



## John Patterson Green (2 April 1845-1 September 1940)

is known as the “Father of Labor Day” due to legislation he proposed in 1890 as an Ohio state legislator to observe the first Monday in September as Labor Day. Although this only applied to Ohio as a state holiday, the United States Congress followed Ohio’s lead and made Labor Day a national holiday in 1894. John was born into a free black family living in New Bern, NC. His father, John Rice Green, was born a slave, but purchased his freedom at age twenty-one. He worked as a tailor to support his wife, Temperance Durden Green, and three children. Conditions worsened when John’s father died when John, the only son, was five years old. Temperance Green became a seamstress to support her family. She moved to Cleveland to join relatives in 1857. At that time, Cleveland offered economic and integrated educational opportunities and a receptive community for blacks.

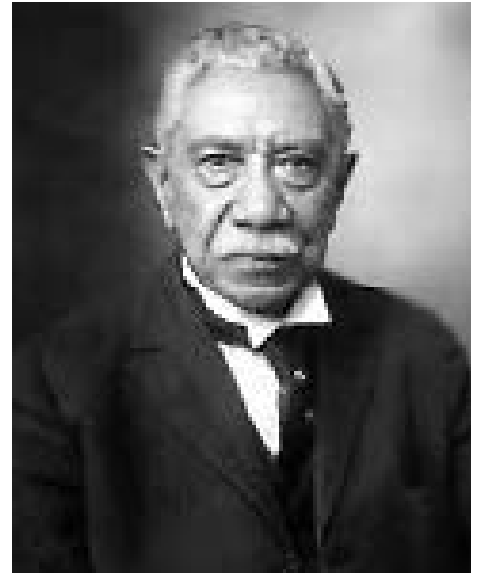


The family struggled economically leading to John, as the only son, leaving school to help support the family in odd jobs as an errand boy and hotel waiter. He continued to read and learn. Whenever an employer did not allow John to use his “down time” to study, John would find another employer who would. A few of his employers took John under their wing and provided advice that helped John learn and succeed. Ten years later, he published *Essays on Miscellaneous Subjects by a Self-Educated Colored Youth* (1866) and returned to school attending Central High School, the first public high school in Cleveland. Upon graduation in 1869, he married Annie Walker, with whom he had 6 children: William, Theodore, Jesse, Clara, John Rice and Truman Handy. The latter two children did not survive into adulthood. The following year, he finished his studies at Union Law School, moved to South Carolina and passed the bar to practice law in that state for two years. The South held promise since Reconstruction provided constitutional protections for blacks and promising careers for black Republicans.

Expectations did not meet reality as racial conditions worsened in the South. Green returned to Cleveland in 1872 to the favorable economic and political environment of the city to pursue his political dreams. In 1873, he became the first black elected to office in Cleveland as a Justice of  
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the Peace, a post he held for nine years in Cuyahoga County. In 1880, he published *Recollections of the Inhabitants, Localities, Superstitions and Ku Klux Outrages of the Carolinas*. In 1881, the Republican Party nominated Green to serve in the Ohio House of Representatives. He won that seat. As a legislator, he was reelected in 1889 and went on to propose the Labor Day legislation in 1890. Green's election successes led to his run for the Ohio Senate. In 1892, he became the Ohio Senate's first black member and the only black state senator in the North until the 20th century. His senatorial career was the highest elected office of Green's career. As a state legislator, he sponsored twenty-one major bills to help labor and supported funding for public parks and for the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on Public Square.

His ties to the Cleveland Republican power brokers, Marcus A. Hanna, businessman and supporter of William McKinley, and to barbershop owner, George A. Myers, brought Green an appointment as U. S. postage stamp agent, a position he held 1897-1905. He also served as acting superintendent of finance in the Post Office Department before returning to his criminal law practice in 1906. As an ally of labor, Green nevertheless criticized organized trade unions for their exclusionary practices relegating blacks to unskilled labor. He continued to work for the Republican Party and often attended national conventions as a delegate. After his first wife, Annie, died in 1912, Green married Lottie Mitchell Richardson, a widow, with whom he raised two children and spent his remaining years. He became a founding member of St. Andrews Episcopal Church located at E. 22nd and Prospect until their move in 1915 to E. 24th and Central. During these years, Green continued to practice criminal law and write. His clients represented the working class of both races. He compiled the stories of his life in his autobiography, *Fact Stranger than Fiction* (1920). In 1937, Cleveland's mayor and city council designated April 4th as John P. Green Day. At the age of 95, a streetcar struck Green while he was crossing the street. As one of the oldest practicing attorneys in Ohio, Green died from his injuries one day before his beloved Labor Day in 1940. He is buried in Woodland Cemetery, where he has a memorial garden dedicated to his lifetime of service.



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