NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THOMAS DAY
Pairing Furniture by North Carolina’s Free Black Master Craftsman With Contemporary Pieces from Governor Morehead’s Blandwood

Blandwood Museum
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Preservation Greensboro Incorporated, Greensboro, North Carolina
PREFACE

I’ve often wondered what a craftsperson from the past would think if they saw their work in a modern museum gallery. An object intended for use trapped inside a sterile space. On a platform. Spotlit. Arrayed in a line with other similarly out-of-context things like a series of pinned insect specimens. Decorative arts are inherently messy. A piece of furniture and the constellation of other decorative arts objects around it, make up, in the words of Le Corbusier, machines for living. Taken out of this context, furniture and buildings are merely empty containers. They are like a theater set before the play has begun. This is not to say that such abstraction isn’t sometimes useful. A change in environment can sometimes yield new insights; sometimes it can even serve to elevate an object into capital-A “Art.” However, I would argue that something is also lost in translation when a thing is moved from the room where life happened to the room where it now sits.

*New Perspectives on Thomas Day* provides us with an important opportunity to examine the work of Thomas Day within a unique context, the contemporary domestic environment designed by Alexander Jackson Davis for his client Governor John Motley Morehead in 1844. By exhibiting works by Day from the North Carolina Museum of History and private collections inside Blandwood and alongside surviving examples of furniture purchased in New York and North Carolina to furnish the house, it becomes possible to understand Day’s work within the larger context of the American decorative arts and design during the second-quarter of the nineteenth century.

For many years, scholars of American decorative arts and architecture did not take nineteenth-century material culture seriously. Wallace Nutting, writing in the early twentieth century, notably considered the period around 1820 as the beginning of the “degraded styles.” This reflected his period’s philosophical and aesthetic distaste for both industrialization and the more recent “Victorian” tastes of their parents and grandparents. (It also revealed a nostalgic view of a past that never really was: a past of solitary craftspeople in their pre-industrial shops making things of great beauty for a particular kind of white, male, English-speaking, Protestant consumer). This view found its way into the founding ethos of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1924, the Winterthur collection (opened to the public in 1951), and even the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts, opened in 1965. It has only been in the past few decades through the work of scholars like Ulysses Grant Dietz, Alice Cooney Frelinghuysen, Richard Guy Wilson, and many others that nineteenth century decorative arts and material culture have become an acceptable area of study.

In 2010 Patricia Phillips Marshall’s and Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll’s book and the North Carolina Museum of History exhibit *Thomas Day: Master Craftsman and Free Man of Color* presented Day’s story to a general audience for the first time. (In 2008, when MESDA officially expanded its collecting policy to include objects made before 1860, the first object we acquired
was a dressing bureau with its original bill-of-sale made in the workshop of Thomas Day for James M. Barnett in 1850.) Patricia Dane Rogers and Laurel Crone Sneed's article in the 2013 edition of the Chipstone Foundation Journal American Furniture picked up where Marshall and Leimenstoll left off, presenting new evidence that further complicated our understanding of Day as a free Black man and entrepreneur, an enslaver and an abolitionist, an industrialist and a craftsman, in the antebellum American South. These important works reveal Day as a complicated figure caught between his values and beliefs and an inherently unjust society in which the vast majority of people who looked like him were enslaved by people who looked like his clients.

Interest in nineteenth-century American decorative arts coincided with the important new scholarship on the role slave-labor and human-trafficking played in the United States before 1865. It's worth noting that, according to the 1850 Slave Schedule of the United States Census, Morehead enslaved thirty-seven people—twenty-three women and fourteen men—ranging in age from two to one-hundred. The stories of Thomas Day and John Motley Morehead—and the rooms in and furniture around which those stories happened—sit squarely at the intersection of these two important trends. Both men played important roles in the Old North State’s transformation from a rural agrarian backwater to a modern industrial economy. Morehead invested heavily in the construction of railroads and mills; Day was among the first craftspeople in North Carolina to embrace steam power. It is no surprise that both Day and Morehead find a place in North Carolina history textbooks.

All of this brings us back to the present exhibit organized at Blandwood by Preservation Greensboro. As previously noted, Blandwood was designed by the prominent New York architect Andrew Jackson Davis for Governor Morehead. It was furnished with a combination of furniture from some of New York’s most prestigious firms and regional cabinetmakers. As Judith Cushman Hammer has noted in The MESDA Journal, Davis believed in designing complete environments for his clients, from the landscape outside to the furniture and artwork inside. Day also specialized in crafting complete environments. However, unlike Davis, whose tools were pen and watercolor on paper, Day worked with steam, saw, plane, and chisel on wood to craft house interiors and furniture for his clients. They were hands-on in different ways. And yet the end results of these two artists were the same: three-dimensional functional sculptures in which their clients could live their lives. By bringing their works together into conversation in a domestic space, as this exhibit does, we suggest the possibility of life, of objects doing the things that they were designed to do. This is something that a neutral museum space simply cannot do. And this is the genius of the present exhibition.

Daniel Kurt Ackermann, Ph.D.
Chief Curator & Director of Research, Collections, and Archaeology
Old Salem Museums & Garden & The Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts
Winston-Salem, North Carolina
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Blandwood is a touchstone for American history that encompasses themes central to the African American experience. Evocative story lines of racial legislation, gender and racial roles, development of folkways, and contributions to the decorative arts can be explored at the museum to reveal challenges and triumphs in Black history. This exhibit is part of the process to acknowledge these individuals and their contributions.

As a governor of a slaveholding state, Blandwood’s patron John Motley Morehead held a complicated position in the politics of slavery. Although he represented and presented legislation on behalf of abolitionists, he was himself a slaveholder, enslaving workers such as Hannah Jones and Tinnan Morehead at Blandwood. With others of African heritage who lived across the broader Piedmont region, including free Blacks like Thomas Day, their lives chronicle important themes of culture, agency, and freedom within American history.

Although no documentation has been found to tie Thomas Day to Morehead or to Blandwood, the two men operated in the same social circles: Day as an influential Black tastemaker who embraced machine technology and Morehead as an influential white politician and industrialist.

This special presentation of Day’s furniture acknowledges his role in American history and speaks for the legacy that people of color gave Blandwood. This exhibit is dedicated to a more equitable approach to understanding the experiences of these individuals who have been overlooked in the past.

The creative team of volunteers who have planned this exhibit has been challenged to explore new approaches within the complex history of Blandwood, and to think about its furniture within the themes of gender, race, power, and the African American story of the Carolina Piedmont. The perspectives and insights of the planning team are greatly appreciated.

Special acknowledgment is extended to the North Carolina Museum of History, Margaret Walker Brunson Hill, and Amy and Scott Coley, all of whom have contributed the furniture pieces that are the core of this exhibit. The staff of the North Carolina Museum of History, including John Campbell, Michael Ausbon, Camille Hunt, Courtney Hawkins, Eric Blevins and Kent Thompson, are all to be thanked as well for the exceptional support they provided as we planned this exhibit.

Finally, without the financial backing of our sponsors, this exhibit would not be possible. On behalf of the Board of Directors of Preservation Greensboro Incorporated, thank you to those who share our vision of a more engaging and equitable museum narrative.

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In the furniture and woodwork he crafted for a region’s elite, free Black Thomas Day (1801-1861) combined his cabinetmaking talents with his personal interpretations of fashionable styles to create a distinctive woodworking idiom unique to the mid-nineteenth century Dan River region of North Carolina and Virginia. His remarkable legacy of furniture and architectural woodwork reveals a familiarity with popular pattern books, mastery of furniture-making techniques, incorporation of emerging technology, and expression of a personal aesthetic that elevates him beyond the role of a craftsman to that of an artist. With his great artistic autonomy, Day is one of a few free people of color to leave behind a substantial body of work, one that includes more than 200 pieces of furniture as
well as interior woodwork in more than eighty houses.

Born in Virginia to mixed-race parents, Thomas learned the woodworking trade from his father, John Day. When Thomas was a teen, the family migrated from Virginia to North Carolina, eventually settling in Warren County. In 1821, Thomas left his father’s cabinet-making shop to set up his own shop in Hillsborough. Just two years later he joined his older brother John’s shop in the bustling town of Milton where access to the Dan River and two railroad lines generated a thriving community of artisans and merchants. Although John subsequently left for Liberia to become a Baptist missionary, Thomas remained in Milton where he continued to build his cabinetmaking business, purchasing property in 1827 and establishing his reputation as an artisan. In 1830, Day married Aquilla Wilson, a free Black from Virginia, but she could not join him because an 1826 law prohibited free people of color from migrating to North Carolina. In an unusual response that speaks to Day’s importance within the community, sixty-one prominent white men in Milton and Caswell County successfully petitioned the General Assembly to permit Aquilla to move to North Carolina. Romulus Saunders, the state’s attorney general, endorsed the petition adding:

I have known Thomas Day (in whose behalf the within petition is addressed) for several years past and I am free to say, that I consider him a free man of color, of very fair character — an excellent mechanic, industrious, honest and sober in his habits and 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 as well as of real estate. His case may in my opinion, with safety be made an exception to the general rule which policy at this time seems to demand.¹

The petition was granted in late 1830, and Aquilla joined Thomas in Milton. During the decade that followed their household grew to include three children and eight enslaved people.² Day was a husband, father, church-going Christian, and respected member of the community. He was also a gifted artisan and a clever businessman. As his clientele expand-
ed and his business grew, he purchased more properties in Milton, eventually acquiring the prominent Union Tavern on Main Street to serve as his shop and residence.

Day benefitted from the economic boom-era in the Dan River region that sprang from the 1839 discovery of a process for curing tobacco with heat creating vivid yellow “Brightleaf” tobacco. As the wealth of white planters soared, Day was in the right place at the right time, ready to accommodate their aspirations for refinement and gentility. Many chose Day to express their status through his interpretations of the fashionable Grecian style of furniture that paralleled the emerging Greek Revival architectural style. A savvy entrepreneur, Day capitalized on the planters’ social network to establish the largest cabinetmaker’s shop in the state by 1850 — a shop with a diverse workforce of enslaved men, white and mulatto journeymen, and apprentices.

His furniture and woodwork were primarily crafted for the homes of wealthy planters and middle-class merchants, including such prominent citizens as physician and planter John T. Garland, attorneys Bartlett Yancey and Romulus Saunders, merchant John Wilson, and planters William H. Long, William H. Holderness, and Thomas M. McGehee. In addition, Day also received some institutional commissions, including furnishings for the Dialectic and Philanthropic Society Debating Hall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He also fabricated the pews for the Milton Presbyterian Church where he and Aquilla were respected members.

Day’s early furniture reflects a familiarity with popular pattern books illustrating classically inspired pieces he skillfully replicated. Day was also quick to incorporate the emerging stylistic trends appearing on the national scene, including French, cottage, and Gothic influences. By the 1840s he adopted a more idiosyncratic design aesthetic that distinguished his work from his contemporaries and from the pattern books and broadside posters of the period. Day
fabricated much of his furniture from imported mahogany, or he employed mahogany veneers over secondary woods. His repertoire included all the pieces needed to accommodate a genteel lifestyle, and his embrace of technological innovations such as a six-horsepower steam engine dramatically enhanced his productivity. Between his steam-powered shop equipment and large workforce, Day could rapidly produce orders even as large as Governor David Settle Reid’s 1855 request for forty-seven pieces of furniture.

Day’s custom-made cabinetry and furniture exhibit a powerful energy and a vocabulary of individualized motifs that define both form and detail. While his designs adhered to the principles of symmetry and balance, and utilized classical details, Day pushed beyond standard conventions with bold three-dimensionality, serpentine curves and exuberant ornamentation. The fluidity of his forms suggests a sense of motion that by contrast made the work of his counterparts appear staid. The popular S-shaped scroll motif is incorporated into many of his pieces such as the rocking chair arms and the mirror brackets of his open pillar bureaus (see pages 22 and 21). Day lightens the massiveness of Caleb Richmond’s sideboard with S-shaped pillars terminating at the base in scrolled feet, and he embellishes the mirrored gallery back with a pair of whimsical S-scrolls set on the diagonal (see page 24).

Day often detailed his side chairs and rocking chairs as well as other pieces with ornamentation composed of scroll shapes, ogee and reverse ogee forms, and foliage motifs. While such shapes are certainly not unique to Day, he applies them with more vitality and three-dimensionality than his peers. In particular, Day’s distinctive whatnots with pierced galleries illustrate his use of the jigsaw to create positive and negative shapes. Still balanced and symmetrical, these playful serpentine shapes convey motion and whimsy as do the S-shaped scrolls that support each of the shelves (see page 19).

The unique, signature lounge is the furniture form most closely identified with Thomas Day. It evolved from an upholstered lounge form popular in the early 1800s that incorporated a low back at one end. Day transforms this earlier model by suspending a slender backboard between arching rear pillars so it appears to float effortlessly across the length of the lounge and creates a complementary negative space in the open back below. Likewise, the side arm rails of the lounge mirror their shapes in both positive and negative forms (see page 15).

**KEY EVENTS FOR THOMAS DAY (1801-1861)**

1801  Born in southern Virginia to free Black parents Mourning Stewart and John Day  

1821  Opens shop in Hillsborough, North Carolina  

1823  Moves to Milton, North Carolina  

1827  Purchases property in Milton for residence and shop  

1830  Marries Aquilla Wilson, sixty-one Milton and Caswell County residents sign petition to state legislature “…to give Aquilla the privilege of migrating from Virginia to North Carolina.”  

1839  Process for flue-cured “Brightleaf” tobacco discovered in Caswell County, precipitating planters’ boom economy  

1847-49  Designs, builds interiors of Dialectic and Philanthropic Societies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  

1848  Buys the Union Tavern on Main Street in Milton for residence and shop  

1850  Owns and operates largest woodworking shop in North Carolina per census records  

1853  Completes twenty-six-piece furniture commission from Azariah Graves  

1853 +/-  Mechanizes the shop, steam-powered equipment increases productivity, enables new design features  

1855  Completes forty-seven-piece furniture commission from former NC Governor David Settle Reid  

1857  Economic recession forces decline of Day’s business  

1859  Day’s business auctioned off on Caswell County courthouse steps in Yanceyville, son Thomas Day Jr. buys with loans from local supporters  

1861  Dies in Milton  

1864  Thomas Day Jr. repays father’s debts
Like his furniture, the distinct and innovative architectural woodwork of cabinetmaker Thomas Day emerged from a specific context of race and place as planters in the 1840s and 1850s expressed their gentility through new boom-era Greek Revival houses and front additions to earlier homes in the Dan River region. More than eighty houses constructed or expanded over a quarter century radiate out from Day’s shop in Milton on either side of the Dan River, revealing the volume and scope of his work. Six intact North Carolina houses illustrate Day’s fully articulated woodwork ensembles of the mid-1800s. Two were built as additions to older houses: the 1856 front section of the Bartlett Yancey House and the ca. 1855 side addition to Longwood (lost to fire in 2013). The other four properties are large Greek Revival period houses: the Holderness House (ca. 1851), the Friou-Hurdle House (1858), the Richmond House (ca. 1850), and the Bass House (ca. 1855). In the next decade, Day embraced the emerging Italiante style with lively sawnwork crafted for the exterior and interior of the Garland-Buford House (ca. 1860).

Commissions from wealthy planters provided a springboard for Day to create his own artistic signature writ large through architectural compositions. Using staircases, mantels, niches, corner blocks, baseboards, and casings as his palette to sculpt interior spaces, Day developed a fluid, exuberant, idiosyncratic interpretation of the Greek Revival style adopted throughout the Dan River region — all the while operating within the legal and social systems that constrained free Blacks at the time.

Day brought the vivacity of the curving line to his woodwork in innovative ways that continue to amaze and delight. In his entrance halls, bold and varied S-shaped newel posts
with tightly coiled spirals and sinuous curves spring from the handrails, all in sharp contrast to the straightforward turned newel posts in most houses of the era. Many of these houses typically have turned newel posts or the more traditional circular ring of balusters supporting a horizontal spiral that terminates the handrail. In contrast, Day rotated the relatively serene horizontal spiral 90 degrees and enlarged the vertical spiral to form the entire newel, conveying a sense of energy and motion that extends the movement of the ramped handrail into the entry hall. Day’s signature newel posts proclaimed the owner’s social status to all who entered.

Complementing his newel posts, curvaceous stair brackets at the end of the treads display fluid-lined variations on standard patterns. While most Greek Revival staircases incorporate decorative stair brackets, only Day’s utilized coordinated motifs to reinforce the S-shaped newel post statements, such as those he crafted for the Glass-Dameron House and Hunt House staircases.

Day’s mantels, the focal point of many a planter’s parlor, invigorated standard Greek Revival idioms with robust serpentine mantel friezes to create a sense of movement unlike the static paneled friezes of their counterparts. As seen in the Holderness House parlor, Day reinforced the hierarchy of the parlor as the most formal interior space by flanking the mantel with arched niches framed by deeply fluted moldings. Likewise, around door and window openings, Day installed bold casings animated by the shifting patterns of light and shadow on their deeply fluted surfaces. The undulating forms and sharply cut sawnwork characteristic of Day’s interiors play upon the tension between positive and negative space.

Like his furniture designs, Day’s architectural woodwork grew out of the framework of classical architecture, respecting formality, symmetry and hierarchy. To his interiors, Day brought fluidity and movement as he abstracted, distorted, rotated, intensified and distilled to transform that vocabulary. Day skillfully maximized and celebrated the fluidity of form as someone who knew the rules and understood how to break them.

The remarkable design aesthetic of his furniture and architectural woodwork speaks to us of the complexity of the life and work of Thomas Day — an entrepreneurial free person of color who crafted a remarkable legacy equally complex in its style and expression. His amazing tangible body of work continues to astound and inspire far beyond the Dan River region. Day’s work also reveals the enduring power and innovative evolution of his appealing aesthetic, an aesthetic ironically empowered by the most powerful and wealthy white citizens of his time and place.

1 Journals of the Senate and House of Commons of the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, Session 1830-31 (Raleigh, NC.: Printed by Lawrence & LeMay, 1831), 113, 248.

Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll is a preservation architect and a Professor Emerita at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro where she was instrumental in the creation of the graduate curriculum in Historic Preservation in 2000. She co-authored with Patricia Phillips Marshall the book entitled Thomas Day Master Craftsman and Free Man of Color published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2010. The book received the 2010 Ragan Old North State Award for Nonfiction from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association.
Why a Thomas Day Exhibition at Blandwood?

“The Room(s) Where it Happened”

Governor John Motley Morehead (1796-1866) completed the Alexander Jackson Davis-designed addition to his Greensboro, North Carolina home in 1846. With the help of the New York architect who enlarged his home with two expansive and elegant light-filled parlors, the wealthy statesman set about furnishing the home where he and Mrs. Ann “Eliza” Morehead entertained their large family and guests from across the state and beyond.

It is not known if Morehead purchased any furniture for Blandwood’s parlors and other rooms from Thomas Day (1801-1861), and it is also unknown if he ever met the free Black and highly successful cabinetmaker from nearby Milton. Nevertheless, Day and Morehead were more than contemporaries. During the 1840s their paths likely crossed in at least such places as Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They shared acquaintances, among them David Lowry Swain (1801-1868), former North Carolina governor and University of North Carolina president, who commissioned Day to complete the university interiors of the Philanthropic and Dialectic Societies, a project Morehead was aware of. Revered throughout the state as a progressive leader, Morehead hailed from the same social class as Day’s Dan River region clients, among them physicians, attorneys, planters and statesmen.

Blandwood Museum is presenting the temporary exhibition, New Perspectives on Thomas Day. That exhibition pairs eleven pieces owned by Morehead at his Blandwood mansion with eleven contemporaneous examples, designed by or attributed to Day, all expressing similar form, function and style. The pieces date primarily from the antebellum decades when Morehead was furnishing Blandwood and when Day was at the height of his success. These twenty-two furniture items are presented in public and private interior spaces — parlors, dining room, bedrooms and the like — where the Moreheads conceivably placed them. Moreover, these “room(s) where it happened” likely mirror the rooms where Day’s clients themselves lived...
and interacted with the furniture they commissioned from the renowned cabinetmaker.

By examining the style, construction, materials, origin and provenance, as well as the roles this familiar furniture play in their households, the juxtaposition of Day's furniture alongside Blandwood's strives to underscore Day's achievement, and also, at the same time, explore issues of race, power and gender among elite mid-nineteenth century families in North Carolina's Piedmont.

The furniture Day created for his wealthy clients resembles the pieces owned by Morehead and purchased from a gamut of sources, some nationally known in New York City, others local craftsmen in North Carolina. For the most part, Day's clients, like Morehead, championed the Greek Revival vocabulary gentility favored as it broadcast its own prominence among peers and embraced Classical world values optimally steering their own country.

These Classically-inspired furniture designs feature bold silhouettes, shiny mahogany veneers and abundant scrolls invoking ancient designs. More is at issue here, however, than the visual similarities between Day's and Morehead's furnishings. As significant as that design mode might be for the period, it also reflects the values espoused by these refined homeowners.

Looking at examples of Day's crafted furniture and Morehead-owned pieces side by side sheds light on Day's achievements, artistic and entrepreneurial, as a free Black North Carolinian in the decades prior to the Civil War. The pairs reveal Day's innovative interpretation of current styles and the forging of his own vocabulary. They also underscore Day's competitive prowess in manipulating new industrialized tools to fashion original statements.

Viewing these furniture combinations in a domestic setting like Blandwood furthermore illuminates the dynamics of the social world of the owners, of those who bought, commissioned, and lived with this furniture — regardless of the maker and who it belonged to. How do the dining room sideboards convey the significance of class and power in the households? What do the parlors' ladies work tables say about the role of women? What do the men's desks tell us about economic success and wealth? And finally, these "rooms where it happened" pose compelling questions about race relations and a slave population that buttressed the refined lifestyle embodied by Day-crafted and Morehead-owned furniture.

Contextualizing Day's furniture with contemporary pieces in specific rooms then allows exhibition visitors to appreciate Day in a fresh way and to take a new look at North Carolina's eminent free Black artisan and entrepreneur. — Judith Z. Cushman Hammer
For their prominently displayed parlor furniture, both Governor Morehead’s and Day’s clients typified elite men of the period in opting for the stylish Greek vocabulary of the ancient world. Their Grecian, or Late Empire, style furniture, thereby affirmed within their social circles their wealth and stature. Notably, Day extended that established visual vocabulary by manipulating positive and negative spaces in a lyrical way and by using S-curves and scrolls to suggest motion.

Lounge. Made by Thomas Day, 1858. Walnut, yellow pine (upholstery not original). NC Governor David Settle Reid purchased this lounge — one of twelve attributed to Day — in 1858 for his Dan River plantation in Rockingham County. Loan and photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

Sofa. Unknown maker, likely in New York City, ca. 1845. Mahogany, mahogany veneer (upholstery not original). NC Governor John Motley Morehead acquired Late Empire seating for Blandwood probably through its architect, Alexander Jackson Davis. Blandwood Collection.

Annotations by Jon B. Zachman and Judith Z. Cushman Hammer.

For fuller information on Day’s furniture, see Thomas Day Master Craftsman and Free Man of Color by Patricia Phillips Marshall and Jo Ramsay Leimenstoll, published in 2010 by the University of North Carolina Press.

For fuller information on the Blandwood furniture descended through the Morehead family and illustrated here, see Governor Morehead’s Blandwood, A History & Catalog, published by Preservation Greensboro in 2020. All Blandwood photographs are by Bert VanderVeen.
Made in sets of twelve or even eighteen, side chairs were plentiful in elite parlors and frequently rearranged and even moved from room to room by the household’s enslaved servants as they accommodated different guests, social events, or large family get-togethers.

**Side chair.** Made by Thomas Day, 1855. Mahogany, yellow pine, tulip poplar (needlepoint not original). An itemized 1855 bill-of-sale to NC Governor David Settle Reid includes twelve bannister back chairs, as Day described them, including this one in a Grecian style. Altogether Reid purchased at least twenty-six pieces of seating furniture from Day between 1855 and 1858 for his Rockingham County plantation. Loan and photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

**Side chair.** Unknown maker, likely in New York City, ca. 1845. Chestnut, mahogany veneer. NC Governor John Motley Morehead acquired the ancient-Greek-inspired side chairs for Blandwood probably through its architect, Alexander Jackson Davis. Blandwood Collection.
Ubiquitous in parlors of the period, these two center tables on their aprons, pedestals and bases extensively use the machine-cut thin mahogany veneers that were a hallmark of Late Empire designs promoted by Joseph Meeks and inspiring Day. In the early years of his career, Day placed ads in the local newspapers alerting his patrons and the public to his handsome furniture made of imported mahogany, walnut and stained wood. By the 1850s he had skillfully integrated mahogany veneers into his designs, establishing his reputation as a master of mahogany. In tune with the industrialization reshaping furniture making, Day embraced such technological innovations as steam-powered equipment, including new saws that expressed his design motifs and, at the same time, increased productivity.

Center table. Attributed to Thomas Day, ca. 1850. Mahogany veneer, pine, white marble. Along with this example featuring a Late Empire base, Day created round and beveled turtle top-shaped center tables. Original owner unknown. Loan and photo courtesy of private collection.

Center table. Attributed to Joseph Meeks & Sons, New York City, ca. 1835-1845. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, maple, Egyptian marble. NC Governor John Motley Morehead acquired this bold Late Empire piece for Blandwood probably through its architect, Alexander Jackson Davis. Blandwood Collection.
UPSTAIRS PARLOR

These two ladies worktables bespeak the role of women in the household. Elite nineteenth-century women like Mrs. Morehead and the wives of Day’s clients were formally trained in needlework, considered a mark of refinement. Used for both practical and ornamental work, their tables were familiar accessories in their homes and moved from room to room, including parlors, where women simultaneously conversed and sewed. More than utilitarian pieces, the fashionableness of these worktables underscored the owners’ status.

**Ladies worktable or sewing stand.** Attributed to Thomas Day, ca. 1850. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, pine. Rectangular top with drop leaves; top convex drawer over two flush drawers flanked by carved Ionic columns. Variation in the number of drawers, the use of drop leaves, and the shapes of the pedestal, base and feet are evident in surviving sewing stands attributed to Day. Original owner unknown. Loan and photo courtesy of private collection.

**Ladies worktable or sewing stand.** Attributed to Thomas Day, ca. 1840-1850. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, poplar, yellow pine. Owned by the Governor’s wife, Ann “Eliza” Morehead. Long-term loan to Blandwood, courtesy of private collection.
UPSTAIRS PARLOR

These whatnots both feature open shelves allowing a clear view of the bric-a-brac and curiosities they held and which stimulated many a parlor chat among white elite families of the period. Day’s example with polished veneer and imaginative and intricately cut twisting shapes and scrolls exhibits his mastery of the jigsaw and embodies the defining creativity for which he is known today.

**Whatnot or étagère.** Made by Thomas Day, 1853-1860. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, yellow pine, tulip poplar, walnut. Merchant and tobacco factory owner John Wilson purchased this exuberant style whatnot and at least five other pieces from Day for his home in Milton, NC, known today as the Wilson-Winstead House. Descended through the Wilson-Walker-Brunson family. Loan courtesy of Margaret Walker Brunson Hill. Photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

**Corner whatnot or étagère.** Possibly factory made, ca. 1855-1870. Black walnut or rosewood. Blandwood Collection.
UPSTAIRS EAST BEDROOM

Day’s marketing savvy is evident as he pivoted to the more informal cottage styling, in demand in particular for bedroom sets as an alternative to the heavier look of Classical-based designs.

Bedstead. Made by Thomas Day, 1855-1858. Walnut, maple, pine. In response to the emerging popularity of the cottage style, Day created new furniture forms and designs like this bedstead with shaped posts and thirteen turned spindles on the headboard and footboard. Fifteen cottage style furniture pieces are attributed to Day, including five purchased by NC Governor David Settle Reid. Loan and photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

Bedstead. Unknown maker, likely in North Carolina, ca. 1830-1840. Birch, originally with yellow “cottage” finish, beneath “mahoganizing” treatment applied later to the formal silhouette. Used by the Governor’s wife, Ann “Eliza” Morehead. Blandwood Collection.
Bureaus were familiar parts of upscale bedroom sets. The example for NC Governor Reid illustrates Day’s defining S-scrolls and his skill in creating a lighter appearance where the mirror seems to float between its stylized supports.

Bureau with looking glass or mirror. Made by Thomas Day, 1855. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, yellow pine, poplar, white marble. Referred to as an open pillar bureau, this piece has a shaped swivel mirror with supports resting on two small top drawers and two half-width drawers over three full-width drawers. NC Governor David Settle Reid purchased this bureau and two others from Day. Loan and photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

GOVERNOR MOREHEAD’S BEDROOM

The idiosyncratic pierced and cut-scroll front arm supports of this rocking chair and others made by Day demonstrate his mastery in incorporating scrolls and foliage-shaped elements in his furniture designs and in imbuing them with a sense of motion.

**Rocking chair.** Made by Thomas Day, ca. 1850. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, pine (upholstery not original). Day is credited with producing numerous rocking chairs with low seats and high serpentine back designs, although no two are identical. When this Grecian style piece was reupholstered, the name “Thos Day” written in pencil was visible under the arm rests. Original owner unknown. Loan and photo courtesy of private collection.

**Open-arm upholstered rocking chair.** Unknown maker, ca. 1850-1860. Walnut (upholstery not original). Blandwood Collection.
Much like the bureaus made by Day, his washstands were ever present in the homes of his elite white clients. By the 1850s the largely utilitarian washstand had evolved from a simple wooden stand that held a basin to a cabinet with a drawer, doors and sometimes a marble top and backsplash. Typical of Day’s furniture from this period, this washstand’s drawer and door fronts are covered with mahogany veneers. Enslaved servants most likely provided the fresh water and tended to other needs of their master.

**Washstand with marble top and backsplash.** Made by Thomas Day, ca. 1858. Mahogany veneer, yellow pine, white marble. NC Governor David Settle Reid’s interest in Day’s furniture kept the cabinetmaker and his apprentices at Union Tavern busy. This washstand, one of three purchased by Reid, is part of the sale of forty-seven pieces of furniture — the largest documented commission Day received from a client. Loan and photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

**Dressing table.** Unknown maker, ca. 1830-1840. Mahogany, mahogany veneer. Blandwood Collection.
DINING ROOM

Massive in size, sideboards literally dominated dining rooms, as evidenced by the Blandwood example. These pieces were central to the frequent formal meals and large-scale entertaining that took place at Blandwood and in the homes of Day's clients. Such events were managed by the women of the household, but most likely prepared and served by enslaved servants who played a critical role in facilitating their masters' refined lifestyle. Designed to create a visual sign of wealth and a sense of drama, the sideboards' mirrors reflected the hosts' conspicuously displayed silver and glass.

**Sideboard.** Made by Thomas Day, ca. 1840-1855. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, yellow pine, poplar, walnut, white marble. Foundry and sawmill owner Caleb H. Richmond purchased this sideboard and at least two other Day pieces for his Caswell County residence — better known as Woodside. Loan and photo courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

**Sideboard,** unknown maker, possibly in Virginia or North Carolina, ca. 1840. Mahogany, mahogany veneer, yellow pine. Blandwood Collection.
In contrast to the ladies worktables, these two desks underscore the role of men as successful and prosperous providers. Whether in a more rustic style like Morehead’s or a more formal statement like Day’s, the desks hint at the responsibilities of their owners, be they merchants, plantation owners, physicians or statesmen. The design of the desk attributed to Day intimates in particular that the owner benefitted from the economic success of “Brightleaf” tobacco in the Dan River region.

“Brightleaf” tobacco secretary desk. Attributed to Thomas Day, ca. 1850. Mahogany veneer, pine, maple. Carved tobacco leaf motifs on the front columns and bright interior compartments refer to the flue-cured process known as “Brightleaf” which resulted in a vivid yellow appearance of the tobacco leaf. Original owner unknown. Loan and photo courtesy of private collection.

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Long before High Point became the center of the global home furnishings industry, generations before central North Carolina became America’s leading furniture manufacturing region, Thomas Day was designing and building pieces that are still prized by collectors as some of the finest ever created.

We are grateful for the leadership of Thomas Day, and we celebrate him as one of the giants upon whose shoulders North Carolina’s furniture industry stands.

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