

HISTORY
of
PERTH AMBOY

NEW JERSEY

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By

WILLIAM C. MCGINNIS, A.B., A.M., Ph.D.

AUTHOR OF

"WILLIAM DUNLAP," "THE KEARNYS," "THE WESTMINSTER," "HISTORY OF
ST. PETER'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH," HISTORY OF PERTH AMBOY Y. M. C. A."
"HISTORY OF PERTH AMBOY SCHOOLS," "HISTORY OF PERTH AMBOY
VOL. No. I," AND OTHER WORKS INCLUDING MORE
THAN 200 MAGAZINE ARTICLES.

AMERICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY
PERTH AMBOY, NEW JERSEY



Thomas Mundy Peterson,

THE FIRST NEGRO VOTER in the United States...

Thomas Peterson was the first Negro voter in the United States. He was sometimes known as Thomas Mundy. Before moving to Perth Amboy his father was employed by the Mundy family in Metuchen where Thomas was born in 1824. His parents came to Perth Amboy in 1828 where Thomas lived all his life from four years of age.

The fact that Thomas Peterson was the first Negro citizen to vote has been established beyond question. It was established when a claim was made for that honor by a Negro voter of Princeton, N. J. Tom Peterson did not want to have the distinction of being the first negro voter unless his claim to it was just, and so a committee of prominent citizens of Perth Amboy was selected by him to make an investigation and report. The committee was made up of J. L. Kearny, Patrick Convery, William Paterson (former Mayor), John Fothergill (former Mayor), and I. T. Golding, City Treasurer.

J. L. Kearny was the person who had suggested to Mr. Peterson that he vote and Patrick Convery received and recorded his vote at the poll.

Thomas Peterson cast his vote in Perth Amboy on March 31, 1870, the day following the adoption of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution. The Princeton claimant, an honorable and popular citizen, cast his vote on April 13, 1870. He readily conceded the fact that Thomas Peterson voted before he did. The Committee made a thorough investigation and found that there were only a few elections on March 31st and none March 30th and that no Negro had voted anywhere except in Perth Amboy.

Thomas Peterson was a good citizen. He served as custodian of School Number One.

On Memorial Day, 1884, the citizens of Perth Amboy at a large meeting at City Hall presented Thomas Peterson a medal. On the obverse side of the medallion was the profile of Abraham Lincoln and on the reverse these lines —

PRESENTED BY CITIZENS OF PERTH AMBOY, N. J.

TO

THOMAS PETERSON

THE FIRST COLORED VOTER IN THE UNITED STATES
UNDER THE FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT,

AT AN ELECTION HELD IN THAT CITY,

MARCH 31, 1870.

The following is a copy of the program.

The Presentation of a Medal to Thomas Mundy Peterson

DECORATION DAY, MAY 30th, 1884

In the City of Perth Amboy, New Jersey

In commemoration of his having been the First Colored
Citizen in The United States to cast a vote under
the Fifteenth Amendment.

with Addresses By

HON. WILLIAM PATERSON

and Others

PERTH AMBOY, N. J.

The Middlesex County Democrat Print
1884

Reprinted 1935. H. E. Pickersgill, Perth Amboy, N. J.

On the inside of the south wall of St. Peter's Church a visitor will note a bronze tablet with the words:

In Memory Of

THOMAS PETERSON

First Negro Voter of The United States

Under The Fifteenth Amendment

At An Election Held In This City

March 31, 1870.

His Body Rests In The

Southern Portion Of The Churchyard.

ERECTED BY THE

NEGRO HISTORY CLUB OF PERTH AMBOY

March 10, 1940

A newspaper clipping in the possession of Mrs. Johannes Garretson Koyen (without date) reports an interview with Thomas Peterson: "I was working for Mr. J. L. Kearny on the morning of the day of election, and did not think of voting until he came out to the stable where I was attending to the horses and advised me to go to the polls and exercise a citizen's privilege . . . When I went home to dinner at noon I met Mr. Marcus Spring of Eagleswood, a place about a mile out of town, and he, too, advised me to claim the right of suffrage at the polls.

"The question at stake that day was not a party issue but rested upon the adoption of a new charter. A desire had arisen on the part of some people of the town for a revised charter, while others wished to surrender the charter altogether and revert to a township government. As I advanced to the polls one man offered me a ticket bearing the words "revised charter" and another one marked, "no charter." I thought I would not vote to give up our charter after holding it so long; so I chose a revised charter ballot.

"Our side won the election by a vote of 230 to 63 and I may mention as a coincidence that I was afterward appointed one of a committee of seven to revise the charter."

The article goes on to state that "Peterson was born in Metuchen, N. J. . . . His father was Thomas Peterson. His mother's name was Lucy Green. The former came from free parents, but the latter's parents had been slaves in Gov. Newell's family; in Monmouth County . . . When four years old, his father moved to Perth Amboy. On Feb. 10, 1844 he was married to Daphne Reeve whose family had been slaves on the Bell estate in Perth Amboy."

Peterson's statement continued, "For seven years I was employed by the city as janitor of the public school, and last year I was a delegate to the Republican county convention." Thomas Peterson was janitor of School No. 1 in 1870-1877. The medal described in this history was presented to Peterson on May 30, 1884. In the above newspaper report and interview there is no mention of the medal. It is safe to state that the date of the newspaper article is between 1877 and 1884.

Thomas Peterson's grandson Alfonso, lives in Rahway, N. J. with his wife and eleven year old daughter, Althea. He was born in Perth Amboy.

It has long been a matter of St. Peter's Church history that Thomas Peterson was buried in St. Peter's Churchyard, but the exact location was not known. The Reverend William H. Watson and this writer recently located Mr. Peterson's grave beside the grave of his wife. In August 1959 the church collected a special fund and placed a large stone:

HERE LIES THE BODY OF
THOMAS MUNDY PETERSON
FIRST NEGRO VOTER IN THE UNITED STATES
UNDER THE FIFTEENTH AMENDMENT
AT AN ELECTION HELD IN PERTH AMBOY
MARCH 31, 1870
Member Of
A COMMITTEE TO REVISE THE CITY CHARTER
BORN OCTOBER 6, 1824
DIED FEBRUARY 4, 1904
HIS WIFE
DAPHNE REEVE PETERSON
BORN OCTOBER 2, 1820
DIED NOVEMBER 23, 1891

NOTE: William A. Newell was governor 1857-1860. It was his ancestors who owned Daphne Reeve's slave ancestors.

When Mr. Peterson went to church or to any other gathering of people he wore his medal. After Mr. Peterson's death the medal was owned by Judge Harold Pickersgill. Later the Rev. George H. Boyd tried to buy it for St. Peter's Church and offered to pay a good price for it. The new owner refused to sell it to the church. It was sold at auction in New York. It was finally sold to Xavier University in New Orleans and is in the University Museum. Xavier is a Negro Catholic institution. If Perth Amboy could not have the medal it is good to know that it is in a Negro institution, but it should be in Peterson's home town. Thomas Peterson's granddaughter, Mrs. Helen H. Ewing lives in New York, 2042 Madison Ave.

ST. PETER'S CHURCH

VERY REVEREND DR. GEORGE H. BOYD, *Rector*
 REVEREND WILLIAM H. WATSON, *Assistant*

Program

NOVEMBER 1, 1959 — 4:00 P. M.

IN MEMORY OF THOMAS PETERSON (1824-1904)
 FIRST NEGRO VOTER IN AMERICA, AND THE DEDICATION
 OF THE CHURCHYARD STONE MARKING HIS GRAVE

ORGAN PRELUDE Joseph W. Sheldon, A. G. O.
 HYMN: (2nd Tune) No. 126

CRUCIFER
 Samuel Hazell

ACOLYTES

Elnando Bryson	James Baker
Roger Chestnut	George Carty

USHERS
 Anguilla Society Members

CHOIRS
 St. Augustine's Church (Elizabeth)
 St. James A. M. E. Church (Perth Amboy)

PRAYERS
 The Lord's Prayer
 Prayer For World Peace
 Prayer For Brotherhood
 Prayer For Faith

ADDRESS *The Hon. James J. Flynn, Jr.*
Mayor of the City of Perth Amboy

ADDRESS *William C. McGinnis, Ph. D.*
Historian

RECESSIONAL TO CHURCHYARD
(The Congregation will follow the Choirs)

AT THE GRAVE OF THOMAS PETERSON

ADDRESS *Henry Wade*
President, Perth Amboy Chapter N.A.A.C.P.

PLACING OF WREATH

DEDICATION OF MEMORIAL STONE *The Rev. Junius Carter*
Rector, St. Augustine's Church, Elizabeth, N. J.

NATIONAL ANTHEM

N.A.A.C.P. PERTH AMBOY BRANCH

For many years The National Society For The Advancement of Colored People has worked for the betterment of Negroes throughout the United States. Several white people are members of the Perth Amboy N.A.A.C.P. The officers of the local organization are:

Henry M. Wade	<i>President</i>
Mrs. Mary E. Wilson	<i>Secretary</i>
Mrs. Leola M. Wood	<i>Assistant Secretary</i>
Mrs. Geneva Miller	<i>Treasurer</i>
Kenneth F. Wood	<i>Executive.. Board Chairman</i>
Ira Wilson	<i>Program Chairman</i>
Mrs. Leola M. Wood	<i>Youth Advisor</i>
Aldan D. Markson	<i>Legislature Chairman</i>
Rev. Herbert M. Martin	<i>Housing Chairman</i>
William Storvall	<i>Membership Chairman</i>
William Morton	<i>Labor Chairman</i>
Herbert Richardson	<i>Educational Chairman</i>
Patrolman James Hodge	<i>Publicity Chairman</i>
Mrs. Hilda Hodge	<i>Freedom Fund Chairman</i>
David Mandel	<i>Legal Redress Chairman</i>
Elsie Gibbs	<i>Community Coordination Chairman</i>
Alston Smith	<i>Life Membership Chairman</i>