



# SAPFM Chronicles

A LIFE INFLUENCED BY THE SPIRIT OF THOMAS DAY

JOHN BORLEY, *Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

*Teaching African-American history and culture — “incredibly inspirational...”*

Jerome Bias has a simple philosophy when it comes to building furniture. “I build what I like and what I love,” he says.

Bias is a furniture maker and SAPFM member who lives near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. When you speak with him, there’s no doubt that he loves what he does.

He still remembers the moment, 15 years ago, that started him on his woodworking

odyssey. He was looking for a new bed. He found a beautiful four-poster at a furniture store. Two ideas came to him that day. One, after looking at the \$11,000 price tag, was that he would make his own. Two, he would learn all he could about the 19th-Century cabinetmaker who had inspired this reproduction, a man named Thomas Day.

Bias was in college at that point and had never built anything. Most people would choose something simpler for a first project, but he waded right in. He



bought several hundred pounds of mahogany and some tools; he learned what he could from books and blogs. And went at it “by trial and error.”

“There was one time, I was using the lathe for the first time and turning a six-by-six. A chisel did go flinging into the wall once, and there was one time when a board came out of the chuck on the lathe.”

He recalls getting some advice from well-known woodworker Adam Cherubini. “I learned the idea of ‘get in the ballpark.’ Once you can get in the ballpark, then you can mess with the details. But just figure out how to get in the damn ballpark first!”

He persevered and finished the bed. “Perseverance” is a word he uses

## “Most African-Americans don’t do period furniture.”

when talking about Thomas Day. Day was a free black man who owned one of the largest cabinet shops in North Carolina during the early 19th Century. (See sidebar article.)

Bias says, “Most African-Americans don’t do period furniture.” Learning about Day “made me feel less like an outlier. It redefined the narrative that I had been taught most of my life, that most Americans had been taught most of their lives. It kind of gave me permission to try making that bed.”

Today, Bias tries to spread that mes-

sage. He’s part of the Thomas Day Education Project, which focuses on teaching African-American history and culture. He calls it “incredibly inspira-



tional, to see how giving of information and teaching people could be used to change the lives of students.” It’s been “a foundational point in my life,” he says.

Bias interprets Day’s work at other historic sites and museums. He also works in period costume as an historic

tradesman at the Old Salem Museum and Gardens in Winston-Salem.

Bias works almost exclusively with hand tools, except for his lathe. His

*Moravian plank bottom chairs that Jerome Bias is currently working on at Old Salem*



*Bias in period costume at the Old Salem Museums and Gardens*



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JEROME BIAS PHOTOGRAPHED BY STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER AT THE NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF HISTORY



# SAPFM Chronicles (continued-2)

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shop is a 15-by-15 foot room in the house that he rents in the middle of a dairy farm. He's currently working on a series of Eastern Shore blanket chests, based on a 17th-Century walnut chest from eastern North Carolina. He adds,

**"I love woodworking. I love my Southern heritage. So I get to celebrate those things. Best of all, CL woodworking is fun."**



"I'm lucky to have a shop at work" (at Old Salem). At that shop, he's working on a set of Moravian plank-bottom chairs.

One challenge he enjoys is making an exact replica of a piece of furniture in a museum. "It's really wild to finish one, and put it right beside the original, and see where the other guy made mistakes and decided to live with them, or made choices along the way. You learn a lot about the other guy and what he was up to. It's absolutely amazing."

There is one other element to Jerome Bias's philosophy of woodwork-

ing. He calls it "CL Woodworking." That stands for Celebrating Life through woodworking. On his website, he describes that as "his exploration of the past and the ways that history shapes the present and the future." But he sums

it up this way: "I love woodworking. I love my Southern heritage. So I get to celebrate those things. Best of all, CL woodworking is fun." —JB

Visit the website of Jerome Bias at <http://jeromebiasfurnituremaker.com>



**Link to the Woodwright Shop  
visit to Thomas Day**

*Today, a statue of Thomas Day stands proudly outside the North Carolina Museum of History.*

Thomas Day's life reads like a novel, but with some important pages missing. Here's what researchers and historians can tell us about him.

We know Day was born in Virginia around 1801. He came from families that had been free for many generations. He apprenticed with his father, who was a cabinet maker. At the age of 24, he moved to Milton, North Carolina, and in 1825, set up his own cabinet making shop.

"Free" is a relative term, of course. Day still faced many restrictions and challenges. But he was able not only to survive but also to thrive. He built furniture for some of the most influential members of North Carolina society. He made high-end walnut and mahogany pieces but also worked with more common woods. And unlike most cabinet makers at the time, he could also design and build house interiors.

By 1850, Day's shop in Milton was producing one-sixth of all the furniture in the state. But a few years later, the business failed. It was a victim of an economic downturn, more restrictive laws on black business owners, and his failing health.

Sadly, much of his story is unknown after that. There are no known photographs or portraits of him. (A statue of him outside the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh involves some artistic license.) We don't even know when Day died or where he was buried.

What we do know is that he left behind an amazing legacy. He was a master craftsman whose furniture is in great demand by collectors. More than 80 room interiors have been identified as Day's work. And perhaps most important, his life story continues to inspire others, including Jerome Bias.

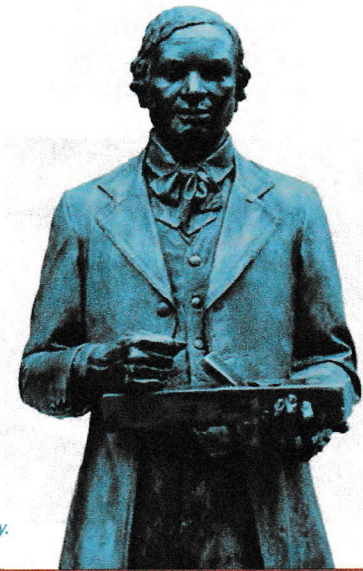


ILLUSTRATION OF THOMAS DAY STATUE CREATED BY NEWSLETTER STAFF