

BLACK HISTORY AND HUMAN DIGNITY

WHAT BLACK AMERICA BUILT



DR. NAKEYAU PATTERSON

READ A SAMPLE

What Black America Built

Dr. Nakeyau Patterson
Black History and Human Dignity

For students in grades 6-12, with teacher or family support as needed. Explore the opening of the book and see how specific contributions can be investigated through historical records.

Included in this preview

Title and copyright pages
Full-book contents and reading routes
Introduction: Learning to See the Work
Chapter 1: Who Gets Credit, including its questions and inquiry
Source-note pages supporting the chapter

Finding your way

Use the PDF bookmarks to move between the included sections. The original printed page numbers are retained: pages 1-12, followed by source-note pages 252-253. The contents describe the full book; the remaining chapters and reference sections are not included in this preview.

Chapter 1 uses notes 1-6. The final included source page also contains notes 7-11, which relate to later chapters.

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Dr. Nakeyau Patterson

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For grades 6–12

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Sources and credits appear in the source notes. Hypothetical classroom examples are identified in the text.

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Reading by subject

You can read in order or follow an interest across chapters. Later chapters return to selected fields with additional cases. The routes below connect related work; a chapter can belong to more than one route.

Area of interest	Chapters
Tools and technical systems	5, 6, 17, 18, 22, 23, 26, 36, 37, 39
Health and living systems	7, 8, 18, 25, 27, 31, 40, 41
Land food and movement	2, 3, 6, 19, 23, 24, 33, 34, 36, 37
Arts writing and public information	9, 12, 13, 20, 29, 35, 38, 42
Education and opportunity	4, 14, 15, 16, 21, 28, 30, 32, 39, 40, 41
Work and community institutions	2, 4, 10, 11, 16, 19, 21, 24, 30, 33, 34

Source notes explain the records behind the cases. Use the Name Index and Subject Index to find discussions across chapters. The chronology and glossary offer dated examples and explain recurring terms.

Each chapter includes questions and an inquiry. Try explaining a selected contribution in your own words before consulting the reference. Use the inquiry to decide which record to examine next.

Some chapters contain more cases than others. For a shorter reading session, choose one named contribution, follow its source note, and answer one chapter question. Return to another case when you are ready to compare how the work was done or credited.

Introduction

Learning to See the Work

When you look at a building, hear a song, or use a tool, what do you know about the people who helped make it possible? A familiar name may begin the story. Following the work can reveal the people who solved a problem, supplied a material, taught a skill, or kept an organization going.

This book follows Black contributions to American life through particular people, communities, and records. Its subject includes invention and scientific knowledge, the work that built physical places, the creation of institutions, and artistic expression. We will ask what people did, how we know, and what happened to the credit for their work.

A clear account names the responsibility involved: designing an object, improving a process, producing materials, or teaching others. These tasks can support one another while requiring different knowledge and skill.

Some of the history involves work performed under slavery. Recognizing a person's skill does not make the conditions of that work acceptable. A useful account must ask who controlled the work and who received its benefits. Other histories will follow people choosing a profession, building a business, supporting a community, or creating something for the pleasure of making it.

The title *What Black America Built* invites a broad view. It cannot promise an inventory of every contribution ever made. We will study documented examples across fields and investigate further questions, keeping gaps visible when records leave them unanswered.

A patent identifies an invention and the people named on its document. A payroll records work and payment. A recollection tells us what someone remembered. Reading different kinds of evidence together can reveal both connections and disagreements.

You can take pride in achievement without turning it into a test of human worth. No Black child has to become an inventor, champion, or celebrated artist to deserve safety, opportunity, and respect. People belong in history because they lived, acted, imagined, and made choices within circumstances that deserve to be understood.

As you read, ask what work you can now recognize and what evidence would help you understand it better. Carry those questions into the histories you encounter beyond this book.

Chapter 1 Who Gets Credit

Guiding Question

How can we recognize a contribution accurately when public credit tells only part of the story?

A Skilled Worker and a National Statue

In 1860, Philip Reid was enslaved by foundry owner Clark Mills. Thomas Crawford's plaster model for the Statue of Freedom needed to be separated into sections before bronze casting. According to the Architect of the Capitol, Reid found a way to reveal the seams by pulling on the model's lifting ring with a pulley and tackle. His technical solution helped make the next stage possible. [1]

Reid also maintained fires under the molds. The surviving payroll distinguishes payment to him for Sundays from payment to Mills for his other workdays. Reid became free in 1862; the statue's final section was installed on the Capitol dome in 1863. He contributed to its making without being its sculptor or owning the foundry. [1]

Following Reid's task changes the question from whose statue it was to how the statue could be made. The completed object brought together different kinds of expertise. Explaining one worker's solution helps us understand the process behind it.

We should also keep the conditions of the work in view. Skill and freedom are separate questions. A person can know how to solve a difficult problem while being denied control over their own labor. Describing that expertise accurately helps us recognize the person; it does not excuse the power exercised over them.

Names for Different Kinds of Work

When we say someone built something, we should explain the work we mean. A person might develop a design, turn it into a working object, make an improvement, or produce the materials needed for it. An organization might gather money and labor so that a project can continue. These contributions can support one another while remaining distinct.

Here is an invented example. A student group creates a model bridge. One student proposes the shape. Another discovers that an extra support keeps the model from

bending. A third draws the instructions clearly enough for a second group to build it. A fourth makes the pieces with care. If the group credits only the person who presented the model, its account leaves out work that mattered.

A project report could distinguish the proposed design, the added support, the instructions, and the construction. Each description tells the reader what a student contributed and how that work affected the model.

Names identify the participants; verbs explain their work. Designed what? Improved which step? Taught whom? Made which part? A precise verb turns a name into a question that evidence can answer.

Lewis Latimer and the Telephone Record

Lewis H. Latimer's recollection adds a contributor to a familiar telephone story. In writing preserved in a 1911 logbook, he remembered receiving Alexander Graham Bell's instructions for patent-application drawings. Historian Bayla Singer reproduces this account through the Rutgers Edison Papers and explains that the exact application remains unclear. It is a later recollection, with an important limit on what it identifies. [2]

A separate document, U.S. Patent 174,465, names Alexander Graham Bell. It records an application filed February 14, 1876, and a patent dated March 7, 1876. Its drawings and written description concern improvements in telegraphy, including a claim about transmitting vocal or other sounds. The document does not supply a full account of everyone who contributed to preparing it. [3]

Read together, these records distinguish the invention named in the patent from the drawing work Latimer remembered doing. His contribution can be recognized while the particular application remains uncertain. The evidence here does not establish that he invented the telephone.

Technical drawing makes relationships visible so that another person can follow a design. As in the invented bridge project, clear instructions and careful representation are skilled work. Naming the task explains more than calling someone a helper.

An Invention Credited to Latimer

Latimer also appears as an inventor in his own patent record. U.S. Patent 252,386, issued January 17, 1882, identifies his Process of Manufacturing Carbons. The Rutgers patent catalog records its assignment to the U.S. Electric Lighting

Company. Here, the evidence concerns a particular manufacturing process, with its own inventor, date, and description. [4]

The original specification describes a practical manufacturing problem. Thin pieces of material could become distorted or break during heating. Latimer proposed placing them in protective envelopes while they were carbonized, or heated to produce carbon. His description connects the invention to a particular step in making carbon conductors for lamps. It gives us something specific to investigate, rather than an unexplained claim that he invented the light bulb. [4]

The two Latimer cases concern different stages of technical work: communicating a design and developing a manufacturing process. Distinguishing those stages gives each contribution a clear place in the account.

To investigate an improvement, ask what the earlier method made difficult and what the new method changed. A patent can begin that inquiry. Records of adoption, production, and use are needed to establish whether proposed benefits occurred.

Henry Baker Searched for the Missing Names

In his 1913 publication *The Colored Inventor: A Record of Fifty Years*, Henry E. Baker described the difficulty of identifying Black inventors through patent records. The records generally did not state a person's race. A search for inventions by Black people therefore required information beyond the patent entries themselves. Baker worked as an assistant examiner in the United States Patent Office. [5]

Baker described inquiries sent to patent attorneys, newspapers, manufacturers, and other people who might know of inventors. Answers included definite information, rumors, and guesses. He compared responses with official patent records. He reported gathering more than 1,200 leads and verifying about 800 patents as belonging to Black inventors. These were patents, not a count of 800 different people. [5]

His account also described refusals to identify inventions with the Black community. Baker offered possible concerns about commercial consequences as an explanation. We should preserve that distinction: he recorded a difficulty and proposed a reason for it. We should not turn his explanation into a statement of every inventor's private motive. [5]

Baker was reconstructing connections that the patent entries alone did not preserve. His work shows why the history of an invention can depend on research conducted long after the technical work itself.

Baker's numbers describe his 1913 investigation, not all Black inventions then or now. He acknowledged its incompleteness. A record of what has been found should leave room for work that remains undiscovered. [5]

A printed source also remains open to examination. We can learn from Baker's method without treating every account he included as settled fact. If we use an individual example from his publication, we should seek the relevant patent or other evidence. A source can be valuable and still contain claims that need further checking.

Work That Does Not Appear in a Patent List

Patents cover one part of the history this book will examine. The National Archives preserves wage rolls, vouchers, and other records of enslaved people who worked on the White House and Capitol. Documented work included carpentry, stonecutting, bricklaying, hauling materials, and sawing lumber. The records also show payment going to enslavers. They identify labor without establishing that workers chose it or controlled the money it produced. [6]

A payroll can identify a worker and a task while leaving relationships, aspirations, and choices unrecorded. Other evidence is needed for those parts of a life; some may remain unknown.

This is one reason we will look beyond a list of patented inventions. Work can make a place usable, sustain an institution, pass on knowledge, or create a form of expression. The evidence may be a school record, a letter, an object, a performance, or a community archive. We will choose records suited to the contribution we are studying.

We will also distinguish work performed under coercion from work people chose. Coercion means pressure or force that restricts a person's choice. Recognizing the skill in forced labor should lead us to ask about both the contribution and the injustice. It should never make enslavement sound like an opportunity someone was fortunate to receive.

Write a Claim That Can Be Checked

A useful historical claim usually identifies a person or group, a particular action, a time or place, and the evidence that supports it. It also keeps a limit when the source requires one. You do not need all of these details in every sentence, but your account should make them available to the reader.

Start with the action. If your evidence identifies an improvement, describe the improvement. If it records making parts, describe that work. If an account comes from a person's memory many years later, say so. The wording lets a reader see both the contribution and the kind of evidence behind it.

Next, separate what the source states from what you infer. An inference is a conclusion you draw from evidence. It can be reasonable without becoming a directly recorded fact. A payroll entry might support the conclusion that a particular task mattered to a project. It does not tell you whether the worker felt proud, anxious, or hopeful that day.

Finally, look for what would strengthen or change the account. Another record might identify a collaborator, show how a device was used, or correct a date. A new source can make your explanation more complete. Changing a claim when the evidence changes is part of taking the subject seriously.

The same care applies to claims that someone took another person's work. Such a claim deserves investigation. It also needs evidence about what was created, who had access to it, and what happened afterward. Unequal recognition and the transfer of an invention are related questions that may require different records. We should investigate each rather than let one stand in for the other.

Achievement and Human Dignity

Human dignity does not wait for a discovery. A person's right to fair treatment cannot depend on whether their work changes the world, produces wealth, or appears in a museum. The person whose name survives in a payroll and the person celebrated for an invention both deserve a history that treats them with care.

That principle matters for you as a reader, too. This book invites you to learn, question, and recognize. It does not give you the job of proving a racial group's worth through your own achievement. Your curiosity has value. So do your ordinary interests, your relationships, and your life beyond what anyone can measure.

As the book follows more kinds of work, ask what was made, whose knowledge mattered, and what the record supports. Let recognition lead to further questions about how people worked and lived.

Reflection Questions

1. Choose one example in this chapter. What specific verb describes the contribution better than helped?
2. What can a payment record show about someone's work? What would you need another source to learn?
3. Why should an inventor's name, a contributor's task, and the ownership of a business be recorded separately?
4. How can you recognize an achievement without treating achievement as a condition for respect?

Short Inquiry

With help from a teacher or librarian, choose a patent, payroll, or historical publication linked in the source notes. Ask for help with unfamiliar technical terms.

Identify the record's creator, date, and intended purpose. Write one action it documents and one question it leaves unanswered. Then draft two or three sentences describing the contribution.

Underline the words in your draft that the evidence directly supports. Mark any inference and explain it. Use respectful descriptions of people while identifying degrading historical language accurately when it appears in the source. Revise a vague verb or unsupported claim.

Teacher Note

Assess the student's use of evidence, precision, and ability to distinguish a documented action from an inference. Provide accessible excerpts or read a selected record aloud when needed. Explain historical racial language before presenting it, and keep the inquiry focused on the person's work and the record's purpose. Students should not have to disclose personal experiences or prove their own value to participate.

Source Notes

The numbers in the text, chronology, and glossary lead to the records below. Each note identifies a source and prints its web address for further study. Read each source with attention to its purpose, date, and limits. Original records and later historical interpretations are identified separately.

1. Architect of the Capitol. Philip Reid and the Statue of Freedom. Institutional history with original payroll and payment-voucher images. Used for Reid's foundry work, technical solution, payment distinction, and the stated chronology. No claim that Reid sculpted the statue or owned the foundry.

<https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/blog/philip-reid-and-statue-freedom>

2. Bayla Singer. Inventing a Better Life: Latimer's Technical Career, Rutgers Thomas A. Edison Papers. The telephone section reproduces Latimer's later recollection and preserves uncertainty about the application. Its note 4 identifies the 1911 logbook pages with preprinted November 18 and November 17 dates; these are page identifiers, not dates assigned here to the recalled work.

<https://edison.rutgers.edu/resources/latimer/inventing-a-better-life-latimer-s-technical-career>

<https://edison.rutgers.edu/resources/latimer/inventing-a-better-life-latimer-s-technical-career/notes>

3. Alexander Graham Bell. U.S. Patent 174,465, Improvement in Telegraphy, March 7, 1876. Original six-page scan. Specification page 1 identifies the applicant and filing date; page 4 includes claim 5. The patent is not attributed here to Latimer as its draftsman.

<https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/10/ab/a3/b4f5c6e5826640/US174465.pdf>

4. Lewis H. Latimer. U.S. Patent 252,386, Process of Manufacturing Carbons, January 17, 1882. Original patent reproduced by the Rutgers Edison Papers. The accompanying Latimer's Patents catalog identifies the assignment. No claim about sales, adoption, or a quantified effect follows from the patent alone.

<https://edison.rutgers.edu/images/archive/latimer/patents/252386.pdf>

<https://edison.rutgers.edu/resources/latimer/latimer-s-patents>

5. Henry E. Baker. *The Colored Inventor: A Record of Fifty Years*. 1913. Original public-domain text, transcribed by Project Gutenberg, ebook 21281. Pages 4 to 6 describe the research method and reported verified patents; page 12 discusses incomplete coverage. The historical title is retained for identification. Baker's numbers are dated reported findings, and his accounts of individual inventions require separate checking before reuse.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/21281>

6. National Archives. *Slaves Built the White House and Capitol - See the Records*. December 10, 2008. Institutional description and reproduced records from Record Group 217, including payrolls and vouchers. Used for documented work and payment to enslavers. The chapter does not infer workers' motives or attach named workers to an untranscribed pictured payroll.

<https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2009/nr09-28-images>

7. National Park Service, Pullman National Historical Park. "Pullman Porters." Institutional history and reproduced 1877 engraving. Used for job divisions, exclusion, the Brotherhood's formation, and the 1937 agreement.

<https://www.nps.gov/pull/learn/historyculture/pullman-porters.htm>

8. National Archives. Construction records discussed in Chapter 1. Used here only to recall work and payments to enslavers.

<https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/2009/nr09-28-images>

9. Mills Pennebaker. "Race, Gender, and More in the AFL Records." Library of Congress, *Unfolding History*, March 10, 2022. Archival commentary identifies and links Private Archie Lee's June 1919 correspondence. The account was inspected; the linked original letter did not resolve in this drafting session. Lee's experience and request are therefore attributed through this commentary, not described as an independently transcribed letter. Its outcome is not established.

<https://blogs.loc.gov/manuscripts/2022/03/race-gender-and-more-in-the-afl-records/>

10. National Park Service, Rosie the Riveter/WWII Home Front National Historical Park. "Historic Richmond Shipyards." Institutional history used for the location, wartime manufacturing process, and recruitment. No production-speed, workforce-total, or individual-wage claims are made here.

<https://www.nps.gov/rori/learn/historyculture/historic-richmond-shipyards.htm>

11. National Park Service. "Betty Reid Soskin." Institutional biography and transcript of the recorded presentation "Of Lost Conversations." The page contains a film with multiple speakers as well as Soskin's presentation; this chapter uses her identified work and her own subsequent account, not unidentified film testimony. Her recollection is treated as a situated account, not a census of the workforce.

<https://www.nps.gov/rori/learn/historyculture/betty-reid-soskin.htm>