

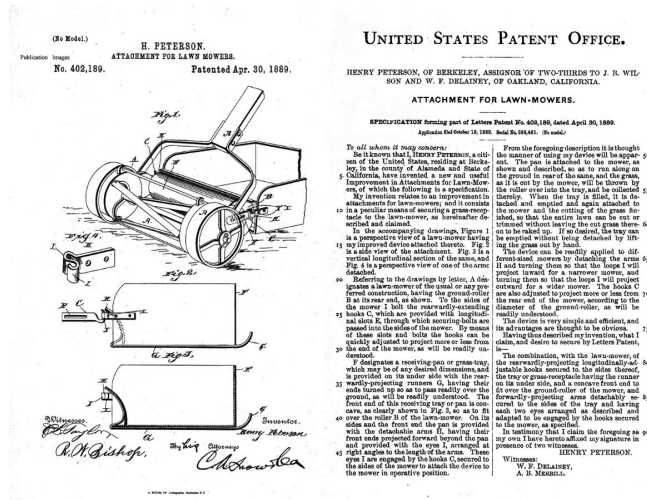
Berkeleyside

BUSINESS

Black Berkeley town father invented the lawnmower grass-catching pan in 1889

Henry Peterson arrived in Berkeley in its earliest days and co-founded the city's first church.

By Richard Schwartz, March 25, 2022, 4:02 p.m.



Left: The patent illustration submitted by Henry Peterson for his lawnmower bag, with an official note that the patent was granted on April 30, 1889. Note the actual signature of Henry Peterson on the lower right of the document. Right: The text of patent No. 402,189, used to this day.

A single paragraph that appeared in the Berkeley Advocate in June 1888 is enough to establish the legacy of Henry Peterson, an African American inventor who was among the first residents of Berkeley:

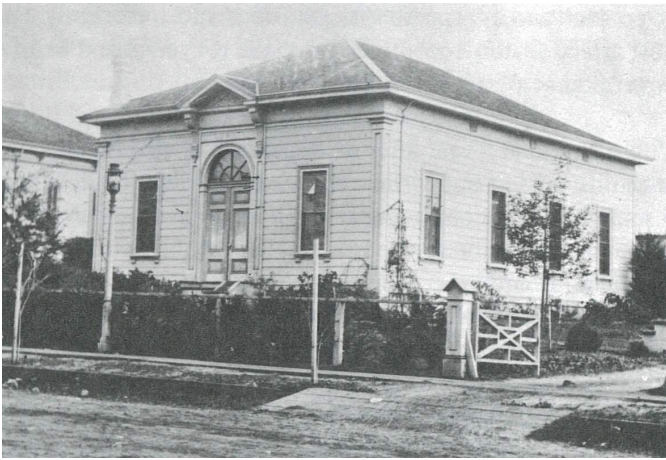
Mr. Peterson, who lives on Dwight way, has been offered \$15,000 for his patent appliance for a lawn mover. The invention consists of a pan which is attached to the lawn-mower so as not to leave any grass on the lawn after it has been cut. Mr. Peterson perfected his invention and obtained a patent on it some two or three years ago.

One might imagine the magnitude of Peterson's invention: The \$15,000 he was offered was for selling a two-third interest in his lawn mower tray could have purchased five nice houses in those days. But even before they had access to such money, Henry S. and

Caroline Peterson had already made a lasting contribution to the cities of Berkeley and Oakland.

Henry and his wife, Caroline, arrived in Berkeley by 1872, in time to witness the laying of the cornerstone of South Hall, the first building of the University of California, which was erected that year. Only about 600 people were living in all of Oakland Township at the time.

Four years before Berkeley was incorporated, Henry Peterson and two others founded the First Congregational Church, according to the Berkeley Daily Gazette. It was the first church founded in Berkeley's history. The best known of the three founders was Dr. Samuel Willey, also a founder of UC Berkeley. On June 24, 1874, a Congregational church service was conducted by the Rev. E. S. Lacy in a room at the Berkeley Hotel at the corner of Choate Street (now Telegraph Avenue) and Bancroft Way. Henry and Caroline Peterson were undoubtedly in attendance.



The First Congregational Church, in its first building at Telegraph and Dwight Way. The building was occupied from 1874 to 1884. Courtesy: the First Congregational Church

On March 22, 1875, Reverend Edward B. Payne held the first service in the new Congregational Chapel at Dwight Way and Choate Avenue, the first church building in Berkeley. Later, the congregation constructed a new chapel at Dana and Durant streets.

Peterson is first listed in printed local directories in 1878, the year Berkeley incorporated as a city, and he is listed continuously until 1907. According to the city directories, he worked variously as a gardener, laborer and dairyman, all very typical trades in early Berkeley. His residence is listed on Dwight Way between Fulton and Ellsworth streets from 1887 to 1907. He had previously lived in the same neighborhood on Channing Way near Bowditch for at least nine years. The area was composed of small farms and ranches, and was near Berkeley's first commercial center at Shattuck Avenue and Dwight Way.

Henry Peterson was born in New York sometime between 1841-45. The 1880 Census indicated that 39-year-old Henry lived in his Berkeley home with his 42-year-old wife, Caroline, and his sister, E. E. Phelps, a 44-year-old widow.



Henry and Caroline Peterson's home at 2222 Dwight Way. Courtesy: the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

In 1885, Peterson was one of a group of 11 directors that filed for the incorporation of an important African American newspaper in the Bay Area called *The Elevator*. The *Elevator* had been published since 1869 and stopped its regular publication in 1874. There were mentions of delinquent payments from subscribers and new owners that seem likely sources of at least some of the problems. The effort Peterson joined in 1885 appears to be an attempt to resurrect and stabilize this historic publication.

When Peterson applied for his lawn mower tray patent on Oct. 18, 1888, his invention was a secret. Two Oakland investors, J. R. Wilson and W. F. Delainey, saw the potential of his grass catcher and offered him a huge sum for a two-thirds interest in the invention. These two men maintained a close relationship with the inventor and acted as witnesses on the patent application. Henry S. Peterson was issued patent number 402,189 from the U.S. Patent Office on April 30, 1889.

Just what Henry and Caroline did with their financial reward is unknown, save for the fact that they moved to the house on Dwight Way, appraised at three times the value of their previous home on Channing Way. But as Berkeley directories show, they lived for scores of years in the comforts of the same east Berkeley neighborhood where they had lived for decades prior to Peterson's success.

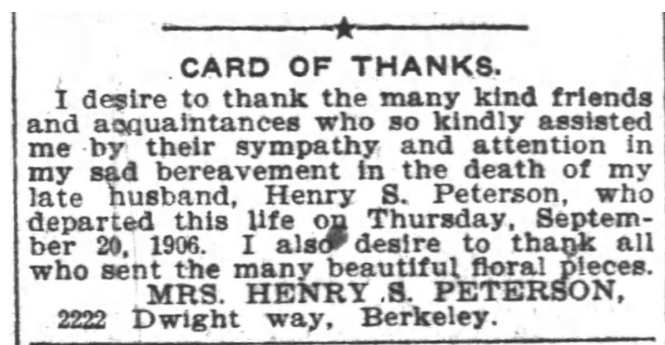
In 1896, the *Berkeley Advocate* published a piece recalling all of the pioneers of the town who voted in the election of 1878 to form the city of Berkeley. The *Advocate* checked the Great Register to see how many of

those famous 1878 voters were still residents eligible to vote almost 20 years later. Stalwart Henry Peterson was among those 105 names. The article provides proof that Henry Peterson, by his voting, was a founding father of the city of Berkeley.

In January 1906, Henry Peterson was involved in founding of the North Oakland Baptist Mission. Later that year, he and his wife survived the April 18, 1906, earthquake and witnessed the flood of refugees into Berkeley. It could not have been easy for them as Caroline had been an invalid for some time. To provide himself some recreation, Henry played a good game of baseball on Sept. 4 for the Berkeley Merchants against a West Oakland team at Freeman's Park, the Berkeley guys winning 7-6.

On Sept. 20, 1906, 62-year-old Henry Peterson died suddenly of heart failure while coming in the rear door of his home. He had been in declining health for a number of years, but his death was totally unexpected, and his wife was devastated by his loss.

The couple had been Berkeley residents for more than 33 years. Peterson's obituary in the Berkeley Daily Gazette called him "one of the best known and pioneer residents of Berkeley." He was buried at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland.

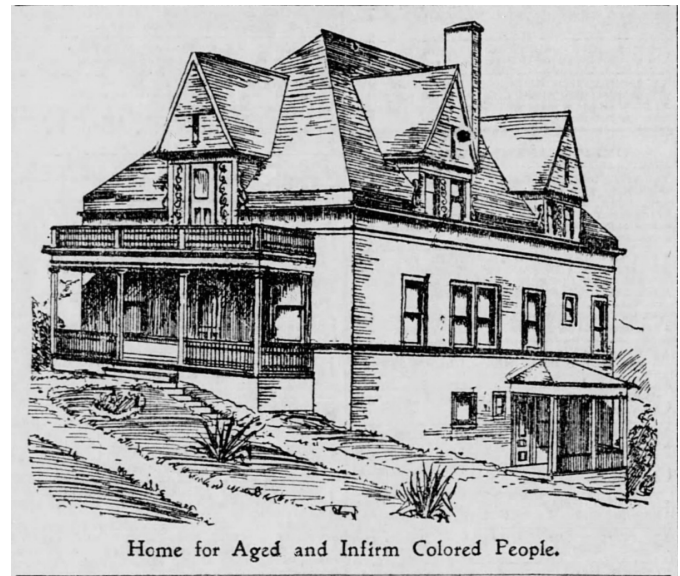


Oakland Tribune, Oct. 4, 1906

Caroline Peterson lived only four months longer than her husband. "Mrs. Peterson was widely known throughout her home town, and enjoyed the respect and good will of a host of friends," the Berkeley Daily Gazette reported.

Caroline bequeathed \$600 of her \$6,000 estate to the First African M. E. Church and \$600 to the Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People at 5245 Underwood

Ave. in Oakland. The rest of her estate was to be divided among her friends.



The Home for Aged and Infirm Colored People, located near Mills Seminary, was opened in 1897. The home was where Caroline Peterson donated a portion of her estate in 1906. This drawing appeared in the Aug. 21, 1897, issue of the San Francisco Call.

A version of this story first appeared in Richard Schwartz's book ["Eccentrics, Heroes and Cutthroats of Old Berkeley."](#)

The story draws from the Berkeley Daily Gazette, The Berkeley Advocate, The Berkeley Herald, the San Francisco Call and many other accounts and records from the period. Schwartz offers a special thanks to Mike Flynn, a former Berkeley Fire Department historian who rehabilitated the old Berkeley Firefighters' Association collections; to the Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley and Dean Smith; to Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association historian Anthony Bruce; to Sean Dickerson of the African American Museum & Library at Oakland; to Louise Halsey and the First Congregational Church in Berkeley; and to the Berkeley Public Library's Berkeley History Room.

Schwartz, a Bay Area historian, is also the author of four other award-winning books: "The Man Who Lit Lady Liberty: The Extraordinary Rise and Fall of Actor M. B. Curtis," "Earthquake Exodus, 1906: Berkeley Responds to the San Francisco Refugees," Berkeley 1900, Daily Life at the Turn of the Century" and "The Circle of Stones: An Investigation of the Circle of Stones in Stampede Valley, Sierra County, California." You can [learn more about his work on his website.](#)

