

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Alexander Miles



(May 18, 1838 – May 17, 1918)

“Inventor of Elevator Automated Door Technology”

Alexander Miles was born on May 18, 1838, in Circleville, Ohio, to Michael and Mary Miles. Alexander moved to Winona, Minnesota in the late 1850s and worked as a barber. There he met his future wife, Candance J. Dunlap, a white woman from New York City. In the late 1860s, Alexander and his wife moved to Toledo, Ohio where he honed his barbering skills and pursued his first patent, Improvement in Compounds for Cleaning the Hair: U.S. Patent 121,536 (December 5, 1871).

After the birth of their daughter, Grace, they moved to Duluth, Minnesota where Alexander continued working as a barber.

By the early 1880s, Alexander owned and operated one of the leading barbershops in the city, located in the prestigious four-story St. Louis Hotel in Duluth. He purchased additional property for a real estate office. Alexander became the first black member of the Duluth Chamber of Commerce.

In 1884, Alexander built a three-story brownstone building at 19 West Superior Street in Duluth. This area became known as the “Miles Block”.



Before the creation of automated doors, riding an elevator was both complicated and risky. People had to manually shut both the shaft and elevator doors before riding. Since many people would forget to do so, there were numerous reported accidents of people falling down elevator shafts. Alexander experienced this danger first-hand, when his wife and young daughter almost fell down an elevator shaft after a door was carelessly left ajar. He took it upon himself to develop a better solution.

White inventor, John W. Meaker, patented his invention of the first automatic elevator door system in 1874. On May 23, 1887, Alexander filed the patent application for a mechanism that automatically opens and closes elevator shaft doors. He designed a flexible belt attached to the elevator cage, so that when the belt came into contact with drums positioned along the elevator shaft just above and below the floors, it allowed the elevator shaft doors to operate at the appropriate times. The elevator doors themselves were automated through a series of levers and rollers. Although Meaker received the patent first, it was Miles' innovation that made electric-powered elevator doors widely accepted around the world. Today, the influence of his patent is present in modern designs for elevator systems in which automatic doors are a standard feature.

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In 1899, Alexander and his family moved to Chicago, where he founded “The United Brotherhood” insurance agency, with the goal of providing life insurance primarily to blacks who could not get coverage from white-owned insurance firms.

His family relocated once again to Seattle, Washington. By 1900, it was believed that Alexander Miles was the "wealthiest colored man in the Northwest".

Alexander Miles died on May 7, 1918. He was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2007. The technology he developed in 1887 is still used in many older building elevators.

