

IT HAPPENED HERE NEW JERSEY

Thomas Mundy Peterson

Target Age: High School
Time Period: 19th Century
Featured County: Middlesex
NJ 350th Theme: Liberty

NJ Common Core Standards:

Social Studies: 6.1.12.A.3.f, 6.1.12.D.4 a and b,
Social Studies Skills: Chronological Thinking,
Critical Thinking
Language Arts Literacy: 3.1 Reading, 3.2 Writing



Courtesy of Division of Political History, National Museum of American History.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: How did New Jersey citizen Thomas Mundy Peterson impact the liberty of not only New Jersey, but also the rest of the United States? How is his legacy still felt today?

BACKGROUND:

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 of Perth Amboy, New Jersey 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also ratified the Fourteenth Amendment that year, but when political leadership changed yet again, the ratification was rescinded in 1868. Keeping true to the now established pattern, 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.

Years later, Peterson liked to describe how one white man, upon seeing him vote, ripped up his own ballot and declared that the franchise was worthless if a black man was allowed to vote; Peterson said that particular white man did not vote again for at least a decade. But not all whites opposed black

suffrage. Some political figures recognized that blacks could be an important voting bloc and sought their support.

Peterson remained an active member of the Perth Amboy community for the rest of his life, continuing to vote and even serving on the town's committee to revise the City Charter. Through his actions, he became one of the many New Jersey citizens who pushed forward the cause of liberty, even in the face of opposition and discrimination.

ACTIVITY:

Ask students to create a class-generated definition of liberty, one of the central themes of the NJ350 "It Happened Here: New Jersey Project." After consensus is reached, share a dictionary definition of liberty (such as an online source: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberty>).

With this information in mind, have students discuss how Peterson fought for liberty. Ask them to speculate about how his vote affected African-American men, the future votes of women, as well as liberty for all Americans.

You can also ask students to consider who was still unable to exercise their vote in 1870 (women, Native Americans, and many African Americans who, even after the 15th Amendment was ratified federally, faced racial violence and intimidation at state and local levels intended to discourage its application).

On May 30, 1884, the town of Perth Amboy presented Thomas Mundy Peterson with a medallion commemorating his historic vote (see images below). Peterson wore the medallion faithfully, and it is now preserved by Xavier University of Louisiana.



Courtesy of Xavier University of Louisiana Archives and Special Collections.



Courtesy of Xavier University of Louisiana Archives and Special Collections.

The medallion reads:
PRESENTED by CITIZENS
OF PERTH AMBOY N.J.
TO
THOMAS PETERSON

THE FIRST COLORED VOTER
IN THE U.S. UNDER THE
PROVISIONS OF THE
15TH AMENDMENT
AT AN
ELECTION HELD IN
THAT CITY
MARCH 31st 1870

Why might Perth Amboy citizens have felt it was necessary to raise the \$70 dollars (equivalent to \$1000 in 2010) in order commission this medal? On the medallion is the image of President Abraham Lincoln. Ask the students to make the connection between the image of Lincoln and the significance of the vote.

FOLLOW-UP:

On June 25th, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act. Congress first passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to counter racial discrimination in voting, which it believed still occurred in certain areas of the country, especially in some southern states. Section 4 (a) of the Act established criteria to identify those areas and remedies where appropriate, such as a five-year suspension of “a test or device,” such as a literacy test as a prerequisite to register to vote. It also required that states in those areas could not pass laws about voting behavior or restrictions without federal approval.

On June 25, 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Section 4. John Roberts, the Chief Justice, wrote that the court made the decision because Section 4 “is based on forty-year-old facts and has no logical relation to the present day.” Following this Supreme Court decision, on August 12, 2013, North Carolina’s governor, Pat McCrory, signed into law one of the nation’s most stringent voter identification laws. The measure requires voters to present government-issued photo identification at the polls and shortens the early voting period from 17 to 10 days. It will also end pre-registration for 16- and 17-year-old voters who will be 18 on Election Day and eliminates same-day voter registration.

The following websites offer a range of opinions on the subject of voter registration and state regulation. Divide students into small groups and assign each group one article. Ask them to take a few moments to read the article and identify its key arguments, then come together as a class and share their findings (T-charts work well here) about the pros and cons of voter ID cards.

http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/misc/sec_4.php)

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

<http://www.npr.org/2013/08/16/212664895/in-rural-n-c-new-voter-id-law-awakens-some-old-fears>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/20/ellie-kinnaird-resigns_n_3784644.html

<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/nation/la-na-north-carolina-voting-20130727,0,2299545.story>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2013/08/12/north-carolina-governor-signs-extensive-voter-id-law/>

Students should be encouraged to list as many ideas as possible, as well as be politically sensitive—this is a contentious issue. After the list has been generated, the teacher should prompt students with additional questions to encourage further thought:

Who might or might not have a government issued ID, and why or why not?
If we need ID to get on an airplane, why not need it for voting?

Finally, after the generation of the list and the arguments, and the subsequent class discussion, ask students to make the connection to Thomas Mundy Peterson. This can be done in the form of exit slips, small discussions or formal writing assignments.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Places You Can Visit

St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Perth Amboy, NJ: Burial Site of Thomas Mundy Peterson.

- <http://stpetersepiscopal.com/history/>
- <http://lostinjersey.wordpress.com/tag/thomas-mundy-peterson/>

Thomas Mundy Peterson School (formerly known as P.S. No. 1), State Street, Perth Amboy.

- http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Mundy_Peterson_School.jpg

For More Information

New Jersey Citizens, Perth Amboy, *History and Proceedings attending the Presentation of a Medal to Thomas Peterson-Mundy, Decoration Day, May 30, 1884* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1884). This forty-four page reproduction was printed from a digital file created at the Library of Congress as part of an extensive scanning effort started with a generous donation from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Available online at <http://www.amazon.com>.

Marion Thompson Wright, "Extending Civil Rights in New Jersey through the Division against Discrimination," *Journal of Negro History*, 38:1 (Jan. 1953): 91-107.

Hanes Walton Jr, Donald R Deskins Jr and Sherman Puckett, *The African American Electorate: A Statistical History* (Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2012).

Voter ID: <http://www.ncsl.org/legislatures-elections/elections/voter-id.aspx>

The Voting Rights Act of 1965: <http://www.history.com/topics/voting-rights-act>

Supreme Court overturning of section 4 of the Voting Rights Act

- http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/misc/sec_4.php
- http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

CREDIT INFORMATION:

Classroom Activity:

Pg. 1: Wooden Ballot Box, Smithsonian Institute.

Pg. 2: Thomas Mundy Peterson Medallion (left and right), Xavier University.

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