

Miriam Benjamin

Miriam E. Benjamin (September 16, 1861 – 1947) was an American school teacher and inventor from Washington, D.C. On July 17,^[1] 1888 she obtained a patent for her invention, the Gong and Signal Chair for Hotels. The chair would "reduce the expenses of hotels by decreasing the number of waiters and attendants, to add to the convenience and comfort of guests and to obviate the necessity of hand clapping or calling aloud to obtain the services of pages." The chair worked when the person sitting would press a small button on the back of the chair which would then send a signal to a waiting attendant. A light would illuminate as well, allowing the attendant to see which guest needed help. The system was eventually adopted by the United States House of Representatives and was a precursor to the signaling system used on airplanes for passengers to seek assistance from flight attendants.^[2]

Life and career

Miriam Elizabeth Benjamin was born, a free black woman, in Charleston, South Carolina in 1861,^[3] the eldest of five children of Francis Benjamin and Eliza (Hopkins) Benjamin.^[4] In 1873, the Benjamin family moved to Boston, Massachusetts,^[5] where she attended high school. She moved to Washington, D.C. where she was a schoolteacher in the segregated municipal school system. In 1888, she was living at 1736 New York Avenue, N.W. in Washington.^[6]

Miriam Benjamin briefly attended Howard University's medical school,^[7] but after passing a competitive civil service examination and working as a government clerk in a number of federal departments,^[8] she enrolled in the law school of Howard University; upon graduation, she set herself up in business as a "solicitor of patents."

Music historians believe she, under the gender-neutral pseudonym **E.B. Miriam**, also composed marches. One of these was used by the presidential campaign of Theodore Roosevelt in 1904.^[9]

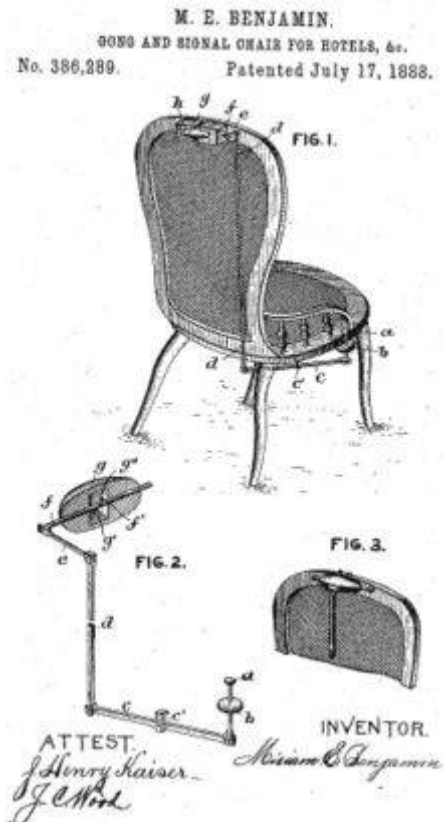
In 1920, she returned to Boston, where she lived and worked with her brother, Boston attorney Edgar P. Benjamin.^[10] Along with Sarah Boone, Ellen Eglin, and Sarah Goode, Benjamin was one of four African American women inventors of her time who developed new technology for the home.^[11]

She died in 1947.^[12]

Family

Miriam Benjamin never married. For most of her life she lived with her widowed mother Eliza Jane (Hopkins) Benjamin (1840–1934) in the Boston area.^[13]

Miriam E. Benjamin



The patent used by Benjamin for the Gong and Signal Chair for Hotels.

Born	Miriam E. Benjamin September 16, 1861 Charleston, South Carolina
Died	1947 Boston, Massachusetts
Nationality	American
Occupation	Inventor Educator
Known for	Inventor of the Gong and Signal Chair and second black woman to receive a patent in the United States

She had four siblings. Her sisters were Charlotte D. "Lottie" Benjamin (1863–1928, m. Walter W. Sampson, 1889, no children) and Eva S. Benjamin (1867–73).^[14]

Her brother Lyde Wilson Benjamin (1865–1916) was a Boston attorney as well as an inventor; on May 16, 1893, he received U.S. patent no. 497,747 for an improvement on "Broom Moisteners and Bridles."

Her younger brother Edgar Pinkerton Benjamin (1869–1972) graduated from the law school of Boston University and had a successful private practice in the city of Boston.^[15] Although best remembered for establishing the Resthaven Nursing Home (now the Benjamin Healthcare Center) in Roxbury, Massachusetts, he also held a U.S. Patent; on May 31, 1892, he was awarded U.S. patent no. 475,749 for a "Trousers-Shield," or, a bicycle clip.

References

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2. "Miriam Benjamin" (<http://www.blackinventor.com/pages/miriam-benjamin.html>). *Inventors. The Black Inventor On-Line Museum*. 2011. Retrieved 13 November 2011.
3. Daniel Smith Lamsity Medical Department (*Washington, D.C., 1900*), 235
4. Although she would consistently cite 1868 as her birthda 2nd Ward of the city of Charleston, Charleston County, South Carolina, page 117, lines 17–25 (misspelling her name as Marianna)
5. 1880 Federal Census for Suffolk County (Massachusetts) Enumeration District 703, Sheet 14, Lines 42–45 (10 Dover Street, Boston, Mass. [1st Precinct of the 16th Ward])
6. *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia*(Washington, 1888), 208
7. Lamb, 235
8. *Boyd's Directory of the District of Columbia* (*Washington, 1891*), 212
9. Eleanor Mahoney (2019). "Miriam E. Benjamin (1861-1947)" (<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/benjamin-miriam-e-1861-1947/>). *BlackPast.org*. [blackpast.org](https://www.blackpast.org). Retrieved 17 July 2019.
10. 1930 Federal Census for Suffolk County Enumeration District 13-319, Sheet 15-A, Lines 24–26 (50 Fernwood Road, Boston, Mass.)
11. McNeill, Leila (7 February 2017). "These Four Black Women Inventors Reimagined the Technology of the Home" (<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/these-four-black-women-inventors-reimagined-technology-ho-me-180962060/>). *Smithsonian*. Retrieved 6 February 2018.
12. Massachusetts Deaths for 1947 6:63; Department of Public Health, Registry of Vital Records and Statistics. Massachusetts Vital Records Index to Deaths [1916–1970]. Volumes 66–145. Facsimile edition. Boston, MA: New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.
13. 1930 Federal Census
14. *Massachusetts Deaths* 258:7. Massachusetts State Archives, Columbia Point, Boston, Mass.
15. Anthony W. Neal, "Edgar P. Benjamin: Philanthropist, Noted Attorney and Banker," *Bay State Banner*, March 28, 2013, cited at <http://baystatebanner.com/news/2013/mar/28/edgar-p-benjamin-philanthropist-noted-attorney-and/> Accessed September 10, 2013. He always used the date 1871 as his birthdate; however the 1870 Federal Census return cited above shows him as a six-month-old infant born the previous December.

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