

Freeborn Furniture Maker

Thomas Day Symposium to be Presented in Yanceyville November 10-11

A two-day symposium, "Navigating the Labyrinth of Color: The World of Thomas Day," will be presented on November 10 and 11 in Yanceyville. This symposium will bring together academic scholars, elementary and secondary

school teachers and other interested individuals to explore together the world of free African Americans in the antebellum upper South, through the lens of one particular individual: Thomas Day. The symposium is being hosted by the

Thomas Day Education Project, african American history education and research project based in Durham, in partnership with the Caswell County Historical Association. All presentations and discussions are open to the public free of charge but pre-registration is required.

Thomas Day was a freeborn successful cabinetmaker (furniture maker) who lived and worked in southeast Virginia and the north central Piedmont of North Carolina during the first half of the 19th century. He defies easy categorizations. He was a man of color, but also one of the wealthiest businessmen in Caswell County, North Carolina. He owned slaves, yet his children were sent north to

be educated at a school with abolitionist sympathies.

His life and the lives of his brother, wife, children, and ancestors, all delineate the maze of obstacles and choices, political realities and personal aspirations navigated by all free persons of African descent at that time. Many fine examples of his furniture and architectural decoration remain as a testament to his artistry and the recognition he received in his day in museums and private homes primarily in North Carolina and Virginia but also across the United States.

Internationally recognized scholar, Dr. Ira Berlin from the University of Maryland, will present the keynote address "Thomas Day and the Free Black Experience in the Antebellum South" in the historic courtroom on Friday evening. Two of Dr. Berlin's many books, *Slaves Without Masters* and *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, exemplify his place as one of our most respected and significant scholars in the history of free and enslaved blacks.

"Thomas Day, American" a visual presentation by Thomas Day Education Project (TDEP) Executive Director Laurel Sneed will open the symposium and highlight major events in the life of Thomas Day as discovered in the extensive research conducted by the project.

Nationally known scholars in the field of African American history and art will lead the exploration of the world of Thomas Day. Scholars and their topics include:

- Dr. Juanita Holland, Independent Scholar, University Park, Md. - "Cultural Emancipation: The Free Black Artist and Artisan, North and South"

- Dr. Suzanne Lebsock, Professor of History at the University of Washington-Seattle - "Free Women of Color in the Upper South"

- Mr. Jon Prown, Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee, Wis. - "Thomas Day's Furniture and the Problem of Interpretation"

- Dr. Marie Tyler-McGraw, National Park Service, Washington, D.C. - "Race after the Revolution"

- Dr. Richard Powell, Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University - "Symposium Overview"

Other presentations will include:

- Janie Leigh Carter, Independent Scholar, Providence, N.C. - "The Other Day: John, Brother of Thomas"

- Dr. G.C. Waldrep, Independent Scholar, Halifax, Va. - "Choosing Worlds: Thomas Day, His Neighbors, and Mixed-Race Identity in the Old South"

Together with Thomas Day Fellows, a group of eighteen dedicated elementary and secondary North Carolina school teachers who are engaged in a two-year course of study in African American history through 1865, conference participants will explore how Thomas Day reflects the varying and complex experiences of free African Americans in the nineteenth century.

The series is designed and organized by the Thomas Day Education Project, a project of the North Carolina Central University Foundation which received a



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