

African American Inventors

The paths of Africans to Americans have taken so many dark twists and turns. The unbelievable thought that people felt it was OK to capture another human being and take them into slavery just because of the color of their skin. Enduring the horrific, devastating, cruel, inhumane conditions of a slave ship with people stacked on top of each other, Women enduring rape on the journey and upon arriving in the Americas and beaten when they did not comply either killed you or made you stronger. Africans arrived in the United States chained and sold like cattle from 1619 to 1863/ 65. African Americans were treated as less than human.

They were beaten if they attempted to learn to read and then called illiterate after the Emancipation Proclamation because they could not read. But in spite of all of this many managed to achieve unbelievable things. This presentation will expound on a few of those phenomenal individuals.

NORBERT RILLIEUX

1806 -1894

Norbert Rilleux was born a slave on March 17, 1806, into a prominent Creole family in New Orleans, LA he was the son of Vincent Rillieux, a white plantation owner. Rillieux was fortunate to have received his early education at private Catholic schools in Louisiana before traveling to Paris in the early 1820s to start study at Ecola Central Paris, one of the top engineering schools in France.

In the 1800s, the process for sugar refinement was slow, expensive and inefficient the most common method of converting sugar cane into sugar was called the “sugar train”; it was also known as the “Spanish train”: or “Jamaican train.” While in France, Norbert Rillieux started researching ways to improve the process of sugar refining.

Norbert Rillieux was an African American inventor who was widely considered one of the earliest chemical engineers and noted for his pioneering invention of the multiple-effect evaporator. The invention was an important development in the growth of the sugar industry and improved the process of developing sugar.

His ingenuity improved the process of developing sugar by reducing the production time, reducing waste and improving the quality of the sugar.

ELIJAH MCCOY

1843-1929

Elijah McCoy was born in Canada of runaway slave parents. Born free in Canada, he came to the United States after the civil war. His basic invention, a “drip Cup,” ended countless complaints of waste and costs by making it unnecessary to stop and restart engines in order to lubricate them. McCoy opened the Elijah McCoy manufacturing company in Detroit MI in order to develop and market his inventions, working with such intensity that from 1873 to 1899 he found over 20 patents. He invented an automatic lubricator for oiling the steam engines of locomotives and ships. The confidence inspired by the reliability of his more than 55 inventions was such that the phrase “the Real McCoy” was coined. In regard to lubrication systems. This phrase became a part of our language.

JAN ERNST MATZELIGER

1852-1889

Jan Matzeliger was born on a coffee plantation in Dutch Guiana. His father, Ernst Matzeliger, was a third generation Dutchman of German descent living in the Dutch Guiana capital of Paramaribo. His mother was a house slave of African Descent; she lived on the plantation of which Jan's father was the owner for a time.

At the age of 10, Jan worked in the Colonial Ship Works in Paramaribo where he demonstrated a natural aptitude for machinery & mechanics. At the age of 19, he began working as a mechanic on a Dutch East Indies merchant Ship. He did this for several years until settling in Philadelphia, PA where he first learned the shoe trade. He revolutionized the shoe-making industry by developing a shoe lasting machine. After five years of work, Matzeliger obtained a patent for his invention of an automatic shoe laster in 1883. Prior to this, shoes were made by hand.

GRANVILLE T. WOODS

1855-1910

Granville T Woods was born to Martha J Brown and Cyrus Woods. His mother was part Native American and his father was African American. Granville attended school in Columbus, OH until age 10, but he had to leave school due to his family poverty which meant he needed to work. He worked as an apprentice in a machine shop and learned the trades of mechanics and blacksmith

In 1872, Woods obtain a job as a fireman on the Danville and Southern Railroad in Missouri. He eventually became an engineer and in December 1874 moved to Springfield IL and worked at a rolling mill, the Springfield Iron Works. He studied mechanical and electrical engineering in college from 1876 to 1878

In 1884, Woods received his first patent for a steam boiler furnace and in 1885, Woods patented an apparatus which was a combination of a telephone and a telegraph. He was commonly known as the "Black Edison." He obtained over 35 patents on electrical and mechanical inventions. He also invented the automatic air brakes used to stop trains.

GARRETT A. MORGAN

1875 – 1963

Morgan was born in 1877 in Claysville, Harrison County, Kentucky, an almost exclusively African American community outside of Paris, Kentucky. His father was Sidney Morgan, a son and freed slave of Confederate Colonel John H. Morgan. His mother was a slave named Elizabeth Reed, daughter of reverent Garrett Reed, she was part African and part Native American. With a 6th grade education from branch elementary school in Claysville, Morgan moved at the age of 14 to Cincinnati OH in search of work.

His most Notable inventions were the gas mask and the three-prong stoplight. However, he had many years' experience with sewing machines and he finally opened up his own sewing machine company. His first invention developed during this time was a belt fastener to sewing machines. In 1909 he and his wife Mary Ann expanded their business ventures by opening a shop called Morgan's cut rate ladies clothing store. The shop had 32 employees and made coats, suits, dresses, and other clothing. In 1913 he incorporated hair care products into his growing list of patents and launched the GA Morgan hair refining company which sold hair products including his patented a hair straightening cream, a hair coloring product and a hair straightening Comb. All invented by Morgan