

A New and Useful Improvement: 19th-Century Patents and Their Inventors

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The Van Gorden-Williams Library presents “A New and Useful Improvement: 19th-Century Patents and Their Inventors,” an uncommon look at original patents coupled with the stories of the amateur inventors who staked their hopes and fortunes these new and often ingenious ideas.

Throughout American history, inventors have sought to protect their rights to make and sell their inventions through patents. However, until 1835, the U.S. Patent Office granted patents without examining the merit or novelty of the inventions. As a result, many of the patents granted were worthless or in conflict with other designs.

The Patent Act of 1836 required an inventor to submit a specification or written description of the invention, drawing or drawings of the invention, along with a scale model. The invention had to be proven both useful and new before the patent would be granted. The law also emphasized the necessity of determining the utility or novelty of an invention. President Andrew Jackson was a key figure in establishing this new patent system and its requirements.

A vast number of aspiring amateur inventors flooded the Patent Office with their ideas in the mid-1800s. Among those amateur inventors were John M. Chandler, Amory Davidson, James W. Hodges, and John B. Root. Their patent ideas included improvements on bracelet fastenings, a machine for washing clothes, an automatic steam trap, and baling presses.