



Black Inventors in the Age of Segregation: Granville T. Woods, Lewis H. Latimer, and Shelby J. Davidson

Rayvon Fouche

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According to the stereotype, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century inventors, quintessential loners and supposed geniuses, worked in splendid isolation and then unveiled their discoveries to a marveling world. Most successful inventors of this era, however, developed their ideas within the framework of industrial organizations that supported them and their experiments. For African American inventors, negotiating these racially stratified professional environments meant not only working on innovative designs but also breaking barriers.

In this pathbreaking study, Rayvon Fouché examines the life and work of three African Americans: Granville Woods (1856--1910), an independent inventor; Lewis Latimer (1848--1928), a corporate engineer with General Electric; and Shelby Davidson (1868--1930), who worked in the U.S. Treasury Department. Detailing the difficulties and human frailties that make their achievements all the more impressive, Fouché explains how each man used invention for financial gain, as a claim on entering adversarial environments, and as a means to technical stature in a Jim Crow institutional setting.

Describing how Woods, Latimer, and Davidson struggled to balance their complicated racial identities -- as both black and white communities perceived them -- with their hopes of being judged solely on the content of their inventive work, Fouché provides a nuanced view of African American contributions to -- and relationships with -- technology during a period of rapid industrialization and mounting national attention to the inequities of a separate-but-equal social order.

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