Miller Reese Hutchison, who held more than 1,000 patents and was chief engineer for famed inventor Thomas Edison, can arguably be called the greatest scientist and engineer that Auburn ever produced. Born in 1876 in Montrose, Ala., he attended several private schools, including Spring Hill College in Mobile, before enrolling at Auburn. According to records from the time, he pursued “a special course in electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, and machine design” at Alabama Polytechnic Institute, as Auburn was then known, from 1895 through 1897.

Although he listed his class year as 1897, apparently he didn’t actually receive his degree until 1913, when API awarded him an electrical engineering degree for professional work. That same year he received an honorary doctorate from Spring Hill. The year before, in 1912, Edison had appointed Hutchison as his chief engineer. By that time he already held rights to some 500 patents, a number that would double before his death at age 67 in 1944. He had developed his first patent as a 15-year-old — a lightning arrester that prevented thunderbolts from burning out telegraph wires.

While a student at API in 1895, attempting to help a deaf friend, he invented the Acousticon, a telephone-like device connected to a battery. It worked, and the invention brought considerable attention in its day. In 1902 Princess Alexandra of Great Britain called Hutchison for help with her deafness. By August of that year, Alexandra was so pleased she conferred on him a special gold medal for “scientific investigation and invention.” Edison’s wife bought an Acousticon to mitigate her husband’s deafness, and while he claimed it worked — reporting that he listened to a concert with it — he made little use of it, calling deafness a great advantage to the business of thinking.

In 1906 he put one of his best known inventions on the market, the Klaxon Warning Signal, which at one point was used on all General Motors cars, and by more than 150,000 vehicles in 1912. In 1908 a Hutchison invention, an electric tachometer used to measure speeds in ships, brought him in contact with men such as Admiral Dewey and presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft. By 1915 he was named as assistant to the chairman of the prestigious Naval Consulting Board under Edison. He later became that body’s assistant to the president, and an operative in naval intelligence during the First World War.

Hutchison, separated from Auburn by no small distance in those pre-aviation days, still found time to stay involved with his alma mater, attending the institution’s first homecoming in 1913. One of the highlights of that celebration came when Hutchison presented API President Charles Thach with a two and a half kilowatt wireless, at the time “the most powerful station owned by any technical school in the world.” Used by the department of mechanical and electrical engineering, it made possible the first course offered in wireless telegraphy in the South.

Special thanks to Mary Ellen Hendrix of the Auburn Alumnus for contribution to this biographical sketch.