

Justice Lewis Peterson

His brother might be more famous among Civil Rights and Voting Rights historians, but both men reflected a hopeful moment between Reconstruction and mid-20th century the Civil Rights Movement.

Gordon Bond

On March 31, 1870, Thomas Mundy Peterson stepped up to the polling place at Perth Amboy's City Hall and made history as the first African-American in the country to cast a vote both guaranteed and protected by the U.S. Constitution thanks to the Fifteenth Amendment certified as law the previous day. As many GSL reads will already know, I have been working on a new book about Peterson to have ready by March 2020, when Perth Amboy will be observing the 150th anniversary of this moment in Civil Rights and voting rights history.

In exploring Peterson's story, however, I find myself a little less interested in what made him famous. Make no mistake—it is historically important. But, the chance to become the first such voter came to Peterson by dumb luck through no particular effort of his own. He was the right man in the right place at the right time. Indeed, it can be argued it all says more about the surprisingly progressive white community of the city that encouraged and celebrated him than about Peterson himself. Peterson could very easily have cast his vote, gone back to work at his employer's stables and disappeared into history a curious footnote. Instead, he fully embraced civic life. His first vote was in a city charter referendum and he was appointed without opposition as a member of a subsequent charter revision committee. He voted the rest of his life, attended Middlesex County political conventions for Republican and Prohibition parties, and served as a petit juror in the County court. One thing that has been largely forgotten by Peterson historians—and which I seem to have rediscovered—is that he also ran for a City Council seat and maybe other local offices. This fact may have fallen by the wayside because he never won election. Nevertheless, all this deserves at least equal attention with his vote—these are things he did of his own agency and speak far more intimately to the man's character.

But I am not here to write of Thomas Peterson—you'll have to wait for my book to learn more! This article is actually about his younger brother by nine years, Lewis Peterson (albeit adapted from my forthcoming book). Thomas might have been the first Fifteenth Amendment black voter, but Lewis won his election. He evidently became as well-respected in Plainfield, NJ as Thomas in Perth Amboy. In December 1887 he was elected a Justice—an event worthy of a headline in the *Plainfield Evening News*, "No Color Line Here," where he was described this way:

Lewis Henry Peterson, the newly-elected Justice of the Peace in the First Ward, is a good-looking negro with a becoming mustache imperial. He has a voice that has a peculiar legal dryness about it, and his manner has all the dignity of a true

gentleman. Mr. Peterson is of course a Republican. Now in his fifty-first year, he distinctly remembers casting his first vote, which was cast in this city. He came to Plainfield about twenty-five years ago, hailing from Perth Amboy, his native place. He is well-known to business-men and to housekeepers as an industrious worker, and he never lacks employment. He has a brother, age 61, in Perth Amboy. The brother's name is now however, Peterson. He is known as Thomas Mundy—from his old master's name—and was, it is asserted, the first colored man to vote at a public election in this country. He cast his maiden ballot soon after President Lincoln's emancipation proclamation.

“...he has announced his determination to read law all Winter that he may be ready for business in the Spring.”

Lew and Thomas seem to have shared similar impressive bearings and intellect. The phrase “mustache imperial” refers to a type of handlebar mustache, where the ends curl upward, no doubt adding to the effect.

There are, of course, two main errors in the account of his brother—he was not the first black man to vote ever, but first under the Fifteenth Amendment, and as a consequence of it, not the Emancipation Proclamation seven years earlier. Ironically, the paper calls out the *New York World* for erring in calling Lewis the first black Justice in New Jersey—Philip T. Colding, “a prosperous real estate agent and prominent colored Free Mason,” was already a Justice in Camden. Lewis Peterson was elected more for his character than any law experience. It was pointed out his term did not begin until May 1888 and he pledged to spend the next five months reading up on the subject.

The *Trenton Evening Times* noted the novelty of “a full-blooded colored man” as a Justice. He won against a shoemaker, Solomon Flaig. They described Lewis as able to read “but is not much of a writer...he has announced his determination to read law all Winter that he may be ready for business in the Spring.”

Lewis and his wife, Janet, were already fixtures in Plainfield's society. The *Plainfield Evening News* sought fit to mention back on September 26, 1884 that “Mr. Lewis Peterson of East Third street is spending a few days with friends at Rahway.” The address matches the U.S. Census records, so this was the same man. On September 28, 1887 they noted “Mrs. Lew Peterson of East Third street gave a reception last evening to Miss Matilda Ivison and Mrs. John R. Wyckoff of Haverhill, Mass. Friends from Plainfield, Westfield, Roselle [New Jersey] and Chicago were present.”

Throughout the 1890s, the couple is mentioned several

If you are interested in following the progress of my book about Thomas Mundy Peterson, this article was adapted from, I have a Facebook page called "To Cast a Freedman's Vote"

www.facebook.com/groups/354305074984431/

times taking prizes in "cake walks." As a distinctly American form of dance, the cake walk originated in the antebellum South as slave entertainment. Couples strutted in a square pattern, men in exaggerated high-stepping with head and shoulders thrown back and women gracefully curtsying and pirouetting. It began as a lampooning of haughty white society, but evolved into its own choreographed form of stylistic black expression. Couples competed in what became known as "prize walk" contests, often judged by plantation owners—evidently unaware of the irony. It appeared in Minstrel Shows and remained as parties in black communities throughout the country into the early 20th century. The traditional prizes became elaborately decorated cakes—hence "cake walk," as well as still-used phrases like to "take the cake," meaning to win. The Petersons won the cake at a cake walk and dancing party covered by the *Plainfield Evening News* in September 1892 that showed other prized—second prize was a lamp and the best waltzers won a silk umbrella.

Lewis Peterson was reelected several times, but the job was part-time, when the courts were in session. Like his brother, he earned his living as a handyman, and janitor at the Congregational Church until quitting in 1892. "Mr. Peterson says he wants more money than he was getting," the *Plainfield Evening News* reported, "but the Board of Trustees cannot comply with the demand; hence the resignation."

When he was first nominated for Justice in 1887, he was also in the running as a delegate to the Republican convention, but lost. In 1896, a Lewis Peterson, Jr. was among a delegation from the Plainfield Colored Republican Club who met with their Cranford, NJ chapter. While it seems logical to think this was his son, Census records don't confirm it.

After a five year lingering illness being bedridden for half the time, Lewis Peterson died August 24, 1916. By then Thomas was also dead, and it was noted Lewis was "the last of his family." Thomas being the first voter was "a fact of which Mr. [Lewis] Peterson was very proud."

In their respective ways, the Peterson brothers reflected a brief, hopeful moment in the period between Reconstruction and mid-20th century Civil Rights Movement. Segments of white communities gave blacks the impression if they worked hard enough, they would fairly earn their place at the table of citizenship. After all, they could vote, run for office, and be part of the political process. This was a time of Negro universities and the blossoming of black intellectual and artistic life leading to the Harlem Renaissance. By the end of the period, however, it was clear equality still would not be *given* but had to be *taken*.

Nevertheless, for that moment, in places like Perth Amboy and Plainfield, black men like Thomas and Lewis Peterson were sources of civic pride to be celebrated.

