

# Black Pioneers in Business: A Brief Interpretive History 1650-1900

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(for Amalgamated Publishers, Inc.)

## MIDWESTERN STATES

**Henry Boyd**, inventor. Boyd was a Kentucky freedman. He settled in Cincinnati. There, he invented a corded bed. It came to be in great demand throughout the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys. Boyd employed twenty-five men. The operation helped to diminish racial prejudice against black mechanics in the city.

**Robert Gordon**, merchant. He was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia. As a young man, he was placed in charge of the coal yard on the plantation. To reward his efficiency, he was given all the slack from the coal which he sold to local manufacturers. After accumulating several thousands of dollars, he purchased his freedom in 1846. He went to Cincinnati and entered the coal business. His success incurred the envy of white competitors. They conspired to squeeze out Gordon by lowering prices to a point at which he could not compete. Soon the Ohio River froze, making it impossible to transport coal into the city. Gordon then sold out of his supply at a higher price. He increased his wealth sufficiently to invest heavily in United States bonds and in real estate.

**John Jones** (1816-1879), tailor. Jones came to Chicago as a young man with a pittance of money, but the tailoring business made him wealthy. He helped to finance the underground railroad and fought against racial discrimination in Illinois. One of the victories was getting repeal of the "Black Laws" which denied legal equality. He was also instrumental in securing passage of a law that admitted black children to Chicago schools. The city's first public library was located in one of his buildings—among the best in the city. After the Civil War, he was twice elected Cook County Commissioner.

## NORTHWESTERN STATES

**James P. Beckwourth** (1798-1867), frontiersman, fur trader, innkeeper. Beckwourth was born in Virginia, a mulatto son of an officer in the Revolutionary War. The family relocated to a settlement near present-day St. Louis. At eighteen, Beckwourth was apprenticed to a blacksmith, but he ran away, refusing to live as a slave. He joined a Rocky Mountains expedition and found that on the frontier a man is a man, regardless of color. With this satisfaction, he became a man of the mountains,



James Beckwourth, frontiersman and Indian fighter. The picture is from his 1856 story of his life and adventures.

## NEW ENGLAND STATES

**Lewis Temple**, a blacksmith in New Bedford, Massachusetts, invented the toggle harpoon in 1848. It became the standard instrument in whaling, and was regarded as the most important invention in the industry. The fact that it did not slip out of a whale's mouth made it possible to capture more whales.

**David Walker** (1785-1830), clothier. Born in Wilmington, North Carolina, Walker migrated to Boston. He established a used clothes business there in 1827. Having an abhorrence to slavery and impatient over the slow progress to freedom, he published three issues in 1829 of *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World but in Particular and very Expressly to Those of the United States of America*. In uncompromising language, he appealed to blacks to use force, if necessary, to gain freedom. This publication was considered incendiary by slaveholders, and untimely by many abolitionists. Slaves were forbidden to obtain it, under threat of punishment and, in some cases, death. Shortly after publication, Walker died under mysterious circumstances.

## MIDDLE ATLANTIC STATES

**Cato Alexander** (1771-1858), caterer. Alexander was an ex-slave. He established a tavern on the Old Post Road, way uptown in New York at that time. It was a favorite resort for aristocracy for 48 years. They had special parties there. One writer stated, "those who tasted his terrapin, fried chicken, curried oysters, roast duck, or drank his Virginia egg-nog—wondered how anyone who owned him could sell him 'even to himself.'"

Another writer wrote, "not to know Cato's is not to know the world." Alexander made a fortune.

**Robert Bogle** (?-1837), caterer. It is not known precisely when Bogle established his business in Philadelphia. It is a matter of record, however, that early in the 19th century he was conducting a prosperous enterprise. Bogle started out as a waiter, then went into business professionalizing catering to affluent and prominent families. He acquired considerable wealth.

Peter Augustine took over Bogle's business in 1818, and within a few years the business became known throughout the nation. His clients were among the best families in the city, distinguished foreign visitors, and the prominent among American officialdom. *James Prosser* and his son, *Henry Jones*, *Henry Minton* and *Thomas Dorsey* followed as the leading caterers between 1845 and 1875.

**George T. Downey** (1819-1903), caterer. At 26 years of age, Downey's restaurant at 690 Broadway in New York, was already a popular place for high society. He had other places in Newport and in Providence, Rhode Island. By 1860, he had earned enough money to finance construction of a block of buildings in New York. In 1865, he was asked to manage the restaurant of the House of Representatives. He accepted.

**Thomas Jennings** (1791-1859), tailor, inventor. Jennings invented a process for cleaning clothes. He patented it and became wealthy. He was an activist and benefactor in the anti-slavery movement.

**Stephen Smith** (1795-1873), merchant, realtor, philanthropist. Smith was born a slave and was brought to Columbia, Pennsylvania, in 1804. His mother escaped and followed him to Columbia. His master took her in and refused to give her up to her mistress. Smith grew up to become a businessman, forming a partnership with William Whipper, an activist in the underground railroad and an intellectual. They operated a coal and lumber business and became very successful, accumulating stock in several thousand bushels of coal, 2,250,000 feet of lumber, 22 railway cars on the Baltimore to Philadelphia route, \$9,000 of stock in the Columbia Bridge, and \$18,000 of stock in the Columbia Bank. Smith was reputed to be the wealthiest person of color in the United States. In 1867, he contributed property and cash amounting to \$250,000 for establishment of a home in Philadelphia for the aged, the first home in the United States for black aged people. The home bears his name.

**William Still** (1821-1902), abolitionist, merchant, philanthropist. Still was born free and came to Philadelphia in 1841. In 1847, he became a clerk in the office of the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Between 1851 and 1861, he was chairman and corresponding secretary of the Philadelphia branch of underground railroad. Then, he started his own business—a new and used stove operation. It was successful and enabled him to construct an office building and enter the coal business from which he amassed a fortune. He also constructed the largest black-owned public hall in the country. He is best known for his book, "The Underground Railroad", published in 1873. It recorded the stories told to him by fugitive slaves whom he interviewed when they reached Philadelphia for further instructions about their flight. Still founded the first black YMCA.

## NEW ENGLAND STATES

**A. C. Howard** (1863-?), Mississippi, manufacturer. Mr. Howard went to school only briefly before he went to work at the age of ten in order to help support his mother. They finally settled in Boston where he worked first as a steward on a yacht, and then as a porter for the Pullman Company. He observed that there was a need for improving the blacking used for polishing shoes, and he began to experiment in making a more satisfactory shoe polish. He succeeded in doing so and started a business with \$180. By 1907, he was producing 7,200 cans of polish a day, with his picture on it, and shipments were made all over the United States.

**J. H. Lewis**, Heathsville, North Carolina, merchant tailor. Mr. Lewis spent the first eighteen years of his life on a farm. In 1875 or 1876, he went to Concord, New Hampshire. There he learned tailoring, after which time he settled in Boston and opened his own shop with a capital of \$100. By 1896, the business was grossing \$150,000 a year. He became the second largest merchant tailor in Massachusetts, and the fourth largest of the business in the United States.

**Jan Earnest Matzeliger** (1852-1889), Paramaribo, Surinam (Dutch Guiana), inventor. Matzeliger's father was a Dutch engineer and his mother was black. Around the age of ten, he became an apprentice in the government machine shop, and at nineteen became a sailor for two years. He quit the ship in Philadelphia, worked on odd jobs, including one on which he learned to put shoe parts together. Tiring of Philadelphia, he went to Boston and then to Lynn, the largest shoe manufacturing

center in the country. There he worked in several of the factories and familiarized himself with most of the machinery. His English was halting and he was subjected to racial discrimination, even in churches. He carefully studied the technique employed in connecting "uppers" to the soles of shoes, and went to evening school to improve his English and to learn something about physics and related subjects. Convinced that a machine could make the whole shoe, he worked diligently for six months to produce his first model, for which he was offered, but declined \$50. Several years passed before he produced the second model, for which he was offered, but refused \$1500.

Matzeliger was in poor health and needed financial assistance to begin the third model. This was obtained in return for two-thirds interest in the undertaking. In 1883, he succeeded, to his satisfaction, in producing a machine that would produce the whole shoe in a matter of minutes. The machine revolutionized the industry. Production cost was drastically reduced and this enabled most people in the civilized world to buy and wear shoes. Matzeliger continued to improve the machine and received four additional patents. He acquired very little compensation for his ingenious effort that resulted in the formation of the United Shoe Machinery Corporation which had a capitalization of over fifty million dollars in 1955.



Jan Matzeliger, inventor of the machine that revolutionized the shoe industry and made Lynn, Massachusetts the shoe capital of the world. Government experts, baffled by his patent drawings, sent a specialist to examine the machine. Matzeliger died young and poor after working ten years to develop his device.

## MIDDLE ATLANTIC STATES

**Mrs. Henrietta S. Duterte**, (?-1903), Philadelphia, mortician. Mrs. Duterte succeeded her husband, Francis, who established the business in 1852. He died in 1858. She was, reportedly, the first practicing female mortician in the United States, if not in the world.

**Lewis Howard Latimer**, (1848-1928), Chelsea, Massachusetts, inventor. Latimer was free born. When he was ten years old, he went to work to support himself and to assist his mother and the four other children. During the Civil War, he served in the Navy. After discharge, he became an office boy for a Boston company of patent lawyers. There he taught himself drafting and was reluctantly upgraded to that position. In due course, he was made chief draftsman. Latimer married in 1893. He made the drawings and assisted Alexander Graham Bell to prepare the application for patenting the telephone which was granted in 1876. In 1874, Latimer received a patent for his invention of the "Water Closets for Railroad Cars".

As a draftsman for the United States Electric Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut, he improved ways in which the carbon filaments were made and set into the incandescent lamp. It came into wide use. In 1881, together with Joseph V. Nichols, Latimer was granted a patent for an electric lamp, and in 1882, he received a patent for his "Process of Manufacturing Carbons", a superior filament to the one produced earlier. Another of his inventions was the "Globe Supporter for Electric Lamps". Latimer installed some of the incandescent electric light plants in New York, Philadelphia, Canada and London.

In 1884, he was invited to join the Engineering Department of Edison Electric Company in New York. This he did and in 1890, he was transferred to the Legal Department of the company. His work there led to appointment as chief draftsman for the consortium of General Electric and the Westinghouse Companies to protect their patents against encroachments. This operation was discontinued in 1911 and Latimer became an associate with the engineering firm of Hammer and Schwarz.

While with Edison, Latimer became one of the Edison Pioneers, an association of scientists who worked with Edison in development of his electrical inventions. Latimer wrote a book in 1890 entitled *Incandescent Electric Lighting: A Practical Description of the Edison System*.

His later inventions were: "An Apparatus for Cooling and Disinfecting", in 1896 and, in the same year a contraption for a "Locking Rack for Hats, Coats and Umbrellas", and in 1905, another contraption "Book Supports".

A school in Brooklyn, New York, was named after him in 1968. Latimer is also the author of several poems.

**Francis J. Moultrie**, (1842-?), Charleston, South Carolina, caterer. Mr. Moultrie went to school in his home town. He came to New York after the

Civil War and worked in various catering establishments before settling in Yonkers. There he started a catering business from his home and sold dishes for social affairs. The latter business prospered faster than the catering end, so he opened a store to sell these dishes to support the catering venture. The idea worked and, in due course, he rented and later purchased a building in the downtown section of the city and combined the two businesses. The building housed a concert hall, the post office and other public offices. His clientele of wealthy people extended to New York City. He became one of the largest tax-payers in Yonkers; the proprietor of the largest apartment house in the city; a stockholder in several banks; an important factor in the commercial life of the city; and the spokesman for the black population.

**Christopher J. Perry, Sr.**, (1864-1921), Baltimore, Maryland, newspaper publisher. Mr. Perry was free-born. He has the distinction of founding *The Philadelphia Tribune* in 1884, the oldest black-oriented newspaper still in existence. He availed himself of the meager schooling provided black children in Baltimore. As a young man, he went to Philadelphia, attended evening school and worked in private homes where he had access to books. As early as 1867, he began writing newsy and interesting letters to newspapers. In 1881, he was engaged by one of the daily newspapers

to write a column about the social events and activities of blacks in the city. Later, he became editor of the Colored Department of the *Sunday Mirror*. The editorial experience acquired led to his establishing *The Tribune*. In addition to operating the newspaper, he served the city as deputy sheriff, and a member of the Common Council.

**James C. Thomas**, (1864-?), Harrisburg, Texas, mortician. Mr. Thomas received very little education. His parents died when he was nine years old and, as soon as he was able, he went to work to contribute to the support of his six sisters. Thomas drifted to Galveston and did odd jobs until he was engaged as a cabin boy on a steam boat. He did this work on several boats shipping out of New Orleans until he was seventeen years old. The boat on which he last worked could not dock in New Orleans because of the yellow fever epidemic. Instead, it came to New York and Thomas remained in the city. Here, he worked as a steward and in similar jobs in Boston and Saratoga from 1881 to 1897. He saved his money and married in 1884.

After learning the rudiments of the undertaking business, he opened his establishment. At the time, there were two other blacks in the business—one in Manhattan and the other in Brooklyn. White undertakers had most of the burials of blacks. Because of the quality of Thomas' service, the economical, careful and conscientious dealings with people, he not only obtained more business than the other black undertakers, but became the second largest undertaker in the city, getting business in greater New York and adjoining towns in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. From 1897 to 1907, Mr. Thomas superintended some 3,500 burials. He became a stockholder in the Chelsea National Bank, and a director and the heaviest stockholder in the Afro-American Realty Company.

**John S. Trower**, (1849-?), Northampton, Virginia, caterer. From sixteen years old to twenty-one, Mr. Trower worked on a farm. After finishing payments on it for his family, he went to Baltimore worked as an oyster-opener and saved his money to come North. He settled in Germantown, a suburb of Philadelphia, and opened a restaurant. From the very beginning he prospered and added a catering service, appealing to the wealthy and fashionable residents. They responded and Mr. Trower purchased a three-story building. He made it into the most complete business of its kind in the country, employing some twenty-odd people. He became wealthy and conducted a lucrative real estate operation as an avocation.

**BLACK PIONEERS IN BUSINESS  
WILL BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK**