

MAN IN THE MIDDLE: THOMAS DAY AND THE FREE BLACK EXPERIENCE

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

Overview

Thomas Day (1801–ca. 1861) was a free black man who stood “in the middle” of competing forces in nineteenth-century America: between black and white, slave and free, North and South, and Africa and America. A black man who owned slaves and who also had abolitionist ties, Day embodied the contradictions and complexity of his era, yet he and many other free black men and women in the North and South managed to navigate the labyrinth of race, culture, and power in nineteenth-century America. Not only did these free blacks survive, but many helped to “craft freedom” for themselves, members of their families, and other less fortunate members of their race. Thomas Day remained in the South his entire life. In 1857, a national financial crisis destroyed one in three businesses, including his. On the eve of the Civil War, there were 500,000 free blacks living in the United States. Thomas Day’s story illuminates the significant, yet little-known, group of free African Americans and their experiences before the Civil War. This lesson uses Day as a focal point for students to learn about ways that free blacks attained their free status and “crafted freedom” for themselves and others through their craft and entrepreneurial skills, through political activities, by leveraging their social position and contacts, and through their art and creativity.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Recall who Thomas Day was and list critical facts about his life.
- Recall several strategies free blacks used to deal with their second-class citizenship.
- Discuss how free and enslaved blacks crafted freedom for themselves and their families.
- Analyze Thomas Day’s life in terms of how he crafted freedom—enhanced the freedoms and opportunities for himself, his family, and members of his race.

Guiding Questions

Who were free blacks? How is Thomas Day’s experience reflective of the free black experience? Why do you think that successful free African Americans would have been concerned about helping the enslaved attain their freedom?

Suggested Time

1 class period

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief biography of Thomas Day.
2. Review the short video, *Who Was Thomas Day?*, which provides an overview of Thomas Day's life and work. Be prepared to show this video to your students.
3. Review Teacher Tool 2, which contextualizes Thomas Day as part of the free black population.
4. Review Student Handout 1, which provides a timeline of events in Thomas Day's life in parallel to events that were happening in the country.
5. Review Student Handout 2, which compares the ways that slaves vs. free blacks "crafted freedom" for themselves, their family, and other members of their race.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. To begin this lesson, show the short video, *Who Was Thomas Day?* to engage students in this man and his life.
2. Using the information in Teacher Tools 1 and 2, provide students with a brief overview of the life and work of Thomas Day and his experience as a free black in the nineteenth century.
3. Distribute Student Handouts 1 and 2 and ask students to read them.
4. Explain that "crafting freedom" refers to the way enslaved and free black people worked to enhance opportunities and freedoms for themselves and their family members through acts such as: using profits from their business ventures to purchase their own or a family member's freedom; using their funds to educate family members and to help other blacks become educated; running away from slavery to claim their freedom; expressing their love of freedom and democratic principles through their works of art and literature; and serving as role models of upstanding "free" black Americans for others to emulate.
5. Ask students to write a two-page essay that describes Thomas Day's life and at least two ways he crafted freedom for himself, two ways he crafted freedom for members of his family, and two ways he crafted freedom for his fellow African Americans.

Extending the Lesson

- Ask students to compare Thomas Day and how he crafted freedom to an enslaved person (like George Moses Horton, Harriet Jacobs, or Elizabeth Keckly, three other nineteenth-century African Americans featured on this website) and how they crafted freedom.
- Ask students to write an essay that addresses the obligation to "give back" to others in an oppressed group if you yourself have moved up and out of the group.

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