



Lewis Latimer

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

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Lewis Latimer was an American inventor, **patent draftsman**, and artist whose work included detailed drawings for the telephone patented by Alexander Graham Bell and the light bulb patented by Thomas Edison.

Mr. Latimer was born in Massachusetts in 1848. While he was in grammar school, Mr. Latimer showed an interest in reading and drawing. At the young age of 16, Mr. Latimer served in the Union Navy during the Civil War.

After his time in the Navy, he made his way to Crosby Halstead and Gould, a patent law firm. They helped inventors apply for patents, which are legal documents that protect and prove that someone is the creator of an invention. Patents also map out how an invention works and the materials needed to recreate it.

When an inventor applies for a patent, a draftsman puts together documents with **mechanical drawings**. The drawings give technical descriptions of the invention. Because of his interests and innate talent, Lewis Latimer learned how to create these drawings by observing draftsmen and buying books and drafting tools to teach himself the trade.

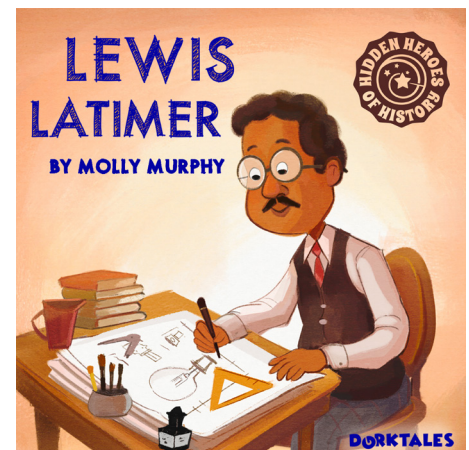
Eventually, Mr. Latimer's talents were recognized, and he became one of the firm's draftsmen. As part of his work, he was responsible for finding a way to make someone's vision come to life, imagining and drawing things that never existed before. His work was so important because without these detailed drawings, the inventor would not have achieved a successful patent application.

In the 1870s, Mr. Latimer worked with Alexander Graham Bell on his patent application. He drafted the images for an invention Mr. Bell named the telephone.

In 1880, Mr. Latimer was hired by Hiram Maxim, the chief engineer and founder of the United States Electric Lighting Company—Thomas Edison's major competitor.

Mr. Edison was a famous inventor, most well-known for coming up with the incandescent lightbulb. His patent was for a lightbulb that used a carbonized bamboo **filament** that burned for 1,200 hours. If it was lit continuously, it would only last for 50 days.

Mr. Latimer invented an even longer lasting carbon filament that was also more durable. As a result, **incandescent light bulbs** became affordable to more people. Safer and less harsh than other lights, incandescent bulbs transformed the average American home.





Lightbulbs evolved further and his innovation kickstarted all the huge advancements that came after him. So, without Lewis Latimer, the lightbulb may never have been as available to all of us as it is today!

His employer, Mr. Maxim, eventually sent Mr. Latimer to London to help set up a lamp factory. Unfortunately, the employees at the factory treated him unfairly because of the color of his skin. He decided to return to the United States to work for other electrical companies.

He was hired by Thomas Edison for The Edison Company— which is now known as General Electric. He was the company's patent expert. Mr. Latimer worked alongside other scientists, and together they made electrical inventions that helped people with their day-to-day lives.

Thomas Edison might not be the most well-known inventor of electric lights if it wasn't for the work of Lewis Latimer:

- Mr. Latimer proved why Mr. Edison's patent was the most important for electric lights. He published a book on Thomas Edison's development of the electric light and explained how an incandescent lamp works in an easy-to-understand way.
- He was a founding member of the Edison Pioneers, a group of former employees who came together to preserve the legacy of Thomas Edison. He was the only African American member of the group.

Mr. Latimer received seven patents for his own inventions, including:

- Apparatus for Cooling and Disinfecting: an early version of air conditioning which made rooms more sanitary and climate controlled. The device was particularly valuable in hospitals.
- Locking Racks for Hats, Coats, and Umbrellas: a device used in public spaces for securely holding items so they weren't taken or misplaced.
- Book Supporter: an improved product that made sure books stayed neat and tidy on shelves.
- Water Closet for Railroad Cars: an improved toilet system for railroad cars.

Beyond his work as a patent expert, draftsmen, and inventor, Mr. Latimer enjoyed painting, playing the flute, and writing poetry and plays. His daughters published a book of his poetry in 1925 in honor of his 77th birthday.

Lewis Latimer left behind a brighter world for us all through his talent, innovation and achievements!

Glossary

Patent Draftsman – A person who draws plans and sketches to illustrate an invention for a patent application. The plans are an important part of the process and once a person is granted a patent, they have the sole right to make, use or offer for sale their invention.

Mechanical Drawings – Detailed, technical sketches that give an exact representation of an object. They show the shape, structure, dimensions, and any other requirements to make the object.

Filament – A slender, threadlike object or fiber and, in the case of a lightbulb, it's the wire or thread inside the bulb which lights up when you turn it on.

Incandescent Light Bulb – turns electricity into light by sending the electric current through a thin wire called a filament. The resistance of the filament heats up the bulb and when it gets hot, it glows. (source: kiddle)

Give it Some Thought

Why was Lewis Latimer's work as a patent draftsman so important for inventors like Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison?

What character traits did Lewis Latimer demonstrate when he taught himself the skills to become a patent draftsman?

How do you think Mr. Latimer's artistic talents might have helped him problem-solve and create his inventions?

Use Your Imagination

Using Lewis Latimer's innovative spirit as your inspiration, think about some common problems people in your community have and choose one to focus on. Come up with an invention that will solve that problem and make their lives better. Use your journal or the "Make Life Better Invention" worksheet to answer these questions:

1. What's the problem your invention solves?
2. How does it work?
3. How will it make life better?
4. Draw a diagram of your invention and include text to show the details. (Optional)