

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 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 a card table 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. *For more information:* Call: 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. (Breezy Oaks Farm is 18 miles from the Visitor Center) *For more information:* E-mail: [breezyoaks@gamewood.net](mailto:breezyoaks@gamewood.net) or call: 434-822-5841 (please leave a message).

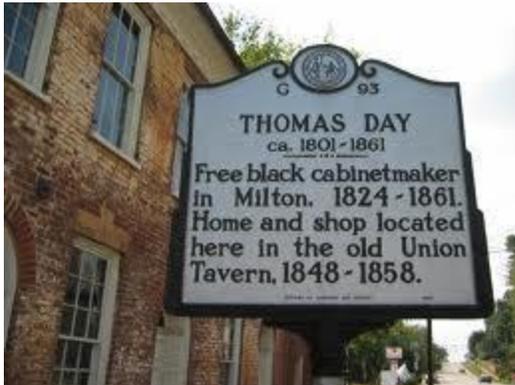




That evening would be a good time to visit [Virginia International Raceway](#), where you can eat at the **Oak Tree Tavern** and see its two mantels and a staircase built by Day. The entrance is made up of Day's double-leaf-with-panels doors, surrounded by a large transom and sidelights, which are contained 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.

*Looking for a dining experience?* Both the [Bistro 1888](#) and [Molasses Grill](#) are nearby for a great meal. Molasses Grill has a Thomas Day sideboard on display.



*~ 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.*