

Gas mask inventor dim memory here

By Jim Strang

He was an inventor, a businessman, a publisher and a hero. His inventions still touch the lives of millions. Yet the name Garrett Augustus Morgan is unknown to most residents of his adopted home, Cleveland.

It was Morgan who, after witnessing a collision between a horse-drawn wagon and an automobile, invented the first mechanical traffic control device — the traffic light.

It was also Morgan who conceived the idea of carrying an air supply in a helmet-like contraption later to be refined into the gas mask.

His birthplace, Claysville, Ky., the former black section of Paris, Ky., was renamed Garrett Morgan Place in 1974. The year before, Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley officiated at the dedication of Garrett Morgan Elementary School and park.

Yet, in the city where he lived and worked, his only memorials are tucked away in files of clippings and on library shelves.

Morgan came to Cleveland with a sixth-grade education and a sixth sense — inventiveness. One of his first developments was a process for straightening hair. In 1905 he started a company to produce the straightener.



Inventor Garrett Augustus Morgan with his medal for bravery, presented by the city of Cleveland after he rescued several men from a tunnel explosion in 1916.

It supported his family for the rest of his life.

He was born March 4, 1877, the son of a railroad worker and a preacher's daughter. Shortly after he left school he came to Cleveland to find work. He spent his first three nights here sleeping in a railroad freight car with newspapers his only cover, he later told a reporter.

He found a job as a janitor in a sewing machine factory. It was there that he invented a belt fastener for the drive belt of the machines, an invention that simplified their operation.

But it was a spare-time project that brought him world fame. He and his brother, Frank, by 1912 had developed the breathing apparatus that was precursor of the gas mask. They marketed it for \$25, but found little interest.

On July 24, 1916, there was an explosion in a tunnel being dug here for a city water intake. Eleven men were trapped in the shaft under Lake Erie. Smoke and gases filled the shaft. Ten rescuers went down the hole. None returned alive.

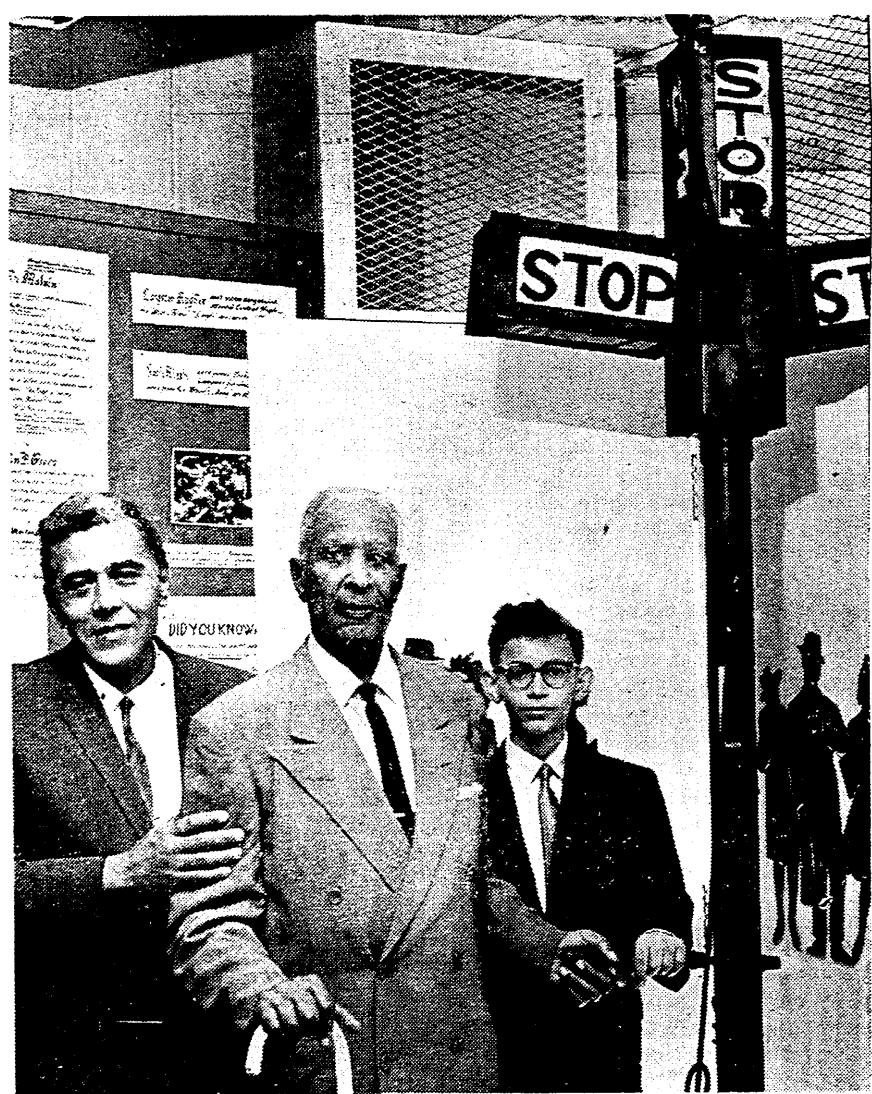
Then someone remembered Morgan and his breathing helmet. He was called, and he and Frank went into the tunnel with a dozen of the devices.

In hours, the Morgans had brought out six of the trapped men.

Morgan became an overnight sensation. Although only two of the rescued men lived, his invention was proven. Honors and orders poured in. The city gave him a gold medal for heroism, as did the International Association of Fire Chiefs, which also made him an honorary lifetime member.

He demonstrated his gas mask throughout the country. But when he wanted to show it in New Orleans, he had to hide his identity because he was black.

He took a white friend, Charles Salem, to act as "Garrett A. Morgan" while he posed as "George Mason, demonstrator." New Orleans authorities, who could ac-



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Shortly before his death in 1963, Garrett Augustus Morgan displayed his traffic light at an exhibition. With him are his son, Garrett Jr., and grandson, Garrett III.

cept a white man's invention, bought.

It was shortly after the tunnel disaster that he saw the accident that brought the tricolored traffic light into existence. The first models were operated by hand. When a lever was thrown, the light would change from green to red and a "stop" sign would descend.

The patent was granted in 1923, and the first working model was put in service at Vine St. and Mentor Ave. in Willoughby.

The General Electric Co. bought rights to the light for \$40,000.

He also started the Post, a one-man tabloid newspaper that merged with the Call in 1932 to become the Call & Post.

But his experience in the tunnel left its mark. Throughout his life, he was plagued with nightmares of the death that surrounded him that day.

And, although the mask had kept him alive in the tunnel, enough fumes had seeped through to impair his health for the rest of his life.

He remained active until his death. In 1960 he developed an electric curling comb similar to one now in common use. He also invented a pellet to be put in cigarettes to extinguish them, should be the smoker fall asleep. Both these inventions came after he was totally blinded by glaucoma.

Morgan died July 26, 1963 at 86. His wife, Maryanna, whom he married in 1908, died five years to the day after her husband.

Morgan's son, Garrett Jr., now lives at 19730 Merideth Ave. NE. He often speaks in schools about his father's accomplishments.

"I point out to the youngsters that what father did, he did on a sixth-grade education," Morgan said.

"The key word is perseverance. Despite the lack of education, he accomplished so much. The youngsters pay attention to that."

Morgan's other sons are John, of 10205 Somerset Ave. NE, and Cosmo of 2095 Rossmoor Rd., Cleveland Heights.

Among Morgan's honors was a special degree in the sciences, given him by Western Reserve University, which enabled him to join Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. He was active in the fraternity and Antioch Baptist Church until his death.

The house at 5202 Harlem Ave. NE, where he lived for more than 30 years, still stands.

Today, throughout the country and the world, millions of traffic lights flash in mute witness to his inventive genius. But in his adopted city, Morgan is only a memory.