

FORGOTTEN FACES

Black Automaker Among Early Trailblazers

By Reginald Larrie



Katherine, Dollie, Frederick Douglas and Samuel. By the time the youngest Samuel came along, Patterson was already very successful. He had bought out his white partner and had started building the most popular carriages of the day.

Patterson gave his boys the best education possible.

Frederick was the first African American to graduate from a local high school, and the following year he entered Ohio State University (OSU), where he was the first black to play on the school's football team.

After three years, Frederick left OSU to teach in Kentucky, but only remained there for two years, before returning home to his first love -- the family carriage business.

Soon after his arrival, however, his father died, leaving the young teacher and various relatives to operate the company.

In search of more business, Frederick decided to accompany his sales manager C.W. Napper, on his route one day. As they traveled, he began to notice more and more of those "funny-looking horseless" carriages on the road. He immediately reported his findings to the company's board.

"In 1902, there was one car to 65,000 people and by 1909 there was one vehicle for every 800 people and with those kinds of figures... I believe it's time for us to build a

Patterson horseless carriage," he said.

Frederick's plan was bold. He wanted to build a vehicle that could compete against any car on the market by being more comfortable and easy to drive.

Within two weeks, the factory began the transition to build the Patterson-Greenfield motor car. On Sept. 23, 1915, young Patterson saw his dream roll off the line --- an awkward looking two-door coupe.

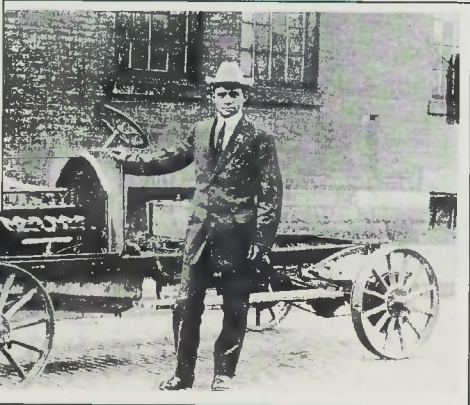
Word about the new vehicle swept across the state like a brush fire. Some of those who saw the vehicle claimed it came with a 40 horsepower Continental 4-cylinder engine; reported top speed of nearly 50 mph and had better bodywork than the "Tin Lizzie" being made up in Detroit by some fellow named "Ford." (Of course, by this time, Henry Ford was well on the way to becoming one of the largest automobile producers in the world.)

The Patterson-Greenfield was priced at \$850. It came in two models; a roadster and a big four-door touring car.

However, the venture was short-lived because of a lack of capital and slow sales,



Top: Dollie Patterson with the Patterson-Greenfield car (1917). Center: One of the first models built. Bottom: a chassis and engine for the Patterson-Greenfield motor car.



"A customer can have a car any color he or she wants so long as it is black!" *Henry Ford*

Frederick Douglas Patterson would have certainly agreed with those words. For Patterson, one of the nation's few black automobile manufacturers, realized that black was the only color he could count on.

Frederick's story began years before he built his first car with his father Charles "Rich" Patterson. One of the wealthiest men in his hometown, Patterson senior was the owner of the C.R. Patterson and Sons

Carriage Company of Greenfield, Ohio.

He was born into slavery to Charles and Nancy Patterson on a Virginia plantation in April 1833. He later became a blacksmith by trade. According to reports, just before the Civil War in 1861, he fled from slavery by crossing the Virginia Allegheny Mountains, hiking through West Virginia and crossing the chilling Ohio River waters. He eventually made it to the friendly town of Greenfield, apparently an important station along the Underground Railroad.

Because of his master craftsman skills, Patterson immediately got a job at the Dines and Simpson Carriage and Coach Makers Company. Within a few years he had been promoted to foreman and later formed a partnership with J.P. Lowe, creating a carriage building company that was noted for its expert craftsmanship and high quality.

He married the former Josephine Quetz and the couple had four children: