

Thomas Mundy Peterson Day of Democracy

Thomas Mundy Peterson was born in Metuchen, New Jersey on October 6th 1824. His father, also named Thomas, worked for the Mundy family. His mother, Lucy Green, was a slave of Hugh Newell (1744–1816) of Freehold Township, New Jersey. She was released from slavery at age 21 by Newell's will. After moving to Perth Amboy, Peterson married Daphne Reeves, whose mother, Bette, had been a slave on an estate of Andrew Bell in Perth Amboy.

For several years (between 1871 and 1878) Peterson was an employee of the Board of Education, serving as a custodian of School No. 1 located on State Street in Perth Amboy. He was also a general handyman around town and was active in both the United States Republican Party and the Prohibition Party. It has been claimed that he also holds the distinction of being the city's first "colored" person to serve on a jury, however, no direct evidence has been found.

Following its ratification by the requisite three-fourths of the states, the 15th Amendment, granting African-American men the right to vote, was formally adopted into the U.S. Constitution ensuring that "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."

On March 31, 1870, one day after it was adopted, Thomas Peterson Mundy became the first African American to vote under the authority of this new law. New Jersey's legislative record on race and suffrage is complicated and reveals just how remarkable Mundy's actions were.

In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment (which abolished slavery) was not initially ratified by the New Jersey State Legislature, although ratification did follow in 1866.

After a change in leadership the legislature also ratified the Fourteenth Amendment, (which granted citizenship and guaranteed equal protection of the laws), but when political leadership changed yet again, the ratification was rescinded in 1868.

The New Jersey State Legislature voted against ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. The Amendment, which gave black men the right to vote, was ratified on March 30, 1870 despite the lack of support from New Jersey.

Thomas Mundy Peterson cast his historic vote the very next day.

Peterson was notably remembered for voting in the local election held at Perth Amboy City Hall over the town's charter. Some citizens wanted to revise the existing charter while others wished to abandon the charter altogether in favor of a township form of government. Peterson cast his ballot in favor of revising the existing charter. This side won 230 to 63.^[9] Peterson was afterward appointed to be a member of the committee of seven that made subsequent amendments leading to the final version that was approved by the State Legislature on April 5, 1871.^[10] Historical records as to his contribution to revisions in the form of minutes, writing, or other records are still wanting. Through his work on the committee, he helped shape the city's educational system by aiding in organization of the Perth Amboy Board of Education in 1870 and construction of School No. 1, the city's first public school. When the school opened for classes in 1871, 378 students enrolled and Peterson became its first custodian.^[8]