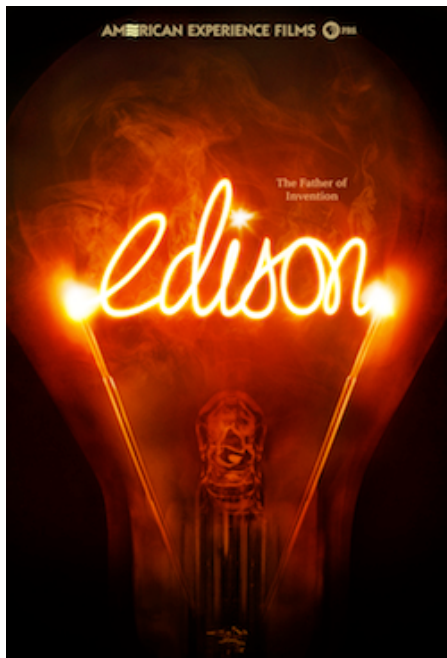


## AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Presents *Edison*

Premieres Tuesday, January 27, 2015  
9:00-11:00 p.m. ET on PBS



By the time he died in 1931, Thomas Alva Edison was one of the most famous men in the world. The holder of more patents than any other inventor in history, Edison had amassed a fortune and achieved glory as the genius behind such revolutionary inventions as sound recording, motion pictures, and electric light.

Born on the threshold of America's burgeoning industrial empire, Edison's curiosity led him to its cutting edge—and to the fascination with telegraphy that set him on his course through life. With just three months of formal schooling, he took on one seemingly impossible technical challenge after another, and through intuition, persistence, and a unique team approach to innovation, invariably solved it, catapulting himself to worldwide fame by the age of thirty-one.

Driven and intensely competitive, Edison was often neglectful in his private life and could be ruthless in business. His first wife died of a morphine overdose at the age of twenty-nine; his closest friendship ended with a bitter and irrevocable rupture. Later, challenged by competition in the industry he'd founded, Edison launched an ugly propaganda campaign against his rivals, and used his credibility as an electrical expert to help ensure that high-voltage electrocution became a form of capital punishment.

*Edison* explores the complex alchemy that accounts for the enduring celebrity of America's most famous inventor, offering new perspectives on the man and his milieu, and illuminating not only the true nature of invention, but its role in turn-of-the-century America's rush into the future. Written and directed by Michelle Ferrari and produced by Ferrari and Amanda Pollak, *Edison* premieres on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Tuesday, January 27, 2015, 9:00-11:00 p.m. ET on PBS ([check local listings](#)).

Born in 1847 and raised in Port Huron, Michigan, Edison had a precocious curiosity and a natural scientific acuity. By fifteen, he was working as a telegraph operator, and at twenty-two, he moved to New York to pursue a career as an inventor, a business lucrative enough to finance his dream laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

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With a group of like-minded young men, Edison had an audacious goal: to create one minor invention every ten days and a major one every month. The thrill of invention was in the air; the recent 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia had introduced enthralled visitors to such amazing devices as the elevator and Alexander Graham Bell's telephone. In a matter of months, Edison and his team designed a device that trumped Bell's—a "carbon button transmitter" that carried sound over much larger distances and turned the telephone into a commercially viable device. In the process, Edison stumbled upon the invention of the phonograph—the first device to record sound and play it back.

The phonograph made Edison an overnight sensation, but he was restless, an inveterate tinkerer, and soon on to the next big thing: devising a way to bring electric light indoors. Although arc lighting for outdoor spaces was already available, no one had been able to create a long-lasting light bulb and the electrical power system necessary to make it viable.

Edison finally solved the challenge with a high-vacuum bulb and a filament of carbonized cotton thread, and on New Year's Eve 1879, he invited the public to Menlo Park for the unveiling of his light. For the crowds who tramped through the snowy dark that night and saw the lab glowing in the distance, it was clear a miraculous new era had dawned. Less than three years later, Edison lit up lower Manhattan with his electrical power grid.

By 1888, the electrification of the country was well underway, and Edison's electrical empire was vast and growing. But competition was fierce, and his rivals' embrace of cheaper, more efficient AC current threatened to make his own DC system obsolete. Edison waged a ruthless campaign to discredit his competitors and convince the public that AC was unsafe, but he lost the war. In the end, Edison's backers insisted on a merger with a rival AC provider, and "Edison General Electric" became known simply as "General Electric."

Even before the merger was finalized, Edison was on to other pursuits, among them experiments with motion pictures. Inspired by the work of Edward Muybridge and Jules Etienne Marey, Edison eventually created an electrically powered camera called a "kinetograph" which, he claimed, would "do for the eye what the phonograph does for the ear." The first films were short loops—mere seconds—viewable on a coin-operated peephole cabinet called a "kinetoscope." At first, the public was mesmerized, but the novelty soon wore off. Before long, other inventors, including the Lumière brothers in Paris, had devised projection systems that freed the viewer from having to move from machine to machine. Beaten to the punch, Edison bought the patent rights to a rival inventor's projection system, rechristened it "Edison's Vitascope," and effectively launched the American motion picture industry.

As the years progressed, Edison continued to invent and manufacture a multitude of devices while simultaneously overseeing the massive business empire that had become, by the early twentieth century, a worldwide brand. As Edison biographer Paul Israel says, "Edison didn't just have ideas and build devices that worked in the laboratory, he actually took them to the marketplace. And did it over and over again. He came up with the modern process of innovation."

When Edison died on October 18, 1931, he lay in state for two days in the library of his West Orange complex, as thousands lined up to pay their final respects. On the third night, at the request of President Herbert Hoover, radio listeners across the country switched off their lights as a reminder of what life would have been like without Edison. "Thomas Edison was born into a world that wasn't industrialized," says

inventor and entrepreneur Nathan Myhrvold. “Indoor lighting was candles or kerosene lamp. We couldn’t record voices or sounds or motion. What Edison left by the end of his life was a world that was well on its way to becoming the world we know today.”

\* \* \*

### **About the Participants (in alphabetical order)**

**Neil Baldwin** is the author of *Edison: Inventing the Century*, and a professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance and Director of the Creative Research Center in the College of the Arts, Montclair State University, New Jersey.

**Leonard DeGraaf** is the archivist for the Thomas Edison National Historical Park in West Orange, New Jersey, and author of *Edison and the Rise of Innovation*.

**Ernest Freeberg** is a professor of history at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and author of *The Age of Edison: Electric Light and the Invention of Modern America*.

**Lisa Gitelman** is a professor of English and of media, culture, and communication at New York University, a former editor of the Thomas A. Edison Papers Project at Rutgers University, and author of *Thomas Edison and Modern America: A Brief History with Documents*.

**Paul Israel** is the director and general editor of the Thomas A. Edison Papers Project at Rutgers University and author of *Edison: A Life of Invention* and *Edison’s Electric Light: The Art of Invention* (written with Robert Friedel).

**Jill Jonnes** is an author whose books include *Empires of Light: Edison, Tesla, Westinghouse, and the Race to Electrify the World*.

**Nancy Koehn** is a historian at the Harvard Business School where she holds the James E. Robison chair of Business Administration. Koehn's research focuses on entrepreneurial leadership and the way that leaders—past and present—craft lives of purpose, worth, and impact.

**Nathan Myhrvold** is an inventor and entrepreneur; he founded Intellectual Ventures after retiring as chief strategist and chief technology officer of Microsoft Corporation.

**Robert Rosenberg** is the former director of the Thomas A. Edison Papers Project at Rutgers University.

**John Staudenmaier** is a historian at the University of Detroit Mercy and editor emeritus of *Technology and Culture*, *The International Quarterly of the Society for the History of Technology*.

**Randall Stross** is a historian and author of *The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas Alva Edison Invented the Modern World*.

## About the Filmmakers

Written and Directed by	Michelle Ferrari
Edited by	George O'Donnell
Produced by	Amanda Pollak
	Michelle Ferrari
Narrated by	Michael Murphy
Original Music by	John Kusiak
	P. Andrew Willis
Director of Photography	Rafael de la Uz
Associate Producer	Nina Krstic

An Insignia Films production in association with 42nd Parallel Films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

**Michelle Ferrari (Writer/Director/Co-Producer)** has been creating innovative, critically acclaimed documentary narratives for nearly two decades. Her work as a screenwriter and story editor has been seen on PBS, HBO, and at film festivals nationwide, and has garnered honors from the Writers Guild of America, the Western Writers Association, the Organization of American Historians, the Sundance Film Festival, and the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. The writer of numerous AMERICAN EXPERIENCE episodes—among them, *Silicon Valley*, *Roads to Memphis*, and *Kit Carson*—Ferrari is perhaps best known for the highly rated *Seabiscuit*, which earned her a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing. Additional recent credits include the landmark PBS series *Half the Sky* and the Emmy-winning HBO documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*. She is a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, and holds an M.A. in American History from Columbia University.

**Amanda Pollak (Co-Producer)** has been producing, researching, and writing documentaries for public television since 1992. Her investigative skills were rewarded early on when she received an individual Emmy for her leading role in researching *TR: The Story of Theodore Roosevelt*. Since then, she has continued to research and produce compelling historical films including the Peabody Award-winning *1900* and the Emmy-winning *Truman* and *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, all for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. She delved into the history of world commerce with the movie *Money and Power: The History of Business*. In 2002, she won an Emmy for producing one hour of David Grubin's five-hour scientific series for PBS entitled *The Secret Life of the Brain*. She next returned to her specialty, historical narrative, by joining Insignia Films to produce *Reporting America at War*, which earned a Cine Golden Eagle Award and was nominated for Best Documentary at the 2004 News and Documentary Emmy Awards.

With Insignia Films, she has gone on to produce ten films for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE including *Las Vegas*, *New Orleans*, *Kit Carson*, *Roads to Memphis*, *Panama Canal*, *Custer's Last Stand*, *Grand Coulee Dam* and *1964*. She recently completed *The Big Burn* and is currently directing *The Aeronauts*. In addition to her work with AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, Pollak directed the fourth episode of Henry Louis Gates' PBS series *Faces of America*, produced PBS' *Constitution USA with Peter Sagal*, and with Insignia Films, she helped to create *Retro Report*, an online series featured on *The New York Times* website, that combines documentary storytelling with shoe-leather reporting to peel back the layers of some of the most intriguing news stories of our past.

**Mark Samels (Executive Producer)** was named executive producer of American Experience, PBS' flagship history series, in 2003. Under Samels' leadership, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations, and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. A native of Wisconsin, he is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

#### **About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

Television's most-watched history series, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2013. The series has been hailed as "peerless" (*The Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including thirty Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and sixteen George Foster Peabody Awards, one most recently for the series represented by *Freedom Riders*, *Triangle Fire*, and *Stonewall Uprising*.

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