

Lewis Howard Latimer Biography

Ways to use the biographies

Studying the lives and achievements of scientists is part of Sc1 (National Curriculum)-Ideas and evidence in Science - Scientific Enquiry - in the National Curriculum.

All children need to know that Minority Ethnic peoples have contributed to science in the past and present.

Read and discuss the biography of a person relevant to the area of science the children are studying. Many of the biographies have Race Equality issues in them, discuss these with the children and relate to their own experiences of Race Equality Issues.

Comprehension activities could be developed from these biographies.

Collaborative paired or group tasks and discussions could be

- What evidence did the scientists have to identify a problem?
- What did they do?
- How did it make a difference to people's lives?
- What do you think were the main difficulties that faced the scientist?

- To role play the life of the scientist.
- Produce a poster about the scientist and her/his discovery.
- Produce a story-board of their life.
- Write a list of questions they would like to ask the scientist if they could.
- How did this scientist achieve? Ask them to listen and discuss in groups the personal qualities of the person. E.g. persistence.
- Have they heard of this person before? If not, why not? Is there another scientist whom they associate with this discovery?
- Who are scientists? What do scientists do? What tools do they need?

Lewis Howard Latimer

1848 – 1928

Lewis Howard Latimer was born on September 4th 1848 in Chelsea Massachusetts in America. He was born 6 years after his father had escaped from slavery. At the time Lewis Howard Latimer grew up most black people in the American South were still slaves.



Latimer went to the local grammar school and was an excellent student who loved to read and draw. Most of his time though, he spent working with his father, which was typical of children in the 19th century.

In 1864, when Latimer was 16, he joined the Navy and fought in the American Civil War. When the war ended, he got an honorary discharge from the Navy and left in 1865.

In 1868, Latimer found a job as an office boy with a company named "Crosby and Gould". This company registered patents of new inventions. Latimer saw draftsmen making drawings of things that people had invented. He decided that he wanted to do this and studied hard. Eventually, he was promoted to the position of head draftsman.

Near the office was a school where a teacher called Alexander Graham Bell worked. Alexander Graham Bell invented things in his spare time; he and Lewis Latimer became good friends. Bell hired Latimer to do the drawings for one of his new inventions - the telephone.

In 1880, Latimer went to work for Hiram Maxim, who was an inventor and founder of the U.S. Electric Lighting Company. In his new job, Latimer became an expert on electric lighting, an area in which there was fierce competition between companies.

Soon, Latimer was setting up public lighting systems for entire cities. He travelled to places such as New York City; Montreal, Paris and London to install lights and teach people how to create and maintain them. To communicate directly with his workers, Latimer had to quickly learn French. Also, both he and his wife learned German while living in London

In 1884, Latimer was invited to work for Maxim's rival, Thomas Alva Edison, in New York. Now an expert electrical engineer, Latimer's work for Edison was critical because of his thorough knowledge of electric lighting and power. Latimer guided Edison through the process of filing patent forms properly at the U.S. Patent Office, protecting the company from infringements of his inventions.



Thomas Edison invented the electric light bulb in 1879 but he had not found a way of making a bulb that lasted.

Latimer had invented a solution to this problem and on January 17th 1882, he received what was probably his most important patent, a "Process of Manufacturing Carbons." This method resulted in a superior filament for light bulbs, which meant they lasted months instead of days.

Throughout the rest of his life, Latimer continued to devise ways of improving everyday living for the public, eventually working in efforts to improve the civil rights of Black citizens within the United States

Lewis Howard Latimer died on December 11th, 1928 at the age of 80 leaving a remarkable legacy. His name will forever be associated with two of the most revolutionary inventions of all time: the incandescent electric light bulb and the telephone.