

## Black like me

Yesterday's black inventors helped make today's luxuries a possibility

By Kyle Ross  
THE BATTALION

This month, people all over the country will celebrate Black History Month. They will recall the misfortunes and oppressions of black people throughout the years, and celebrate the many triumphs and achievements that often go unnoticed. There is no better time for the nation to take a peek into how black people have helped shape science and technology than now.

According to the U.S. Patent Office, Thomas Jennings is thought to be the first black person to receive a patent for an invention. In 1821, Jennings was granted a patent for a dry cleaning process. Sixty years later, Judy Reed became the first black woman to obtain a patent for a hand-operated machine for kneading and rolling dough. At that time, slaves were prohibited from receiving patents, and while free black inventors were legally able to file, few ever did, probably in fear of the intolerance all around them.

Henry Blaire received a patent in 1834 for a seed planter and another in 1836 for a cotton planter. He is the only person documented in the U.S. Patent Office records as "a colored man."

Because Blaire could not write, he signed his patents with an "X." Born in 1856, Granville Woods spent a greater part of his life contributing innovations to the railroad industry. Woods filed 27 patents ranging from a railway telegraphy system to the automatic train air brake. Due to his contributions, many called him the "Black Edison."

From these humble beginnings has come a wave of black inventors and their number continues to grow with each passing generation.

Valerie Thomas, a black inventor and retired NASA employee is one of this generation's leading women. Growing up in somewhat of a modest background, she has become one of the more successful and influential black women in the science and technology world.

"I grew up in an area of Baltimore that some may call 'the projects,'" Thomas said, "but the development was not like normal project housing. It wasn't a ghetto. It was built more like a park and was a wonderful place for a child to grow up. I was able to wander around and explore the world in front of me."

Thomas, who worked as a data analyst for NASA and was project manager for NASA's image-processing system on Landsat, the first satellite to send images to Earth, is credited with inventing the Illusion Transmitter. Her vision was to create three-dimensional projections of images without having to use 3-D glasses.

"My father was really into photography. He would develop and even enlarge his own photos in the kitchen of our house," Thomas said. "I would watch him, even at an early age, and he would explain how it worked. He also fixed televisions, and I remember seeing all the machinery of a broken TV and wondering how a picture could come from it. That's probably when I first became interested in optics."

What gives Thomas and others like her such a significant amount of achievement are the challenges awaiting ethnic minority groups and women that must be overcome in the disciplines of science and technology.

"Ethnic minority groups face a lot of challenges in the engineering world such as racial profiling, and it is harder for them to be represented in the world, period," said Ashley Gaines, a representative for the National Society of Black Engineers at Texas A&M. "Being a woman in the engineering industry is different from being a man in engineering industry. Not better, not worse, but different. In the professional engineering fields, it is filled with men. It is harder for women to get jobs. Women have to work extra hard to be well-respected at their job."

Despite the struggles of racial equality in the United States, black men and women have always offered their innovations to science and technology. Without black inventors, we would not have such things as traffic lights, the gas mask, the potato chip, the mailbox or the golf tee. We wouldn't have the fire extinguisher, the elevator or the automatic gearshift. Even the idea of a blood bank and system for long-term preservation of blood plasma came from a black inventor.

Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865 abolishing slavery everywhere in the United States, but it wasn't until 1957 that The Civil Rights Act was written. That's less than 50 years ago - a mere blip on the timeline of this young country.



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY JOSHUA HOBSON AND RUBEN DELUNA • THE BATTALION

Thomas is just one of the growing multitudes of black inventors finding success in a society that is still walking the path toward racial and gender equality.

"My advice to young women, or more specifically young African American women out there, is to seek out organizations and peer groups that you can relate to," Thomas said. "And also make learning a lifetime activity. Never stop taking classes or seminars or workshops. Never stop learning. It's worked out well for me."

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Wednesday February 18

"Five Reasons God Exists and Three Reasons Why It Makes A Difference"

with Dr. William Lane Craig

&

"Is There Scientific Evidence for the Existence of God?"

with Dr. Walter Bradley

see below for time and location details

Wednesday February 18

"Five Reasons God Exists and Three Reasons Why It Makes A Difference" with Dr. William Lane Craig  
9:30-11:00 A.M. • Rudder 404

"Is There Scientific Evidence for the Existence of God?"

with Dr. Walter Bradley  
7:00 P.M. • Rudder Auditorium

Thursday February 19

Women's Lunch: "The Role of the Body in the Spiritual Search" with Lilian Calles Barger (President of Damaris Project),  
12:30-1:45 P.M. • MSC 231 • RSVP RHildreth@clm.org

"What I Learned from Sex and the City" with Lilian Calles Barger  
4:00-5:30 P.M. • Rudder 410

"Relativism, Truth, and Tolerance" with Dr. Peter Kreeft  
7:00 P.M. • Rudder Auditorium

Friday February 20

Catholicism and Evangelicalism: Are They Compatible?, with Dr. Peter Kreeft. St Mary's Catholic Church, 7:00 A.M. (reservations please: info@aggiecatholic.org) NOTE: This event is not just for Catholics. Everyone is welcome to attend. There is no charge for the breakfast.

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