

Black History Profile - Lewis Latimer



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Date 2025-02-28 16:40



“Tomorrow may be fair,
however stormy the
sky of today.”
— Lewis Latimer

As **City Startup Labs** comes to the end of Black History Month 2025, we want to acknowledge an amazing scientist, inventor and key figure behind the more well known *lamps* of the late 1800's — Lewis Latimer. *His words seem appropriate for these times.*

Before you read about Latimer, I'd first like you to know about some new developments at City Startup Labs. ([best read in a browser](#))

On **January 28th** City Startup Labs presented a Pitch Event for new ventures hatched out of the 6th cohort of the **ReEntry Entrepreneurship Program (REEP)**. We heard from *Freeman Dental*, *A Whole Lot of Fun*, *Dunch & Brunch* and *Rachet.co*.





Restorative Pathways, our reentry workplace readiness initiative, has a new cohort starting for justice-impacted people on April 22, 2025.

We are hosting the following info sessions:

RP Applicant Info Session
(mandatory for participants)
Tuesday, March 11th
10:00 AM
Central Piedmont Community College – Hall Building, Room 304

Preferred Referral Partner Info Session
Tuesday, March 11th
6 PM
CPCC – North Classroom Building, Room 4124

City Startup Labs was proud to be profiled twice on Charlotte TV during the past month (click below to view segments)

WCNC-TV & WSOC TV

Lewis Harold Latimer

American Inventor

(September 4, 1848 – December 11, 1928)

Lewis was born to fugitive slaves from Virginia in the abolitionist environment of Boston in 1848. His father, George, was almost immediately arrested and imprisoned shortly after they arrived. When his former master sought to have him returned to Virginia, his case became a cause celeb for Massachusetts abolitionists.



is. J. T. Latimer

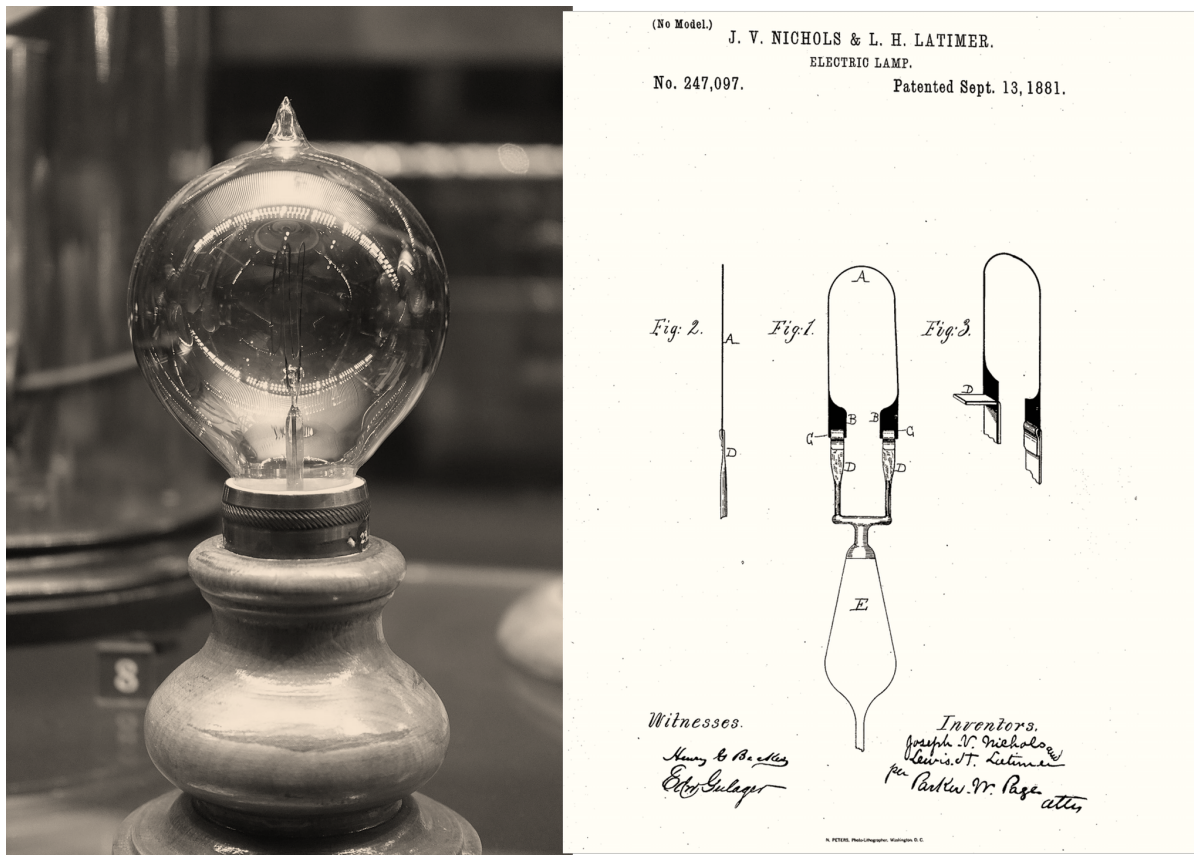
During the post-telegraph, new electric-age, in the last quarter of the 19th century, George Westinghouse, Alexander Graham Bell Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla were the most noted innovators with electricity in the United States.

The companies that grew out of this period where mainstays in the 20th century, such as American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) and General Electric.

By and large (Tesla being a noted exception), these inventors had teams who worked intensively, often in obscurity, on the intellectual property of the era. With Bell and later Edison, Lewis Latimer was the IP linchpin that led to fame and fortune for these two.

Following a stint with the Union forces during the Civil War, Lewis landed work with Boston patent attorney, Crosby Halstead and Gould. He proved worthy of becoming the chief draftsman, and it was during this time that he also met Alexander Graham Bell (right). Latimer's journal recounts *how the two young men worked together at night to develop diagrams for a patent application for Bell's new innovation — the telephone.* Latimer helped to develop a more efficient transmitter that improved the quality of the sound, and his drawings were crucial to finalizing Bell's patent application in 1876, submitted only hours before a competing claim.





A chance encounter with Hiram Stevens Maxim, then chief engineer of United States Electric Lighting Company, led Lewis to be hired to a position where he helped establish some of the earliest electric lighting plants. Here is where Latimer focused on the incandescent lamp — one of the most revolutionary inventions of our time. He recounts that, *"These were strenuous times, and we made long hours each day. At the factory by seven in the morning, and after the days work somewhere running lamps until twelve o'clock or later at night."* He received several patents for improvements in electric lighting, including his **1882 "Process for Manufacturing Carbons,"** which made the carbon filament (used in early light bulbs) last longer and become more commercially viable.

ELECTRIC LIGHTING.

A Practical Description of the
Edison System.

BY
^{Louis}
L. H. LATIMER.

TO WHICH IS ADDED THE
DESIGN AND OPERATION OF INCANDESCENT
STATIONS.

By C. J. FIELD.

AND A PAPER ON
THE MAXIMUM EFFICIENCY OF INCANDESCENT
LAMPS.

By JOHN W. HOWELL.



The Edison Electric Light Company in New York City hired Latimer in 1884 as a draftsman and an expert witness in patent litigation on electric lights. While at Edison, Latimer supervised the installation of public electric lights throughout New York, Philadelphia, Montreal, and London. He also wrote the first book on electric lighting, entitled *Incandescent Electric Lighting: A Practical Description of the Edison System* (1890).

Latimer continued working with the Edison and General Electric companies and in 1918, Latimer became a founding member of an exclusive social group — the Edison Pioneers (seen below). These men were business or technical affiliates, either of Edison's many companies, or of Edison himself. They had all played some part in the development of the electric utility industry.

All the while, Lewis maintained, as was a recurrent theme in his recollections, that "a colored man" was capable of highly technical work and invention. From Crosby and Gould, to United States Electric, to his "bosses" and fellow employees in the Edison shops, supervisors as well as coworkers *needed convincing of his merit*. Latimer prevailed repeatedly, and the quality of his work and personality kept him employed through several company reorganizations.



- Another invention of his included a 1874 improved toilet system for railroad cars called the Water Closet for Railroad Cars - Latimer co-patented (with Charles M. Brown).
- Latimer also developed a forerunner of the air conditioner called "Apparatus for Cooling and Disinfecting".
- In 1894, Latimer pursued a patent on a safety elevator that prevented the riders from falling out and into the shaft.



Lewis Latimer, the self-taught engineer, draftsman, and inventor, was also a true renaissance-man who wrote plays and poetry, played the flute and had been an active advocate for racial equality, died on December 11, 1928 at the age of 80.

Though obscure to many, he represents how amazing talents can be unleashed when given an opportunity. **City Startup Labs** celebrates Lewis Latimer as we do others, who are often overlooked but also can exhibit noteworthy potential.

With Gratitude,

Henry Rock

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