

Introduction

Made in New York

When Frank Sinatra sang “New York, New York,” perhaps the legendary crooner’s most famous song, he proclaimed “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere.” What Sinatra neglected to mention was all the things invented in New York that went everywhere around the globe. Throughout its history, New York has been the epicenter of life-changing invention.

New York’s inventive influence in almost every human endeavor is outsized. Every school kid learns how Robert Fulton invented the steamboat and sailed it up the Hudson River in 1807, ushering in a new age of transportation. With the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, New York became the most important center for commerce in North America. As New York grew, so did the inventive minds of its population, one that was determined to leave a mark.

That mark could range from the mundane to the grandiose. Seth Wheeler of Albany may be a name largely lost to history but his invention of perforated toilet paper in 1871 is used daily. Billiard balls developed by another Albany inventor, John Wesley Hyatt, in 1863 still carom around modern pool tables. The widely used, porch-loving Adirondack chair is a creation of Thomas Lee and Harry Bunnell, who lived in Westport by Lake Champlain at the turn of the twentieth century.

On a grander scale, Long Islander Leroy Grumman co-founded an aviation company in 1929 that has since morphed into the giant

defense contractor Northrup Grumman. Likewise, George Eastman of Syracuse made Kodak synonymous with photography. Isaac Singer of Pittstown turned sewing machines bearing his name into one of the first multinational companies. Of course, Willis Carrier of Angola is the coolest, forever linked to the air conditioners that still bear his name.

Other inventive geniuses labored under the umbrella of corporations. At General Electric, Charles Proteus Steinmetz, a man who stood four-foot tall, was a giant in the field of electromagnetism and electric motors during the start of the twentieth century, earning the nicknames “Wizard of Schenectady” and “Forger of Thunderbolts.” In 1913, a Corning physicist named Dr. Jesse Littleton invented a heat-resistant glass called Pyrex, which became a chef’s best friend. New York became home to numerous corporate research laboratories belonging to major companies like the computer maker IBM and national labs like physics-oriented Brookhaven, all of which made their own innovative contributions.

Like many New Yorkers, some inventors came from elsewhere but had their greatest successes developing innovations in their adopted home—a roster that would include superstar luminaries such as Nikola Tesla and Raymond Loewy. In some instances, inventors developed their creations elsewhere but eventually became New York residents. Madam C. J. Walker, the developer of hair-care products for Blacks, was perhaps the world’s wealthiest woman when she died in Irvington, New York, at the age of fifty-one in 1919. Conversely, some inventors born and educated in New York made their mark once they left. Harlem-born and New York educated Dr. Patricia Bath was the first Black woman physician to obtain a patent and was an inductee into the 2022 National Inventors Hall of Fame for a 1988 medical device that removed cataracts—invented after she moved to California to become the first woman ophthalmologist at UCLA’s Jules Stein Eye Institute. Some inventors who never lived in New York made their mark from afar, like little-known Anna Connelly of Philadelphia whose lifesaving exterior fire escape, invented in 1887, became an iconic feature of New York architecture.

New Yorkers are creative inventors when they're hungry. Despite their names, the English muffin, the Baked Alaska, General Tso's chicken, pasta primavera, and Napoleon cookies were creations of New York chefs. Add the Reuben sandwich, eggs Benedict, red velvet cake, the Waldorf salad, hamburgers, hot dogs, Oreo cookies, and the potato chip to the New York menu. A New York restaurant could probably get by with just serving New York-created food.

Cocktails like the manhattan and the cosmopolitan were born out of New York nightlife as was drinking a bloody mary the morning after, although drink origin stories are often a little fuzzy. New York nightlife also gave birth to or showcased nearly every form of music. Two of Manhattan's most famous music venues, the Metropolitan Opera House and Carnegie Hall, were constructed in the nineteenth century. Broadway is the home address of musical theater. Venues large and small like Studio 54, CBGB, the Village Vanguard, the Bottom Line, the Cotton Club, the Blue Note, Max's Kansas City, the Palladium, and Madison Square Garden are legendary. Bebop jazz, salsa, punk rock, and hip-hop were born out of New York's cultural diversity. In New York, there's always an ear for a new song.

Any list of New York inventions is a formidable one that cuts across every endeavor. MADE IN NEW YORK tells the stories of New York inventions that have had a significant impact on the world stage. Perhaps more to the point, their origin stories are surprisingly relevant in modern times. New Yorkers are no strangers to adversity. Many New York inventions were born out of adverse conditions and their inventors often faced challenging circumstances. Even something seemingly as innocent as the Brooklyn-born teddy bear has a backstory of racism. Some inventors never benefitted financially from the fruits of their labor. Others waited decades for recognition. Some are still relatively unknown outside a small circle of insiders in their respective fields.

Most were genius visionaries and risk-takers way ahead of their time. Many, of course, succeeded beyond their wildest dreams and were amply rewarded for their perseverance, often channeling their new-found wealth

toward worthy causes because that's what this breed of New Yorkers are about. It would be fair to call all of them heroes. Their stories are connected in that their innovations have become cornerstones of modern life.

Sinatra had it right.