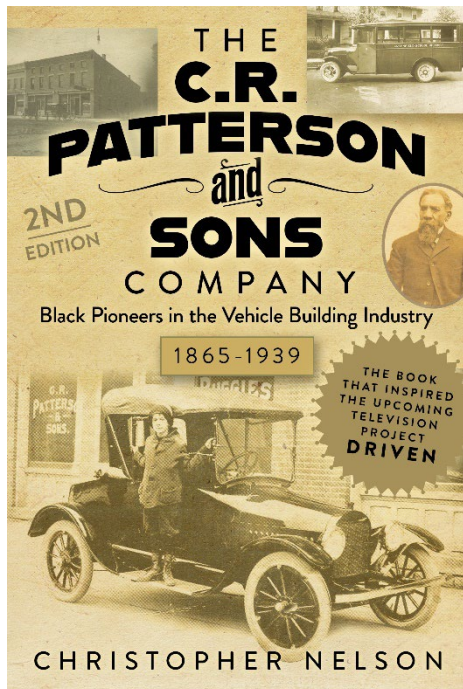


An overview of the C.R. Patterson and Sons Company: the first Black auto manufacturers and transportation pioneers

By Christopher Nelson, Tennessee state cultural resources specialist

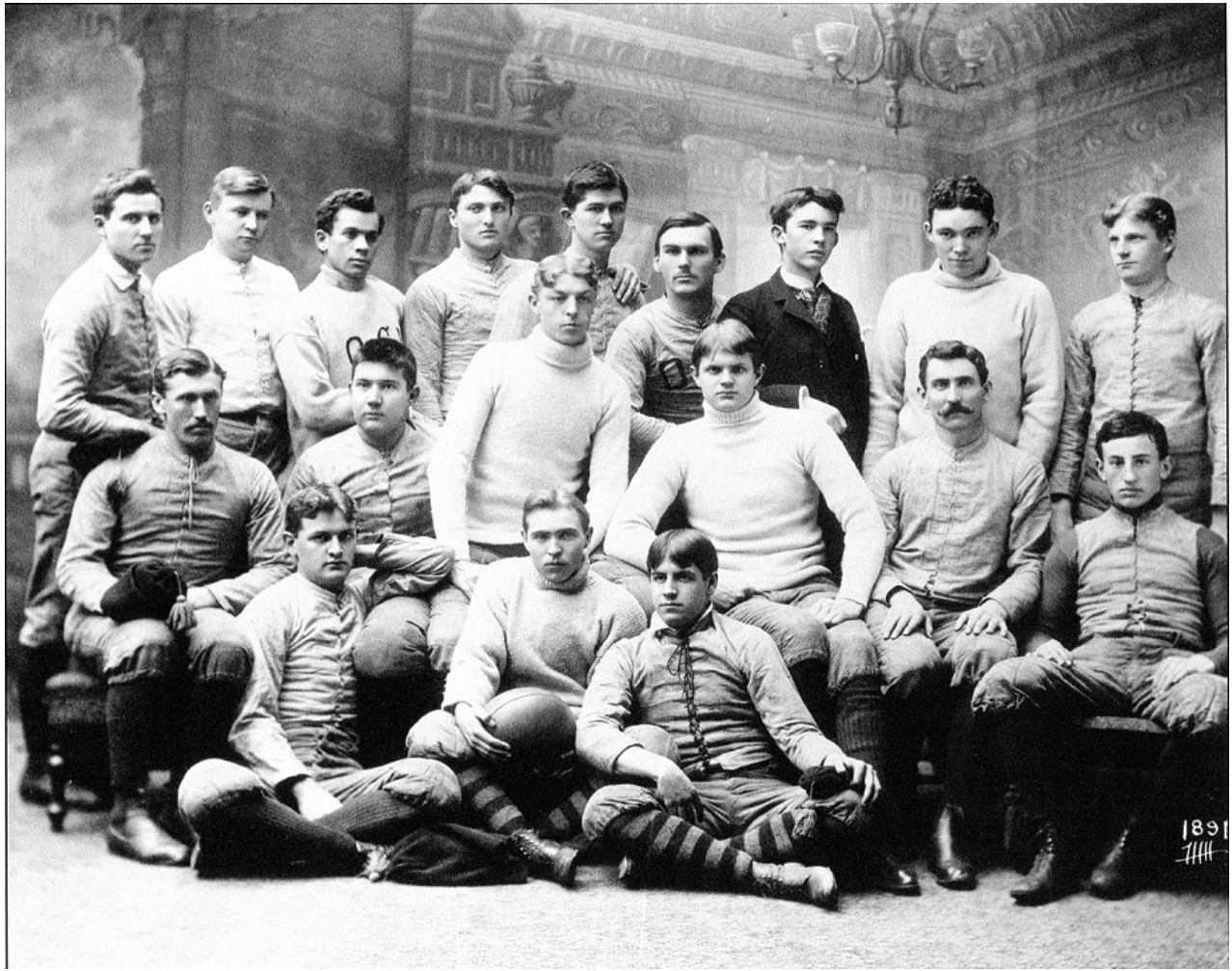
On a late September day in 1915, the big wooden doors of the local Greenfield, Ohio, carriage shop opened wide. The C.R. Patterson and Sons Carriage Company had opened its doors countless times before to let the thousands of carriages roll out into the street ready for sale. But the vehicle that rolled out of the doors on this particular day was different; it was an automobile. Frederick Patterson believed that the auto age was here to stay, and that the company founded by his father, Charles Richard Patterson, must transition from carriages to automobiles in order to survive.



The “horseless carriage” in question, dubbed the Patterson-Greenfield, was like most cars of the era, lacking significant body style, components, or performance differences with any other car on the market. Yet the Patterson-Greenfield was unique. On that September day, Patterson had accomplished something that no other African American man had done he became the first and only African American auto manufacturer in the United States. The achievement was but one in a series of remarkable triumphs in his life.

Born in Greenfield in 1871 and named after the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Frederick was the youngest of Charles (affectionately dubbed “C.R.” by family and friends) and Josephine Patterson’s four children. His older brother, Samuel, was the first Patterson son in the firm, joining his father in 1893 after C.R. had bought out his white business partner, J.P. Lowe, to take ownership of the twenty-year-old carriage company. Frederick delayed joining the carriage business while he engaged in other activities that would later help grow the business.

C.R. wanted his son Frederick to have a good education and, at times, was willing to fight to ensure that happened. Frederick attended Greenfield’s African American elementary and middle schools. On completing middle school, Frederick received a card indicating that he was “promoted to the high school grade.” But there was no local high school for African Americans in Greenfield. So Frederick showed up at the white high school for the first day of classes in 1886. When Frederick was refused admittance, a furious C.R. filed suit against the Board of Education, arguing that in the absence of a local “colored” high school, his son should be admitted to Greenfield’s all-white school. The board countered that Ohio’s “Black Laws,” dating back to the State’s 1803 Constitution, limited the rights of African Americans and that eliminated all “grounds for the complaint.” The father persisted, and the courts ultimately ruled



in his favor, ordering that the young student be admitted under the same regulations that governed white pupils. Furthermore, the defendant was ordered to pay all court costs. Having broken the color barrier, Frederick Patterson went on to graduate as the 1888 class Valedictorian. It was the first in a long line of successes for the young man.

In September 1889, Patterson became the third African American to enter Ohio State University (two enrolled the year prior). He became the first of his race to play football for Ohio State, joining the team in 1890, and playing for two seasons. While not necessarily a star player – Frederick scored at least one touchdown, including the first defensive touchdown in Ohio State football history – he paved the way for future athletic greats at the university. In addition, the young man was active in the Horton Literary Society and served as the Assistant Business Manager for *The Lantern*, the campus newspaper. More impressively, the class of 1893 voted Patterson to be its president, clearly judging him on merits rather than his race. Patterson, however, relinquished the position during his senior year to become a high school teacher in Kentucky, a place he termed “land of good whiskey, fast horses, and fair women.” Writing to *The Lantern* editor Walter J. Sears, he insisted he was “making hay in a way that is pleasant to me. My eyes are being opened and I am getting a glimpse of the field which I will have to tread in a year or two.” A university “is not the world,” he insisted, and his “battles” had to be fought

outside academia. “For that reason,” he told Sears, “I am trying my hand at experience, and let me tell you, it is the best of teachers.”

In 1900, Booker T. Washington recruited Patterson to help develop the National Negro Business League, a national organization promoting Black-owned businesses. Together they grew the league’s membership and aided business owners with direct support and education in sound business practices. Patterson served as vice president under Washington for most of the league’s first decade, and, while frequently speaking across the nation, gained a reputation as a fine orator. “Mr. Patterson,” Washington joked during a 1905 introduction, “has not only a reputation for building first class carriages, buggies, and all sorts of vehicles, but he has an equally fine reputation for making short and good speeches.” Patterson took the hint and promised not to forget the “warning to keep it short.”

Patterson’s skills soon led him into the political arena. In 1902, he became a delegate for the Republican State Convention in Springfield, Ohio. A contemporary historian noted that he was “looked upon as a rising young man whose popularity aided by his marked ability promises for him high honors in the ranks of his party.” The honors came when, in 1924, he became Ohio’s first African American delegate at that year’s Republican National Convention – breaking yet another color barrier.

A national celebration was held in 1914 to honor the 50th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Congressional legislation directed that an organizing committee be appointed to develop a program and details of the celebration. Members were to be chosen from “the leading men of this country, including both the white and colored races,” so that the exposition “be in every particular a practical demonstration of the Negroes’ ability and achievement in every phase of human endeavor.” Patterson was chosen as a committee member, having already made a name for himself even before building his first automobile.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Patterson and his young Kentucky wife returned to Ohio to help with the carriage business. Using skills acquired through the Negro Business League, he soon helped the company to prosper and grow. He always insisted, however, that his carriages were in demand “only because of their superior quality.”

Expanding on his father’s good business sense, Patterson used his writing skills to propel the business forward. A firm believer in advertising, he mailed monthly bulletins and placed weekly advertisements in regional newspapers. A 1902 article in the *Greenfield Republican* noted that Patterson Company catalogs “carried the name and fame of the Patterson vehicles throughout the length and breadth of Ohio, through Illinois, even past the portals of the ‘White City’ [Chicago], down into the Blue Grass State and into sunny Tennessee.” By 1910, the Patterson Company had shipped carriages all across the continental United States and as far away as Puerto Rico. “One good vehicle selling another,” the *Journal of the National Medical Association* proudly observed, “together with constant, consistent use of printer’s ink, has caused this concern to have a remarkable growth.”

Patterson’s advertisement in the *Journal of the National Medical Association* was telling. Established for African American doctors excluded from the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the magazine offered a unique audience. Doctors making regular house calls needed



durable, high-quality carriages, and the firm's special physician's buggy became a major seller across the nation. The company's enclosed winter buggy was also extremely popular. The Pattersons held a patent for a sliding door that operated in a similar manner as the side door on a modern van. The tracks were on the inside of the vehicle, which kept them from clogging and freezing. Over fifty larger American carriage manufacturers conceded that it was the best on the market and paid Patterson a royalty for its design. Patterson, however, demanded a two-year waiting period while his company used it exclusively, saturating the market with the Patterson Perfect Winter Buggy.

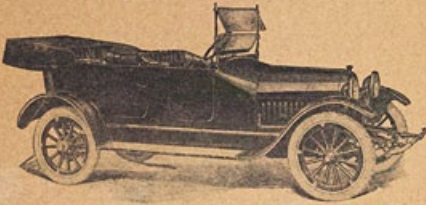
Several other Patterson Company patents were used by other manufacturers throughout the years. The Pattersons pioneered a school wagon that could transport up to 28 students, while still being light enough to not overload the horses pulling it. Once schools began to consolidate, such larger vehicles gained in popularity. As a result, the firm monopolized the school market in Ohio and surrounding states.

With well-designed and high-quality products – accompanied by shrewd advertising – the Patterson business grew rapidly. In 1888, the company had ten employees, but by 1900, there were thirty-five to fifty men working to produce as many as 400 to 600 vehicles annually. A 1914 article in the *Journal of the National Medical Association* stated that the Patterson Company had “a large workforce of skilled mechanics with a yearly payroll in the ten-

thousands.” The demand was so great that the company was “unable to promptly meet the demands made on the business.” By the following year, historian Frank Mather indicated that the Patterson Company was the “largest plant owned by colored people in the United States.” But the demand for carriages would soon decline.

Sixty-five thousand automobiles were on the roads of Ohio in 1912. Three years later, that number had grown to 168,000. Patterson saw that automobiles were the product of the future. Since taking over the company after his father’s death in 1910, Patterson had incorporated automobile repair services into the business, something commonly done at the time by local blacksmiths. The repair business convinced Patterson that automobiles were the way to keep the business afloat. Following the introduction of the first Patterson-Greenfield automobile in September 1915, an estimated 30 to 150 cars were built in a three-year period. It was not enough to keep the business going, but just when all looked hopeless, a new opportunity presented itself.

The Patterson-Greenfield Automobile



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The First Automobile Produced in Highland County. Will Always Lead

THE PATTERSON-GREENFIELD automobile possesses every feature and convenience demanded by modern motoring. It is a wonderful car, appealing for handsome appearance and enduring qualities.

SPECIAL FEATURES--Full Floating rear axle. Cantilever spring. Demountable rims. Left Hand Drive. Center Control. Electric Starting and Lighting System. One-man Top. Ventilating windshield. Fully Equipped.

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Made in Two Models for Roadster and Touring Car

OUR CLOSE-AT-HOME GUARANTEE compels your consideration. All Repair Parts right here ready at your call. You don't have to wait and lose time when you use a Patterson-Greenfield. We are handy. This Service Counts. Think about it. WRITE for full description.

SEND FOR INFORMATION. Get our prices. Arrange for demonstration. Drop a postal to

C. R. Patterson & Sons - Greenfield, Ohio

You are cordially invited to visit our factory. Glad to have you. Glad to show you how good we make the Patterson-Greenfield Automobile. It will pay you to come and look around.

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OURS is a complete service--we do anything from the engine clear thru to the top. Our Repainting with General Overhauling makes your car just as good as new--often far better.

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BRING or send your top, Cushion, Windshield Repairs.

ALL MATERIALS RIGHT HERE IN STOCK

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Buggies, Surreys, Harness, All Kinds of Farm Repair Work



By 1918, World War I was in full swing, and the army was field-testing trucks produced by the large Detroit auto manufacturers. Before the war, trucks were unreliable, but the war created a need for larger vehicles to move troops and equipment. Bakers, grocery suppliers, and other businesses that typically delivered goods by horse and wagon realized that improved trucks would allow for more expedient deliveries, as well as access to a greater range of consumers. Since the Detroit companies were locked into supporting the war effort, small manufacturers such as the Patterson Company were left to fill that void. Frederick quickly made the transition to trucks. While its car manufacturing had been a failure, it had provided the knowledge of automotive mechanics needed for this new endeavor. The earliest trucks had wooden bodies

placed on an existing chassis. The Patterson chassis came from such firms as Ford, Dodge, and International. Fifty years of carriage-making, however, proved an invaluable asset, so Patterson began making its own bodies. Each truck’s body was custom-built based on the needs of customers hauling everything from ice, furniture, milk, baked goods, and even dead bodies. Hearses for funeral homes became a valuable product for Patterson.

Further school consolidation in the early 1920s increased the need for mechanized school buses, and Patterson had a major advantage over its competitors by having established clientele through

its previous supply of horse-drawn vehicles. Like trucks, Patterson placed wooden school bus bodies on existing chassis obtained from other manufacturers. But the Pattersons were also pioneers in school and transit bus design. They soon saturated Ohio's school districts with their new buses. By 1929, a survey showed that 36 percent of all the state's school buses were built by Patterson. That same year, the Patterson Company reportedly had an output of 500 bus bodies and an annual profit of just over \$150,000. A *Greenfield Republican* article at the time set the workforce at 70 men. Sold across the United States, at one point, several Patterson buses were shipped to Haiti.

When Frederick Patterson died in 1932, the company was taken over by his two sons. By this time, however, the company was in decline, the Great Depression having taken its toll. When Ohio introduced school bus standards in 1935 requiring that all bus bodies be made of metal, the company's 70 years of experience building wooden bodies was no longer an advantage. Lacking the capital to retool their shop to meet the new requirements, the two brothers attempted to stay afloat. Sales rapidly dwindled as they lost out to such larger, and better equipped, companies as Wayne Body Corporation and Superior Body Company. In a last-ditch effort to save the small-but-mighty Patterson and Sons, in 1938 Postell and Frederick Postell Patterson moved operations to Gallipolis, Ohio, after being recruited to that city. A year later, the Patterson Company closed after 74 years in business. Postell's wife, Kathleen, wrote in her autobiography that after "a year of struggling, we found that we just couldn't make it," adding, "it was very hard to give up the dream."

With Frederick Douglass Patterson at the helm, C.R. Patterson and Sons readily adapted its product offerings to accommodate ever-changing markets. His combination of business savvy and technological know-how kept the company alive several decades after the horse-drawn carriage faded into oblivion. Throughout his life, the "son" successfully broke down color barriers and, in so doing, proved that business sense, intelligence, craftsmanship, and respect were within the grasp of every citizen regardless of background. Even though the Patterson factories no longer stand, Greenfield takes pride in the family's unique contribution.

Fast-forwarding to July 22, 2021, C.R., and Frederick Patterson, the first two generations of family to run the Patterson Company, were inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame in Detroit. This honor was bestowed on them for their contributions to the transportation industry and for Frederick being the first Black manufacturer of automobiles. This demonstrated that the Patterson contribution to history mattered and, while their story has generally fallen by the wayside for 80 years after they closed the factory, a long-overdue recognition of their efforts has finally come to light and their story will live on.

I was invited to attend the Automotive Hall of Fame induction ceremony as a VIP attendee, given that my book on the C.R. Patterson and Sons Company was largely responsible for the Patterson induction. The book, first published in 2010, was an adaptation of my master's thesis in Industrial Archaeology and History from Michigan Technological University. It was a great honor to attend the black-tie event and see the results of the culmination of my research ending in such recognition for the Patterson family. Just when I thought things couldn't get any better, resulting from relationships developed through attendees I met at the Automotive Hall of Fame ceremony, the idea of a possible documentary and feature film was presented to me. A

screenwriter asked me about characteristics and personality traits of the people involved in the Patterson story as those details would aid in developing the movie script. I really had to think about it and realized that I didn't know as much about those aspects of the people involved in the story as previously thought. The original research for this story was for a master's thesis and the focus of the research was more on technical details of the factory and the different types of vehicles that the Patterson Company built. Some personal details of the people were thrown in as they were discovered, but there was not enough to have a full understanding of the family personalities and involvement outside of the company.

This led to a deep dive into additional research over the past 14 months, which uncovered many new details. I must admit that it was a lot of fun to go back through the original research while looking at it with a new focus. Many details were missed during the original research because they weren't part of the focus at that time. Many new sources of information were discovered during the current research as the internet has increased the amount of readily available materials over the past 13-14 years since the original research was conducted. Additionally, members of the Patterson family were able to provide several details and documents that helped to piece more of the story together. The new details discovered during the current research, as well as those provided by Patterson descendants, were numerous. Many never-before-seen images were provided to me by the son and daughter of one of the third-generation family members that ran the company and I have exclusive rights to use the images in the book and in the films. The collection of this much additional information resulted in the revision and addition of many of these details into a second edition of the book that was just released in September 2022. The second edition of the book is titled, *The C.R. Patterson and Sons Company: Black Pioneers in the Vehicle Building Industry, 1865-1939*.

At the time of this writing, both a docuseries and feature film have been greenlit by a Philadelphia and Los Angeles based film production company. We are currently working on securing financing for the films, with hopes and anticipation that both will receive full funding. If funding is secured, it is anticipated that the docuseries will be released within the next two years with the feature film released a year or so later.