Inventive Americans

Today, it seems as though nearly everyone wants to be an inventor. The United States Patent Office in Washington, D.C., grants thousands of patents each year. A patent is a legal document. It gives an inventor the exclusive right to make and sell an invention for twenty years in the United States.

Patents encourage inventors to create new things by awarding them rights to make money from their inventions.

Since feeding and clothing their families were traditionally women’s work, it was logical that women would look for ways to make these chores more efficient. Sybilla Masters, for example, designed a more effective method of turning corn into meal using hammers instead of grinding wheels.

The laws at the time didn’t allow women to hold patents. Sybilla Masters was forced to get her patent in the name of her husband. The English court granted that patent in 1715, while America was still a colony.

In 1809, Mary Kies became the first woman inventor to receive a U.S. patent. She found a way to weave silk into straw for hat making. Actually, her work depended on the innovations of another inventor, Betsy Metcalf. Metcalf said she didn’t patent her method because she didn’t want her name known in Congress.

Mary Kies wasn’t so modest, and her timing was perfect. Intent on staying out of the Napoleonic Wars raging in Europe, the United States government decided to ban the import of all European goods. President Madison was looking for ways to replace them with made-in-America goods. Hats were a crucial item, since nearly everyone in the country wore them. First Lady Dolley Madison praised Kies and her skill in hat making.