

First Patents

The United States has issued several patents with claims to being the first patent.

The first legal patent was issued in 1790 to Samuel Hopkins for an improvement in making potash and pearl ash. Potash and pearl ash were early industrial alkalis that were used in making soaps, glass, bleaching fabric and the manufacture of gunpowder. At the time potash was an impure form of potassium bicarbonate and was manufactured by burning hardwood and then mixing the ashes with water to leech out the alkali. This water was then boiled off to generate a black corrosive tar. Today, you can see the same process in action in old charcoal grills: when the charcoal gets wet it creates a corrosive effect that eventually eats through the grill. Hopkins innovation was to burn the ashes a second time in a furnace before leeching the residual in water. This second burning increased carbonate formation which increased the yield of the process.

The original patent document, now known as [X1](#), was signed by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. While Canada did not exist as a country at the time, the process is considered Canada's first "patent" because the Quebec parliament authorized a "reward" to Hopkins for his discovery.

In 1836, Congress passed a law reorganizing the patent office. Under the new system, patents were no longer issued by name and date but by an assigned patent number. [Patent Number 1](#): "Locomotive steam-engine for rail and other roads" was issued to Senator John Ruggles on July 13th, 1836. Senator Ruggles, a Jacksonian Democrat from Maine, was Chairman of the Patents and Patent Office Committee and eventually became known as the "Father" of the Patent Office.

Senator Ruggles' invention was for a cog and gearing system that improved the traction of train wheels. The patent has been cited several times since its issue, most recently in February 2013.

During the Civil War, the Confederate States of America also maintained a patent office in Richmond Virginia that issued 266 patents. While the records and models were destroyed in the war, it is known that their first patent was issued in August 1861 for a breech loading gun.

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