

# Local Engineer Exposes the Mystery of the Lumière Brothers' Burlington Factory

By [Chris Farnsworth](#)

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[Hugo Martínez Cazón](#) was combing through microfilm at the University of Vermont, researching architectural blueprints for a project, when something odd scrolled across the screen.

"I saw the name Lumière fly by, and I came to a dead stop," the Argentinean-born and Burlington-based environmental engineer said, recalling a fateful day in 1991. "There were these blueprints for a factory, the name Lumière, then the words 'dry place for photographic material.' It didn't make sense to me."

That random discovery would have a huge impact on Martínez Cazón's life. Since then, he has devoted 31 years to solving a captivating mystery: How and why did the world-famous Lumière brothers build a factory in Burlington in 1903?

["The factory was maybe the most advanced on the planet." Hugo Martínez Cazón](#)

The Lumières are generally credited with giving birth to cinema in 1895, as well as pioneering color photography with their autochrome process. The building where they once produced films, photography and even X-rays still stands today at 180 Flynn Avenue. [Burlington Beer took up residence there in 2021](#), replacing the former tenant, Vermont Hardware.

Martínez Cazón's research has inspired the brewers to highlight the history of their new headquarters.

"We weren't really aware of the historical connection when we chose the site," Burlington Beer event coordinator Emerson Loisel said, as he led *Seven Days* on a tour of the recently renovated space. "As we've learned more, we've started looking for cool ways to honor the building's legacy."

Burlington Beer recently hosted an event called Café Lumière, where guests indulged in French cuisine, were serenaded by a jazz trio and listened to a historical presentation by Martínez Cazón.

The researcher said he initially had trouble getting people to believe his claims. In the worlds of cinema and photography, the story of Auguste and Louis Lumière is well known, but it's tied to the French city of Lyon, where their first factory was located.

"I even thought to myself, *There's just no way*," Martínez Cazón said. "All my education told me that the Lumières never produced their work outside of France."



"To not only see that they had an American factory no one knew about, [but] that it was in the very city I was sitting in — it all just felt too unreal," he continued. "Like someone claiming Napoleon had an apartment in Chicago or something."

Piece by piece, Martínez Cazón assembled the puzzle. He found old ads for Lumière autochrome plates that listed two factory locations: Lyon and Burlington. He came across an editorial by famous American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who compared the color photos made in Lyon with the ones in Burlington. (In a gallant fit of homerism, Stieglitz said the Vermont photos looked better.)

"It's weird to me," Martínez Cazón said. "Because there's a bunch of people who know about the building now. Twenty-five years ago, though, nobody would talk to me about it. They would just ask why in the world the Lumière brothers would build in Burlington."

Turns out there are a few reasons the brothers built their only non-French factory in Vermont.

For one, it was an economically opportune moment to build in America. In 1897, U.S. representative Nelson Dingley Jr. (R-Maine) introduced the Dingley Act, which raised the tariffs on woolens, linens, silks, china and sugar. For the Lumières, it made more financial sense to build a U.S. factory than to import those goods to France.

Still, why Burlington? Why not a thriving port city such as New York or Boston? Martínez Cazón believes that it came down to two factors.

First, though Burlington's population was only 18,000 at the time, it was a semi-bilingual city, with many French-speaking residents. That allowed for better communication between the new factory and the home base in Lyon.

Wishing you luck with color photography and a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

ALFRED STIEGLITZ.

face, soak the print in a 10 per cent. solution of formaline for five minutes and wash for about ten minutes.

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Beyond the language issue, Martínez Cazón said, the Lumières were excited about the Queen City's dyes. Toward the end of the 19th century, Burlington-based Wells, Richardson patented, manufactured and distributed dyes under the name Diamond Dyes. The company was located in the College Street building that's now home to Bennington Potters.

Dye was crucial to the autochrome process, which involved coating glass plates in varnish and dusting them with potato starch pellets, each dyed a different color. The development of the film entailed mixing and pixelating the colors, not unlike a modern computer, to create a lushly colored image.

So Burlington allowed the brothers to avoid high tariffs and speak French while gaining access to one of the key ingredients for a product that they knew would be revolutionary. The city "made sense" to them for yet another reason, Martínez Cazón said: its relative remoteness from population centers.

"You have to understand, in the early 20th century, most people assumed color photography was either impossible or would only be available to kings and presidents," Martínez Cazón said. "But Auguste and Louis knew what they had with autochrome. And they knew they had to protect it from others trying to steal the secrets of the process."

The Lumières broke ground in 1901 in the area off Pine Street once known as Howard Park. Over the next year or so, the factory went up just off what was then Park Street, renamed Flynn Avenue in 1934.

When it opened in 1903, Lumière North American was a marvel to behold. Martínez Cazón uncovered multiple accounts from local companies that helped construct the Lumière factory. The brickwork was done by Drury Brick and Tile, whose workers remarked on how proud they were to be involved in such a project.

"The factory was maybe the most advanced on the planet," Martínez Cazón said. "They had environmentally controlled clean rooms, and the film was stored in rooms that were refrigerated year-round. The rooms were lightproof, and the workers all wore silk to make sure dust particles couldn't get onto the film. It was really, really thought out."

Much of that architectural cunning can still be seen in the building today. Just past Burlington Beer's taproom, vintage movie posters and ads for the Lumière brothers line the old brick walls of an intimate dining hall. Books on the history of the Lumières are stacked beside the bar.

But the brothers' legacy is easier to see in the high ceilings adorned with south-facing skylights, or in the long room full of kegs. It once stored the autochrome plates that delivered color photography 35 years before Kodak introduced Kodachrome.

"The folks at Burlington Beer Company have been great," Martínez Cazón said. He added that the building's owners, Dominique and Trey Pecor, were also involved in discussions about the old factory's past. "Everyone is intrigued by the history," Martínez Cazón said.



In 2019, Martínez Cazón made a pilgrimage to Lyon to visit the Musée Lumière and speak to members of the city's historic preservation society. Much like their U.S. counterparts when he presented his findings, the French were incredulous at first.

"I imagine it's like showing up to a house and announcing yourself as a long-lost uncle or something," Martínez Cazón joked.

But disbelief turned to passionate curiosity, he said, as the French grasped that there was indeed a former Lumière factory standing in Burlington. The original Lyon factory was demolished during urban renewal projects in the 1950s.

Martínez Cazón recalled one dumbstruck member of the historical society who simply said, "You have the building."

The Lumière brothers' Vermont adventure ended in 1912. Waning business back home played a part, as did the rising cost of importing gelatin, a key ingredient in film. Having merged with a competitor to form Lumière & Jougla — which would last until 1928 — the brothers deemed operating two factories too costly.

"It was a short stay," Martínez Cazón said of the Lumières' time in Burlington. "But anyone who looks at it as a failure is being shortsighted."

He noted that one of the first-ever autochrome portraits was shot in Burlington. It depicted factory manager and chemist Claudius Poulailon's daughter, Martha. Because the plate itself wasn't preserved and local newspapers couldn't reproduce the picture in color, he went on, "all we have is a black-and-white photo."

With the history of the Lumière factory finally exposed, Martínez Cazón hopes to see more celebrations of its legacy. The interest that the owners and tenants have shown encourages him, as does the changing attitude in France toward the old factory. He's talked with France's honorary consul to Vermont, Lise Veronneau, and believes that wheels are in motion to honor the site further.

"Burlingtonians are starting to realize how important this historical connection is," he said. "I can't predict what will happen, but I really think there's more to come."

Learn more about Hugo Martínez Cazón's research in *Vermont History* at [vermonthistory.org](http://vermonthistory.org).

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