

Lyda D. Newman

“Invented the Hairbrush in 1898”

“African-American inventor Lyda D. Newman patented a new and improved hairbrush in 1898 while living in New York. A hairdresser by trade, Newman designed a brush that was easy to keep clean, durable, easy to make and provided ventilation during brushing by having recessed air chambers. In addition to her novel invention, she was a women's rights activist.

Hairbrush Improvement Patent

Newman received patent #614,335 on Nov. 15, 1898. Her hairbrush design included several features for efficiency and hygiene. It had evenly spaced rows of bristles, with open slots to guide debris away from the hair into a recessed compartment and a back that could be opened at the touch of a button for cleaning out the compartment.

Women's Rights Activist

In 1915, Newman was mentioned in local newspapers for her suffrage work. She was one of the organizers of an African-American branch of the Woman Suffrage Party, which was fighting to give women the legal right to vote. Working on behalf of her fellow African-American women in New York, Newman canvassed her neighborhood to raise awareness of the cause and organized suffrage meetings in her voting district. Prominent white suffragists of the Woman Suffrage Party worked with Newman's group, hoping to bring voting rights to all of New York's female residents.

Her Life

Newman was born in Ohio around 1885. Government censuses of 1920 and 1925 confirm that Newman, then in her 30s, was living in an apartment building on Manhattan's West Side and was working as a family's hairdresser. Newman lived much of her adult life in New York City. Not much else is known about her private life.

Hairbrush History

Newman did not invent the hairbrush, but she did revolutionize its design to resemble the brushes in use more today.

The history of the first hairbrush begins with the comb. Found by archaeologists at Paleolithic dig sites around the world, combs date back to the origins of human-made tools. Carved from bone, wood, and shells, they were initially used to groom hair and keep it free of pests, such as lice. As the comb developed, however, it became a decorative hair ornament used to display wealth and power in countries including China and Egypt.

From ancient Egypt to Bourbon France, elaborate hairstyles were in vogue, which required brushes to style them. The hairstyles included ornate headdresses and wigs that were used as displays of wealth and social status. Because of their primary use as a styling tool, hairbrushes were an indulgence reserved exclusively for the wealthy. As late as the 1880s, each brush was unique and carefully handcrafted—a task that included carving or forging a handle from wood or metal as well as hand-stitching each individual bristle. Because of this detailed work, brushes were usually bought and gifted only on special occasions, such as weddings or christenings, and cherished for life. As brushes became more popular, brush makers developed a streamlined manufacturing process to keep up with demand.”

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