Elisha Graves Otis Biography

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Contents

Elisha Graves Otis Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Elisha Otis, a descendant of revolutionary patriot James Otis (1725-1783), was born near Halifax, Vermont. He left his family's successful farm at the age of nineteen to pursue a number of trades, including carpentry in Troy, New York, and gristmilling, followed by carriage manufacturing and sawmilling in Vermont. In 1845 Otis moved his family to Albany, New York, where he worked as a master mechanic at a bedstead factory and invented an automatic lathe.

In 1851 Otis went to Bergen, New Jersey, and then to Yonkers, New York the following year to supervise the construction of a new bedstead factory for his employer. While in Yonkers, Otis designed a "safety hoist" to lift loads at the factory; his crucial innovation was a safety catch that kept the car from falling if the lifting cable or rope broke. Otis set up a small elevator shop in Yonkers in 1853, selling only a few for hoisting freight. To increase sales, Otis dramatically demonstrated his elevator during an exhibition at the Crystal Palace in New York City in 1854, riding in the cab high above onlookers and then having the cable cut. This did attract attention, and in 1857 Otis installed the first passenger safety elevator in a New York department store, and later his passenger elevator made the skyscraper feasible. Just before his death, Otis patented a steam-driven elevator, which was the basis for what became the Otis Elevator Company, run by Otis's two sons, Charles and Norton. Among other devices Otis patented were railroad car brakes (1852), a steam plow (1857), and a bake oven (1858).