



Traffic Safety Issue

Garrett Morgan - First Three-Way Traffic Signal

Scott #1272

Issued on September 3, 1965 in Baltimore, MD

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Garrett Augustus Morgan was born in Paris, Kentucky sometime between the years 1875 and 1879. Garrett was the seventh of eleven children. His parents were former slaves and the family lived in abject poverty. Garrett left home at the age of 14 with very little schooling, but a keen interest in the workings of machines. Garrett moved north to look for work in 1895 and settled in Cleveland, Ohio in 1901. On his first three nights in town he sleep in a railroad car.

Garrett taught himself how to repair sewing machines and eventually opened his own business selling and repairing sewing machines. He also ran a tailor shop, making suits, coats and dresses.

While trying to find a solution to the sewing machine friction caused by the needles high speed movement which often scorched the cloth, Garrett discovered a fluid which turned curly hair straight. He set up a company to market his hair straightening lotion as "*G.A. Morgan Refining Cream*."

Two of his other inventions were a woman's hat fastener and an electric curling comb. Garrett's most famous inventions were the first three-way traffic signal and an early gas mask.

Garrett got the idea for the three-way traffic signal after he witnessed a serious accident between a automobile and a horse drawn carriage at a busy intersection. Determined to find a method of better accident prevention, Garrett came up with his idea for the first electric traffic signals.

Existing traffic signals of the time only showed stop and go. Garrett believed that most accidents were caused by impatient drivers who proceeded as soon as the go signal was shown often colliding with vehicles that were still passing through from the other direction.

Garrett's traffic signal had a third signal; an all-directional stop signal, that halted all traffic in-between each go signal and allowed pedestrians to cross in safety before the next go signal. Garrett patented his traffic signal in 1923 and sold the rights to General Electric for \$40,000. His traffic device was installed in many cities and his basic idea is the principle behind the red-amber-green traffic lights in use today.

Garrett was also actively involved in the early civil rights movement. He began publishing the *Cleveland Call*, a newspaper containing news of and for the African American community in 1920. His newspaper, now called *The Call and Post* is still published today and has a large circulation in Ohio. Garrett was the treasurer of the *Cleveland Association of Colored Men* which later became a part of the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored People* (NAACP).

Garrett developed glaucoma in 1943 which left him essentially blind. He died in 1963. The city of Cleveland has honored Garrett Morgan as a member of *The Cleveland Hall of Fame*.

Sources:

United Kingdom Science Museum On-Line

Scott's Standardized Catalog of U.S. Stamps