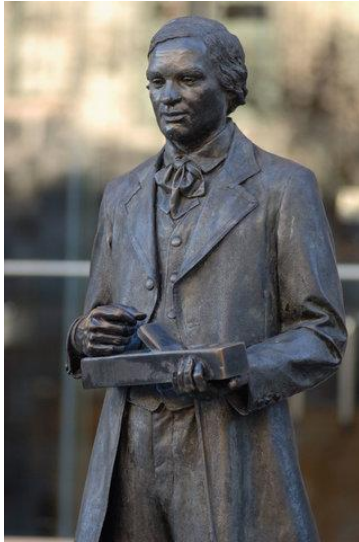


Thomas Day Tour

At a time when most Southern African-Americans were slaves, the leading furniture maker in the region was a free black man who produced beautiful, high-quality pieces with a unique style.



Gaining new acclaim in the 21st century, Thomas Day's works have been exhibited at the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh. But you can see some of his best pieces - chairs, beds, bureaus, wardrobes, stairs, door and window framing and mantels - in Halifax County, Va., and at his shop and home in nearby Milton, N.C.

From the 1820s to the 1850s, Day, his employees and slaves turned out large volumes of furniture and at one point he was the biggest furniture manufacturer in the North Carolina. He was famous for his designs that included undulating shapes and spiraling forms with S-curves. The governor of North Carolina bought 37 of his pieces for the statehouse, giving Day an amazing two-month deadline.

Day was one of the wealthiest people in the region until the Panic of 1857, when his business went to pieces. He had overextended himself and was unable to collect from debtors. Though his shop survived, his business was wiped out by the Civil War. He died in 1861.

For a tour of Day's marvelous works, start with the Halifax County Visitor Center at 1180 Bill Tuck Highway (Route 58) in South Boston, where you can find maps and other information. Then go to the lodging of your choice:

Oak Grove Plantation Bed and Breakfast is in South Boston. The original plantation house was built in 1820, the same year that Day started his business in Milton. Oak Grove has three mantels and several pieces of furniture which are similar to Thomas Day's work. It also has baseboards, windows, doors, stairs, newel, sidelights and transom which all resemble Day's early handmade work. Largely because of their location, they can probably be attributed to Day's shop in Milton. The innkeeper can take you on a 3 ½ mile hike to show you another house, now a storage facility, with Thomas Day's architectural details. For more information: www.oakgroveplantation.com 434-575-7137.

Breezy Oaks Farm, in Alton, is a country residence surrounded by farmland. According to family tradition the house features double leaf doors built by Thomas Day and a mantel in the living room that displayed many of the techniques Day employed. A large fieldstone chimney on the north side is thought to have been built by a traveling group of free black stone masons. The original section of the house, built around 1800, is one of the few remaining planked log houses in the county. (18 miles from visitor center)

<http://www.virginia.org/Listings/PlacesToStay/BreezyOaksFarmhouse/>; breezyoaks@gamewood.net 434-822-5841 (please leave a message).



Villa Cathedral Country Home Bed and Breakfast, in Alton, is a 1920s farmhouse with a modern wing, and only five miles from Day's shop. Once called Eight Oaks, the house has been in the innkeeper's family since it was built. The Villa Cathedral has two Thomas Day doors. (20 miles from visitor center)
villacathedral@gmail.com 434-822-8333.



Woodside Inn, Milton, N.C. Thomas Day, who lived in Milton, built the carved newel post and decorative stair rail in the entrance hall. The cabinetmaker also handcrafted all the fireplace mantels, niches, trim work and more. The inside panels of the doors were painted in his "faux painting" style; making ordinary wood look like mahogany. The Greek revival style home was built in 1838 by the Caleb Hazard Richmond family.



That evening would be a good time to visit Virginia International Raceway, where you can eat at the Oak Tree Tavern and see its two mantels and a staircase built by Day. The entrance is made up of Day's double-leaf-with-panels doors, surrounded by a large transom and sidelights, which are contained within ornate fluted pilasters. The staircase has Day's curved step brackets. A Day-built mantel is in the ladies' room.

Day Two:

Visit the Thomas Day House in nearby Milton, N.C., a few miles south of the Virginia border. Restored in 1989 after a fire, Day's home and workshop contains much of his furniture, mantels and tools of the era. Two films also can be seen of his life and his contributions. The museum is often open on Saturday and Sunday afternoons and by appointment at other times. If you would like to visit this museum, have your bed & breakfast call and arrange a time for you.

Another stop on the trip: The South Boston-Halifax County Museum in South Boston has a Thomas Day sofa as well as other interesting exhibits while it is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday ([434-572-9200](tel:434-572-9200)). Both the Bistro 1888 and Molasses Grill are nearby for a great meal. The Molasses Grill has a Thomas Day sideboard on display.

Thomas Day museum <http://www.miltonnc.com/day.html>

~Note that the Thomas Day works mentioned in this article are in the style of the cabinetmaker but have not been confirmed or documented by an original bill of sale. Day did not sign any of his works.

