



Lewis Latimer

(1848 – 1928)

Inventor and Patent Draftsman

In early October 1842 George Latimer and pregnant wife Rebecca reached Boston after fleeing slavery in Virginia. Within days his enslaver arrived but Latimer had the support of Boston's abolitionist community. Latimer's plight was publicized in abolitionist papers, including *The Latimer Journal* and *North Star*. A black minister raised \$400.00 to compensate Latimer's enslaver to ensure his freedom. On October 17 George Latimer became a free man and soon became an outspoken abolitionist known as "The Lion". Lewis Latimer was born in 1848 spent his early years in shadow of his father in the abolition communities around Boston.

Early Influences

In 1858, George Latimer left his family forcing Lewis was forced to work to help support his mother and siblings. Each successive job impacted Lewis in ways that shaped his later life. At 13 Lewis found work as an office boy for two prominent local attorneys, here he learned about law. At 16, during the Civil War, Lewis enlisted in the US Navy and was honorably discharged in Boston in 1865. Latimer was hired by the firm of Crosby, Halstead & Gould, Solicitors of American and Foreign Patents. They were looking for a young African American man with drawing skill. Latimer began teaching himself drafting in his free time. In 1866, he became the firm's draftsman, staying until 1878.

Drafting in a Nineteenth Century patent office required more than drawing skills. The draftsman worked closely with the inventor to creating a working model of their invention, assisted with patent research, and guiding them through the stages of the patent process. Latimer also handled the legal aspects of patent applications in absence of the lead lawyer.

The Electric World

Patent work allowed Latimer to become skilled in a number of technical areas particularly electricity. During this time Latimer issued his first patent, a water closet for rail cars. While not resulting in a useful product, his patent showed his aptitude for designing solutions to practical problems. It was also during this time Latimer may have assisted Alexander Graham Bell on his application for a patent on the telephone. Bell hired the services of Latimer's firm. It is not clear which, if any, of the telephone patent drawings Latimer created but Latimer did note he found Bell's evening scheduled an annoyance. So Latimer did assist Bell in some capacity.

Latimer left Crosby, Halstead & Gould in 1876 after the retirement of the principals. For the next year Latimer worked at several jobs in the Boston area. In 1879 his sister invited him to move to Bridgeport, Connecticut. He found work as draftsman for a local machine shop. Here he met Hiram Maxim, an inventor of some renown. Maxim recently formed the United States Electric Light Company (USEL) to manufacture incandescent lights: Latimer entered the electrical world.

The United States Electric Lighting Company

The USEL was formed by Maxim and William Sawyer to compete with Thomas Edison. Sawyer soon left leaving Maxim in charge, producing light bulbs in New York City in 1880. While USEL installed the first commercial lighting system it did not become serious competitor of Edison. Its focus was on bulbs rather than lighting systems. In addition, Maxim assembled a small eight man team while Edison employed dozens and Maxim's management style, unlike Edison's, stifled creativity. Soon Maxim's own interest in the company waned. Latimer became a crucial member of the team not only drafting but manufacturing lamps and inspecting installations. Throughout 1880 and 1881 Latimer installed lighting systems in three New York buildings, two as the sole supervisor. He then installed a system in Philadelphia. In late 1881 he installed several systems in Montreal his efforts to learn French contributed to his success.

While in Bridgeport Latimer began to make social connections through writing and lecturing. Latimer lectured on the connection of art and science. He wrote about current scientific advances and biographies of local inventors. He prepared an exhibit on Maxim's lighting system. He offered a critique to the local newspaper of the larger than life statues popular in public spaces at the time.

Latimer the Inventor

Latimer created a process to treat filaments with a hydrocarbon vapor to make them stronger, a process adopted by USEL. Latimer received a patent for the process in 1882. Along with associates he patented a process to attach filaments to wires and another for a globe supporter for arc lights. After returning from Montreal, Latimer became the supervisor of the forty men in the USEL lamp department. Latimer became a prominent member of the electrical industry.

In late 1881 USEL merged with Weston Electric Lighting Company to form the Maxim-Weston Electrical Company in Great Britain. The new firm needed someone to establish a lamp factory in London. Latimer experience and reputation made him a natural choice. He and his wife left the United States for the new firm and new life. Latimer establish a successful and profitable factory in only nine months. Despite that success Latimer found life in London difficult, English workers did not trust him and his wife was not accepted by English society. The Latimer's returned to the United States in 1882 but he found it changed, he had trouble finding employment and his wife was pregnant.

In Transition

For the next three years Latimer moved from position to position. Giving him insight to how other companies manufactured lighting systems. His experience with these second and third tier companies placed him in a good position for the next act of his life. Latimer spent time at the Weston Company in Newark, then Olmstead Electrical Light & Power in Brooklyn - which failed but not before Latimer unsuccessfully tried to patent a lamp design. Next he worked for the Acme Electric Lighting Company which failed and then the Excelsior Electric Company. Latimer met a former USEL employee Thomas Perkins who hired him at the Imperial Company. Both men left soon after to take positions at the Mather Electric Company in Hartford. Finally 1885 the Edison Electric Light Company sought out Lewis Latimer. His life was to change dramatically once again.

The Edison Enterprise

In 1885 the Edison Electric Company circulated a booklet listing the patents that contributed to the Edison lamp along with a warning to potential infringers that legal action might be taken against them. Litigation quickly was initiated against Latimer's former employer, USEL. In Latimer's words "the Edison people sent for me". He was to be a "draughtsman, inspector and expert witness as to the facts in the early stages of the electric lighting business...traveling extensively, securing witnesses' affidavits, early apparatus, and testifying in a number of the basic patent cases to the advantage of my employer." In 1889 Latimer became member of the Edison legal team.

Latimer worked on many patent infringement cases for Edison but only the case against USEL was brought to completion; however, two companies were forced to close the Mather Electric Company and the Perkins Electric Company named after Thomas Perkins. Latimer's role in these cases is not entirely clear but the implications suggest he played a key role. In 1892 General Electric formed from the merger of Edison General Electric and Thomson-Houston. Latimer was named chief draftsman of the Board of Patent Control for General Electric in 1896. It was during his tenure that General Electric and Westinghouse fought a patent battle then merged their patents to the benefit of both companies. Latimer played a key part in the negotiations. Latimer remained a vital part of the Patent Board until it was dissolved in 1911. Latimer took a position with Hammer & Schwartz, a patent consulting firm where he remained until his 1924 retirement.

Latimer and Edison

It appears that Latimer and Edison did not have a close personal relationship but Latimer penned a book complimentary to Edison and sent Edison poems and correspondence over a number years. In 1890 Latimer revised a book by William Sawyer as published as *Electric Lighting: A Practical Description of the Edison System*. The book describes Edison's incandescent lamps and the Edison system of lighting in glowing terms. Latimer also praises Thomas Edison's "superior inventive ability" and "unusual business qualifications". In June 1888 Latimer made the unusual move of sending Edison a poem commemorating the Fourth of July. Latimer received a response a few days later from Edison's private secretary extending a thank you from Edison and confirming Edison was to read Latimer's poem on a recording cylinder for replay on the Fourth. Latimer sent another poem the follow July which was praise by Edison. It is not clear if Latimer continued send poems to Edison but another poem sent in 1919.

Edison Pioneers

In 1918 a group of former Edison employees sent letters to all the men associated with Edison prior to 1885 suggesting they meet and form an organization to be called The Edison Pioneers. Latimer became one of the founding members of this organization. The group met on Edison's birthday.