



Margaret E. Knight

February 14, 1838 - October 12, 1914

Framingham, Massachusetts

Margaret Eloise Knight, the Maine-born inventor who designed the machine that mass-produced the flat-bottomed paper grocery bag and held dozens of patents in an age that rarely credited women with mechanical genius, died in Framingham, Massachusetts, on October 12, 1914. She was seventy-six.

She was born on February 14, 1838, in York, Maine. After her father died, her mother moved the family to Manchester, New Hampshire, where young Mattie and her brothers worked in the Amoskeag textile mills. As a girl she fashioned a safety device to keep shuttle looms from injuring workers, an early sign of the habit that would define her life: watching a dangerous or wasteful process and inventing a better way.

In 1867 she went to work at the Columbia Paper Bag Company in Springfield, Massachusetts. The bags of the day were mostly envelope-shaped cones, awkward for groceries. Flat-bottomed bags still had to be folded by hand. Over two years she designed a machine that would cut, fold and glue a square bottom automatically. When a machinist tried to patent the idea as his own, she fought him in court and won, one of the rare nineteenth-century patent victories by a woman against a male claimant. She co-founded the Eastern Paper Bag Company in Hartford and kept inventing-shoe machinery, a window sash, numbering devices, and, late in life, rotary engines for the automobile age.

She never married, lived frugally in a cottage on Hollis Street in South Framingham, and left an estate of only a few hundred dollars. She died of pneumonia and gallstones at Framingham Hospital and was buried in Newton. In 2006 she was inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. Every square-bottomed paper bag still carries a little of her work.

Services

Died in Framingham, MA, October 12, 1914, aged 76. Portrait: Photograph published in the Boston Sunday Post, March 31, 1912 (public domain), hosted by Notice Nearby.

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