

THOMAS DAY AND HIS FAMILY

BY W. A. ROBINSON AND OTHERS

Although we have learned much about Thomas Day, the cabinet-maker or furniture manufacturer of ante bellum Milton, North Carolina, some parts of his story have not yet been clarified. In an article in a Durham daily which appeared in 1929, Paul Ader says that Thomas Day was born in the West Indies on the same island on which Alexander Hamilton was born. There, Ader says, he became interested in woodcarving, using mahogany which grew on his native island, and when he came later to Milton, North Carolina he applied his craftsmanship in the production of furniture and imported from his native home the hardwoods which he had been accustomed to using. Others have said, as did Mrs. Caroline Pell Gunter in her article in *The Raleigh News and Observer*, June 30, 1929, that he was born a free Negro on a farm two miles from Milton at sometime between 1785 and 1795. She tells us further that his mother had been given her freedom, and since the child followed the condition of the mother, he was born free. She says also that he developed a passion for making baskets and boxes and engaged in woodcarving. When visiting homes, he gave serious attention to the style of the furniture and especially to its decorations. He began carving out of walnut some of the designs which he had observed and thereby attracted attention to his interest in art. He was therefore given the opportunity to study and to concentrate especially on drawing. He finally persuaded his mother to provide for his studying in Boston and Washington where he spent three years in preparing for his chosen field.

Returning to Milton, he married a Portuguese woman and settled down to developing the business of a craftsman. He made beautifully carved chairs, small tables, and footstools from walnut. Later he began to import mahogany from

the West Indies and by 1818 was offering such furniture for sale. His business increased rapidly and it was necessary for him to find larger quarters than the small building in which he began his career. He next occupied the old Yellow Brick Tavern in Milton where once had been entertained all great visitors, even George Washington when he once passed through the town of Milton.

Day made furniture for the most distinguished families of the state including Governor Reid, who placed with Day a special order to supply his home in Washington when the Governor became United States Senator from North Carolina. Day's designs were considered inimitable. Crude copies, according to Mrs. Gunter, have been made of Day mahogany, but the artistic lines and exquisite workmanship are difficult to imitate and antique dealers and repairers wonder at the painstaking thought of the most minute detail which characterizes all of Tom Day's work.

In this business Thomas Day achieved well. He owned also a farm which was worked by slaves whom he possessed. According to the United States Bureau of the Census, as recorded in Free Negro Heads of Families in the United States, he was between 24 and 36 years of age in 1830, had six persons in his family, and owned . . . slaves. While he used slaves to run his farm, he used apprenticed whites to produce his furniture. Numbers of whites vied with each other for such service. It is said that he found more aptitude among the whites who worked with him than among the Negroes whom he assigned to the farm. In his dealings he was a firm task master but he was known to be fair in all of his dealings.

Day was a very religious man and had his slaves attend service and Bible study classes at his home every Sunday. He urged them to attend church also where they had

to sit in two pews of the local Presbyterian meeting house designed especially for them. He felt however, that inasmuch as he was considered an outstanding man in the town of Milton, that he himself should not be required to sit among the Negroes in their special pews. He therefore induced the officers of the church to permit him to sit among the whites if he would present the church with walnut pews for the entire congregation.

Day was a man of fine physique and commanding appearance, but was unaffected and unassuming. He was devoted especially to his family and gave his children the opportunity for an education at various points in the North. This devotion as well as his philosophy of life is well expressed in a letter to his daughter when she was studying at the Wilbraham Academy in Massachusetts.

Reporting on his visit to Milton, Paul Ader said:

"Across the street from the Yellow Tavern, where Tom Day lived and worked, lives G. G. Donoho, 74, in whose family a number of pieces of Day's furniture have been kept. Chief among them is the magnificent old sideboard in Donoho's dining room. No picture of the side-board is able to do it justice. It stands from floor to ceiling, a towering, graceful piece of hand-tooled mahogany, probably one of the masterpieces of Tom Day. The side-board has been in the Donoho family for two or three generations, G. G. told us, and will stay there for some time!

"In the kitchen is a little side-table, with a marble top, and on this Mrs. Donoho makes her biscuits every day. 'You won't find many American housewives making biscuits on a mahogany table,' old G. G. chuckled. 'This little table weighs 'round hundred and fifty pounds, don't you think so, Mayor?' He was talking to Mayor Ed. W. Walker who was with us. Milton's mayor came from Locust

Hill in 1936, when he bought the famous old State Bank building, now the post office.

"G. G. took us next to the living room, pointing out seven little mahogany chairs which Day made. There was a writing table also, one of a pair. The other, G. G. said, was in the possession of his sister. They stood together once with a huge mirror between them.

"Donoho told us that much of Day's mahogany furniture was scattered all over the county, over the State. In Durham, in Greensboro, in Raleigh, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Fayetteville. Tom Day bought literally shiploads of mahogany from the West Indies, fashioning it into sturdy, solid desks and chairs and sideboards.

"Old G. G. pointed to the desk in his living room. 'Bud Wilson down in Yanceyville wants me to will him that when I die,' he laughed. 'The old rascal, I'll just bet I do!' The chairs and desk form an odd group with the other more modern furniture, but taken individually the chairs and desk by Day stand out in the solid elegance of their true aristocracy.

"Ed Walker purchased the state-ly old bank building in '36 when he moved to Milton. The structure is unusually solid. Every other brick is 'headed in.' The building was put up in 1857-61 and has a section reserved for the president (Billy Hill first occupied the building before the War between the States), three out-buildings for servants and the cooking, and cost \$31,000, according to Walker. He bought it for one-sixth that amount and put it in the United States post office of Milton.

"Inside Walker showed me some unusual furniture, all solid mahogany or walnut. There is one amazing hand-carved divan and a round center table. Of Day's handiwork Walker preserves two pieces. The top of a round table in his living room is in two halves and the table has a secret drawer, probably for silver. Upstairs Walker showed us a chest of drawers, with new glass knobs, but

showing again the thorough construction, the deep-wine colored wood which Day worked. None of Tom Day's stuff is veneer, Walker insisted. And aside from the glass knobs, the pieces he has are quite authentic. They stand as Day made them nearly a hundred years ago.

J. M. Fleming and Boulder

"Milton's oldest inhabitant, J. M. Fleming, 77, posed for us several times, once standing behind a hand made gate, with the Yellow Tavern in the background. The Tavern, J. M. Fleming told us, is 225 years old, and is probably the oldest standing building in Milton. In 1715 it was painted yellow, but now it is deep red. And the old veranda is gone. Stolen is the old tavern register. 'Some people,' Fleming said, with indignation, 'think Milton is public property!'

"The Tavern, now owned by Tom Moore, has none of the furniture of Tom Day in it, so we did not stay long in it, other than to take a cursory glance at the rooms where Day worked, and the one where Washington and Lafayette spent the night during Cornwallis' retreat. Moore still preserves a gold headed cane which Washington is said to have left in the room.

"Fleming, with his black derby hat always perpendicularly perched, and Donoho, with his racy anecdotes, were full of the history and fable of Milton and particularly of the fame and work of that straight-haired West Indian Tom Day. Not long ago, they told us, the grand-nephew of Day came down for a visit. His name is W. A. Robinson, and he is shown in one photograph by the grave of his grand-uncle Tom. Robinson is now director of the Secondary Schools and Colleges for Negroes of North Carolina. He came to Milton to see the place in the old Yellow Tavern where his kinsman lived and worked, to look at the remaining pieces of Tom Day's work that remain in Milton, and to negotiate with G. G. Donoho for the purchase of some of those very pieces.

"Robinson sat in the same pews in the Presbyterian Church in which Tom Day was privileged to sit. He admired the stately elegance of the sideboard and chairs in Donoho's living room. But for all his dickering, Donoho was unwilling to part with it. He wants, like Walker and the others, to keep it there in Milton where it was made. 'We got to hold on to the past,' he protested, running his fingers fondly over the wine-colored wood of the old sideboard.

"'My grandfather,' he added, 'was a Dr. Garland, and he first owned those pieces you see here. We Garlands and Glens and Donohos have been living here a long time and we've kept this furniture in the family.'

"Not long ago Fleming was forced to conduct a sale and it was then that several valuable pieces of Day furniture were taken out of Milton, chiefly to Fayetteville and Greensboro.

"Fleming it was who urged us to see Mrs. Lewis Walker, widow of the oldest practicing druggist (at his death) in North Carolina. Mrs. Walker (formerly Sue Cuning- ham) came to Milton from her home, 'Waverly' in Person County. 'Waverly' is a towering three-story house which took 12 years to build, according to Mrs. Walker and her sister Belle Cuning- ham, who live now in their little Cape Cod cottage in Milton. The old Walker home was burned some years ago, and with it went many valuable native and imported pieces of furniture, and family portraits.

"Mrs. Walker has in her living room a day bed of solid walnut which Tom Day fashioned in his cabinet shop down the street. The other furniture, a rocker, a sofa, a pair of tables, are mahogany, imported from London before the War between the States.

"On the walls, in addition to several coats of arms, are several old portraits, one by Brown, done in 1850, of Mrs. Walker's cousin, one of her mother, a beautiful dark haired lady, and one of her father.

Also, over the sofa, two rare Sully portraits, one of Mrs. Walker's grandfather, Alexander Cuninghame, and one of his wife, who was Miss Isabella Wilson of Virginia. The frames of these two portraits are gold leaf. Thomas Sully was the celebrated Philadelphia artist who did the portrait of President James K. Polk now in the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Mrs. Walker, being an aristocrat and an Episcopalian, spoke with some asperity about Tom Day and his Presbyterianism. She perhaps is one of the few Miltonites who does not claim pride for the church's mahogany pews. She told of the Episcopalian's exclusiveness. Of how, when a new member applied for entrance, they would send him, if they did not like his pedigree, to the Baptists with a little cash bonus for his cooperation!

"But Day has left his stamp on Milton and on Caswell, with the work of his hands, whether it be the graceful cherry wardrobe in the home of H. T. Watkins of Blanche or the sideboard in Donohoe's dining room or the walnut day bed in Mrs. Lewis Walker's Cape Cod cottage."

The following written by Thomas Day to his daughter in Wilbraham, Massachusetts where all of his children were educated discloses his ideals and philosophy of life:

Milton, N. C. 27 Nov, 1831
My Daughter

We are in Rept of your Letters regularly & glad to hear from you we are pleased to Know you are well & to hear of your satisfaction in your home—& hope your religious Engagements may continue a comfort to you & consolation to the Brethern with whom you associate.

The time is drawing to a close when I hope to meet with you Again—& I hope Your return to Milton may be a source of Comfort to you not with standing The obscure residence You may have here—you inquire how long before I leave & also observe you cant—se how I have lived so long in Milton—I can tell you it will not be verry great while before I hope to leave

Milton—and I can also tell you I have long since learned to Enjoy my life in a higher circle than depending on human society for my comfort or happiness—My pleasures are placed in hope beyond this world—My highest pleasure is in discharge of my Every day duty as nearly as possible.

You have read in the scriptures how the two first Brothers Cain & Abel Enjoind Each others Society and how also the Patriarch David loved—his Beautiful son Absalom—and you se the modern time net work society also—how frail the affection of Friends—how deceitful the—well you must love the lord thy God with thy whole heart—soul & strength & thy Neighbor as Thyself but all the time Worship God only

I am perfectly satisfied as regards Milton—I came here to stay four years & am here 7 time 4 I love the place no better nor worse than first day I came into it—My Mother & many other unavoidable incomerances has held me here and I am as busy as you Ever se an Old fellow trying to work my way out—& as happy in doing it as I shall ever Ever be any where—No doubt my great concern at this time & will be is to get some sootable place for you and your Brothers—us all—to settle down—I want you to be in some place whare your turn of feelings & manners can be well met with associates—& I fully Expect to affect my purpose if I live long Enough

You some time ago mentioned your regret at having attempted to learn Music—I want you to persevere in the practice of music and in all other accomplishments that may be useful—or Gratifying to you & to your friends in your intercourse through life

The Mind is verry much like any piece of Building or workmanship it requires mony members sootably arranged to give proper gracefulness & semetry to a building in like maner the mind requires certin accomplishments to give that sootable Ease—Necessary to its refinement—Music has a happy tendency to soothe the unregular & bad Pashions of our nature I want you to learn music well—to learn all other Branches well that you have taken—learn to walk well—to stand Erect—learn to feel free & to feel well & easy—learn to wear

a free & Ease Expression—and never forget the Modesty and Gentle cartion so necessary in a Lady to give her an independent and unquestionable Character

Much has been said in your favor since you have been at Wilbraham—if you have done right and acted deservingly it has been Just what you owe to your self & to your Creator and to the world—of corse you know we are all gratified to hear favorably from you—& I hope you will Ever regard your Character more than your life—and it is well for your Ladies to be verry cautious particularly when well spoken of be Ever on your Guard in all respects—A Good character is of Great Vallue Consequently it requires much attention to retain it—The Higher The character the greater the responcibility the more is Expected of the character or person—& consequently the more you have to learn & to know—to meet the Expectations & wishes of your friends.

All this is nothing hard to do—The way to keep out of Evil is never to get into it—I wish that all persons knew the worth of true Female Virtue & the Blessings of Female accomplishment—how much better is a Lady prepared to stand croses—Loss affliction—poverty when she has a good character & Good information than is one ignorant of the Vallue of any & Every thing Even her Own Boddy & soul—what a blessing is true Piety to a young Lady—Bracing her infirmities & preserving her mind from Extravagant desires how many Beautiful young Ladies are lost to all usefulness by a lack of proper information—There is now a perfect Waste of human flesh here in this verry way the young Ladies come into Villages to School—They learn a little of one thing a little of another and a little on Piano—they return to their country homes knowing nothing but a scoff at persons who they think inferior to themselves & with nothing in their heads but foolish pride They enter upon life they know how to Dress their Bodies according to fashion and all is done They cant—Write—they wont read—They are something they cant tell what—They Keep Clear of Poor people & follow after rich people—& so try go & such children they raise here are Just such

as could be Expected from such parents.

I have been truly sorry to hear Devereux health in such a precarious fix—I hope he will remain still till he is better or so perfectly well as to be able to attend to Business I wish you use your persuasion with him get him to stay at Wilbraham till he is perfectly well—I have written to him to that affect if his constitution wont stand the cold I want him to come home tho would rather he would work in Boston till next summer—at which time I will come on I will then see him I conclude for the Best

Nothing but Religion is the theme in Milton now—The Greatest revival I Ever Knew in the south 95 or 7 persons in Milton professed conversion There came an Englishman originally a sailor But now a Baptist Preacher—he has been Preaching Every night & day for one month & his meeting has resulted in the profeshion of the above number—I truly hope they may be faithful to the End

Your mother is still quite well but complaining a little—She wants to see you very badly & so do I—but I am not allowing myself to get very uneasy till the time comes—I intend to get you a Piano and am in hopes you will learn to play on the Guitar so so to amuse yourself while traveling perhaps on the Broad Ocean.

Sofrona Jeffryes is dead Nathans Daughter—Miss Hawkins has not been here this year—Miss Esther Fair is thinking of moving again from No Durhams—Mrs Patey Smith is still moderately well—and remembers you as usual—Nothing new in Milton worth attention—when you come home you must expect cool Comfort so far as human intercourse is concerned—There is nothing here but to make a little money & that but little to induce us to stay here—Tho with all this you will Enjoy yourself well as any where for a while—

I have mailed a check to Mr. Ray Mond for about \$285 — which is to meet your Expences & a part of Devereux Tho not Enough for Devereux & not wanting him by any means to leave Wilbraham till he gets well I want to send him some money & must by the time he will be able to go

The check to Mr. Raymond comes on Tuesday mail Your

mother sends her love to you & says she is going to send you a Christmas Gift

From your Affectionate Father
Thos Day.

In another letter to his daughter, he said:

“I see from Mr. Merrick’s opinion you are in the confidence and standing as a lady in your department. His only remark is you spend too much money and Mr. Raymond gives you a high character with the only fault of not being fond of hard or useful studies but in light and lady-like accomplishments you improve to great advantage. I’ve reason to be thankful that you improve in something and am truly glad to see you are prudent and highly respectable in your conduct. Nothing can more comfort a parent than prudence and a high sense of honor in a daughter. I have lately been much perplexed with the conduct of Devereux, and while I esteem the family regard you cherish for your brother, I see you labor under a great mistake as to the causes of his depravity. In your letter to your mother, you say: ‘It is not to be wondered at that D is so depraved when you consider he has been raised in a shop of the meanest of God’s creation and that, or the illusion of being born in the oppressive South, has had a miserable influence on our family.’ You greatly mistake there. Devereux was worse when he came from Clinton by a great deal than when he left home and you greatly mistake the character of this shop and the hands. There is not a more respectable house of the kind in my knowledge and no hands as laborers have a higher credit than ours. Devereux, I am sorry to know, was the worst boy I ever had to manage in my life in most of his ways. He was not so public in some of his follies as some others but his habits as an example among boys is coarse.

“I wish young people only could know the value of time and money. The fool squanders away his money for things he does not need and fails to pay for such necessities as sustains his worthless life, lives poor. He never fails to take his hives before his honey matures.”

In a communication addressed to the Editor, Day’s great grand-nephew said in 1942:

Atlanta, Ga., Jan. 13, 1942
Dr. Carter G. Woodson, Director
Journal of Negro History
1538 Ninth Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C.

Dear Dr. Woodson:

Southern white admirers of my great grandfather (maternal), Thomas Day, have made all of the researches and I do not have even a piece of the furniture for which he is so famous. I have seen much of it in wealthy North Carolina homes and am told that much of it has brought fabulous prices on the northern antique market.

I was in Milton last spring a year ago and was received most cordially by the old aristocratic families, now poor, who have old rotting mansions and formal gardens “gone to pot” but still have antique furniture made by Thomas Day which they consider now their most valuable possessions. I was shown old receipts signed by Thomas Day and told intimate stories of his close association with the white families on a basis of friendship and equality. Stories of him are the prize stories of the town among the oldsters and they take great pride in telling of the wealth that he amassed and of the property that he owned in the heart of the town which was laid out by the same man who laid out the city of Washington. Thomas Day, for instance, owned the old Tavern in which George Washington and Lafayette were entertained when they passed through the town. The building is still standing and is now a cheap apartment house but is still an architectural gem and is in rather good condition.

I have photo-static copies of two letters which he wrote to his daughter, Mary Ann, who was attending Wilbraham Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, sent there from a white private academy in North Carolina after the law began to harass Free Negroes in the state.

Mary Ann, Thomas, Jr., (mother’s father) and Devereau, the second son, were all at Wilbraham when these letters were written. Devereau was a handsome blade who finally ran away with the white daughter of one of the best families and was given his share

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tian affairs offered sufficient pretext for England to increase its power in Egypt. Further restrictions imposed upon the Khedive reduced him to a figurehead. Lord Cromer sent by the British to take charge of affairs as British Commissioner became the de facto ruler of Egypt. He instituted significant reforms such as the equalization of the burden of taxation which had fallen very heavily on the Egyptian peasantry. He recognized the administration of justice, built important irrigation works, including the famous Aswan Dam, constructed railroads, and established factories which assured great economic prosperity and assured funds to reduce the national debt and avoid bankruptcy. These achievements crowned Lord Cromer as one of the most successful agents of economic imperialism.

The pacification of Egypt, however, had not yet been achieved. In 1892 Abbas Hilmi, of strong nationalistic tendencies, became khedive and for a time made changes prejudicial to the interest of Britain. In the meantime Marchand with a French force occupied Fashoda which the British claimed as their territory, and Kichner with a military force had difficulty in forcing the French commander to leave. The French avoided war by withdrawing in 1899 on the condition that the British would agree to their expansion elsewhere in Africa. France recognized England as the "protector" of Egypt in return for respecting her rights in Morocco. Other nations recognized this agreement and relations between France and England improved, Egypt recovered control of her finances, and they defeated the Turks in their effort to extend their jurisdiction in the Zinai Peninsula. While the Egyptians did not deny that the country had prospered under British control, they could not tolerate the thought of being forever under the domination of any foreign power.

The khedive encouraged the growth of nationalistic sentiment. The malcontents, therefore organized opposition to the established

regime. They held assemblies to devise means for their deliverance, edited newspapers devoted to this as their ideal, and proclaimed their position to the civilized world. From these centers of protest went certain radicals who precipitated riots and killed a considerable number of the British, but these outbreaks were put down by authority and punished with great severity as in the case of the Denwashi attack in 1906. In 1913, therefore, the British endeavored to pacify the country by allowing the establishment of a representative assembly with partial control over taxes, but the Commissioner was still supreme in the premises.

Egypt reached an important turning point in 1914 when the Turkish Government entered the First World War on the side of the Central powers. Dominated by Britain, Egypt easily declared its independence of Turkey and became a British protectorate. The nationalistic outbreak against Britain in Egypt in 1919, however, complicated matters which the British handled diplomatically. Then came the investigation by the Milner Mission. Since that time the British have been considerate enough to grant Egypt gradually increasing authority until it has become nominally at least an independent nation except retaining the right to guard the Suez Canal.

Thomas Day and His Family

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of the property by his father said to have been \$100,000.00.

With the war came loss in status among Day's white friends, and debts. No one could afford fine furniture anymore. Thomas Day died and Thomas, Junior, could not carry on the business successfully.

There are many stories about his Negro slaves and his white bond servants apprenticed to him by their parents. Some of the people now in the town tell with pride that their parents were "Old Tom Day's" servants.

I have a copy of *The Antiquarian*, Edward Wenham, Editor, 461

Eighth Avenue, New York, N. Y., September, 1928 with an article, Thomas Day—Craftsman by Mrs. Caroline Pell Gunter.

Some of the articles written by these present day white researchers do not accord Thomas Day the place of equality and superior wealth that he admittedly achieved in his community and state before the war.

Sincerely,
W. A. Robinson, Director
Secondary School Study

"Go Thou and Do Likewise"

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before the management. The occasion offers a fine opportunity for the public to follow the example of Morgan College in showing its appreciation for the achievements of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

The Study of Negro Life and History

BY ADOLPHUS DEAN

Admission to membership in this Association connects you with the only scientific organization, primarily concerned with the preservation of the records of the Negro race. The objectives of the Association are the collection of sociological and historical documents, and the promotion of studies in Negro Life and History. The Association has an intelligent constituency of men and women of both races in this country and abroad. They are unanimous in expressing the opinion that they derive so much benefit from the study of the publications of the Association that they consider them indispensable. The Association is not endowed, but it receives donations of varying amounts from persons interested in scientific research and philanthropic enterprise.

The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History was organized by Carter G. Woodson with five persons . . . three of whom are still living. The organization was incorporated under the laws of the District of Columbia, Oct. 2, 1915.

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