

◆◆◆◆◆ NORTH CAROLINA ENTREPRENEURS ◆◆◆◆◆

THOMAS DAY, MASTER CRAFTSMAN

- ◆ **Learning Outcome:** *Students can describe the obstacles that Thomas Day overcame to*
◆ *build a successful business as a free black man living in North Carolina in the decades*
◆ *before the Civil War.* ◆



Statue of Thomas Day

Entrepreneurs are people who use creativity, intelligence, perseverance, courage, and hard work to overcome challenges and solve problems. Thomas Day was an entrepreneur who overcame enormous obstacles and built a successful business in the early 1800s. All entrepreneurs must adapt to challenging circumstances and overcome difficulties, but Thomas Day stands out even among North Carolina's most successful entrepreneurs. He managed to build a successful business as a free black man living in North Carolina at a time when slavery was legal.

Mr. Day became a famous **cabinetmaker** in North Carolina. A cabinetmaker is a person who makes cabinets and other kinds of furniture for the home. Mr. Day was known for his **craftsmanship** — the ability to carefully design and make products that were both beautiful and useful.

Thomas Day was born in Virginia in 1801. He was a free black person at a time when most black people in the United States were enslaved. His father, John Day, Sr., moved to North Carolina, where

VOCABULARY WORDS

- ◆ Cabinetmaker
- ◆ Craftsmanship
- ◆ Liberty
- ◆ Petition

he taught his two sons how to make furniture. In 1825, Thomas Day and his brother started a business in Milton, North Carolina. After Thomas' brother left the United States to become a Christian pastor in Liberia (a country in Africa), Thomas ran the furniture business by himself.

Mr. Day had amazing talent. He designed and built chairs, tables, dressers, fireplace mantels (the shelves over a fireplace), church pews, bookshelves, and decorations for staircases. Mr. Day also gave his customers advice about how to decorate the rooms in which his furniture would be used. For example, he once helped the members of a debating club at the University of North Carolina decide how to arrange the furniture in their debating hall, and then he built all of the furniture for the room.

Many people wanted to buy Mr. Day's furniture. Gradually, Mr. Day built the largest cabinet shop in North Carolina and became a wealthy man. Despite his wealth, as a free black man living in a state that allowed slavery, Mr. Day's **liberty** (freedom) was restricted in many ways. For example, in 1830, Mr. Day wanted to bring his wife, Aquilla Wilson Day, from Virginia to North Carolina, but a North Carolina law, which had been passed a few years earlier, made it illegal for a free black person from another state to move to North Carolina.

Fortunately, people in Milton took action to reunite Mr. and Mrs. Day. Sixty-eight of Mr. Day's white neighbors signed a **petition** (a request) and sent it to the North Carolina General Assembly. The petition described Day as "a remarkably sober, steady and industrious man, a high-minded,

