

FROM PARADE TO PERMANENCE

John Patterson Green and the Making of Labor Day

The overlooked Black legislator who helped transform a workers' movement into an American institution



Before Labor Day became a long weekend, a storewide sale or the unofficial end of summer, it was a declaration—one that boldly proclaimed that the people who built America deserved to be seen.

In the late 1800s, workers powered the nation's factories, railroads, mines and workshops, often laboring 12 hours a day, six or seven days a week. Their hands created America's prosperity, yet they had little protection, limited political influence and almost no time set aside to honor the dignity of their work. Labor leaders began demanding something revolutionary: a day belonging to the worker.

But an idea is not a holiday. A parade is not a law. And public enthusiasm, no matter how passionate, does not guarantee permanence.

That transformation required John Patterson Green.

THE MEN WHO STARTED THE MOVEMENT

The story begins in New York, where two labor leaders with nearly identical last names became rivals for the title "Father of Labor Day." **Matthew Maguire** was a machinist and secretary of New York's Central Labor Union. Many historians believe he proposed the observance and helped organize the first Labor Day parade on September 5, 1882. Thousands of workers marched through New York City, sacrificing a day's wages to stand together in public. They carried banners. Bands played. Families gathered. Workers usually hidden inside factories took possession of the streets. Maguire's politics, however, were considered radical. His association with socialist causes made some conservative labor leaders reluctant to place him at the center of the holiday's history. Later evidence strengthened the case that Matthew Maguire may have been the holiday's original creator—a possibility now acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Labor.

Peter J. McGuire became Labor Day's most prominent national champion. A co-founder of the American Federation of Labor and leader of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, he promoted an annual celebration featuring a parade that would demonstrate the unity and strength of organized labor.

Matthew Maguire helped organize the moment. Peter McGuire helped spread the movement.

Their contributions were essential. They rallied workers, commanded public attention and gave the campaign energy. But their defining work was organizing and advocacy—not legislative codification. The idea still had to cross one of its most important thresholds: from labor demonstration to enacted law.

That was Green's contribution.

THE MAN WHO GAVE RECOGNITION THE FORCE OF LAW

John Patterson Green did not fit the image most Americans associate with political power in the nineteenth century. Born free in North Carolina in 1845, Green lost his father at five and grew up in severe poverty. His family moved to Cleveland when he was a child. He worked, studied and pushed his way through barriers designed to keep Black Americans from education, professional standing and elected office.

He became an attorney, author and public servant. Cleveland voters elected him justice of the peace, making him the city's **first** Black elected official. He later became the **second** African American to serve in the Ohio House of Representatives and, eventually, Ohio's **first Black state senator**. The Ohio Statehouse remembers him as a fearless advocate whose most celebrated legislative achievement was establishing Labor Day in Ohio.

In 1890, while serving in the Ohio House, Green introduced legislation designating the first Monday in September as a legal state holiday honoring labor. The proposal encountered resistance and political maneuvering. Yet Green persisted. The measure became law on April 28, 1890—four years before Labor Day received federal recognition.

This was more than a ceremonial victory.

By placing Labor Day in the law, Green declared that honoring working people was not merely the concern of unions. It was a responsibility of government. Workers were not asking for charity. They were demanding recognition of their indispensable place in American life.

Green gave that recognition the force of law.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND PERMANENCE

The early labor organizers built their cause from the ground up. They marched, organized, spoke and demonstrated. Their power came from collective action. Green worked inside government. His task was different: to translate the movement's moral demand into legislation capable of surviving beyond a single rally, leader or generation.

The distinction matters.

*Maguire and McGuire helped America imagine Labor Day.
Green helped prove that government could formally recognize it.*

The first Labor Day celebration took place in 1882. Oregon became the first state to enact a Labor Day law in 1887, and other states followed. Green carried the movement into Ohio—one of the nation's growing industrial centers—strengthening the state-by-state momentum that preceded national action.

By 1894, 23 states had adopted Labor Day legislation. On June 28 of that year, President Grover Cleveland signed the federal law establishing the first Monday in September as a national holiday. No single man accomplished that victory alone. Labor Day was born from a movement. It required workers willing to march, organizers willing to lead, legislators willing to act and communities willing to believe that labor possessed dignity.

THE MOVEMENT'S UNFINISHED PROMISE

Yet the movement carried a profound contradiction. Many of the men who championed the dignity of labor worked within unions that denied Black workers equal membership, opportunity and recognition. Some unions excluded them outright. Others segregated their locals or blocked their access to skilled trades and union-protected jobs.

There is no clear evidence that Labor Day itself was created as a whites-only holiday, or that its founders personally intended racial exclusion. But the “worker” celebrated by much of organized labor was too often imagined as white. Its promise of dignity did not extend equally to every pair of working hands.

And still, a Black man born before the Civil War—while millions of Black people remained enslaved—rose from poverty, entered public office and helped secure legal recognition for labor across race, region and occupation. At a time when Black workers were routinely excluded from opportunity and Black citizens were being pushed out of political life, Green used the authority he had earned to advance a holiday for everyone.

John Patterson Green's role deserves special recognition because it reveals something powerful about America: those pushed to the margins have often helped expand the meaning of its democracy.

That is why his story matters.

LET US REMEMBER THE WHOLE STORY

We should honor Matthew Maguire for helping organize the first great celebration. We should honor Peter McGuire for championing the idea across the national labor movement. And we should proudly restore John Patterson Green to his rightful place as Labor Day's legislative pioneer—a man whose work helped turn a workers' demonstration into an enduring American institution.

Every Labor Day, the nation pauses because generations of working people demanded recognition. But we also pause because leaders such as Green carried that demand into the halls of government and insisted that respect for labor be written into law.

His life reminds us that progress needs more than a powerful idea. It needs someone courageous enough to introduce it, defend it and build a path toward permanence.

So, when we celebrate Labor Day, let us remember more than the holiday. Let us remember the hands that built the country, the voices that demanded justice and the Black legislator who helped make their recognition official.

John Patterson Green did more than help place a holiday on the calendar.

He helped place the dignity of working people into the law—and their worth into the conscience of America.

■ By Lura Daniels-Ball, President, OASC

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor; Ohio Statehouse; Cleveland Public Library; Library of Congress; Harvard Law School.