was commissioned to furnish the interior woodwork in one of the original buildings of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

(Commissioned: appointed; authorized)

3. Although he owned slaves himself, he challenged deeply entrenched racial and social injustices of antebellum South.

(Entrenched: established securely)

4. When he married a free African American woman, Aquilla Wilson of Virginia, Day confronted an 1826 law that barred free African Americans from migrating to North Carolina.

(Barred: forbid; refused)

5. & 6. With the support of North Carolina's attorney general and more than sixty prominent whites in Milton who petitioned the General Assembly on his behalf, Day and his wife were granted an exemption.

(Petitioned: a formal document with a request signed by many people)

(Exemption: to free from a rule)

7. He expanded his business to coincide with the growth and changing tastes of antebellum society.

(Coincide: to occur at the same time)

8. & 9. His inventive decorative motifs and impeccable craftsmanship are characteristic of his furniture, the quality of which eventually won him nationwide recognition.

(Motifs: a repeated figure in a design)

(Impeccable: flawless; without defect or error)

10. The legacy of Thomas Day can be seen across North Carolina today.

(Legacy: anything handed down)

Creative Responses

Select one of the activities to complete.

See *Activities* page. Responses will vary.