

**THOMAS DAY'S LETTER TO HIS DAUGHTER, MARY ANN DAY**

## TEACHER TOOL 4: WHAT HAPPENED TO MARY ANN DAY?

The following is an overview of the life of Mary Ann Day, including details about her life after she left Wesleyan Academy.

Mary Ann Day was born in 1835 (ca.) to Thomas and Aquilla Day. She was one of three children and the only daughter. Little is known about her early life in Milton, North Carolina, although letters her father wrote to her suggest that the Day family's social circle consisted primarily of other free African American families and that the family was also frequently in the company of the free whites, slaves, and free blacks who worked in Thomas Day's shop, which was also the Day home.

By 1851, Mary Ann and her two brothers, Thomas Jr. and Devereux, were enrolled at Wesleyan Academy in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, a co-educational preparatory institution founded by Methodists. In the 1830's the school became ardently anti-slavery. While Mary Ann was in attendance at Wesleyan, Thomas Day wrote her several letters and a couple of them have been uncovered. In these letters, Day expresses his hopes and dreams for Mary Ann, and also gives her practical fatherly advice. It is clear that Thomas Day had high expectations for Mary Ann and believed that she would enjoy greater freedoms and opportunities in adulthood than had his generation of free blacks.

After Thomas Day died at the beginning of the Civil War, his widow, Aquilla, moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, a thriving port city and the largest in the state. There was a large, active, free black population in Wilmington. Mary Ann and her brother, Thomas Jr. joined their mother in Wilmington. By 1865, before the fall of the Confederacy, Mary Ann had helped to establish a school for recently freed black children where she was a teacher. An article in the A.M.E. newspaper, *Christian Recorder*, dated April 15, 1865 describes the school:

Nearly or quite seven hundred children were in the basement of the [A.M.E.] church on March 11<sup>th</sup> having been announced that schools were about to be organized. Speeches were made . . . . At 10:30, Gen. Hawley entered . . . . He as all others was pleased with the children. Some little misses made little speeches and did it as though it was common to them and they sang splendidly. The above named gentleman assisted by Misses Day, Sampsons and Cowan organized the school and it is now in splendid running order. The "underground" schools have been taught in this city for a number of years by the young ladies and others.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "A Few Strange Incidents From the South," *Christian Recorder*, April 15, 1865. Mary Ann Day's mother, Aquilla had requested a transfer to Wilmington from the Milton Presbyterian Church in October 1864. Thomas Jr.'s wife, Virginia was trained as a teacher and Mary Ann was classically educated. Thomas Jr. was there at the same time. The same article talks about the prominent "colored" people of Wilmington. "There are many mechanics here, Mr. Thomas Day, Mr. Hostler . . . and a host of others."

Mary Ann later explained in a letter that she had spent a portion of her own salary paying for supplies for her students because they were too poor to pay for what they needed for their studies.

In Wilmington, Mary Ann met James Chresfield, a charismatic Presbyterian minister and educator, who had been prepared for the ministry at the Ashmun Institution in Pennsylvania, the forerunner of Lincoln University. She and Reverend James Chresfield married on February 28, 1867 at her parents' old church in Milton and then moved to Lexington, North Carolina where Chresfield established a school at the Shady Side Presbyterian Church. It is very likely that Mary Ann was a teacher at this school also.

Mary Ann had two children with Reverend Chresfield: Mary Aquilla, born November 1, 1868 and James Day Chresfield, born August 10, 1870. Mary Ann died one month after the birth of her son, likely from complications of childbirth. The infant son died a few months after his mother. Chresfield lived into the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His only surviving child with Mary Ann, Mary Aquilla Chresfield, married S. F. Coakley in Monroe, North Carolina in 1891. Descendants of Mary Ann Day Chresfield's daughter have yet to be identified.

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