

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

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

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*William Pretzer (bio)*

Rayvon Fouché has set out to humanize African Americans who identified themselves as inventors around the turn of twentieth century by studying the careers of Granville Woods, Lewis Latimer, and Shelby Davidson. By humanize, he means to give them human dimensions beyond just being black and inventive. In so doing, Fouché has uncovered new information about their lives and careers, information that enables us to "understand them and accept them as men of their times, and not what we would have hoped them to be" (p. 184).

Woods was a productive inventor, mainly of electrical equipment, during the era dominated by Thomas Edison, Elihu Thomson, and George Westinghouse. Indeed, just after Edison had established the first central power station and was constructing his West Orange laboratory, the *Catholic Tribune* proclaimed Woods "the greatest inventor in the history of his race," and a year later called him "the greatest electrician in the world" (p. 51). Likewise, Latimer spent his career in electrical engineering. But even though he was successful in inventing incandescent light bulbs and manufacturing processes, his forte was patent litigation. He was a first-rate expert witness, a role that men of his race never seemed to affect. Wood's and Latimer's stories unfolded in the context of business organizations and competitive capitalism. Davidson, on the other hand, was a longtime employee of the federal government, where he distinguished himself as a designer of office machines.

Fouché documents the struggles of these black inventors and dismantles several myths surrounding their lives. Latimer thrived professionally through assimilation with his white colleagues, while Woods never achieved financial success, even though his forty-five patents earned him accolades. Davidson battled racism as well as the Washington bureaucracy but never achieved the promotions he coveted within the government and resigned in 1912 to begin successful careers

in law, real estate, and civil rights.

Though the evidence has been stretched as far as Fouché can manage, his book still does not provide enough detail to draw distinct pictures of these three men. In the case of Woods, Fouché relied overwhelmingly on information provided in patent application files. Giving new meaning to the term "internalist history," it is not the hardware but patent affidavits and testimony that dominate the intellectual landscape. Fouché is so caught up in the patent shenanigans that embroiled Woods through most of his career that we never learn if his inventions were widely disseminated.

Reliance on patent records also creates problems of another sort, for, as Charles Bazerman has argued in *The Languages of Edison's Light* (1999), the **[End Page 848]** patent system "supports a heroic notion of the history of technology" (p. 109). Still, Fouché's extensive use of these records should inspire others to examine such materials with new questions in mind.

Fouché has more sources and more success with Latimer and Davidson, and their stories certainly seem to match his intentions better. Attempting to dispel the "myth of the black inventor" (a myth not defined clearly), Fouché shows that both Latimer and Davidson were productive even though they faced difficulties in profiting from their work. He never quite demonstrates, however, that their difficulties were fundamentally different from those faced by most white inventors of their era. Indeed, what is striking is how seldom they attributed their difficulties solely to racism and how often the rough-and-tumble of competitive capitalism or bureaucratic infighting thwarted their ambitions. Through their biographies as Fouché has recounted them, we see more clearly the outlines of their times, but the outlines remain vague. Precisely how racial attitudes combined with other factors to define the conditions of these black inventors' lives and contributions is still an open question.

Dr. Pretzer is curator of political history and print culture at the Henry Ford, in Dearborn, Michigan.

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

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