

# Real Life Safety Heroes: Garrett A. Morgan (1877 – 1963)



Garrett A. Morgan is not a household name. But his accomplishments directly affect the lives of every single person who's ever ridden in a car or walked down a busy street. If you drove to work this morning you probably had at least one encounter with the legacy of Garrett A. Morgan. And you will again when you drive home this evening.

You see, Garrett A. Morgan invented the traffic signal. Morgan was born in Kentucky in 1877. His parents were slaves. His formal education stopped at elementary school. But he was smart and ambitious. When his family moved to Ohio in 1895, Morgan hired a tutor. He started tinkering with mechanical devices and got a job fixing sewing machines. By 1907, he had opened his own repair shop. In 1920, he started his own newspaper, the *Cleveland Call*, and got rich.

One of the things Morgan did with his money was to buy what in those days was a luxury: an automobile. Legend has it that Morgan got the inspiration to invent the traffic signal while driving down the streets of Cleveland. What we do know for sure is that traffic back then was unregulated and accidents were frequent. We also know that Morgan received a U.S. patent to create a traffic signal device in 1923.

The Morgan traffic signal was a T-shaped pole that featured

three positions: Stop, Go, and an all-directional stop position halting traffic in all directions to allow pedestrians to cross streets safely. The device, which was hand-cranked, was first used in Cleveland in 1924. New York City started deploying the device in 1930. Soon the Morgan invention was a fixture in all major U.S. cities. It remained in use for decades before being replaced by the automatic red, yellow, and green light system of today.

Electric traffic lights arrived on Canadian streets in 1925, first in Hamilton, and shortly afterwards in Toronto. The device allowed cities to free up police constables who had been tied down directing traffic at major intersections. Ottawa began using them in 1927.

Morgan invented many other safety devices throughout his life including, most famously, the Morgan Hood—forerunner of the modern gas mask. He died in 1963 at the age of 86.

By Glenn Demby