

## **Overview of the Free Black Experience: Thomas Day's World**

### **Being in the Middle and Walking the Fragile Color Line**

In nineteenth-century America before Emancipation, whites were on top of the social hierarchy and African American slaves were on the bottom. But there was a third, much smaller group, in the middle: “free” African Americans. Thomas Day was part of this “in between” group. In his world, moral character, ability, intelligence, and even class and gender were not as significant as *skin color*. Like other “free people of color,” Day and his family walked a fragile line between the enslaved population that represented the majority of blacks in the South and members of the white community on whom they often relied for patronage and safety. Due to their unique “in-between” status, free blacks were subject to laws to control their activities and restrict their freedoms in all southern states. As tensions mounted between slaveholding and free states in the United States, free African Americans became a focal point for abolitionist and pro-slavery rhetoric.

### **Rebelling in Virginia and Its Consequences**

The Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831 ignited the suspicion toward free blacks that was already brewing in a society where being black was supposed to mean being enslaved. Nat Turner, a self-educated slave preacher, grew up in Southampton County in southern Virginia at the same time Thomas Day was growing up in neighboring Sussex County. Turner's slave revolt left nearly sixty white people dead. The immediate effect of the rebellion was violent retaliation throughout the South against African Americans and free blacks were especially targeted. Whenever white power and its chief institution of slavery were challenged, those blacks who already had their freedom were scapegoated. They were no one's property and were viewed by many whites as expendable. The long-term effect of Nat Turner was new laws further restricting all African Americans in the South—both free and enslaved.

Historian Ira Berlin points out that the laws restricting free blacks were so numerous that they could not be consistently enforced with the number of law enforcement officials. In his view, the laws functioned more as “threats” designed to keep free blacks in their place. Historian Mel Ely similarly observes that although the white South disapproved of free blacks *as a concept* they could never decide, or agree on, what to do about them as flesh-and-blood people. There was always diversity of opinion and action among southern whites vis-à-vis free blacks, even though the basic operative assumption was that whites would rule society.

### **Growing up Free and Black**

For Thomas Day (1801 to ca. 1861), see the “Brief Biography of Thomas Day” handout

In the early 19th century, many free black families, including the Days, left Virginia to acquire better, cheaper farm land but also to escape the increasing number of discriminatory laws, or black codes that targeted free blacks. Some moved to northern cities like Philadelphia and Boston, which had established free black populations. A small number left the country. Thomas Day's brother, John Day, became a Baptist minister who eventually immigrated to Liberia, a colony established for free blacks on the west coast of Africa. There he became a missionary, statesman, and signer of Liberia's Declaration of

### ***Man in the Middle: Thomas Day and the Free Black Experience***

Independence. Many more Virginian free blacks, however, migrated to other states, and a considerable number migrated across the state line to North Carolina.

### **Clinging to Family and Community**

Census data indicate that many free blacks in Southern Virginia migrated as extended families and re-established their communities in rural areas of North Carolina in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The networks formed by these communities played an important social and economic role in the lives of free blacks. Friends and extended relatives provided protection and security. These networks also fostered mobility and free blacks in these networks helped one another find employment opportunities. Christianity played a very prominent role in the lives of many free blacks. Thomas Day and his brother John Day were very religious and their strong Christian faith enabled them to cope with the racial inequities and injustices of their world.

### **Using the Power of Whites**

Free blacks in the South benefited from relationships with powerful members of the white communities in towns where they lived and worked. For example, in 1830, Day obtained permission from the state legislature for his wife to migrate into North Carolina to live with him. She had been forbidden from doing so by an 1827 law that restricted free blacks from immigrating into the state. Day used his influence to motivate sixty-one prominent white citizens of Milton to sign a petition on the Days' behalf. In addition, Attorney General Romulus Saunders, a prominent resident of Caswell, attached a statement to the petition describing Day as "an excellent mechanic, industrious, honest and sober in his habits." It was very useful for free blacks to have whites with power and influence on your side.

### **Supporting Education**

Education was highly prized by free blacks. It provided not only marketable knowledge and skills but the confidence needed to survive as a second-class citizen with restricted freedoms. Educated free blacks were often involved in helping to establish schools for others of their race. There was a strong education tradition in the Day family. Thomas and his brother John were educated by Quaker tutors. Quakers in Virginia were anti-slavery and supportive of free black rights including their right to education before the Revolution. John Day Jr., as a preacher, missionary, statesman, and educator, founded several schools in Liberia.

Thomas Day sent his children to Wesleyan Academy, an abolitionist-led school in Wilbraham, Massachusetts where he was on very close terms with the school's leaders. Mary Ann Day, Thomas Day's daughter, founded an underground school for recently freed black children in Wilmington, North Carolina, before the fall of the Confederacy. She and her husband, Rev. James Chresfield, were later actively involved in establishing other educational institutions for African Americans. Thomas Day, Jr. married Annie Washington of Washington, D.C., a noted social activist and educator who served as the principal of the Stevens School, a premier black institution the nation's capital. Their daughter (Thomas Day's grand-daughter) Annie Day Shepard, married James E. Shepard, the founder of North Carolina Central University, the first state-supported liberal arts college for blacks in the United States. Annie Day Shepard played a very active role in the first decades of that institution.

## **Free Blacks and the Abolitionist Movement**

White Americans like William Lloyd Garrison, the founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society and publisher of the *Liberator*, an anti-slavery newspaper receive much attention for their role in ending slavery. However, historian, Manisha Sinha, an expert on black abolitionism, observes that African Americans were the backbone of the movement for their own liberation. She notes that, “the people who were on the cutting edge of the abolitionist movement in terms of developing a program and new tactics, seem to have been African Americans. William L. Garrison got his ideas *against* Liberian colonization and for immediate (rather than gradual abolition) from African Americans.”

There was not only a handful of black abolitionists but thousands—and some were in the South. One of the most famous abolitionist southerners was David Walker from Wilmington, North Carolina. His widely disseminated “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” described in powerful language the immorality and hypocrisy of slavery and the need for its immediate end by any means necessary. (See the *Crafting Freedom* lesson on [David Walker](#)) According to Sinha, there were blacks before Walker who expressed similarly strong and aggressive abolitionist ideas as Walker’s. Some free blacks who remained in the South, like Thomas Day, maintained ties with free black communities in the North. Free black northern communities supported abolitionism, although there could not be open support in the south because of the risk of imprisonment or even death. Sinha asserts that the black abolitionist movement in the South “went underground,” and did not re-emerge until after Emancipation. Because of Thomas Day’s strong ties with black and white abolitionists in the North, it is likely he had anti-slavery views that he could not openly express in the South.

## **Refusing to Accept the Hand They Were Dealt**

Historian Ira Berlin, observed that the social and economic realities of the first half of the 19th century seemed to doom Thomas Day and other free people of color. Yet the amazing thing is that Thomas Day and his family and others like him grew in number and grew in prosperity. And in doing so they transcended the logic of the American experience... “[T]hey simply made history, rather than being made by it.... [T]hey refused to accept the position which was being dealt out to them.”

[Note: all quotes by historians are from interviews and comments made during the development of a script for the documentary film-in-progress on Thomas Day.]