

EDITORIAL

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The Portland Observer

p e e r s p e c t i v e s

The Curtain Rises On Black Inventors (Slightly) III

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BY
PROFESSOR
MCKINLEY
BURT

By Prof. McKinley Burt

It has been almost a month since the "History Channel" (42) partly raised the 'cotton curtain' on one of the most exciting and revealing chapters of America's industrial history. We continue with the well-documented account of two black titans of electrical engineering who made America's technology the greatest.

For the moment, we shall continue on with the illustrious career of Howard Lewis Latimer (1870's), while black engineer Granville T. Woods - protagonist to be - was busy in his Cincinnati, Ohio workshop developing over 150 patents on seminal electrical devices that shape our transportation and communications today (telegraphs, telephones, railways, airbrakes).

Last week we learned that Latimer invented and patented the first electric lamp with a carbon filament, and a cheap way to make the filaments. That United State Electric Company comes on stage

again (Maxim and "Charles Wilson), building factories to manufacture Latimer's inventions. Latimer supervises the installation of his lighting systems in Canada and London. He wrote the first textbook on the subject.

He returned to New York in 1882 and joined the newly established "Westinghouse Corporation" (Charles Weston), where the first assignment for this prominent African engineer was to install the lighting systems for the Equitable Building and the Union League Club. Latimer also supervised much of the early lighting on New York Streets. In 1883, Edison asked him to join his company, "the Edison Pioneers; where he further developed a remarkable and illustrious career. He died in 1928 and the New York Times covered the funeral which was attended by members of the 'Pioneers'.

A reader has sent me an article from the 2/11/95 Oregonian (D8) "Light-bulb Collection Is A Tribute To Thomas Edison." John T. Davis of Vancouver, Washington had been researching and studying lightbulbs for 25 years. John Bowditch, curator at the Ford Museum said. Among Davis' noteworthy items: the Maxim M. filament bulb by Louis Latimer - "an inventor who held an important

patent."

You had better believe that filament patent was "important." Without the black man's genius no fame for "lighting up the world." The African Americans were the sine qua non of Americas seminal technology, but their contributions have been deliberately hidden and obscured by jealous, envious racists. However, even the formidable iron curtain of Russia was pierced - and despite the book burnings of Nazi Germany, the light of truth has illuminated the European stage.

While I was telling a local group that Latimer went on to supervise street light installations in England, Austria, Poland, etc, they interrupted to remind me of the curtain over the identity of local black engineer Don Rutherford who designed the engine controls for Howard Hughes' famous "Spruce Goose."

A gathering storm was about to engulf the fiercely competing major electrical companies about the time that Latimer joined Edison. In their attempts to monopolize the industry, two giants, General Electric and Westinghouse organized a "Board of Patent Control." Latimer was appointed Chief Draftsman and expert legal witness.

The history Channel Cable

account and other sources inform us that Howard Latimer and our prolific black inventor Granville T. Woods engaged in bitter courtroom legal battles over patent infringements - Woods winning both struggles with Thomas Edison. But we wonder how many of our great inventors of color were able to stand up against this combine; or of any race for that matter.

But now we move Granville Woods back to center stage. The man whom the American Catholic Tribune described as, "The Greatest Electrician In The World." This was in 1888 when engineers from around the world gathered at Coney Island to see a demonstration of the "Third Rail", subways were now 'in' because no overhead trolley was needed. Electro-motive Railway System, June 26, 1888, and Electric Railway System, Nov. 10, 1891, 463020.

But my most triumphant retrieval of all, a patent copy that former Oregon Senator Wayne Morse "shook loose" from the U.S. Patent office for me (Photostat in my book). "Automatic Air Brake, June 10, 1902 No. 701981. Assigned (sold) to the Westinghouse Air Brake Company of Pittsburgh, PA." Like Edison, they wanted something that worked!

Continued next week

To Be Equal: There's No Denying The Truth

BY HUGH B. PRICE
PRESIDENT NATIONAL URBANLEAGUE

One may not see at first glance what the scientific confirmation of Thomas Jefferson's long liaison with Sally Hemings, a slave at his Monticello plantation, and an article extolling life in a southern black community during the era of legal segregation share.

But, in fact, the controversy surrounding Jefferson and Sally Hemings and writer Russ Rymer's assertion in his article in the New York Times Magazine that "Segregation helped black business. Civil Right helped destroy it" have a great deal in common.

They both illustrate how powerful the dynamic of denial in America about the realities of race has been.

No single controversy of American history has better illustrated how denial has worked among many whites than their refusal to contemplate what many African Americans have long accepted: that Jefferson and Sally Hemings were lovers. Now, the DNA tests confirm that he fathered not just one, but four of five of her children.

Why was there so much resistance for so many years to that possibility?

Did it stem from a refusal to accept that Jefferson embodied the great contradiction of the founding of the United States: A nation which wrapped itself in the rhetoric of freedom and professed allegiance to the inalienable rights of man excluded all but a relative few white men from the enjoyment of those rights, and depended for its prosperity upon the stolen labor of black slaves.

Thomas Jefferson's public role in justifying Slavery helped set the country on a course that has long borne bitter fruit.

Nonetheless, the confirmation that Thomas Jefferson's direct and indirect descendants include Americans on both sides of the color line should not be

regarded as a matter for African Americans to jeer "we told you so," or, to play the "racial dozens."

Instead, all of America ought to accept this news as apparently many of Jefferson's white descendants have—as a profound addition to the accumulating evidence of how intertwined are the bloodline—and the destinies—of Americans all along the spectrum of color, race, and ethnicity.

Such a clarity of vision is what Russ Rymer's article, astonishingly titled, "Integration's Causalities," lacks most of all.

The best one can say about his assertion that black businesses thrived under segregation and that the civil rights victories of the 1960s caused the collapse of "the whole economic skeleton of the black community" is that it displays a breathtaking commitment to denial.

One does not have to examine the ugly moral premise of such an assertion: That for black business men and women to prosper, they had to have blacks, as Rymer himself so revealingly puts it, "captive clientele. By destroying the injustice, integration destroyed the black business' raison d'etre."

In purely economic terms, this is nonsense.

In fact, most black business districts in the South during the decades of legal segregation lived a hardscabble existence precisely because blacks lacked freedom.

Black workers were grossly underemployed and exploited. The black middle class was tiny and limited to preachers, teachers, doctors, and a few lawyers.

And the black merchant class was severely crippled. Without the right to vote, black merchants had no way to influence the local and state political decisions that were so crucial to business development.

In other words, black business districts were deeply dependent upon white goodwill, or at least indifference, just to literally survive: The 1921 white riot which completely destroyed the Greenwood district of Tulsa, Oklahoma—the "black Wall Street" of its time—provided a stark example of that.

Furthermore, the vitality of black business districts in the North as well as the South began to fade in the late 1940s, not the 1960s.

The continued discrimination in lending by white banks wasn't the only problem. The change of the American economy away from localism and regionalism to nationalism and internationalism severely reduced the number of blue-collar jobs and the wages of black workers—whose patronage was the real backbone of black businesses during segregation.

No one can deny—who would wish to?—that even during the harshest times of legal segregation, many black communities were wonderful places to live and grow up.

But segregation didn't produce this. It was the black response to segregation—their determination to take their chances in the modern, complex world as free men and women—that made these communities so valuable to those who lived in them.

African Americans' task today is to recreate that sense of community where they are now, be it deep in the heart of predominantly black inner cities or in predominantly white suburban enclaves.

Despite Rymer's claims, that, too, is happening.

His nostalgia for a mis-remembered past is a product of not being able to separate what has always been wonderful about being black in America from the larger context of the terrible circumstances in which Africans and African Americans found themselves for most of their history here.

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