

APR21-2020-000171

Abstract for an Invited Paper
for the APR21 Meeting of
the American Physical Society

Lewis Latimer: The Shadow Behind the Lightbulb

GARRETT WILLIAMS¹, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Throughout the history of the field of Physics, there is a myriad of untold stories whose details have been eroded by time that are integral to shaping the field today. One such historical gem is the story of the 19th century physicist Lewis Howard Latimer, the African American collaborator of Thomas Edison and primary contributor to the invention of the lightbulb. During one of the most tumultuous periods in American history, at the crossroads of segregation, racism, classism, and elitism, Lewis Latimer's rise from the son of a slave to an Edison Pioneer, one of the founding members of the modern Electric Lighting Industry, has been long overshadowed by racial scars more-often associated with the post-emancipation era. As a result, the existing records of Latimer are scarce and in somewhat poor agreement on important specifics concerning his relations to the Edison Pioneers, greatly inhibiting the accessibility of his story to broader audiences. Presented here is an accessible, encompassing, and well-supported representation of Lewis Latimer and an examination of the collaboration of the Edison Pioneers that transcends racial and societal barriers, which was extremely rare for the time. This collaboration is a historical testament to physics as an institutional discipline as well as a diverse community of like-minded scholars viewing the world through the same lens. By examining the roots of the community culture in the context of early influences like Lewis Latimer, we can better inform our present-day practices of facilitating an innovative and inclusive fellowship of physicists.

¹Physics PhD Candidate, 2025