

# Reinventing Historic Homestead

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**W**HEN LOCAL HISTORY BUFFS and architects first took up the task of renovating the former home of Lewis H. Latimer, a pioneer with Thomas Edison in the infancy of electric lighting, his inventions became the mother of necessity.

This was not, after all, a proposal to simply restore a late 1880s wood-frame house in Flushing to its mint-condition origins, right down to its Queen Anne scalloped siding. In the end, Queen Anne will end up mattering far less than Latimer, the turn-of-the-century inventor who lived in the house with his family for 26 years.

In fact, the house's declaration in 1995 as a New York City landmark, which came with the support of Queens Borough President Claire Shulman and Latimer's granddaughter, Winifred Latimer Norman, was spurred more by the house's role as a repository of Latimer's life and work than by the building's period construction.

"It is a cultural designation," said Katie McNabb, a spokeswoman for New York City's Landmarks Preservation Commission. The home's original design had long since been altered by the original owners, the Latimers and subsequent occupants. The most obvious alteration is the enclosure of the front porch by Norman's aunt, Louise R. Latimer.



Lewis H. Latimer

Thus the home's long-awaited restoration — expected to proceed shortly — will be true to Latimer the man. Blueprints were drawn up by Manhattan architect Joseph Lombardi, in consultation with the city Department of Cultural Affairs and the nonprofit Lewis Latimer Fund Inc. The Latimer Fund will develop the site as a museum.

"We are very much concerned and interested in Latimer's ownership and in the time when he and his family enjoyed the house," Lombardi said. "So the additions which might contradict the architecture are still of great interest and cherished because they are the work of Latimer."

The house now stands at 34-41 137th St., where it was moved to spare its demolition in December, 1988. The renovation is in the final planning stages.

Latimer, a Massachusetts native, moved to Flushing in 1902 and made his mark with the Edison Electric Lighting Co., later the General Electric Co., as a patent specialist. Before he was hired by Thomas Alva Edison, Latimer had worked alongside Alexander Graham Bell in developing the telephone in the 1870s.

During his time with Edison, Latimer developed a carbon filament making electric lighting affordable, and worked in the electrification of major cities including New York, Philadelphia and Montreal. A social and civil rights activist, Latimer was also a founder of the Unitarian Church in Flushing.

"In those days, there were few African-Americans who could buy a house," said his granddaughter, Winifred Norman. "But he was a pretty famous inventor by that time."



Newsday Photo / Viorel Florescu

Winifred Latimer Norman stands in front of the Flushing home of her grandfather, Lewis H. Latimer, last month.

The 1988 relocation from Holly Street in Flushing brought the home a half-block from Latimer Gardens, the Housing Authority apartments built in 1971 that bear his name. That location seemed a natural to the Rev. Timothy Mitchell, a Flushing activist, because it placed the historic structure close to a substantial black community.

Unfortunately, the relocation left behind the home's foundation and Latimer's added-on studio work space — and they will not be part of the restoration on 137th Street.

The museum is spurred by the fund of which Mitchell is president and Norman, a retired social worker who lives in Manhattan, is vice president.

In addition, the Latimer Fund has secured a \$10,000 challenge grant from AT&T Corp., which will watch contributions to that level dollar for dollar. During the past six years, Con Edison has given a total of \$60,000. In recent years, Shulman's office has allocated more than \$1.3 million for architectural design, site development and preliminary work.

The main restoration is being done with \$535,000 from the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, said John Spavins, a spokesman for the city's Department of Design and Construction. Waterproofing and roof restoration costing \$50,000 has already been completed.

Norman brings to the restoration something even more personal than the appreciation and devotion to her grandfather, who died in 1928, when she was 14.

"My brother and I used to play in the attic of that house," said Norman, 82. She and her brother, Ger-

ald L. Norman, are also beneficiaries of the great pride expressed often by their parents, Gerald F. Norman, a teacher, and E. Jeannette Latimer Norman, a musician. They family lived just a few blocks away, on Juniper Street.

"We were all so very proud of him," Norman said.

Family photographs, and images carried in Norman's head, are playing a major role in the restoration. So are inventions and patent documents from Latimer's career, which are likely to become part of the museum's permanent collection. Much of this material belonged to Louise Latimer before her death in 1963.

"There are also some other things from the house which we can make available," said Norman — including two of Latimer's chairs.

Lombardi's plans call for latter-day siding to be removed to reveal the original wood siding, which will be painted the original creamy yellow. Decorative exterior trim will be painted in a terra cotta color close to the original. Inside, wallboard will be removed to show the original plaster walls with their decorative stencil-work restored. Paint will be stripped off the stairwell, baseboards and trim to reveal the original varnished pine.

The city is expected to request competitive bids for the work within the next few months. Meanwhile, fund-raising will continue. And sometime after that, Norman hopes, the doors of the museum may open to shed a whole new kind of light on the Queens inventor's life.