

A Cabinetmaker's Apprentice in a Busy Shop

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In January 3, 1839, Thomas Day traveled from his Milton home to the Caswell County Courthouse in nearby Yanceyville. Court officials had drawn up an indenture for the signature of Day, a highly respected free man of color and talented master cabinetmaker. This contract would determine the future of another free young man of color: Archibald Clark, a 10-year-old orphan. It is unknown just how Archibald had come to be an orphan or whether Day had previous contact with his family. But the boy's fate lay in the hands of George Williamson, a Caswell County court official who was also a supporter of Day.

North Carolina law required all orphans and children of unmarried parents to be bound to a master or mistress through indenture, until the age of 21. Many were placed in homes as servants who cooked and cleaned. Court officials placed others who showed intelligence as apprentices with artisans, so they could learn a trade such as cabinetmaking, house building, blacksmithing, tailoring, or silversmithing. An apprentice did not represent entirely free labor. A master or mistress had to pay \$500 to the county, as well as provide the apprentice with a yearly allowance of food, clothing, and lodging. According to the court papers, Day promised to "teach and instruct" Archibald in "the art and mystery of a cabinetmaker" and to make sure the boy would receive "sufficient diet, washing, lodging and apparel, fitting for an apprentice; and also all other things necessary, both in sickness and in health." Day taught him the "three R's" of reading, writing, and arithmetic. In turn, Archibald was required to "serve his master faithfully," obey "his lawful commands," and "not at any time absent himself from his said master's service without leave." The young man had no choice but to go home with Day and labor in his busy shop.

A Virginia native, Day (1801–1861) owned a very successful cabinet shop where there was no shortage of work. Day in 1827 had moved his business from Hillsborough to Milton, after buying Lot 19 right on Main Street for \$550. Why did Day choose Milton? The town is located in northern Caswell County on the North Carolina–Virginia line. During the antebellum period that began in about 1820, it was the site of a tobacco inspection warehouse and served as a center of commerce for at least six counties along the Dan River. Especially during the 1840s and 1850s, the bright-leaf tobacco boom created a wealthy planter and merchant class in the area. Several dozen merchants, tradesmen, artisans, and mechanics offered their services in Milton.

Owning the work of talented artisans like Day offered proof of a family’s success and social standing. Day supplied elite customers with fashionable furniture such as tables, sofas, lounges, bureaus, and beds. He created fancy woodwork to adorn their Greek Revival–style plantation homes, such as newel posts and brackets for staircases, mantelpieces, and trim molding for doors, niches, and windows. Day became one of Milton’s most successful businessmen. By 1850, only 36 men in Caswell County (all of them white) were wealthier.



Archibald Clark spent 11 years as an apprentice to Thomas Day, whose busy Caswell County shop turned out fine furniture, architectural woodwork, and even coffins. Modern Collectors prize Day’s work. Some of his furniture displays Greek Revival elements (like scrolls and pillars) popular in the antebellum era on everything from buildings to needlework patterns and tableware. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

Day’s workshop resembled no other in the Piedmont. As a man of color, he owned the shop and directed the work of white and mixed-race cabinetmakers, journeymen (workers with more skills and experience than apprentices), and apprentices, as well as enslaved African Americans. Race sharply divided North Carolina society at the time, defining freedom and opportunity. State law defined a person of color to be anyone who had at least one out of eight great-grandparents who was nonwhite. These people had either African American or American Indian ancestry, or they were mixed-race individuals, often called “mulattos.” A woman’s status, free or enslaved, determined the status of her children. According to census records, at least 22,732 free people of color lived in North Carolina in 1840, compared to 484,870 whites and 245,817 enslaved people.

Laws and social restrictions limited the “freedom” of free people of color, regardless of their economic status. They could not, for example, attend public schools, possess alcohol or firearms, marry slaves, travel outside their home county without a license, or testify in court against whites. The 1835 State Constitutional Convention took away their right to vote. Both whites and enslaved African Americans wondered whether free people of color would support slaves who tried to escape or revolt. But free people of color *could* own property, including land and slaves.

Researchers have been able to use many letters, receipts, court documents, newspaper ads, census records, and other evidence to piece together the story of Day, his shop, and the workforce that included Archibald. Families valued Day’s work itself so greatly that much of it also survives. We know that, over the years, Archibald was not the sole apprentice in the shop. In 1838, for example, Day hired a group of white cabinetmakers from the Moravian town of Salem. Jacob Siewers, a master craftsman, brought his brother, John, and three apprentices, Augustus Fogle, Davidson Cook, and Sandford Waggeman. Fogle kept a diary where he wrote that “Mr. Day . . . a free negro . . . was a good cabinet maker, owned three slaves himself, and worked some fifteen hands both white and colored.”

As master cabinetmaker, Day met with white clients to determine the specific item desired, its construction, and its finish, as well as the final price. He managed each step of the construction process, supervising—at the time of Archibald’s indenture—the work of five other craftsmen (one black and four white). Orders were pouring in from the neighboring counties of Person, Rockingham, and Orange in North Carolina, and Halifax, Pittsylvania, and Henry in Virginia. Archibald’s apprenticeship was exactly what Day needed to help meet demand.

As an apprentice in a cabinet shop during this time, Archibald had very little skill or knowledge of the complex tools or painstaking process used to make furniture by hand. He began by being a “gofer”—retrieving items such as tools, messages, food, and water—for the adult cabinetmakers. He then learned how to use an ax and took on the responsibility of cutting firewood for use in the shop. Once he became familiar with the shop and its workings, he progressed to helping with some of the equipment, specifically the great wheel lathe used to cut spindles and balusters (parts for staircases). The apprentice stood and turned a crank that spun a very tall wheel. The wheel was connected by a rope to the lathe, where a square post was placed horizontally and spun at a high speed. The cabinetmaker used a chisel to cut the posts into a variety of round designs. In 1825 Day had advertised in a Hillsborough newspaper that he could provide low- and tall-post bedsteads. While he skillfully cut the shapes, workers like Archibald provided the muscle to power the equipment.



Antebellum cabinetmakers used a variety of tools, including these tools used for joining the parts of a piece of furniture. The probate inventory taken in 1832 after the death of John Day Sr. (father of Thomas Day and also a cabinetmaker) listed such items as 29 moulding planes, 10 bench planes, 24 chisels, 10 gouges, seven kinds of saws, six augers, and two screwdrivers. Image courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

As the years passed, Archibald learned to use a variety of tools. Day began by teaching his apprentice how to use a carpenter's square and marking gauge to measure and mark the wood before cutting. Archibald then worked with simple hand- or bow saws that cut wood into rough shapes. He learned which planes to use to cut and smooth the surface of the wood in order to prepare it for its final finish. He learned how to swing a hammer, too. A cabinetmaker must learn a variety of techniques to join, or put together pieces of, wood. Day took care to give Archibald special instructions on which wood joints to use for specific forms such as chairs, tables, and different kinds of cabinets. Day was known to use very intricate and delicate dovetail joints. Dovetailing is a way of cutting notches into two boards and wedging them together to join the sides of a drawer, for example, without the need of a screw, nail, or glue. Some pieces required the use of screws, and Archibald learned how to use a hand-powered machine that cut screws.

In time, he mastered a special veneer saw that cut very thin pieces of expensive wood, such as mahogany or rosewood. These veneers were glued on top of a cheaper secondary wood like yellow pine or poplar. At the end of his apprenticeship, Archibald had learned how to cut pieces that were only an eighth- to a fourth-of-an-inch thick. He also knew how to prepare the hide glue that most cabinetmakers used to apply veneers in intricate designs. Some of the shop's customers wanted furniture finished with a "faux" style. This meant that workers painted a native or less-expensive wood to appear as if it were a more-expensive one. Archibald studied different pigments of paint. He learned how to mix and apply them in patterns that imitated fancy mahogany and rich rosewood. He also learned to repair broken furniture for customers who could not afford to purchase new items and to take special orders from farmers for items such as plow stocks. Day made custom-ordered coffins, too. Archibald learned to construct them "with all necessary care and attention."

On January 27, 1848, Day needed more space for his shop, as well as to house his family and laborers. He bought the Union Tavern, a prominent brick structure built in 1818 at the center of Milton's main thoroughfare. Day paid \$1,050 for the large two-story building and soon added on to it. (Today a group is working to restore the building as a museum.) By 1850 there were 13 cabinetmakers in Caswell County and 377 in North Carolina, nearly three-fourths of them located in the Piedmont and nearly all of them white. Day's shop, though, was producing nearly 12 percent of furniture made in the state. In 1853 he would take part in the state's industrial advances by upgrading his shop to a steam power operation. He bought a six-horsepower steam engine and new woodworking machines that included a planer and specialty saws. Previously, water had powered the "power" tools. The new machinery allowed the shop to produce more furniture in shorter time.



In 1848 Thomas Day bought this Milton building, shown in a 1940 photograph, to use as his shop and home. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.

Archibald’s apprenticeship lasted 11 years, ending on his 21st birthday. As a master, Day did more than meet the indenture contract’s terms of teaching him the skills necessary to make fine furniture: he also provided him with a new suit of clothes and a set of cabinetmaking tools. As an orphan, Archibald was given an incredible opportunity to work with one of North Carolina’s most talented artisans. Day’s guidance, instructions, and tools gave the young man the means to move from his apprenticeship to life as a journeyman, the next level of cabinetmaker. We are not sure what became of him. But in time, Archibald may even have opened his own shop.

**Patricia Phillips Marshall, who joined the staff of the North Carolina Museum of History in 1992, passed away on September 4, 2010. She served as the curator of decorative arts at the museum and the curator of decorative arts for the North Carolina Executive Mansion. She did extensive research on Thomas Day. Her curation work included the museum exhibit that coincided with this issue of THJH—Behind the Veneer: Thomas Day, Master Cabinetmaker. Her publications included coauthoring Thomas Day: Master Craftsman and Free Man of Color, published by UNC Press in spring 2010.*