

State of Ohio on relation of C. R. Patterson vs The Board of Education of the Incorporated Village of Greenfield, Ohio, and W. G. Moler as Superintendent

By Harold Schmidt

Much has been written about the Patterson family and their work in the carriage and automobile business. Here is little known information about the Pattersons. It shows the importance that C. R. placed on education and how Frederick came to be the business man that he was.



The case was filed on behalf of Patterson on September 30, 1886, by his attorney, Mills Gardner of Washington Court House. It claimed that young Fred was refused admission to the all white high school on the first day of school, September 6, 1886, and every day after that by Superintendent William G. Moler.

The complaint claimed that Fred, aged 16, was three-fourths white and only one-fourth negro and that the negro blood was "scarcely visible," thus he was entitled to the same privileges as other white students. It went on to claim that the Board of Education provided elementary and grammar schools for the negro students separate from those provided for the white students, but provided only one high school. According to Fred's promotion card, he had been "Promoted to the B Grade High School Grade," therefore, the petition claimed, he should be admitted to the one and only high school in town. (The original promotion card and Fred's eighth grade grade card are in the court files of the case.)

Even though slavery was prohibited in Ohio by the 1803 constitution, blacks did not have true freedom and equality. Many states, including Ohio, had what were known as Black Laws or Codes that strictly limited the rights of blacks, including the prohibition of education for blacks. Later, laws were changed to allow racially separate schools, but with financing for the black schools being the responsibility of the black parents.

The complaint asked for a Writ of Mandamus requiring the Board of Education and Superintendent Moler to fulfill their legal obligation to admit Frederick to the only high school in Greenfield.

On September 30, 1886, Common Pleas Judge Huggins ordered an alternative writ be served on the Board and Superintendent requiring them to admit Frederick or appear before the Court on the first day of the court's session in October of the same year and show cause why they had not done so.

The Board of Education and Superintendent each filed their objections to the writ on October 16. They claimed that the writ was not a valid one because the plaintiff (C. R. Patterson) had no legal right to sue and that there were no grounds for the complaint. These arguments were not well taken by the judge. He filed on January 17, 1887, that they should respond to the original complaint by February 1.

On January 31, the Board and Superintendent filed their arguments against the complaint. They denied that Frederick Patterson was a white youth. They claimed that he looked colored and was treated as such in the community.

They also denied that there was only one high school. They claimed that they made provision to extend the curriculum in the colored school to provide a high school education for the colored

students. They said this action was taken long before the school year in question, therefore, Superintendent Moler did not break the law when he refused Frederick entry into the white high school.

There was a hand-written paper in pencil on lineless paper in the court records. It stated that Mr. Baldwin moved that "any colored pupil who has passed the proper examination may be admitted to the High School." Mr. Eckman offered an amendment that the superintendent be required to extend the course of study of the colored schools so as to give the pupils "all the advantages pertaining to the High School of the whites." The vote on the amendment and the amended motion passed. Voting for were Boden, Eckman and Rucker, voting against were Baldwin and a Mr. M_____ (*illegible*).

Since Frederick had not attended school for the year thus far, they claimed he would be behind the other students and should wait until the next year to attend, or at least take a test to see if he was qualified to start immediately.

Judge Higgins handed down his verdict in April 1886. He ruled that the Board of Education and Superintendent immediately admit Frederick under the same regulations they admit white pupils. He further ordered the defendants to pay costs.

The judge's ruling came just days after the Ohio Legislature voted on February 22 to repeal separate schools and allow mixed schooling.

Frederick Douglas Patterson became the first African-American to graduate from a Greenfield high school. He attended The Ohio State University, 1889-92, where he was a member of the 1891 football team, the first African-American to do so. He was also on the staff of the Lantern, OSU's student newspaper, and a member of Company A, a student military group.

According to **The Ohio State University Quarterly**, April 1912, Frederick was a high school teacher in Louisville, Kentucky, for four and a half years. Back in Greenfield he became general manager of C. R. Patterson and Sons after his father's death in 1910. Frederick moved the company into the production of automobiles and buses. He also was a city councilman and member of Knights of Pythias and Masonic Lodge.

At one point Fred was 2nd Vice-President of the National Negro Business League and spoke before that group's meeting in Chicago in 1901. (*The picture above was taken from their program.*) He is quoted as saying that in the carriage making business, it takes a man of common sense, push and hustle. He often thought that his father was wrong, but every time it was Fred who was wrong and C. R. who was right.

Sources:

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