Nathan Myhrvold, Inventor and Entrepreneur: An invention is an idea. It's an idea that is useful. Somebody thinks of something and gives us a new device, a new approach, a new technique. And that new idea suddenly changes the world.

Narrator: They were published in Scientific American each and every week throughout the late 19th-century — lists of new inventions and announcements of patents recently awarded.

Ernest Freeberg, Historian: Americans as a whole were thinking of themselves as a nation of inventors. Some joke that a young American man would feel guilty going to his grave without having won a patent of his very own. This was something that everybody aspired to do.

Narrator: To W.B. Austin of New York, for his Chimney Ventilator; to Joseph B. Underwood of North Carolina, for a newfangled Coffee Roaster; to John Senn of Illinois for his improved Remedy for Hog Cholera.

Paul Israel, Thomas Edison Papers: The newspapers, you see editorials about how it was the patent office now that represented American greatness, not the capital. And I think that beautifully captures the way in which America thought about itself, this growing industrial power on the verge of transforming the world.

Ernest Freeberg, Historian: Americans often felt a little inferior to Europeans. They didn't have the great universities. They didn't have the great arts and literature tradition. But in the late 19th-century, Americans said, "This is what we do, we are inventors."