

Free Man of Color

Thomas Day, son of free Black parents Mourning Stewart and John Day, was born in 1801. As a young man he learned woodworking from his father in southern Virginia before opening a shop in Hillsborough, NC. Day later moved to Milton, where he was recognized for his cabinetmaking and carpentry skills.

In 1830 Day married Aquilla Wilson, a free Black woman, in Virginia, but an 1826 North Carolina law forbid her move. In an unusual response that speaks to Day's stature, sixty-one prominent white men in Caswell County signed a petition that successfully requested an exception allowing Aquilla to join Thomas in Milton.

“Thomas Day a free man of colour, an inhabitant of this town [Milton], cabinet maker by trade, a first rate workman, a remarkably sober, steady and industrious man, a highminded, good and valuable citizen, possessing a handsome property in this town.”

Excerpt from petition on behalf of Thomas Day to North Carolina General Assembly, 1830

The Day household grew to include three children and eight enslaved people, and by 1850, he successfully ran the state's largest woodworking shop with a diverse labor force of free journeymen, apprentices, day laborers, and fourteen enslaved laborers. As a free man of color in North Carolina, Day could legally own property, including enslaved people. He enjoyed other limited rights, such as enfranchisement, habeas corpus, and a trial by jury, until they were taken away or severely restricted by the state legislature.



Day purchased Union Tavern for his home and cabinetmaking shop, where he later utilized steam-powered saws and other equipment.

Jim Lamb, Capital City Camera Club, photographer. Courtesy of Preservation North Carolina

**THOMAS DAY,
CABINET MAKER,**
RETURNS his thanks for the patronage he has received, and wishes to inform his friends and the public that he has on hand, and intends keeping, a handsome supply of
Mahogany, Walnut and Stained FURNITURE,
the most fashionable, and common BED STEADS, &c. which he would be glad to sell very low. All orders in his line, in Repairing, Varnishing, &c. will be thankfully received and punctually attended to.
Jan. 17. 38

Day's earliest known advertisement for solid mahogany and walnut furniture.

Milton Gazette & Roanoke Advertiser, (Milton, NC), March 1, 1827

LARGE AND SPLENDID ASSORTMENT OF CABINET FURNITURE.—THE SUBSCRIBER will have at the State Fair at Raleigh, for sale, a large and splendid assortment of CABINET FURNITURE, to which the attention of ladies and gentlemen is respectfully invited.
THOMAS DAY.
Milton, October 14, 1857. 94—2t.

Day placed this ad for an assortment of cabinet furniture, likely clad in mahogany veneer, three years before his death.

The Weekly Standard, (Raleigh, NC), October 21, 1857