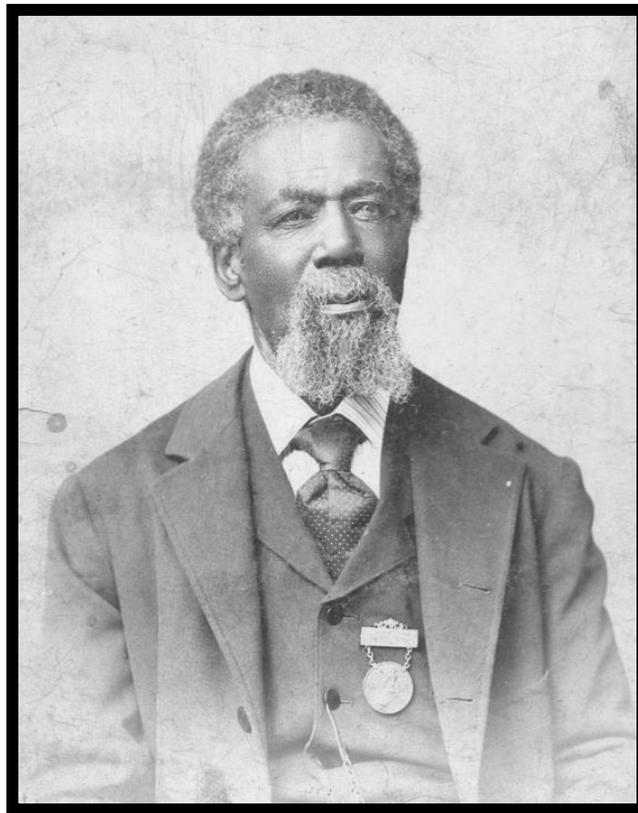


# To Cast A Freedman's Vote

How a Handyman from Perth Amboy  
Made Civil Rights History

by Gordon Bond



**Thomas Peterson**

Many thanks to historian Gordon Bond for sharing this extensive work on Thomas Peterson. The article is one of many that will be included in his forthcoming book, "North Jersey Legacies - Hidden History from the Gateway to the Skylands" due out March, **2012**.

The night Barack Obama gave his acceptance speech following his election as the forty-fourth President of the United States, among those who paused to listen to the President-elect were those old enough to remember a time when men and women who looked like him couldn't drink from the same water fountain or eat at the same lunch counter. In the audience were people who marched on places like Selma and Birmingham. Commentators evoked the names of martyrs to the cause, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. Others still, called up the less distinct memory of the masses of humanity who had toiled their lives away as slaves.

The historic nature of that election rises above the partisanship of politics, regardless of one's political persuasion or opinions of his administration. But while his achieving the highest office in the land might be a high-water mark in the Civil Rights movement, it was, ultimately, just the latest chapter in a long and ongoing story of how humans in America deal with race. Still, it did provide an organic moment to pause and consider the journey thus far.

The face that came to my mind that night was that of a handyman from Perth Amboy, New Jersey, who cast the first African American ballot under the auspices of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1870.

### ***The Fifteenth Amendment***

Do a Google search on "Thomas Mundy Peterson" and it is his historic vote that comes up again and again, but scant little else. While that bit of trivia may be important, the real interest lies in the convergence of all that had to come together to make that moment possible—and everything that came after. And, of course, Peterson was, more than an event. Who was he as a man? How did that moment change his life?

Obviously, in order to become the first voter under the Fifteenth Amendment, there had to be a Fifteenth Amendment in the first place.

Slavery had been part of New Jersey history right from the very beginnings. When Lords John Berkely and George Carteret were enticing settlers to their new property, they promised an extra seventy-five acres for every slave someone brought along. The wharves of Perth Amboy saw ships direct from Africa unloading human cargo, shuffled off in clanking chains to barracks on the corner of Smith and Water Streets, awaiting sale in the town square—in front of the same city hall where Peterson would eventually cast his vote.

The issue of slavery has been likened to a sleeping snake, metaphorically coiled under the table, as the founders fussed and fought over the Constitution that would define the nation they were creating. Unresolved for various reasons, it would, in less than a century, indeed come back to bite the country.

Westward expansion at last brought the question to a head—would these new territories be brought into the Republic as slave states or free? Reaching critical mass, the struggle to answer those questions exploded in the four-year spasm of violence that we call the American Civil War.

President Abraham Lincoln is often referred to as the man who freed the slaves. This laudable title usually refers to his Emancipation Proclamation—his executive order of January 1, 1863. In truth, this was more of a declaration of intent. For one thing, it only applied to the ten states in rebellion. While it nevertheless, translated into freedom for slaves found on Rebel territory taken by Union soldiers, it did not specifically outlaw slavery in the nation as a whole.

A true transitioning away from slavery, however, would require more work even after the Union's victory. In considering the Fifteenth Amendment, one must take it in context with the Thirteenth and Fourteenth, a three-piece set known as the Restoration Amendments.

Considering the bloody war that gave it birth, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution seems rather stark, with a straightforward simplicity of language: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

That's all it took—in theory anyway—to set into motion the once-and-for-all end of slavery in the United States. Of course, that bit of paperwork wasn't going to change the ingrained racial attitudes of those who had just defended that “peculiar institution.” And, what did it really mean to those it claimed to release from bondage? What did it mean to be “free”? What was the legal status of the millions of men, women and children those words affected? Were they citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that status conferred?

The Fourteenth Amendment, passed in 1868, was intended to answer those questions, and is perhaps necessarily a longer text, consisting of five sections, mostly dealing with how to proportion representation after this overnight surge in citizens. But the first section is what was pertinent to all those now-ex slaves:

*All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.*

Individual colonies and states had long ago established bans on importing slaves from outside nations not out of any desire to curb the institution as much as protect the interests of slave traders at home. So by 1868, pretty much all the people freed by the Thirteenth Amendment had been born here. With one broad, inclusive stroke, the Fourteenth Amendment conferred citizenship on the entirety of that population. The Fourteenth Amendment was a direct repudiation of the 1857 *Dred Scott v. Sanford* Supreme Court decision that established that Negroes were not citizens.

Resistance, of course, would be inevitable. People who held tight enough to principles—racist though they may be—to actually fight, kill and die for them, were hardly going to be swayed by laws passed by a government most viewed as illegitimate occupiers. A range of tactics were employed by those seeking to prevent Negro inclusion in civil society—from the outright brutal intimidation of the Ku Klux Klan to the restrictive legislative loopholes of the so-called Jim Crow Laws. State constitutions still asserted the right to limit suffrage based on race or on having been a slave—or even having been the child or grandchild of a slave.

Race, however, wasn't the only issue. Women would be denied regardless of race or other status for another fifty years. Even acceptance of Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior was a criterion for a handful of states—the establishment clause of the First Amendment notwithstanding. And, when race *was* the central issue, it wasn't always specifically about dark skin—some wanted the recent influx of Irish and Chinese immigrants kept out of voting too. Of course, the tools of exclusion worked both ways. Southern Republicans had been using loyalty oaths to stem the influence of ex-Confederates.

Nevertheless, by March 30, 1870, enough states had ratified the Fifteenth Amendment to make it the law in another remarkably straightforward piece of language: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”

It isn't known how closely Thomas Peterson had been following the debates that preceded ratification. But certainly others in Perth Amboy were watching.

### ***Eagleswood***

“I was working for Mr. J.L. Kearny on the morning of the day of the 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,” Thomas Peterson later told a reporter. The question of the day was whether the city of Perth Amboy should revise their existing charter or abandon it to return to a previous township form of government. “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.”

It probably wasn't mere coincidence that Marcus Spring (1810-1874) was there to encourage Peterson to go vote. In 1853, with his wife Rebecca (1812-1911), they established the Raritan Bay Union, a sort of progressive cross between a boarding school, artist colony and utopian community. Not only did male and female students share the classroom, but black and white, as well as other races. Girls were encouraged to do things like public speaking, to engage in sports and perform plays—things any respectable young lady would never be taught in most schools of the day. The Raritan Bay Union attracted an impressive array of progressive liberals, artists and reformers to Perth Amboy. Angelina and Sarah Grimké—the abolitionist and women's suffrage activist sisters—taught classes while Angelina's husband, Theodore Weld—considered the father of modern American abolitionism—ran the school. Among those who lived or worked at the Raritan Bay Union were the influential author Caroline Kirkland; Kentucky-born abolitionist, politician and jurist James Birney; American landscape painter George Inness; portrait artist William Page; social reformist Edward Palmer; teacher, writer, philosopher and reformer Amos Bronson Alcott; and, Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau enjoyed surveying land and indulged his interest by surveying Eagleswood's 260 acres.

But to get a real sense of the Springs and the strength of the ideals that underlay their vision, one needs to look at Rebecca Spring's reaction to John Brown's famous raid on Harpers Ferry. Between October 16 and 19, 1859, the white abolitionist John Brown attempted to incite a slave uprising by leading a group of sixteen white men, three free blacks, one freed slave and one fugitive slave to seize the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. They were defeated by U.S. Marines and militia, under the perhaps now prescient command of Robert E. Lee. When the smoke cleared, ten of Brown's men were dead. Four managed to escape but were later captured. Seven were seized immediately, including Brown himself. All would be hanged.

Rebecca Spring came to Brown's Charlestown, Virginia, jail cell and tended to his wounds. She also administered to Aaron Stevens and Absolom Hazlett. The bodies of some of the executed men would be claimed and brought home. Two apparently ended up as teaching cadavers at medical schools. But when no one claimed the bodies of Stevens and Hazlett, she was determined that they would be buried in *free* soil. She would bring them back to Perth Amboy to graves on the Spring's Eagleswood estate. That was a strong abolitionist statement. But the men were also convicted of treason and when Perth Amboy's citizens got wind of Rebecca Spring's intentions, they were outraged. So the bodies of the two men were landed instead at Rahway and, under the cover of darkness, brought to Eagleswood, where they would remain until 1899 when they were transferred to a cemetery at North Elba, New York.

John Brown's two now-fatherless daughters would find an education with Theodore Weld at the Raritan Bay Union. It is little wonder that Eagleswood became a stop on the Underground Railroad.

The Raritan Bay Union disbanded in 1860, but was replaced by the Springs with the Eagleswood Military Academy. It tried to carry on the same kind of progressivism, but perhaps with some irony, the Civil War ended the experiment. Many of the teachers and students went off to serve, leaving a less economically viable institution behind them.

By the war's end, their school no longer existed, but the Springs were still committed to the ideals it had taught. Indeed, there was a generation of Perth Amboy's leading citizens who had graduated, infused with such ideals—including James Lawrence Kearny.

It was dumb luck that the first post-ratification election in which any black person could vote happened to be in Perth Amboy. But now there was a Fifteenth Amendment and a community influenced by a zeal to see Negro suffrage become reality. All that was needed was a black man to step up meet that destiny.

## *Slave or Free?*

When Thomas Peterson came into this world on October 6, 1824, deep within his cells, somewhere between just four and six genes determined what the rest of his life would probably be like. They regulated the amount and type of something called “melanin”—a pigment that would shade his skin. His DNA, handed down through his African ancestors, gave him other distinctive physical traits—the color and texture of his hair, the shape of his nose and lips. In the eyes of much of the society into which he was born, such features marked one as an inferior creature. Inferior enough, in fact, that for over 7,500 men and women in New Jersey alone, it justified their being held in involuntary bondage and servitude.

Relatively speaking, Peterson was lucky. A “gradual emancipation” law had been passed in New Jersey twenty years before he was born. It didn’t help those already held as slaves, but it meant that, since he was born afterwards, he would never have to personally know what it meant to be the property of another. But that reality was only as far away as his parents and in the lingering attitudes of some of his white neighbors.

The story of Peterson’s childhood is sketchy at best, though not for want of trying by local historians. He was born in what is now Metuchen (then part of Woodbridge) and local historians Tyreen Reuter and Walter Stochel have been researching that part of his life. His parents were Thomas and Lucy, and their story is something of a muddle if you go by the various subsequent articles and histories that mention them. When Thomas Peterson died in 1904, the *Newark Evening News* described his parents as having both been slaves owned by the same Mundy family. This was repeated in a 1959 *Perth Amboy Evening News* article. In his *History of Perth Amboy*, William C. McGinnis says the elder Thomas was “employed” by the Mundys, while Lucy’s parents were slaves of Monmouth County’s Newell family. A 1977 *Perth Amboy Evening News* article, however, says Thomas Sr. was born to free parents while Lucy was born to slaves.

Why the ambiguity?

Well, at least in the instances of newspapers, it can likely be put down to harried reporters looking to make a deadline and not having time to check facts too deeply. But there is also something alluringly melodramatic in the image of the son of slaves casting that first vote as a free man. The reality is a little more complicated.

We do know that Thomas Sr. was indeed associated with the Mundys, an old Metuchen family dating back to 1665, when Nicholas Mundy came over from England and called the place home. The specific member of the family who evidently owned or employed Thomas Sr. was Ezra Mundy (1772–1841). Whether it was an owner-slave or employer-employee relationship isn’t yet entirely clear. It is certainly possible it could have been both—that Thomas was a slave but manumitted and stayed on as paid labor.

Lucy is a little easier to follow. She had been a slave of Hugh Newell (1744–1816) of Freehold Township. Some historians go out of their way to point out that this is the same Newell family that had also produced William Augustus Newell (1817–901)—New Jersey’s delegate to the U.S. House of Representatives (1847–1851 and again 1865–1867), state governor (1857–1860) and even governor of the Washington Territory (now Washington State, 1880–1884)—and author of the Newell Act that created the United States Life-Saving Service (a precursor to the United States Coast Guard).

Hugh Newell, however, is the one that’s important to our story. He settled in Freehold Township from Ireland and saw service in the War for Independence. Evidently, he had other servants, as he is found in 1767 advertising a reward in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for the return of an Irish servant by the name of John M’Cullough. Newell died in 1816, but on April 24, 1822, his executors officially manumitted the twenty-two-year-old Lucy.

How Lucy—who is sometimes identified as Lucy Green—found her way from Freehold in Monmouth County to Woodbridge in Middlesex County isn’t entirely clear, but she obviously did as she is found marrying Thomas Sr. on January 27, 1820. The event was included in a list of marriages performed by Rev. Henry Cook in the records of the Second Presbyterian Church of Woodbridge (now the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen) and offers a clue as to how she might have gotten to Woodbridge.

The list records the marriage between “Thomas, a black man of Ezra Mundy,” and “Lucy, a black woman of John Smock.” What’s striking is that the marriage took place two years *before* Lucy was freed, yet she is identified as being “of John Smock.”

Assuming we’re talking about the same Thomas and Lucy—and there isn’t any reason to believe we’re not—we can make some reasonable speculations. It wasn’t unusual for slaves to be “lent” to others, who would be responsible for them, though legal ownership remained technically with the original master. It is plausible that when Newell died, the family didn’t need her and so sent her off to someone who did—either a friend, relative or someone who paid them for her services. The relationship between the Newells and Smock is still being explored.

If Lucy was twenty-two in 1822 when she was freed, she was born around 1800—too early to fall under the 1804 Gradual Emancipation Act in New Jersey. So she was, as far as the law was concerned, a slave until the Newells emancipated her. Nevertheless, there may have been an arrangement that she would be freed after age twenty-one—the age girls born to slave mothers were to be freed under the act. While the exact circumstances are not known, Lucy may have understood that she would not need to return to Monmouth County and so could marry and set down roots in Middlesex County.

In any event, four years after they were married, Thomas Jr. came into the world—the son of a free mother.

According to McGinnis—who takes much of his information from contemporary newspaper articles—the family moved to Perth Amboy in 1828 and Thomas Sr. died shortly thereafter. We can say he was alive at least in 1830, as well as get an idea of what the family consisted of, thanks to the 1830 U.S. Census. Back then, the censuses were little more than general headcounts, with individuals grouped by the broad categories of sex, race and age bracket. Nevertheless, even these limited data points can be mined for clues.

Thomas Sr. gave his name as Thomas Mundy. That makes sense given his association with the Mundy family. But last names are fluid and indistinct quantities in this story. McGinnis says the elder Thomas was a Peterson. If this is correct, why did he identify himself to the census-taker as Mundy? His son, Thomas, appears over the years as both Thomas Peterson and Thomas Mundy. Exactly when and with whom the Peterson name came into play isn’t clear. A literal interpretation might be that Thomas Sr. was the son of someone named Peter. Peterson seems to have been the “real” family name, but they evidently had no objections to also being known as Mundy—a fact that is suggestive.

There is reason to think that the relationship between the white Mundys and their black servants was, relatively speaking, a positive one. Census records show a free African American family with the last name of Mundy living in the same neighborhood as the Caucasian families of the same name. If someone treats you badly, you probably won’t adopt their last name and live next to them if you can help it.

The make-up of Thomas and Lucy’s family can be hinted at by the 1830 census, showing them living in Perth Amboy. The elder Thomas is represented by the single free Negro male in the category of age thirty-six to fifty-five. That would make his birth somewhere between 1775 and 1795. Lucy would be the single free Negro woman in the age twenty-four to thirty-six bracket. We know she was born around 1800, so she would be thirty years old, making her husband at least six years her senior.

Thomas Jr. would be one of the three boys in the under ten years old category and there was a girl in the ten to twenty-four category. We have to be a little careful here—these headcount censuses don’t list the relationship of the counted to the head of the household. Later censuses would add this information, but it can’t be said with complete certainty that these were all representative of parents and their children. Nevertheless, it seems at least reasonable to assume that by 1830, Thomas Jr. had two brothers and a big sister.

While the idea of anyone “owning” another human being is repugnant to modern sensibilities, human relationships are often far more complicated than that odious state might imply. Regardless of what Thomas Sr. was to Ezra Mundy—slave, servant, employee—there is another clue that their relationship held at least some warmth. We know of this thanks to a matter-of-fact statement in a newspaper article

talking about Thomas Peterson found by Walter Stochel. It is undated, but has to at least post-date 1884 and pre-date Peterson's death in 1904. "'Tom' is a well educated negro," it reads, in the paternalistic language typical of the time. "When a young man he was bound out to Izra Mundy, NJ of Metuchen, by whose name he has been called." They misspelled Ezra's name as "Izra" and misidentified his birth year as 1829, so who knows how trustworthy the information really is. But, if it is true, Thomas Sr. wouldn't indenture out his son to the man if he himself had been mistreated by him.

The 1804 Gradual Emancipation Act began New Jersey's slow withdrawal from the slavery paradigm, though not necessarily from the deeply-rooted racial attitudes that had made it possible. The act set the somewhat arbitrary date of July 4, 1804 as the cut-off—if you were a black person fortunate enough to have been born on July 5, 1804, you were considered free, even if your mother remained a slave. If you were born July 3, 1804, tough luck. Anyone born prior to the date was considered an "apprentice for life." A slave by any other name...

Those born afterwards to slave parents were required to serve a more limited apprenticeship in the service of whoever owned their mother. On the one hand, there was some logic to it—presumably, they would be brought up in some trade or with some skills that would enable them to earn their way in life as adults, akin to a vocational education. But, in practice, it was as much a way of extending their servitude just that much longer. Girls would be free at age twenty-one and boys at age twenty-five. Since Thomas Jr. was born to Lucy after her manumission, it is presumed that the apprenticeship with Ezra was a mutually voluntary arrangement.

### ***Daphne***

The Act required some paperwork. Records needed to be made of all births to enslaved mothers after July 4, 1804. So, on April 18, 1823, Andrew Bell of Perth Amboy dutifully filed, "I do hereby certify that a Negro woman named Bett, [*sic*] a Slave belonging to me was delivered of a female child named Daphne on the eighth day of October, 1820."

Daphne would grow up to marry Thomas Jr. on February 10, 1844—and her association with the Bell family would prove important to their future.

Andrew Bell is an interesting character in his own right. He was born on June 4, 1757, in Philadelphia, but the family soon moved to New Jersey. He studied law under Cortlandt Skinner in Perth Amboy, where Bell's father, a British army officer, had built a fine house. Andrew remained a loyalist during the American Revolution. He joined the British army, serving as a clerk for the British command in New York, including under Sir Henry Clinton. But it wasn't all quill-pushing—he saw action in several skirmishes and the Battle of Monmouth. His diary of his time in service remains a valuable resource for historians.

One might assume that a loyalist staunch enough to take up arms in the cause would have been forced to hightail it out of Perth Amboy when the British lost the war, as so many of his fellow loyalists did. Yet while the house he inherited from his father in 1778 was confiscated the following year, Andrew Bell remained in New Jersey the rest of his life.

That he was able to remain unmolested was likely due a fortuitous family connection through marriage. In 1779, his sister, Cornelia (1755–1783) had married William Paterson, who most certainly came down quite firmly on the side opposite that of his new brother-in-law. Where other men of his generation chased glory on the battlefield, Paterson found his arena of service in the perhaps more mundane, but equally crucial, task of helping to create a working system of government for an America that would—hopefully—soon need one. He represented Somerset County in the provincial assembly and was its secretary when they signed the new Constitution that established them as a state—and in a state of rebellion against Great Britain. As New Jersey's first attorney general, he somehow managed to keep some semblance of law and order amidst the chaos of war. When it came time to consider a national government, Paterson represented New Jersey at the Constitutional Conventions, where he offered the so-called "New Jersey Plan" in the debates over how the legislature would be structured and

representation determined. Paterson went on to become New Jersey's first senator (1789–1790) and second governor (1790–1793).

A powerful and influential man, indeed, for ex-loyalist Andrew Bell to have for a brother-in-law. He was able to settle back into his Perth Amboy estate and start life over as a successful merchant with his wife, Susanna. Whatever hard feelings there might have been over the war, they were brushed aside enough by 1806 for him to be appointed as surveyor general for the East Jersey Proprietors—a position he would hold until 1842. He remained active with St. Peter's Episcopal Church, serving as a churchwarden. In 1787, his name appears on a petition to the New Jersey Legislative Council seeking permission to hold a lottery to help rebuild the church. In the church's archives, I came across Bell's handwritten recipe for producing industrial-sized quantities of ginger wine.

When Andrew Bell sat down to write his will, he and Susanna had no children to leave anything to, but he was not without other family, friends and causes to name as beneficiaries. St. Peter's, for example, received a three hundred dollar trust to fund needed repairs to the church and rectory. He left another trust of four hundred dollars to be used to help Perth Amboy's poor, to be administered by another William Paterson, his great nephew (the William Paterson who married Bell's sister died in 1806).

But he also remembered Daphne and her sister, Jane, who had been their servants, both born of their slave, Betty. According to his will:

*I give and Bequeath to my said wife my coloured female servant Jane until she arrives at the age of twenty one years [the age at which girls were released from their 'apprenticeships'] at which period I Give and Bequeath to my Executors the sum of Five Hundred Dollars in trust for her benefit, and I also Give and Bequeath to my said Executors the like sum of Five Hundred Dollars in trust for the benefit of my female servant Daphne who has lately arrived at the age of twenty one years and I direct my said Executors to deposit the said two sums of Five Hundred Dollars each in the Savings Bank of New York or such other Institution as they may think most expedient and to receive and pay the Interest to each of them and when in the opinion of my Executors it will be prudent and advisable to place in the hands of either of them all or any part of the said Respective legacies they are in that case authorized so to do.*

That he left Daphne and Jane, respectively, more than he left for either the church or the town's poor says a lot—perhaps, as we shall see, more than is obvious.

### **Family**

So when Thomas Peterson married his wife, she came with a legacy. But he wasn't exactly a "kept man." According to an 1884 description, "by trade he may be said to be a man of all work, yet inferior to none." Prior to the Civil War, he served on ships between Perth Amboy and Manhattan and was later described as both digging sewer trenches and maintaining lawns. In an undated newspaper clipping (presumed from between 1877 and 1884), he was quoted as saying for "seven years I was employed by the city as janitor of the public school." An undated slip of paper found in Perth Amboy's City Hall records shows that they paid him \$1.62 for some kind of work. In 1870, the census even listed him as a farmer.

Since those early census records didn't include the relationship between individuals and the head of the household, it is difficult to really trace the growth of Thomas and Daphne's family. We can say, however, that they suffered at least one loss of a child. A Charles M., seven months, appears in records of deaths at Perth Amboy in the second half of 1850 as a victim of whooping cough. He was listed as the son of Thomas and "Zaph."—a clerk's or transcriber's misread abbreviation for Daphne—a name that is often surprisingly and even egregiously mangled in public records.

The 1860 census has been incorrectly indexed to show their last name as "Murray," but it also shows Thomas Peterson as a "Day Laborer" with an estate worth six hundred dollars. Lucy, Thomas Peterson's then-sixty-year-old mother, is found living at Brighton House in Perth Amboy as a washerwoman. A

George Mundy, age twenty-one, Samuel Mundy, age fifteen, and William Patrick, age ten, all appear as living with her. Who these Mundys and Patrick are is unclear.

By the 1870 census, their last name is spelled “Munday,” but includes a Benjamin B., age eighteen; Lucy A., twelve; Alice, ten; Gilbert, seven; and a seventy-one-year-old Lucy. The fluidity of things asserts itself when this is compared with the 1880 census, where familial relationships are, at last, part of the data. Benjamin is there as Thomas and Daphne’s son and Alice as their daughter. Another daughter, twenty-five-year-old Jane, also appears but was not in the 1870 record. Lucy A. also disappears. A Gilbert presents another mystery. A seven-year-old Gilbert appears on the 1870 federal census, but an under-five-year-old Gilbert is in the 1885 New Jersey state census.

There is a gap in 1890, though this is easily explained—those records were in large part destroyed by a fire in 1921.

### ***Mulatto***

If you want to get technical about it, Barack Obama is not our first “black” president. His mother was a white woman from Kansas and his father a black man from Kenya. That makes him most able to be called, literally, “African American.” But, strictly speaking, it also makes him a mulatto. The distinction is, arguably, of small importance these days, but there was a time when it was serious business. The term “mulatto” generally means someone with one Caucasian parent and one African Negro parent, but is often now replaced by words like “biracial” or “multiethnic” and can extend to any mixture of races. Part of the semantic shift comes from the unpleasant history of “mulatto.” It is just one of several racial categories, used mostly by European colonial powers, to quantify the various combinations and mixtures between white and indigenous populations. They needed to know such details so they could say who, by law, was born to be a slave and who was not. If a Negro was viewed as inferior and justly subject to bondage, what was the status of someone who was half-Negro but also half-Caucasian? What about someone whose one parent was mulatto and the other “pure” Caucasian or Negro? The combination possibilities seemed to fascinate the English, French and Spanish bureaucrats who invented such categories as quadroons, octoroon, terceroon, griffe, sambo, etc.

Curiously—tantalizingly, perhaps—the status of Thomas Peterson and his family changed once in the U.S. censuses. In 1850, 1870 and 1900, they are indicated as “B” for “black.” In 1880, however, there was a change. Thomas was still identified as “B,” but Daphne and their children were marked as “M”—mulatto. Even in the hastened handwriting of the census-taker, the “M” is distinct from even the “W” entered for the whites.

It is perhaps dangerous to speculate here, but it does need to be asked—was Andrew Bell’s generosity to Daphne and her sister, Jane, charitable altruism or family obligation? He would have been age 63 when Daphne was born. Considering he and his wife Susanna remained childless, it is possible there was some medical issue that prevented intimacy, which he sought instead with Betty—it is to be hoped, at the very least, with her consent. If he really was Daphne and Jane’s father, at least he took care of them in his will. But without further evidence, assuming any could even be found, this must remain strictly an area of speculation.

### ***Civil War***

Thomas Peterson’s thoughts about the outbreak of civil war in 1861 remain his own. But while the shooting was far away, he would have experienced at least peripherally the national trauma as it bled even into Perth Amboy.

Regiments raised from the New York area returned to Manhattan following campaigns, some catching ferries across the Hudson River to Jersey City or Perth Amboy. Perhaps Peterson saw these weary men gathered at the railway station, awaiting trains home. Some of these soldiers no doubt would have regarded Peterson as a lesser creature by virtue of the color of his skin. Yet, it is to be wondered, would either have appreciated—even in a begrudging way—that one was fighting for the betterment of the other?

It isn't known if Peterson was present, but he likely would have at least heard about an August night in 1862 when, as the *New York Times* put it, "the quiet village of Perth Amboy was all enthusiasm" over a "war meeting." Cortlandt Parker—then of Newark, but representing a family name going back to eighteenth century Perth Amboy—gave an "eloquent appeal" that the town do its part in raising the 600,000 men national quota called for by President Lincoln. By the end of the night, the town passed a resolution to raise money to "thoroughly outfit and pay liberal bounty to such as should volunteer."

Much of Perth Amboy seems to have supported the Union cause, though it was by no means unanimous. By 1865, the *New York Times* was lamenting how troops—some coming home for the first time in as many as three years—were received in New York and New Jersey not by a grateful public, but a lone government agent, who led them to a hot meal in dingy barracks. Perhaps such ambivalence resulted from weariness with the war. Troops coming and going, no matter how gallant, had by then become a commonplace sight.

When the war came to its bloody conclusion in 1865, it brought with it for people like the Petersons the prospect of hope for the future. That same year, the United States adopted the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. At last, once and for all, slavery would be abolished in the land. But if anyone were under any illusions that the transformation would be easy, the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in April of the same year would disabuse them. It is to be wondered how Thomas and his family received the news.

Still, tomorrow must have seemed a little brighter after all the bloodshed and misery. Perhaps such beliefs inspired Thomas and Daphne when they decided to cash in on that legacy from Andrew Bell and buy a home all their own.

### ***A House All Their Own***

We don't know where they had been living—the census records didn't record such data yet. There is, however, reason to believe they may have lived with the family of James Lawrence Kearny—who appears most often in the records as "J.L." Born in 1846, J.L. was the son of U.S. Navy Commodore Lawrence Kearny (1780–1868), who was perhaps best known for beginning negotiations with China in the early 1840s that opened the nation to trade with the U.S. The commodore may not have made many friends in town, however. It seems he sued the city over a street re-grading project that meant he had to add steps from his door to the street. In Katherine Beekman's 1918 reminiscences of her girlhood in the Perth Amboy of the 1850s, she recalled that the commodore, when walking the streets, had the unpleasant habit of muttering the word "damn" over and over again.

His son, however, was more popular and, as will be seen, would play a pivotal role in Peterson's voting.

Andrew Bell's great nephew, William Paterson (1817–1899, not to be confused with the earlier William Paterson), had been tasked with administering some of the trusts from his late great uncle's will—including the \$500 left to Daphne. A Princeton graduate (1835), Paterson was admitted to the bar in 1838, but thanks to his being "of independent means," he didn't need to practice law until mid-life, when he opened offices in Newark and Perth Amboy. In 1852, he had married Salvadora Meade, a Spanish-born woman living in Philadelphia. The 1870 census finds them living in Perth Amboy with their sixteen-year-old daughter Emily, and William's twin brother, Stephen Van Renssalaer Paterson. Over the years between 1846 and 1878, William served as Perth Amboy's mayor, and president of New Jersey's College of Electors—particularly noted for having been the one to cast the state's vote for George B. McClellan over Abraham Lincoln in the 1864 presidential election.

On May 10, 1849, Paterson had bought a plot of land off Commerce Street from the Perth Amboy Manufacturing Company. When Thomas and Daphne Peterson were looking for a house, Paterson sold them this property and even built them a house in return for the \$500 principle of the legacy. We know this thanks to the deed record, which described "the home thereon having been built for the use of Daphne Mundy from a legacy...by the late will and testament of Andrew Bell."

It was in this house that Thomas Peterson was living when the opportunity came to make history.

## ***Negro Suffrage***

Every now and then—usually on an anniversary of Peterson’s vote—some reporter, or even an historian, will celebrate how Thomas Peterson was the first African American to vote in the United States.

Well...not exactly.

In many of the first state constitutions drafted in and after 1776, no mention is even made of *any* limitations on the rights of suffrage, let alone racial ones. Others used broad enough language that neither race nor gender was identified as either impediments or requirements. As late as 1790, of the original thirteen states, only Virginia, Georgia and South Carolina specifically limited voting based on race. In many cases, it seems the authors were just trying to throw up a quick framework of government to replace the provincial versions they were hoping to shortly overthrow. There would be time enough to revise things later. Assuming, of course, that the point was not rendered moot by losing the war and them all being hanged as traitors.

In New Jersey’s case, the constitution was drafted in a particularly hurried five days and ratified in the following two. The framers were, metaphorically speaking, looking over their collective shoulders, across the Hudson River, to where the British had taken over New York. New Jersey seemed next and was teetering on the verge of civil collapse. This was more of a temporary expedient, long on rhetoric and short on considered details. When it came to setting the requirements for suffrage, Article IV declared:

*That all inhabitants of this Colony, of full age, who are worth fifty pounds proclamation money, clear estate in the same, and have resided within the county in which they claim a vote for twelve months immediately preceding the election, shall be entitled to vote for Representatives in Council and Assembly; and also for all other public officers, that shall be elected by the people of the county at large.*

It may have been an oversight, but there was no specific limitation based on either race or gender. As long as you had lived long enough where you intended to vote and had enough personal wealth, there was no lawful reason a woman or Negro couldn’t cast a ballot. Between 1787 and 1788, when the U.S. Constitution was up for ratification, both blacks and whites are known to have voted on the question.

Once the immediate crisis of the war had passed, legislators in many states got down to working on “fixing” their respective constitutions, until by 1850, twenty-five of the thirty-one states existing at the time had specific racial limitations on voting in their respective documents.

Amazingly, despite evident shortcomings—such as the lack of provisions for future amendment—the New Jersey Constitution survived unchanged until 1844. At last, a constitutional convention was convened to rewrite the whole thing, but complete with language limiting suffrage to: “Every white male citizen of the United States, of the age of twenty-one years, who shall have been a resident of this State one year, and of the county, in which he claims his vote five months, next before the election, shall be entitled to vote for all officers that now are, or hereafter may be elective by the people.”

So what made Thomas Peterson’s vote historically significant is that it wasn’t cast under any state constitution, but rather by the authority of the U.S. Constitution, which overrode all the rest. New Jersey and other states were left to rewrite their constitutions to be in line with the new law of the land.

## ***Inclusion and Participation***

Someplace had to have the first election after March 30, 1870. As luck would have it, of all the places in the country, it would be in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. It is perhaps fitting that this election wasn’t really a partisan fight between Democratic or Republican candidates—it was about the form of self-government that the good citizens of Perth Amboy wanted.

So, it was by dumb luck that Thomas Peterson became the first African American to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment. He could have cast his ballot and went back to work, disappearing into history as a footnote.

But he didn't.

In a perfect world, Peterson wouldn't have had anything more to prove than any other man. But he didn't live in a perfect world—he lived in the acutely racially divisive world of 1870. He lived in a world where there were plenty of people who would have loved nothing more than for him to have done something stupid—anything that they could point to and lament the day “those people” were given the vote. I think he understood that, likely through a combination of innate acuity and the influence of the Eagleswood progressives. Peterson was, in fact, a hardworking, God-fearing and sober man. True, a lazy, drunken heathen would still be just as entitled to the franchise. But, as abolition turned into civil rights advocacy, he was an honestly respectable poster boy for the cause.

While Perth Amboy seems to have been something of an enclave of progressivism, not everyone was happy to see a dark hand drop a ballot in the ballot box. Peterson liked to tell of how one white man, upon seeing him vote, ripped up his own ballot, declaring the franchise worthless if a Negro could do it—adding that the man didn't vote again for the next ten years.

But there is a complexity to how even Peterson's champions saw him. There were in America at the time many whites that saw slavery as a cruel and unchristian practice and were glad to see it abolished. But they wouldn't necessarily go so far as to see a black man or woman as their equals. During the now-famous Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858, then-senatorial candidate Abraham Lincoln argued that slavery violated “natural law”—that it was unnatural for any man to own another. Yet he also soft-pedaled the argument for Stephen Douglas' supporters by adding that he didn't necessarily see the Negro as his social equal or entitled to the full rights of citizenship. It was the extreme of slavery that he objected to, but not necessarily the perceptions of inherent inequity that underlay it. It was possible, Lincoln was arguing in what may have been political pragmatism, to abolish slavery without automatically granting social and political equity.

There was an undeniable paternalism in how some regarded Peterson—he was the proverbial “credit to his race.” A nice guy to be sure, but still apart from his white neighbors. Nevertheless, he used his newfound local celebrity to participate in the political life of the city, proving that the inclusion of a black man in such affairs wouldn't herald the end of civilization as they knew it.

“As I advanced to the polls one man offered me a ticket bearing the words ‘revised charter,’ and another one marked, ‘no charter,’” Peterson later told a reporter about his voting experience. “I thought I would not vote to give up the 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.”

Not only did Peterson get to vote on the question at hand, but also to participate in the process of actually revising the charter he had voted to keep. There had been no objections raised to his inclusion. As of this writing, minutes or other records of that process and what Peterson may have contributed are still wanting. But summary treatments of his life include how he had been named a delegate to the conventions held by Middlesex County Republicans on more than one occasion and had served as a juror in county courts. Again, Peterson scholars are still working on finding clues that might shed light on his activities. On the local level anyway, Peterson was participating in civic life in a way that would have been unthinkable for his parents' generation.

But what was really happening here? Aside from the gentleman who tore up his ballot, was Perth Amboy and Middlesex County really infused with such a progressive spirit that they would accept a black man in such positions? I think there are probably three dynamics at work here. One is that there really were some very liberal-minded folks who were fully prepared to shed the cultural biases of their ancestors and see a black man as their brother—certainly Marcus and Rebecca Spring were prepared to go that far.

But most of his white neighbors and friends probably accepted him more provisionally. It's worth noting as a parallel that in many New Jersey suburbs into the early twentieth century, black families moved in and never really suffered the kinds of bigotry present elsewhere, particularly the deep south. Were white folks in the suburban Garden State just more enlightened? Well, to a point. One or two families was one thing and whites could indeed feel enlightened in accepting them as neighbors and friends. But where it became dozens of black families, racial divides became wider and deeper. One black man was fine—particularly one as nice and respectable as ol' Tom Mundy—even as a delegate to a political convention or sitting in judgment as a juror. Even when other blacks in Perth Amboy showed up at the polling places, it was fine. But how far could ol' Tom Mundy have really pushed that warm, fuzzy feeling? Where was the tipping point between where inclusion felt morally good and where it started to feel like a threat to the established order?

We actually have something of an answer in the voting returns of a city election held on April 18, 1879. "Thomas Mundy" appears as running for councilman. Thomas Peterson was the only "Thomas Mundy" living in Perth Amboy at the time—it is worth noting that he used the Mundy name, the name by which most of the white community likely best knew him. He received just two votes—the winner, Chester Smith, received 274. But at least Peterson did better than Pat Carr or John Adair. They just had a single vote each—likely their own.

A third dynamic at play was probably simple opportunism. Whatever one thought of Negro suffrage before, they were a potential voting block now. They were the beneficiaries, after all, of Republican policies that resulted in the three amendment set that had just turned them into full-fledged citizens. To some degree, Thomas Peterson was a political commodity that could be leveraged to court the new black vote. He seems to have been a sincerely decent human being, something that translated in the game of politics to mean unthreatening to white voters still leery of Negro inclusion in civic life. Exactly how much Republican Party leaders made use of this isn't yet clear. Perhaps when more about his participation in their conventions comes to light, we will better understand this aspect of the story.

Interestingly, the one clear example of using the Thomas Peterson brand for political gain comes not from the Republicans, but the Democrats. In 1900, they were fielding William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925) and Adlai Stevenson (1835–1914) as presidential candidates against the incumbent Republican, William McKinley. For Bryan, a liberal Democrat, this was the second of what would be three failed attempts. He stood opposed to American imperialism and the hold the gold standard had on the nation's economy. Something about his platform struck a chord with Peterson and he came out in support of Bryan as offering the best deal for the workingman, white or black. In a small announcement appearing in the *Omaha World Herald*, the Democrats seized the opportunity to crow about how the first Negro voter under the Fifteenth Amendment—and a lifelong Republican to boot—supported *their* candidates.

It would have been interesting to have a more detailed account of what Peterson thought of the politics at stake. But he would have certainly agreed with Bryan on one score—prohibition. Peterson had told a reporter in an undated article that he had belonged to the prohibitionist movement for around fifteen years by then and saw rum as the curse of his race.

Indeed, in an article covering the Prohibition Party's convention to nominate a "General Fisk" for New Jersey Governor in 1886, the *Bridgeton Evening News* made special note Peterson was there as a delegate from Perth Amboy. "They won't settle the rum question," he complained about the Republican Party, "they fool us every year, and I'm done with them." Evidently, he felt so strongly about the issue, he had left the Republicans. Clearly, it seemed Peterson was his own man when it came to politics.

### ***"A Token on the Freedman's Coat"***

The year 1884 had also been a presidential election year—and an important one at that. Before the Civil War, a pro-slavery faction was dominant in the Democratic Party, counseling an immediate peace deal with the Confederates once war came. They called themselves "Peace Democrats," but Republicans branded them the "Copperheads," an allusion to what they saw as a snake-like treachery. The last time a Democrat sat in the White House before 1884 was James Buchanan in a heated 1856 election—the

beginning of a Democratic losing streak that would last six election cycles and remains the longest such streak in U.S. history to date.

By 1876, however, with abolition no longer a question and other issues asserting themselves, the Democrats had an opportunity to recast their image. Republicans disparaged this new breed as “Bourbon Democrats,” mocking what seemed to them like old-fashioned ideas. Bourbon Democrats embraced big business interests—banking and railroads in particular—but stood against giving them subsidies and favored letting competition drive things. They promoted a laissez-faire capitalism and opposed American adventurism abroad while embracing the gold standard and seeking to reform political bossism—particularly New York’s Boss Tweed machine. In 1884, these new Democrats had their best chance of recapturing the White House with a former governor of New York who was born in Caldwell, New Jersey: Grover Cleveland.

It would be a close win for Cleveland, and a short-lived triumph for his party. Four years later, he lost to Benjamin Harrison in even more of a squeaker—Cleveland won the popular vote, but lost in the Electoral College, something that wouldn’t happen again until the 2000 election. It had been a rough and nasty campaign, with Cleveland admitting to having fathered a child out of wedlock. But in Perth Amboy, anyway, there would be an interesting rally of bipartisanship around Thomas Peterson.

Whatever the motivations, it had remained a point of pride for Perth Amboy that the first Negro voter under the Fifteenth Amendment was one of their own. Peterson himself enjoyed a degree of local celebrity and respect. So it would have come as an unpleasant surprise to discover that *another* black man was claiming the same title. In April of 1884, the *Princeton Press* ran a short article:

*Mose [short for Moses] is known far and wide as a professor of music. He goes as far as Atlantic City this season, and has officiated at 125 sociables. By the way, he wears a medal conferred upon him by the people of New Jersey, in honor of being the first colored citizen to vote under the Fifteenth amendment in this State.*

Not a lot is known yet about Moses Schenck beyond the brief data-points gleaned from the U.S. Census. In 1860, we can say he was a twenty-two-year-old waiter. An 1863 draft record describes him as a twenty-five-year-old unmarried laborer. In 1870, he had married a woman twelve years his senior named Mary and was working as a hotel waiter. The 1880 census confirms his occupation as a musician. Mary was a cook and they lived on Hulfish Street in Princeton. He died December 27, 1890, at age fifty-seven.

While Peterson enjoyed his status, he did not want it if he had not honestly deserved it. He asked that a committee of citizens be formed to investigate Schenck’s claim. It was said that Peterson selected them personally. Of the two men who urged him to vote that day, Marcus Spring had died in 1874, but J.L. Kearny was still around, so he was tapped to head the committee. The rest consisted of local politician Patrick Convery, who had been manning the polls when Peterson cast his ballot; ex-mayor and then-judge William Paterson (the same William Paterson who had sold Daphne the land and house); and Alderman John Fothergill. All were Democrats. Balancing out the committee for the Republicans was Collector of the Port J.L. Boggs, ex-mayor and banker U.B. Watson and City Treasurer I.T. Golding.

They wrote to the Princeton newspaper’s editor, asking for further explanation, to which he replied:

*[Moses Schenck] was born in Princeton, and quite an intelligent man. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 1870, Monday, at the annual election for borough officers...Moses Schenck, was the first of about 100 colored voters to cast a ballot. The medal referred to reads: ‘Moses Schenck, First Voter under the Fifteenth Amendment, Princeton, N. J., April 4, 1870.’ I gave Mose [sic] the medal, and by it did not mean to claim for him more than he was the FIRST VOTER IN PRINCETON under the Fifteenth Amendment. The story of his actually being the first voter under the Amendment, has come up under a misapprehension. I have just spoken to Mose about it, and he says he did not set a very high value on Peterson’s claim, for he only voted on a question of a charter amendment, while here, it was the regular*

*election for Mayor, Council, etc. Mose is very proud of his medal, and, undoubtedly, shows it very freely to strangers, and probably claims more than he has a right to.*

As far as the committee was concerned, the non-partisan nature did not affect Peterson's priority—indeed, it was a badge of honor. If Schenck had voted April 4 and Peterson on March 31, it was clear that the honor belonged to Perth Amboy's resident. Their civic pride had been challenged and, they decided, if Schenck had a medal for being first in Princeton, certainly Thomas Peterson should have one for being first in the entire nation!

After making sure there were no other elections held the same day that could more seriously challenge Peterson's priority, they set to work organizing the striking of a gold medallion. They raised seventy dollars for the purpose—not a minor sum in those days. It consisted of a two-inch wide gold bar on which was imprinted "Thomas Peterson, Perth Amboy." Hanging from it by two chains was a two-inch diameter round medallion featuring a profile bust of Abraham Lincoln—interestingly, a younger version, sans-beard. On the reverse, it read:

*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*

It would be presented to him on May 30, 1884—Decoration Day, the post-Civil War precursor to Memorial Day.

### ***Paternalism***

Sitting in the audience to witness the presentation of the medal to her son was eighty-four-year-old Lucy. Perhaps she thought back to her own life in bondage as a young woman and wondered what her enslaved mother might have thought of it all.

It was a big step for people who looked like her and her son. But it was also a step for the white people in the audience around her. They were pinning a medal to a man's coat for doing something that in other parts of the country they would be putting a noose around his neck for. It was fortunate in the extreme that the first election was in Perth Amboy, New Jersey—a place where there was an element of the white community that would encourage that first vote and a black man of solid personal character to not only cast the ballot, but embrace the role that act imposed upon him. Had it been a less sympathetic state, perhaps that first voter would have wound up dead. Those who followed Peterson's example in other parts of the country would do so with a greater degree of personal risk. Perth Amboy, at least, showed how it could work.

Yet even here, in that shining moment when the community was taking pride in Peterson as one of their own, they couldn't help but keep at least one foot on the side of old attitudes.

A former mayor, James M. Chapman, said a few words, followed by "some short but very appropriate remarks" by Rev. Dr. Stevenson. But it was William Paterson who was selected to speak on behalf of the committee. He should have taken his lead from Rev. Dr. Stevenson. His remarks were longwinded, convoluted and, at least from a modern perspective, of questionable appropriateness. He meandered, for some odd reason, through a commentary on the sylvan founding of Perth Amboy, hoping, perhaps, to make the point of how much an advance in civilization Peterson's vote was by contrast. He even included long melodramatic stanzas of florid poetry.

But it was when introducing how Moses Schenck made his claim that he betrayed the still-paternalistic way even those there to honor Peterson viewed him. He told his long-suffering audience, “[t]here is a common saying familiar to all that a darkey is under the woodpile,” in reference to Schenk’s presumed effort to steal the other black man’s thunder. The phrase was used—often with an even more offensive word than “darkey”—to mean a sneak. Later, on the same subject, he interjected an odd, almost childish verse: “So it came out not long ago that / ‘Another of the colored clan / To make a rhyme, say black and tan,’ / living in a University town of high repute where the same dark hue was interwoven in the academic flag...” For some reason, the fact that Princeton University’s colors were orange and, specifically, black, was also of relevance to Paterson.

One has to wonder what was going through Thomas Peterson’s mind as he heard words like “darkey” being bandied about, albeit in what Paterson no doubt thought was a well-meaning—even complimentary—context. It probably wasn’t anything he hadn’t heard plenty of times before.

A pamphlet of the proceedings was produced to record the event for posterity—copies being sent to both Trenton and Washington, D.C. In the introduction, however, there may be the best (or worst) example of the duality of the progressive and the paternalistic present that day. In what was intended as a sincere compliment, the unnamed author wrote how the well-respected Peterson “no doubt will remain quite an institution until called to go where Uncle Ned and all the good darkies go.”

Aside from yet more liberal use of the term “darkies,” there is also the implied conclusion of a separate heaven for blacks and whites. Even by 1923, when local historian Harold E. Pickersgill was writing about Peterson for his history column in the *Perth Amboy Evening News*, he described him this way:

*Tom was a simple hearted, honest man, a perfect representation of the typical northern negro who was willing to work, knew his place and who did his best to earn the respect of those about him, regardless of color.*

Later in the same piece, Pickersgill says of him:

*Tom knew the importance of the honor that unexpectedly came to him, through no effort of his own, and whether it was in digging sewer trenches or working about the lawns that he earned his way, there was a certain dignity about him which indicated even to those who saw him for the first time that there was something out of the common about him. In the history of his race after emancipation, his name should have a prominent place and in his life before and after that event of March 31, 1871 [sic] there was nothing that would add aught but credit to the record.*

In other words, he was a credit to his race. The community genuinely liked him, sang his praises and celebrated his lucky vote with seventy dollars worth of gold.

But he was still the “other.”

Regardless of intentions, phrases like “the good darkies,” and “knew his place,” made me cringe when I first read them. But, again, one must step back for a moment and consider the full context of the bigger picture. In the decade after Peterson cast his vote in 1870, over 600 black people were lynched or otherwise killed in racially motivated murders in the United States. When they gave him his medal in 1884, it was in a period of relative calm between 1880 and 1889, when the number dropped to under 200. But that was only because of an 1871 Civil Rights Act which then-president Ulysses S. Grant pushed through to effectively dismantle the KKK—at least for a while. By the period between 1920 and 1929, inclusive of when Pickersgill was writing his column, it had jumped back to over 500.

Against that metric, what happened in Perth Amboy—for all its imperfection of tone—was truly remarkable.

### *Later Years*

While to modern ears, William Paterson seems to have prattled on ad nauseum, Harold Pickersgill apparently had a different impression, calling it “one of those graceful speeches for which Judge Paterson was more than locally famed.” But he did have one little bit of verse that more gracefully captured the moment:

*And so we meet to decorate,  
By token on the Freedman’s coat,  
The man who was in any State,  
The first to cast a Freedman’s vote.*

It’s said that Thomas Peterson was proud of his medal and never considered himself properly dressed for services at St. Peter’s without it affixed to the left breast of his shiny Prince Albert-style coat. Boots, pants and a prized old silk hat completed his ensemble. Within the collections of the Perth Amboy Public Library is a photograph of Peterson. It has been copied and reproduced ever since, from his obituaries to modern online histories. But in this original print, the details are wonderfully crisp. This is Peterson as a mature man, some wrinkles around his keen eyes and gray in his hair and the mustache and beard combo he sports. He looks off over the right shoulder of the viewer. He looks proud and self-possessed but not in a hard or unapproachable way—perhaps there is a faint smile under the mustache. There is definitely an air of that dignity Pickersgill said was so apparent, even to strangers who first met him.

He wears a medium-toned suit jacket and matching vest, a shirt with light vertical stripes and a dark tie with small light dots. A chain is fixed to a lower vest button, leading down out of the picture, likely linking with a pocket-watch. Just above it, pinned to the left breast of the vest is his medal, Lincoln’s profile just visible if you look close enough. So we know it was taken 1884 or later. He would have been, at minimum, sixty years old.

If this were a made-for-TV movie, we might zoom in on those eyes here, fade to black and start rolling the credits.

But the rest of Peterson’s story—like so much else here—isn’t quite so simple. While he enjoyed a degree of local celebrity and respect—even prestige as a delegate to Republican conventions and as a juror—there was always only going to be so far he was ever really going to go in life as a black man. He was better off than many others, of course. Thanks to the legacy left to Daphne, they owned their own home at nine Commerce Lane, a dead-end, unpaved lane running south from Commerce Street. It was a modest but certainly respectable house. Though no longer standing, Sanborn Fire Insurance maps indicate a two-story wood frame structure with a one-story lean-to out back where the kitchen was. Local historian John Dyke found a vintage photograph where part of the Peterson’s house can be seen in the background. Thanks to that, we know it was a front-gable, board and batten clad building.

Peterson continued to work, being appointed superintendent of the new elementary school building—a janitorial job, but probably better paying than the random handyman gigs he seems to have otherwise been depending on.

Yet financial security was not to be his in the declining years of his life. The first blow came on November 23, 1891, when Daphne—his wife of some forty-seven years—passed away. Fortunately, he had an extended family to comfort him. But then around 1899, the seventy-five-year-old Peterson found his eyesight failing him, leaving him partially blind and unable to work—and, apparently, leaving the house he had shared with Daphne too much to deal with on his own. With his daughters, Alice G. Peterson, and Jane Johnson with her husband, Alfred, also being named on the deed, the Commerce Lane house was sold to St. Peter’s Church, for \$900.

The 1900 census finds Peterson living with his daughter and son-in-law and his four grandchildren, all still at nine Commerce Lane—evidently, the church permitted their old parishioner to remain in the house with his family. He had become an object of charity. A February 26, 1901 article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* described how a group of Perth Amboy businessmen had formed a committee to help raise money to keep the “aged colored man” they described as having been “out of work for some time...feeble and ill, and has been in actual want.” Perhaps saddest of all was how it would later be remembered that he at times was forced to pawn his prized voting medal.

The end came in early February 1904. He had been unwell, and a doctor had to be called on the fourth of February. At 5:20 in the afternoon, at age seventy-nine, Thomas Peterson passed away at home.

In the archives of St. Peter’s, there is the accounts book of Fred F. Fox, the undertaker who buried Thomas Peterson. It is billed to “Ms. Peterson,” presumably Alice, given that Jane would have been Ms. Johnson. Their father had a “Polished Casket, Handles & Plate trimmed Complete,” costing \$35.00. The outer pine case was \$5.00, two coaches were had at \$6.00, and the hearse for \$7.00. Opening the grave cost \$5.00 and use of the church \$2.00. The services of the undertaker and assistant was \$5.00, bringing the grand total to \$65—roughly \$1,600 in 2010 dollars. It was paid off in two installments, one of \$60.00 and one of \$5.00, in cash.

He was laid to rest at St. Peter’s church graveyard on February 7, 1904, at two o’clock on a Saturday afternoon. Some fifty people packed the pews to hear Rev. J.L. Lancaster speak and the women’s choir sing two hymns. The *Perth Amboy Evening News* sought fit to note in the first paragraph how at least half the audience was white.

It also noted that two of his brothers were in attendance, one from Perth Amboy and the other a justice of the peace from Plainfield, New Jersey.

## **H.**

There is something curious about Peterson’s death certificate. Both he and his father are identified as “Thomas H. Peterson.” At first blush, it almost seems like a typo—certainly it would be “M.” for Mundy? But then the “H.” appears again in the undertaker’s accounts book. Some later historian or genealogist was also evidently confused by it. There are some notes on the page, made in pencil, and hash marks lightly over the “H.” as if to correct it, perhaps to read “M.” Then there is the 1900 deed that conveyed the Commerce Lane house to St. Peter’s Church—once more he is identified as “Thomas H. Peterson.”

Once could be a mistake. Twice, perhaps coincidence. But three times?

The mystery of the “H.” is solved by the obituary that appeared in the *Perth Amboy Evening News*. It begins, “Thomas Henry Peterson, seventy-nine years old, the first colored voter in the United States...”

He’s known these days as Thomas Mundy Peterson, but that combination *never* appears in any contemporary records. The closest was the cover of the pamphlet produced describing the 1884 award of the voting medal—and that reads “Thomas Peterson-Mundy.” But in all other contemporary records found thus far, he is either Thomas Mundy or Thomas Peterson.

It is perhaps telling that the “H.” emerges in documents from the end of Peterson’s life—when his children are involved. They were part of the 1900 deed transaction. They would have given the information for the death certificate and to the undertaker. And to the hometown newspaper who published his obituary on the front page.

It may be hyperbole to call “Mundy” Peterson’s slave name. Certainly it would be inaccurate—Peterson was never a slave. But the inclusion of the Mundy name as part of his identity is evocative of the paternalism under which his generation had labored. Perhaps—and this is speculation—at the dawn of the twentieth century, his kids thought it was high time that their father assert his own identity as a free, independent human being named Thomas Henry Peterson.

### *Fate of the Medal*

After lamenting their loss, Perth Amboy's citizens remembered that gold medal they had given him—what, many wanted to know, had become of it? In a story worthy of a front-page article in the *Perth Amboy Evening Times*, it was announced on February 6, 1904, that it was safe and sound—albeit not in the hands of Peterson's heirs, who had no idea where it had gotten to. Peterson had kept it locked away in an old seaman's chest from his days on the water.

Exactly what happened to the medal is a little sketchy.

In this initial account, Peterson was in need of money and decided to pawn his prized possession one more time. He gave it to a W.D. Vorhees who turned it over to local businessman and philanthropist John H. Gregory. Gregory loaned Peterson twenty-five dollars for the medal.

In a second front-page article on the 10<sup>th</sup>, however, the story had changed a little. Gregory clarified that he hadn't loaned any money to Peterson and that Peterson had told Vorhees to *sell* the medal. Vorhees, in turn, handed it over to Perth Amboy's then-mayor, C.K. Seaman, who was on his way to Manhattan to the assay office to sell it for cash—after which, it would likely have been melted down. He happened to bump into Gregory, who immediately bought it. If the city ever had a museum or such proper place to display it, he would give it them, but for now, he would keep it in his personal safe.

There are two important differences between the stories. In the first account, Peterson was only pawning the medal for a loan. Technically, Gregory would not own it but was holding it as collateral against the loan. If the family had come up with the money to pay him back, they could have retrieved the medal. But in the second story, Peterson wanted to sell it—relinquishing ownership to whomever bought it. And that was now Gregory, who looked like the hero of the day, having saved this piece of Perth Amboy—and American—history from being melted down and lost forever.

It is, of course, possible that the first story did indeed lack all the details. Or perhaps Gregory modified things to assume possession of the medal. Would Thomas Peterson have really sold it, as opposed to pawn it as he had before? It is perhaps worth noting that there does not appear to have been any attempts by Peterson's heirs to get the medal back or any compensation for it. And evidently, at least daughter Jane could have used the money. When she died on January 7, 1910, she was a fifty-year-old widow. "Mrs. Johnston [*sic*] lived on charity for several years," her obituary said, adding, "Her father died in poverty five years ago."

Whatever the case, the medal eventually found its way to Harold Pickersgill and then into the Charles F. Heartman's Negro Culture Collection. Heartman was an antiquarian book dealer who specialized in materials relating to the African American experience. St. Peter's Rev. George H. Boyd attempted to buy the medal back at one point for Perth Amboy, but a deal never materialized, to the disappointment of William McGinnis, who wrote that while the Reverend "offered to pay a good price for it," the "new owner refused to sell it to the church." When Heartman died in 1948, parts of his vast collection were broken up (a lot of it is now at South Texas University) and the lots were auctioned off, including the medal. It was bought by Xavier University of Louisiana, where it remains today. These days, Perth Amboy's history community laments that it is so far from home, but take some comfort that Xavier is, fittingly, an African American university.

Peterson's name, while not as well known as some others of the Civil Rights movement, is still recalled with some pride in and around Perth Amboy. That elementary school where he was superintendent is now the Thomas Peterson Elementary School. Apparently Peterson's kin were unable to afford a grave marker and the plot remained unmarked for over fifty years. Member of St. Peter's raised the funds to at last commemorate both Thomas and Daphne (who does have a marble marker that has had to be repaired after breaking in half). While Daphne had a gravestone, her husband for many years did not. On November 1, 1959, a flat granite marker was dedicated, reading:

[SHOULD BE SMALL CAPS]

*Here Lies The Body Of*  
*THOMAS 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*

In attendance at the dedication was his grandson Alfonso Peterson and his wife, along with their daughter, Althea.

In one more acknowledgement, on April 3, 1998, the New Jersey Legislature passed a resolution that henceforth March 31<sup>st</sup> be known throughout the state as Thomas Mundy Peterson Day.

### ***Never Ending Story***

Okay—*now* the fade to black and roll the credits, right?

Well, no. The story doesn't really end here either. As late as 1965, Congress had to pass an act to remind Americans that it still wasn't acceptable to deny citizens the right to vote because of race. Even today, as I write this at the start of the 2012 election cycle, allegations remain of attempts to make it more difficult to vote in non-white neighborhoods.

In 1970, at the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peterson's vote, Marcia Chamber of the *News Tribune* asked several of Perth Amboy's business and civic leaders, "Can the black man achieve full equality in this country?" It was a time still reverberating from the race riots that made Newark a front-page news item just three years earlier. Pessimism was high in both the black and white answers. The evolution continues.

All things considered, Thomas Peterson's act of voting was as simple as dropping a slip of paper through a slot. Maybe it took a minute at most. Still, consider for a moment all that had taken place to make that moment possible. And the promise it represented for what might come after. It was, ultimately, just one step in an ongoing evolution.

Yet, in that simple act, Thomas Peterson made history.

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