

The Clerk's Black History Series



Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

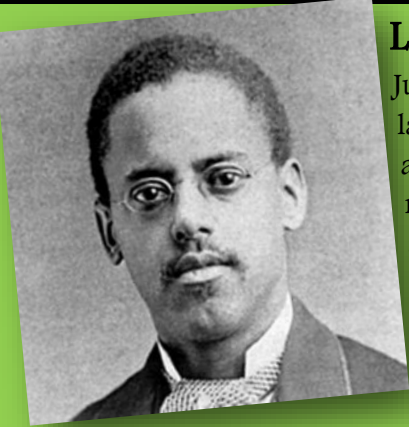


Lewis Howard Latimer

(September 4, 1848 – December 11, 1928)

Inventor and Engineer, Vital Contributor in Patent of the Lightbulb and Telephone

Lewis Howard Latimer was born on September 4, 1848, in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Just six years before his birth, his father, George Latimer, escaped slavery in Virginia but was later captured in Boston and brought to trial as a fugitive. He was defended in court by abolitionists, Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison. With the help of a local minister, George Latimer was able to purchase his freedom for \$400.00 from his owner and began raising a family with his wife, Rebecca. However, after the Dred Scott decision in 1857, George Latimer disappeared in fear of being returned to slavery, leaving his family behind. His father's departure forced a young Lewis Latimer to work and help support the family. In 1863, 15-year-old Lewis lied about his

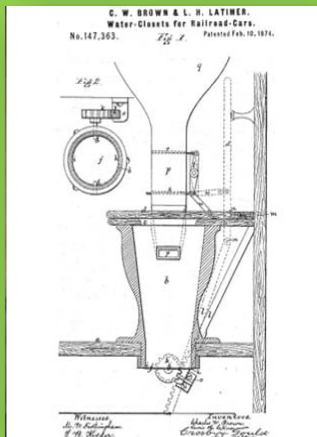


age in order to enlist in the United States Navy and served as a Landsman on the USS *Massasoit*. After receiving an Honorable Discharge, Lewis accepted a position in the patent law offices of Crosby and Gould earning \$3.00 a week. There,

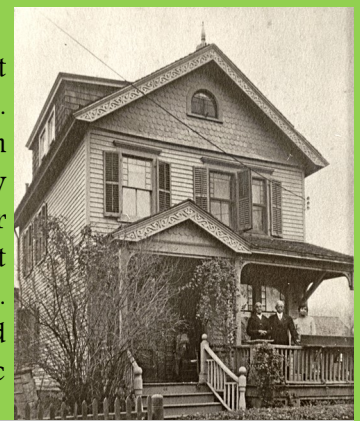
he taught himself mechanical drawing and drafting by observing the work of draftsmen in the firm. Lewis learned how to use a set square, ruler and other drafting tools and by 1872, was promoted to head of draftsman, earning a salary of \$20.00 per week. In November of 1873, he married Mary Wilson and had two daughters.



In 1874, he co-patented, with Charles W. Brown, an improved toilet system for railroad cars called the Water Closet for Railroad Cars (U.S. Patent 147,363). In 1876, Alexander Graham Bell employed Lewis, then a draftsman at Bell's patent law firm, to draft the necessary drawings required to receive a patent for Bell's telephone. In 1879, after moving to Bridgeport Connecticut, Lewis was hired as an assistant



manager and draftsman for the U.S. Electric Lighting Company, a rival of inventor, Thomas Edison. Lewis received a patent in 1881 for the "Process of Manufacturing Carbons" an improved method for the production of carbon filaments used in the light bulb. In 1884, The Edison Electric Company hired Lewis as a draftsman and an expert witness in patent litigation on electric lights. Lewis was credited with improving the process for creating a carbon filament, which was an improvement on Thomas Edison's original paper filament, which would burn out quickly. When



Lewis H. Latimer House
Flushing, New York

the Edison Electric Company was combined in 1892 with the Thomson-Houston Electric Company to form General Electric, Lewis continued to work in the legal department. In 1911 he became a patent consultant to law firms. In addition to his drafting skills, Latimer enjoyed other creative pastimes, including playing the flute and writing poetry and plays. In his spare time, he taught mechanical drawing and English to immigrants at the Henry Street Settlement in New York. He continued to work as a patent consultant until 1922.

On December 11, 1928, four years after his wife, Lewis Howard Latimer died in Flushing, Queens, New York.