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Cyrus McCormick's Reaper and the Founders' Vision of American Innovation

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by

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[Constituting America](#)

Cyrus McCormick received a patent in 1834 for his invention of the first successful mechanical reaper. McCormick is justly famous for solving the age-old problem of increasing food production beyond the physical limits of manual labor. Yet, few today appreciate that he was also fulfilling the Founders' vision of American innovation that they embedded into the structure of our government at the birth of our nation.

McCormick's patented invention, as well as the commercial innovations he developed in selling his invention to farmers, led to a radical transformation in human society. For this reason, his reaper is one of the great inventive achievements of the Industrial Revolution. It exemplifies perfectly what the Framers of the Constitution intended when they explicitly granted Congress the unprecedented power to secure patents to inventors.

The Founders were political innovators who created a radical new system of government, and they were also innovators in innovation policy. The Copyright and Patent Clause in Article I, section 8 of the Constitution empowers Congress "To promote the Progress of Science and

useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries.” This provision departed from the English Crown’s policy of awarding patents as royal monopoly privileges. In this constitutional clause, the Founders discarded royal whim and monopoly grants. In its place, they created a new innovation system governed by the rule of law, with Congress enacting patent laws to secure to inventors a property right in their inventions.

The Copyright and Patent Clause applied in practical politics the aspirations and ideals of the Declaration of Independence: all men are equal and governments are instituted among men to secure their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. All people can be inventors, not just those favored by the Crown with royal privileges. All people can engage in intellectual labor to create new inventions (“useful Arts”), just as any person can engage in productive labor to grow and sow wheat on a farm. The inventor and farmer both deserve to be secured in the fruits of their labors under the law.

Cyrus McCormick’s reaper exemplifies the Founders’ vision of democratized innovation. Before he invented his reaper, McCormick was raised on a farm without a formal education in mechanics. He did not need it. He personified Alexis de Tocqueville’s observation that “Americans always display a clear, free, original, and inventive power of mind.”

As a farmer, McCormick experienced first-hand the problems in agriculture in the early American Republic: wheat was still harvested in the same way as it had been for thousands of years. It was a labor-intensive process, requiring numerous farmhands working all day swinging scythes to cut the wheat. It was a serious labor bottleneck in the production of food, and it required most of the country’s workforce to be employed in agriculture.

McCormick’s mechanical reaper changed everything. It was operated by two men and pulled by a horse, harvesting grain much faster than by manual labor. McCormick’s reaper vastly expanded food production, eliminated the threat of famine, and contributed to the explosive growth in population that began in the nineteenth century and continues to this day.

The dramatic efficiencies achieved by his mechanical reaper made it possible for farmers to cultivate more land with fewer workers, freeing up people to work in the new factories and offices created in America’s fast-growing innovation economy. Approximately 75% of the U.S. population worked in agriculture at the time of McCormick’s invention. Thanks to McCormick and additional inventions in agricultural machinery, less than 5% of the population today works in agriculture, feeding a population that has increased 2,500% since 1834.

The reaper even served an important role in the Civil War: historians often cite the reaper as contributing significantly to the Union’s wartime capacity by producing enough food to feed the nation, despite many able-bodied men leaving farm fields to serve on the battlefields.

McCormick also innovated commercially on the basis of his patents. He invented the first money-back guarantee as an incentive for farmers to purchase his reaper, and he invented the

first customer support service, providing for customers McCormick-certified mechanics to repair broken-down reapers in the field. Lastly, McCormick invented the first installment-purchase plan: farmers paid a small portion upfront as a down payment and then paid the remaining cost of the reaper after their (more successful) harvest. These commercial innovations by McCormick were just as important as his reaper, outliving his invention as common business practices to this very day.

McCormick's reaper is a tale of extraordinary technological ingenuity and business acumen, which makes it an exemplar of the Founders' vision of American innovation. By empowering Congress in the Constitution to secure a property right in the fruits of an inventor's productive labors, the Founders created a uniquely American innovation policy that has been the engine of the American innovation economy and our flourishing society.

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