

*Biography*

Biographical Sketch of  
John Peterson

by  
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The information which is available regarding the remarkable life of the Rev. John Peterson, the greatest of our early coloured educators in the city of New York is somewhat fragmentary, and although the majority of historians make mention of this popular teacher and the schools in which he taught, we can find no record as to the time and place of his birth; but from the information received from one of his admiring students, Mr. Jerome Peterson of Brooklyn, and from the pages of a score or more of books dealing with the early education of Negroes, we know quite definitely that he lived to a ripe old age, and that he served his race unselfishly and with great distinction.

Before proceeding with the few observations regarding the life of John Peterson, it would be interesting to learn something about the history of the School System in which he was interested, and for this information, we must turn to the pages of George Washington Williams' "History of the Negro Race in America", Vol. II, published by G. P. Putnam & Sons, N.Y., 1883. (See pages 165-169)

" A school for Negro Slaves was opened in the city of New York in 1704, by Elias Neau, a native of France, and a catechist of the "Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts". After a long imprisonment for his public profession of faith as a Protestant, he founded an asylum in New York. His sympathies were awakened by the condition of the Negroes in slavery in that city who numbered about 1,500 at that time. The difficulties of holding any intercourse with them seemed almost insurmountable. At first

he could only visit them from house to house, after his day's toil was over; afterward he was permitted to gather them together in a room in his own house for a short time in the evening. As the result of his instructions at the end of four years, in 1708, the ordinary number under his instruction was 200. Many were judged worthy to receive the sacrament at the hands of Mr. Vesey, the rector of Trinity Church, some of whom became regular and devout communicants, remarkable for their orderly and blameless lives..."

" The frequent kidnapping of free persons of color excited public alarm and resulted in the formation of "The New York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting such of them as have been or may be Liberated". These are the names of the gentlemen who organized the Society, and became the board of trustees of the "New York African Free School": Melancthon Smith, Jno. Bleeker, James Cogswell, Lawrence Embree, Thomas Burling, Willett Leaman, Jno. Lawrence, Jacob Leaman, White Mattock, Matthew Clarkson, Nathaniel Lawrence, Jno. Murray Jr. "

"Their school located in Cliff Street, between Beekman and Ferry, was opened in 1786, taught by Cornelius Davis, attended by about forty pupils of both sexes, and appears, from their book of minutes, to have been satisfactorily conducted... "

"Through the space of about twenty years they struggled on; the number of schools varying from forty to sixty, until the year 1809, when the Lancastrian, or monitorial system of instruction was introduced (this being the second school in the United States to adopt the plan), under a new teacher, E. J. Cox, and a very .

favorable change was produced, the number of pupils, and the efficiency of their instruction being largely increased."

When Mr. Neau began this work of teaching the coloured children, he met with strong opposition from Mr. Vesey, who demanded that he wait until he received his license from the Bishop of London before beginning to teach. Neau refused to do this as we have seen. He did not receive his license as teacher and catechist from the Bishop, which empowered him to instruct Indians and Negroes in New York City until 1705. ( See "History of Negro Education in New York City-1701-1853" by C.B. Long, N.Y. 1935.)

As the number of pupils increased, larger accommodations were needed and due to the magnanimity of many citizens and the Corporation of the city, a brick building, large enough to accommodate 200 pupils, was erected on ground in William Street. This new school building was completed in January 1815, but it too soon became too small to accommodate all the students, and additional space had to be secured for school activities.

The ever-increasing number of students made it necessary to acquire a lot of ground, located at Mulberry Street, between Grand and Hester Streets, and another building, accommodating 500 students, was made ready for occupancy of the coloured children in May 1820.

It is evident that this notable school had earned a great prestige, and as proof of this, General Lafayette paid <sup>it</sup> a visit on September 10, 1824. Any one who has read of the struggles of the slaves for freedom, will soon realize how effective was the help given by many liberal minded citizens of France, a country which is suffering so greatly to-day from the invasion of its ruthless foes, who appear to be opposed to the freedom and liberty of mankind.

On the occasion of the visit of the General to this school, he was greeted by one of the pupils, only 11 years old, as follows: "General Lafayette: In behalf of myself and fellow-school-mates may I be permitted to express our sincere and respectful gratitude to you for your condescension you have manifested this day in visiting this institution, which is one of the noblest specimens of New York philanthropy. Here, Sir, you behold hundreds of the poor children of Africa sharing with those of lighter hue in the blessings of education; and while it will be our pleasure to remember the great deeds you have done for America, it will be our delight to cherish the memory of General Lafayette as a friend to African emancipation, and as a member of this institution." "To which the general replied, in his <sup>own</sup> ~~own~~ characteristic style, "I thank you, my child." It will be interesting to note that the little boy, who delivered this address of welcome to the general, afterward became the celebrated Dr. James Mc Cune Smith. ( See Page 133, "Story of the Negro" Vol. II, by Booker T. Washington.)

At the time of the ~~general's~~ general's visit, the Negro schools in New York had an attendance of 600 pupils. (1824) In 1834, when the schools passed into the hands of the New York Public School Society, 1,400 students were registered, with an average attendance of about 700, and the value of the property, was estimated at \$12,130.22.

In 1832 John Peterson was principal of African Free School No. 6. This school was located at 108 Columbia Street which is now Grove Street. There were 161 pupils under the tuition of Mr. Peterson. (See page 59, History of Negro Education in New York, 1701-1853 by C.B. Long, N.Y., 1935)

In 1835 the school on Mulberry Street (Coloured ~~XXXXXX~~ Grammar School No. 1) registered 317 pupils. A. Liebolt was the principal of the school at this time. He was succeeded by John Peterson, who, it is evident, was an able and successful teacher, remaining in charge of the education of Negro youth in this and other schools for probably more than 35 years.

There was a strong desire on the part of the teachers to change the name of the schools. On May 4, 1838, the teachers presented a petition to the Board, requesting that the name be changed, and it was decided, after some discussion regarding the subject, that the change could be made, therefore "the title of the schools was changed to "Colored" in place of "Africa". ( See Chap. XIX:679, History of the Public School Society of the City of New York, by Bourne.

In 1853 the Board of Education of the City and County of New York assumed full control over all ~~XXXXX~~ of the Coloured Schools, until that time under the Public School Society.

As we have seen, the progress of the education of Negro children was constant, despite much opposition. Carter Woodson tells us that "the ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ instructors were then not only teaching the elementary branches of reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography, but also astronomy and navigation, advanced composition, plain sewing, knitting, and marking". (For detailed information about subjects taught and examination questions, please see "The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861 by Carter Woodson, G.P. Putnam's Sons, N.Y. 1915. See also "History of the New York African Free Schools, by Charles C. Andrews, printed by Mahlon Day, N.Y. 1830.)

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Williams tells us that " a normal school for Colored teachers was established, with Mr. John Peterson, principal, and the schools were graded in the same manner as those for white children.) (P.169)

As we have seen, Peterson had been teaching a long time before he became the principal of the first normal school for coloured teachers. He received the highest salary among the coloured teachers in the city. The school over which he presided had a faculty of ten teachers. He received \$1,000 per year, and when he became head of the Normal School, his salary was increased by an additional \$200. The Normal School had an enrollment of 16 pupils, this amount being the number of preceptors who had not attained the grade of principal of a school. ( See page 52, "Education of Negro in New York-1853-1900" by Robert S. Dixon. See also Page 71-72, "History of Negro Education in New York" by C.B.Long.) In the last named work the information will be found that the classes of the Normal School were held on Saturday ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ from 9 A.M. until 3 P.M. There were only two courses which were divided into Junior and Snior branches.

" In New York City", Flick says, "the first free school after the close of the war was that founded in 1786 for Negro children. The charity schools formerly maintained by the various churches were gradually reestablished. In the Episcopalian charity school in 1790, there were eighty-six pupils who were "clothed, taught reading, writing, arithmetic, divine music and needle work, and put out to useful trades when they had received their education". During the same year, the Dutch and Presbyterian congregations each maintained fifty pupils. Meanwhile, the city supported about "sixty helpless infants" in the Alms House. The first free school for white

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children, was established in 1801 by the Association of Women Friends for the Relief of the Poor, a Quaker Society. It was not until 1805 that the Free School Society of New York was chartered. The establishment of a universal compulsory common school system, one of the chief glories of American democracy, belongs to the nineteenth century". (From Flick's "History of the State of New York" Vol. IV:349.)

From the account of the life of Mr. Peterson as given by his genial and scholarly student, now living in Brooklyn, it may be stated that this early educator was a rigid disciplinarian, devoting much of his time to the inculcation of those virtues which would make his students men and women of superior calibre. It was the idea of Mr. John Peterson that the children whom he taught should have a solid foundation, therefore, he was insistent that they should master all subjects which they were taught, particularly the three R's (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic). The students were so painstakingly drilled day after day in these subjects that they could not forget them.

The students taught by Mr. Peterson, who was ably assisted by Rebecca Peterson, were not ungrateful for his efforts in their behalf, and to show their appreciation for his invaluable work, they organized the John Peterson Association. Mr. Jerome Peterson, my informant, was the secretary of this Association.

This educator was held in highest esteem by the graduates of his school, and they honoured his memory for many years after his death, when on the anniversary of his birthday, March 17th, they held a dinner, which was very well attended, according to reports which appeared in contemporary newspapers. Accounts of the first

and second dinners have been preserved by Mr. Jerome Peterson. The first dinner was held in 1888. One of the dinners was held at the Club House of the Society of the Sons of New York. This dinner was attended by the celebrated orator, Frederick Douglas, who was the guest of honour on this occasion.

It is very likely that we would have had a more complete record of the life of this distinguished Negro educator, but Mr. Peterson declares that he was not a man who cared for publicity, and hardly any mention was made of his very creditable work until after his death. He was faithful to his work, both in the church, where he served as a catechist and in the school over which he presided as principal. He was retiring in nature, conservative, and a typical old time schoolmaster.

The Rev. Mr. John Peterson was admitted to the diaconate of the Episcopal Church, and he served with rare ability as assistant minister of Saint Phillips Church.

It was only some years after his death that people began to show their appreciation for the excellent service which he had rendered so brilliantly, yet so unselfishly in the cause to which so many years of his life was so profitably devoted.

Teachers, both white and coloured, in Mr. Peterson's time did not have a bed of roses. Their work was one of great sacrifice, and they had to have faith, courage, perseverance and other gifts or qualities which only the good and noble servants of mankind have always manifested, in order to help those whom they would unselfishly serve. Peterson must have been a most courageous leader in all



~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ affairs of his time in New York City, particularly with respect to the Negroes and the equipment of their schools, because he was able to successfully combat all opposition directed against the education of the Negro children, and to surmount the many obstacles which were placed in his path.

The Negroes in Peterson's time were as anxious as they are now, to receive the benefits of a liberal education. In the Journal of Negro History, Vol. XVIII:173 we will find that Elias Neau thought that the Negroes of New York "were more numerous than the Indians and readier for instruction", and so they were, as his efforts in their behalf was crowned with success.

There can be no doubt that Mr. Peterson was among the most prominent Negroes of his time, for we find in William's "History of the Negro Race in America, Vol. II:134, the following observations: "The colored population of New York was equal to the great emergency that required them to put forth their personal exertions. Dr. Henry Highland Garnet, Dr. Charles B. Ray, and the Rev. Peter Williams in the pulpit; Charles L. Reason and William Peterson as teachers; James Mc Cune Smith and Philip A. White as physicians and chemists; James Williams and Jacob Day among business men, did much to elevate the Negro in self-respect and self-support."

And again in "Education of the Negro in the City of New York-1853-1900 by Robert S. Dixon, we find further mention of the praiseworthy efforts of John Peterson. He tells us that, "Growth of the Negro schools must then be attributed in large measure to the continued interest and broad-visioned attitude maintained toward the extension of educational opportunities for

Negroes of this city, by the directors of the Board of Education during that period. Of likewise great importance were the steady efforts of John Peterson, Charles L Reason, and James Mc Cune Smith, directed toward arousing in the Colored population an increased sense of the importance of education for a wider ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ participation in the opportunities offered.

There were many ways in which encouragement was given to the students by Mr. Peterson. It was customary for him to reward his students when they gave evidence of their diligence in studying their lessons. Mr. Jerome Peterson has in his possession a Bible which was presented to him on December 20, 1869 by his teacher, the Rev. John Peterson.

There can be no doubt that Mr. Peterson had all the necessary qualifications for the work he had undertaken. A number of the leading Negroes of this State were educated by this worthy teacher who must have really loved his work in order to have attained so high a standard among the schools of his time. The people of New York city, especially the Negro children, were most fortunate in having a teacher of Mr. Peterson's amiable character and sterling ability.

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