Thomas Day: Craftsman of the Piedmont Triad

In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Zora Neale Hurston wrote, “No, I do not weep at the world— I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife” (2). A local man living in Antebellum South embodied the spirit of this quote: the determination to rise above.

Thomas Day was born to free, landowning blacks John and Mourning Day in Dinwiddie County, Virginia, in 1801. Day and his brother, who immigrated to Liberia in 1830 as a Baptist minister, were educated by Quaker tutors and studied cabinetry under their father (“About”). In 1827, Thomas Day moved to Milton, NC and advertised his own furniture business in the *Milton Gazette & Roanoke Advertiser* (Rogers and Sneed 121). He quickly became well-respected in the community, later producing the pews for Milton Presbyterian Church and being granted membership there (Rogers and Sneed 105). In January 1830, Day married Aquilla Wilson, also a free black, in Halifax County, VA; however, his wife was barred from entering the state by an 1826 North Carolina law. As a testimony to Day’s reputation in Milton, sixty-one white residents signed a petition requesting an exception be made for Aquilla. The request was granted, owing in part to an affidavit submitted by State Attorney General Romulus Saunders affirming Day’s character and assuring 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’” (“Brief” 1).

In fact, recent discoveries about Thomas Day suggest that his ownership of slaves was a means to demonstrate loyalty to the racial status quo of the South despite maintaining conflicting values personally (Rogers and Sneed 106). In 1835, Day risked his life to secretly attend the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of Free People of Colour in the United States alongside many leading abolitionists (“About”). In 1848, Day purchased Union Tavern—a prominent property in Milton—despite expectations of free blacks to hide property ownership and wealth (Rogers and Sneed 106). Soon after, Day sent his daughter and two sons to a school known for abolitionist sentiment, Wesleyan Academy in Massachusetts (“About”). Moreover, while Day’s artistic style in many ways reflected the popular urban tradition of 19th century America, Day also injected distinctly “Afrocentric” designs such as the Sankofa symbol into some of his pieces (Prown 223-229). Undeterred by growing suspicion of free blacks in North Carolina, Thomas Day managed to conceal his abolitionist leanings and secure the support of prominent whites, and his business expanded in bounds.

By 1850, Day was operating the largest furniture business in North Carolina, and his clientele included Governor David Reid and the University of North Carolina, where his work graced the debating halls and libraries of Old East and Old West Buildings (Bishir et al.). Use of steam-powered machinery and the inclusion of whites, free blacks, and slaves alike in his staff contributed to Day’s success and enabled him to fill large furniture orders. Thomas Day was also recognized for the quality and artistry of his work, which included furniture, cradles, coffins, mantels, stair railings, and decorative trim (“Brief” 1). The Smithsonian Museum of American Art states, “Day’s style is characterized by undulating shapes, fluid lines, and spiraling forms. He combined his own unique motifs with popular designs to create a distinctive style readily identified with his shop” (“Thomas”).

In 1857, Day became one of many victims of a national financial crisis, and his shop was in receivership as the Civil War loomed (“About”). Thomas Day disappeared from records in 1861 and is assumed to have died that year ( “Brief” 2).

Now considered “a founding father of the modern Southern furniture history,” Thomas Day built a furniture empire in the small town of Milton, NC, making a name for himself when opportunities for African Americans were few (“About”). Milton countered the racism of the Antebellum South by developing a reputation for which white persons were willing to make exceptions to their own prejudice (Rogers and Sneed 123). Thomas Day is an integral part of both the history which makes North Carolina the “furniture capital of the world” and the understanding of free blacks in Antebellum South.

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