

Lewis Latimer

September 4, 1848 – December 11, 1928

Problem-solving



“We create our future, by well improving present opportunities: However few and small they are.” Lewis Latimer

Lewis H. Latimer was born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, on September 4, 1848, of parents Georgia and Rebecca Latimer, who were run-away slaves from in Virginia. Because George was fair skinned, he had been posing as a plantation owner and his wife, who was darker, was thought to be his slave. Unfortunately, he was recognized and jailed. This activity created quite a stir in Boston. An African American minister paid \$400 for his release and freedom. However, he was extremely poor, barely supporting his wife and four children.

In 1857, the Supreme court ruled that a slave by the name of Dred Scott was not a free man simply because he lived in a free state. George Latimer left his family at that time in what appears to be consideration of this freedom and the safety of his family. Lewis Latimer took on the obligation for supporting his family in the absence of his father. He worked as an office boy in a well-established patent office. He learned the trade of drafting by watching others, reading, and practicing mechanical drawing. He learned to master the skills necessary to be successful and excel, creating beautiful drawings. He was able to secure the promotion as a draftsman making \$20 per week instead of his former \$3 per week salary.

His timing was quite fortunate as well. Latimer met Alexander Graham Bell, who hired him to draw plans for the

telephone, his new invention. Apparently, there were many inventors trying to complete their patents at the same time. Latimer was able to provide the necessary drawings and blueprints in order to file the patent just hours earlier than a rival competitor on February 14, 1876.

After working at an electrical company in Brooklyn, NY, Latimer was invited to work for Thomas Alva Edison. Because of Latimer's knowledge of electrical and patent documentation, they were able to file all patents to protect Edison's inventions. This included translations into French and German in order to prevent European infringements. Latimer gained expertise as an investigator and in infringement cases as well.

Latimer worked until he was 74 years old, when his eyesight became too poor to continue. He remained able to teach mechanical drawing and English to new immigrants in the area. He was an officer in the *Grand Army of the Republic (GAR)* and supported civil rights activities as well until he died on December 11, 1928, at the age of 78. Lewis left a legacy in the **soft skill of problem-solving** as a permanent recording in the U.S. Patent Office for two of the most significant inventions of his time—the lightbulb and the telephone.

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