

Garrett Augustus Morgan
Morgan, Garrett A.



Record Information

Source: District of Columbia Public Library.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1877–d. 1963

Description:

Garrett A. Morgan, an astute businessman and a leader of Cleveland's African-American community, won his greatest renown as an inventor of such devices as the gas mask and the automatic stop light. In 1901 Morgan patented his first invention, an improvement on the sewing machine, which he then sold for \$150. In 1916 Morgan and three others dramatically demonstrated the effectiveness of his "gas inhalator" by saving more than twenty men who had been trapped by a tunnel explosion. Seven years later he patented the electric traffic signal and sold the rights to General Electric for forty thousand dollars.

Morgan was born in Paris, Kentucky, on March 4, 1877, the son of Sydney Morgan, a farm laborer, and Elizabeth (Reed) Morgan, a former slave who had been freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. He was the seventh of their 11 children and spent his childhood working on the family farm while attending school. At the age of 14, he traveled north to Ohio in search of a better education, settling first in Cincinnati and then in Cleveland, supporting himself by working as a handyman. In Cleveland, he learned how sewing machines worked, going on in 1907 to open his own sewing machine store, where he sold new machines and repaired old ones. In 1908, he married Mary Anne Hassek, with whom he eventually had three sons.

Garrett Augustus Morgan spent most of his life as a small entrepreneur, but he was also a brilliant inventor. Because of his entrepreneurial skills, he was able to form new businesses to make and sell his inventions; he also formed a business—a black newspaper—to serve his community. Morgan's inventions include the first human-hair straightener, the gas mask, and the first modern traffic light. He started businesses to make and sell the first two products and sold the rights to the third to General Electric for what was then a remarkable sum of \$40,000.

Morgan opened a tailoring shop in 1909, where he made and sold coats, suits, and dresses. He noticed that sometimes the automatic sewing machine needle moved so quickly that it scorched the thread of woolen fabrics, and he decided to develop a liquid that might polish the needle and reduce friction. Inadvertently, he invented a hair-

straightener instead, and went on to market the product as the GA **Morgan** Hair Refining Cream, sold by his newly formed GA **Morgan** Refining Company. In 1912, he set out to develop a device he called first a "safety hood," then a "breathing device," but which is known today as a gas mask—a hood that fits over the head to protect the wearer from breathing poisonous gases in the atmosphere. He formed the National Safety Device Company to make and sell the product, but sales did not really take off until after July 24, 1916, when **Morgan** and his brother Frank wore the devices in an effort to rescue the 32 workers trapped in a tunnel being dug under Lake Erie by the Cleveland Water Works. The tunnel was filled with smoke, dust, and poisonous gases that threatened the workers and would-be rescuers alike, but with the aid of the gas masks, the Morgans were able to save at least some of the workers. **Morgan** received national publicity as well as local and international awards for his invention and his rescue efforts. Initially, orders poured in for the device from fire and police departments nationwide, though when some buyers learned that **Morgan** was black, they cancelled their orders. Later, the U.S. Army bought gas masks to protect soldiers from poison gas used in World War I.

By this time **Morgan** was comfortably off, but he went on to create a third major invention, a traffic safety light designed to prevent the many accidents common in the early days of the automobile, when cars and carriages shared the roadways. **Morgan's** device had three settings: "Go," "Stop," and a "Stop" setting that arrested traffic in both directions, allowing pedestrians time to cross the street. **Morgan** sold the device to the General Electric Company, winning acclaim from many influential people, including the tycoons John D. Rockefeller and J. P. **Morgan**, for whom he named one of his sons. He then turned his efforts to help the African-American community, in 1920 founding the *Cleveland Call*, the city's first black paper (it was later renamed the *Call & Post*), which he operated through 1923, and serving as the treasurer of the Cleveland Association of Colored Men, which later merged with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In 1931 he ran unsuccessfully for Cleveland City Council. In 1943, he developed glaucoma, an eye disease that eventually cost him 90 percent of his vision, and he died on July 27, 1963, in Cleveland. A Harlem public school has been named in his honor, as have numerous awards and scholarship programs.

References and Further Information

"**Garrett Morgan**." The Black Inventor On-Line Museum. Available online. URL: <http://www.black-inventor.com/Garrett-Morgan.asp>. Downloaded on January 17, 2014. Science Museum. "The Inventions of **Garrett Morgan**." Science Museum website. Available online. URL: http://www.sciencemuseum.org/uk/onlinestuff/stories/garrett_morgan.aspx. Downloaded on January 13, 2017.