

Nathaniel Alexander

“Invented the Folding Chair in 1911”

“On July 7, 1911, an African-American man named Nathaniel Alexander of Lynchburg, Virginia patented a folding chair. According to his patent, Nathaniel Alexander designed his chair to be used in schools, churches, and other auditoriums. His design included a book rest that was usable for the person sitting in the seat behind and was ideal for church or choir use.

Little Biographical Data

Alexander's invention is found on many lists for black American inventors. However, he has escaped having much biographical information known about him. What can be found confuses him with an early governor of the state of North Carolina, who was not a black American. One says he was born in the early 1800s in North Carolina and died several decades before the date of the patent of the folding chair. Another one, which is written as satire, says he was born the same year as the patent was issued. These seem obviously erroneous. Patent 997108 is the only invention on record for Nathaniel Alexander, but on March 10, 1911, his application was witnessed by two people: James R.L. Diggs and C.A. Lindsay. James R.L. Diggs was a Baptist minister from Baltimore (born in 1865), who was a member of the Niagara Movement, and holder of an MA from Bucknell University and a PhD in Sociology from Illinois Wesleyan in 1906—in fact, Diggs was the first African-American to hold a Sociology Ph.D. in the United States. The Niagara Movement was a black civil rights movement led

by W.E.B. DuBois and William Monroe Trotter, who assembled in Niagara Falls, Ontario (American hotels barred blacks), to discuss Jim Crow laws following the Reconstruction. They met annually between 1905 and 1910: in between 1909 and 1918, Diggs corresponded with DuBois about a possible history of the movement, among other things. There may have only been a passing connection between Alexander and Diggs.

Foldable Chairs for Churches and Choirs

Alexander's folding chair is not the first folding chair patent in the United States. His innovation was that it included a book rest, making it suitable for use in places where the back of one chair could be used as a desk or shelf by the person seated behind. This would certainly be convenient when setting up rows of chairs for choirs, so they could rest music on the chair ahead of each singer, or for churches where a prayer book, hymnal, or Bible could be placed on the reading shelf during the service.

Folding chairs allow the space to be used for other purposes when there is not a class or church service. Today, many congregations meet in spaces that used to be large "big box" stores, supermarkets, or other large, cavernous rooms. Using folding chairs set up only during services, they are able to quickly turn the space into a church. In the early part of the 20th century, congregations likewise might have met outdoors, in warehouses, barns, or other spaces that didn't have fixed seating or pews.

Earlier Folding Chair Patents

Folding chairs have been in use for thousands of years in many cultures, including ancient Egypt and Rome. They were even commonly used in churches as liturgical furniture in the Middle Ages. Here are some other patents for folding chairs that were granted prior to that of Nathaniel Alexander:

M.S. Beach of Brooklyn, New York patented a folding chair for pews, U.S. Patent No. 18377 on October 13, 1857. However, this design appears to be a drop-down seat such as an airplane jump seat rather than a chair you can fold, stack, and store away.

J.P.A. Spaet, W.F. Berry and J.T. Snoddy of Mount Pleasant, Iowa were granted U.S. Patent No. 383255 on May 22, 1888, for a folding chair designed to look much like a regular chair when in use. It could be folded up to be stored away and save space.

C. F. Batt patented a folding chair for steamers on June 4, 1889, U.S. Patent No. 404,589. Batt's patent notes that he was seeking improvements on longstanding folding chair designs, especially avoiding having a hinge at the side arms that can pinch your fingers when folding or unfolding the chair."

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Patent Link: <https://patents.google.com/patent/US997108A/en>