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Moellenberg et al.

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(54) **PORTABLE SOLAR POWER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

H04W 4/008; H04W 72/0446; H05B 33/0815; H05B 37/00

USPC 307/24

See application file for complete search history.

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(65) **Prior Publication Data**

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(51) **Int. Cl.**

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H02J 7/35	(2006.01)
H05B 33/08	(2006.01)
H05B 37/00	(2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **H02J 7/0068** (2013.01); **H02J 7/0072** (2013.01); **H02J 7/35** (2013.01); **H05B 33/0815** (2013.01); **H05B 37/00** (2013.01); **Y10T 307/352** (2015.04)

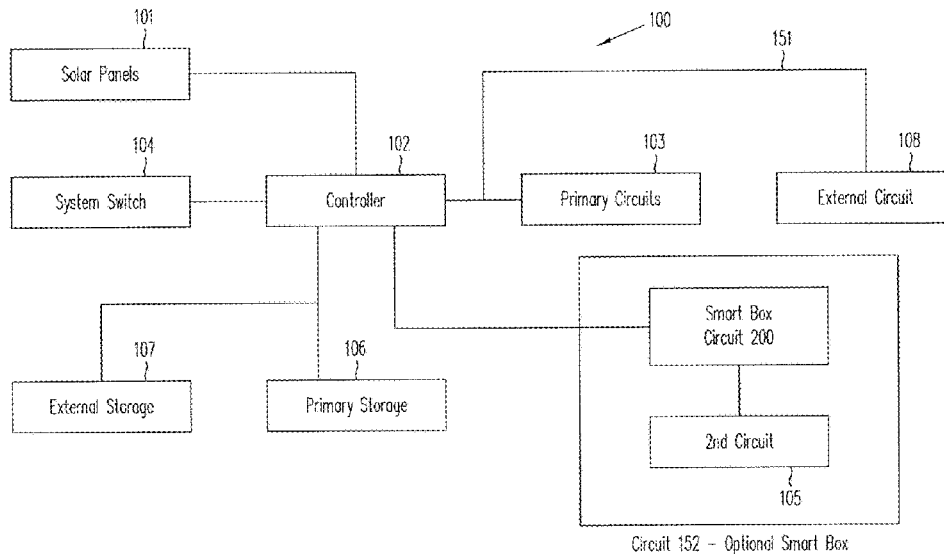
(58) **Field of Classification Search**

CPC H02J 7/0068; H02J 7/025; H02J 50/20; H02J 50/80; H02J 7/0072; H02J 7/35;

(57) **ABSTRACT**

A portable solar power management system includes (i) a solar panel interface to one or more solar panels, (ii) an energy storage interface to one or more energy storage devices, (iii) a charging circuit which routes the electrical currents from the solar panels to the energy storage devices; (iv) a load interface to one or more load devices, the load devices being powered independently on primary and secondary load circuits; and (v) a controller for controlling the operations of solar panel interface, the energy storage interface, the charging circuit, and the load interface. In addition, a secondary load control circuit and a programmable controller may be provided which route the electrical currents from the energy storage devices to the load interface, wherein the programmable controller, based on the sensing signals, also activates and deactivates the secondary load circuit.

24 Claims, 17 Drawing Sheets



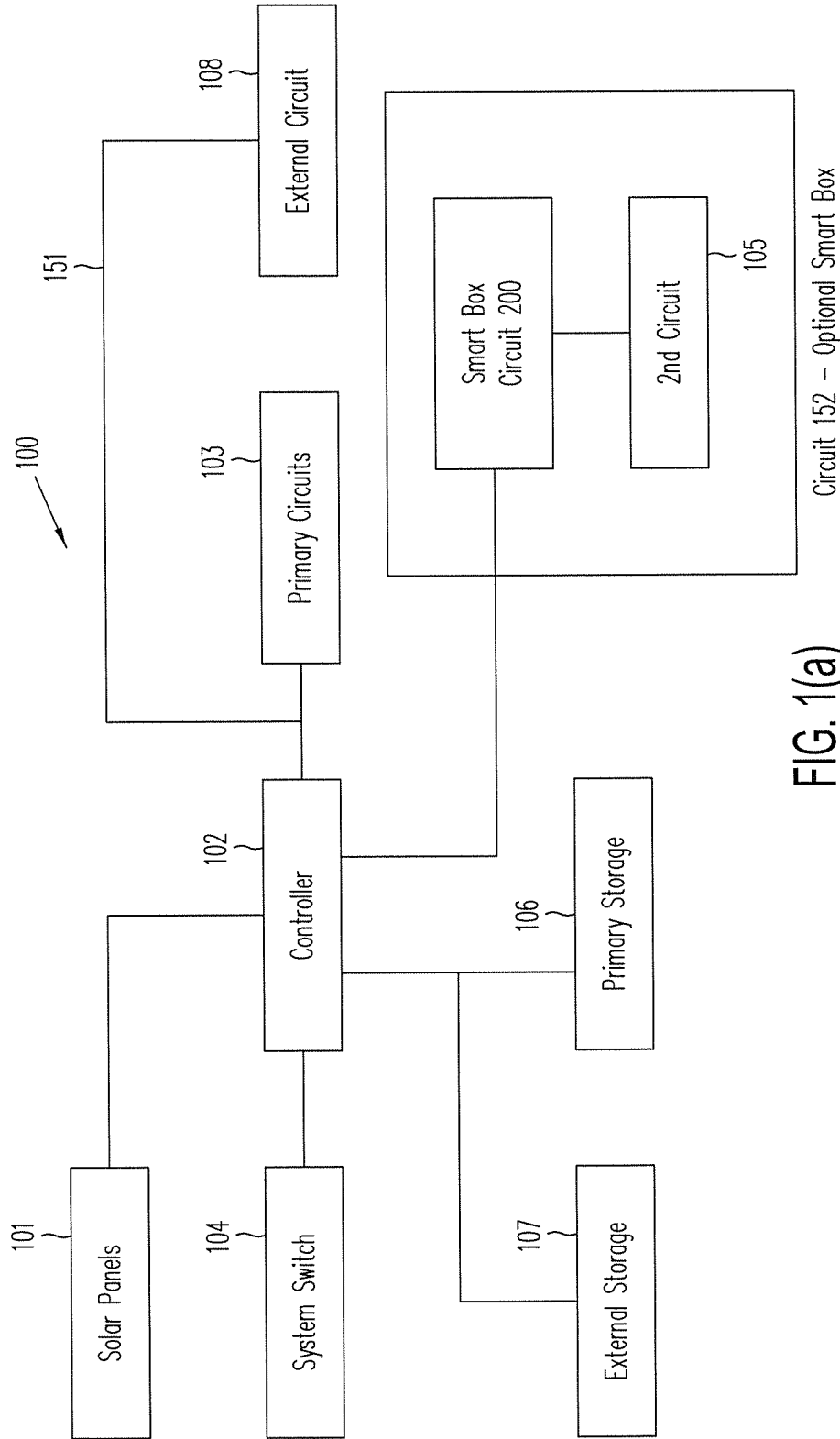


FIG. 1(a)

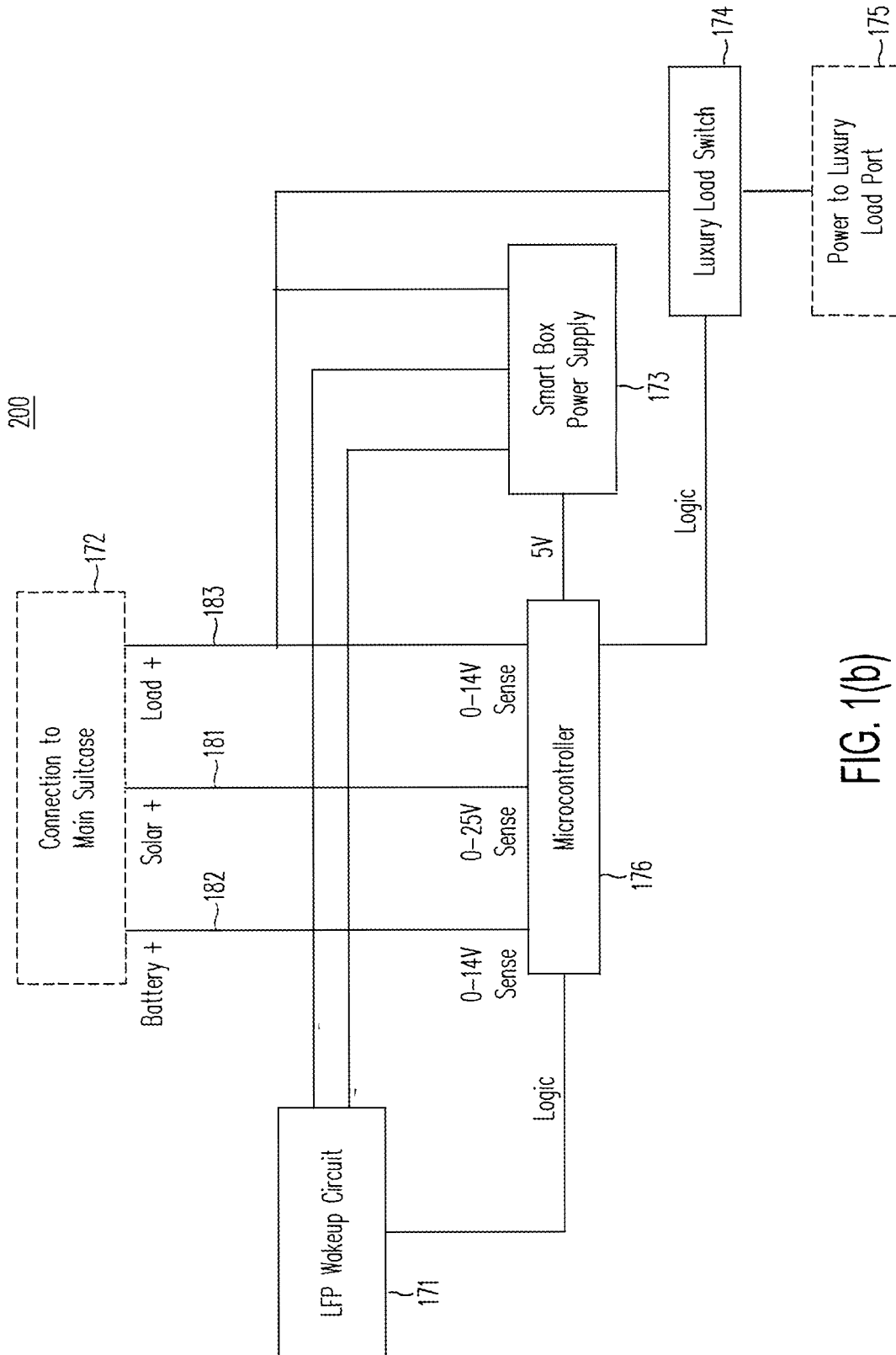


FIG. 1(b)

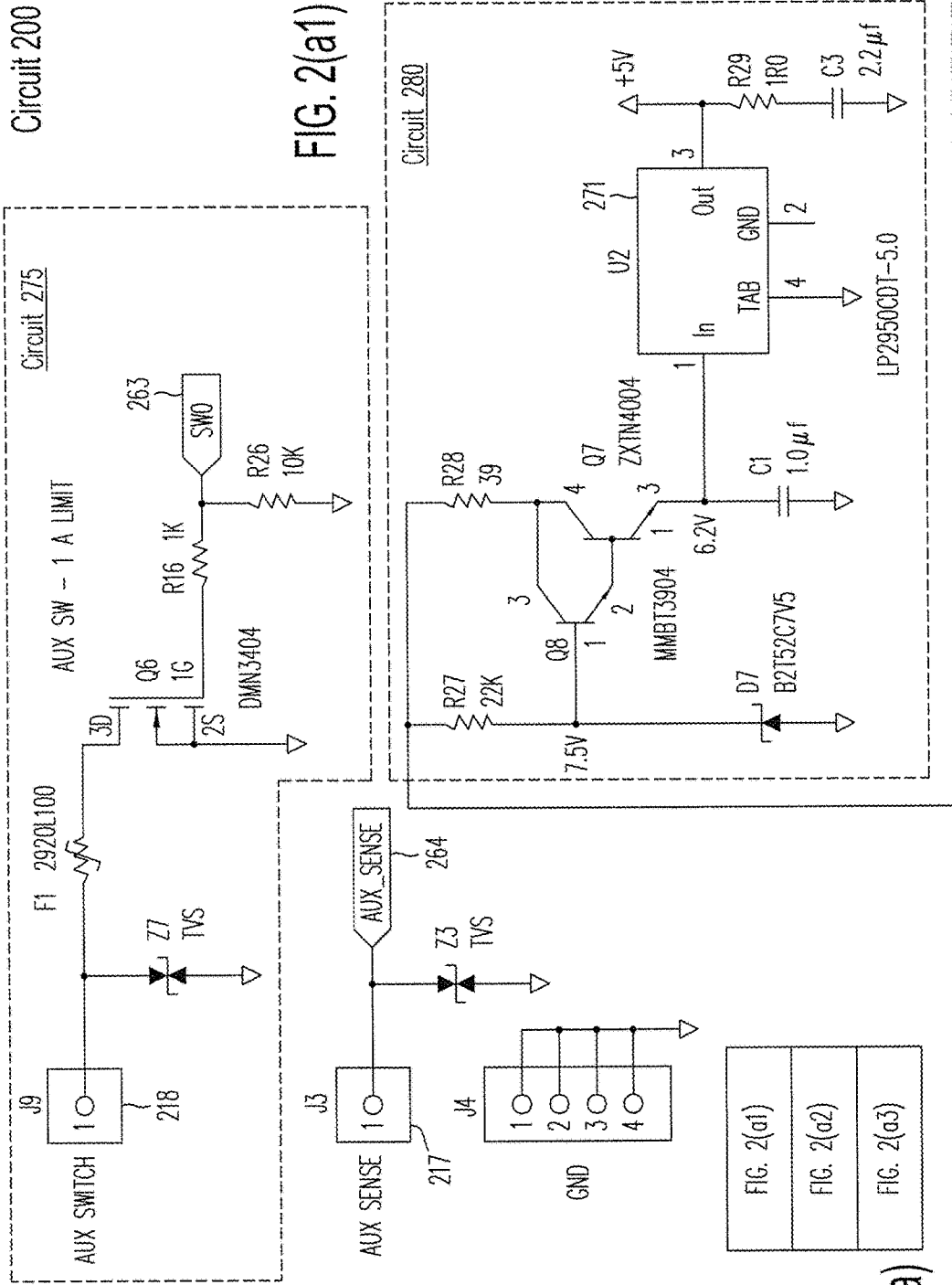


FIG. 2(a1)
FIG. 2(a2)
FIG. 2(a3)

Key To

FIG. 2(a)

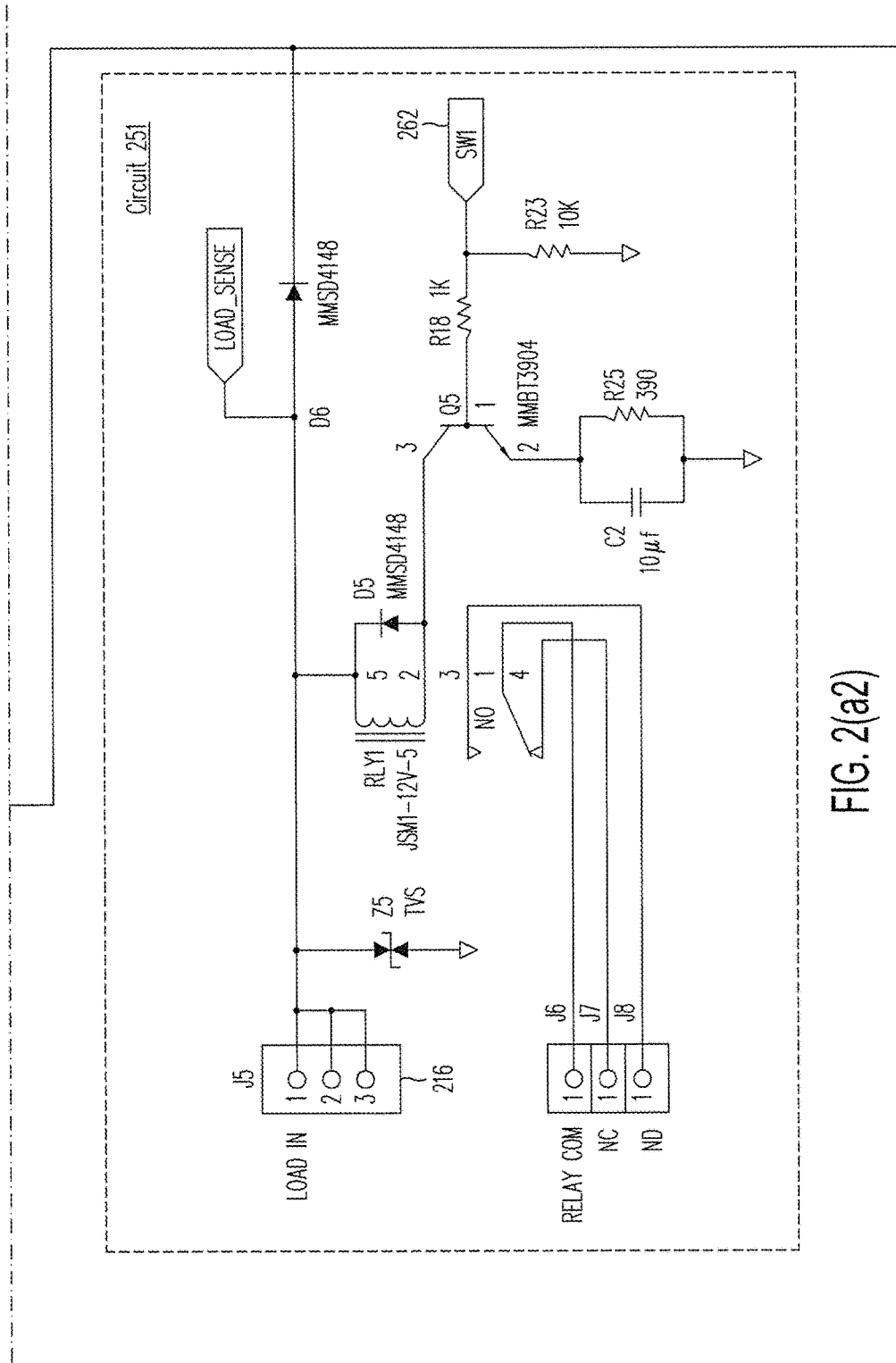
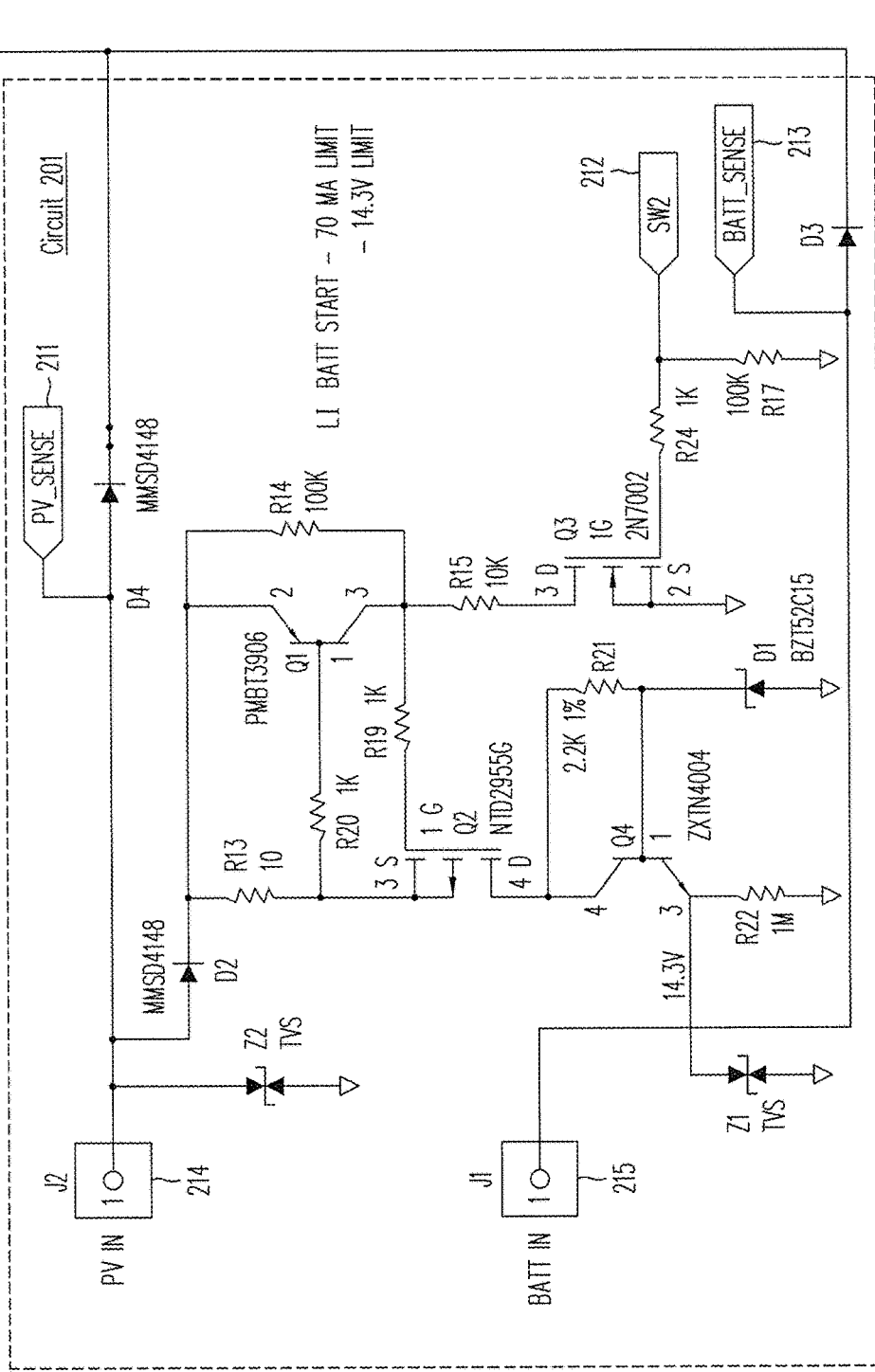


FIG. 2(a2)

FIG. 2(a3)



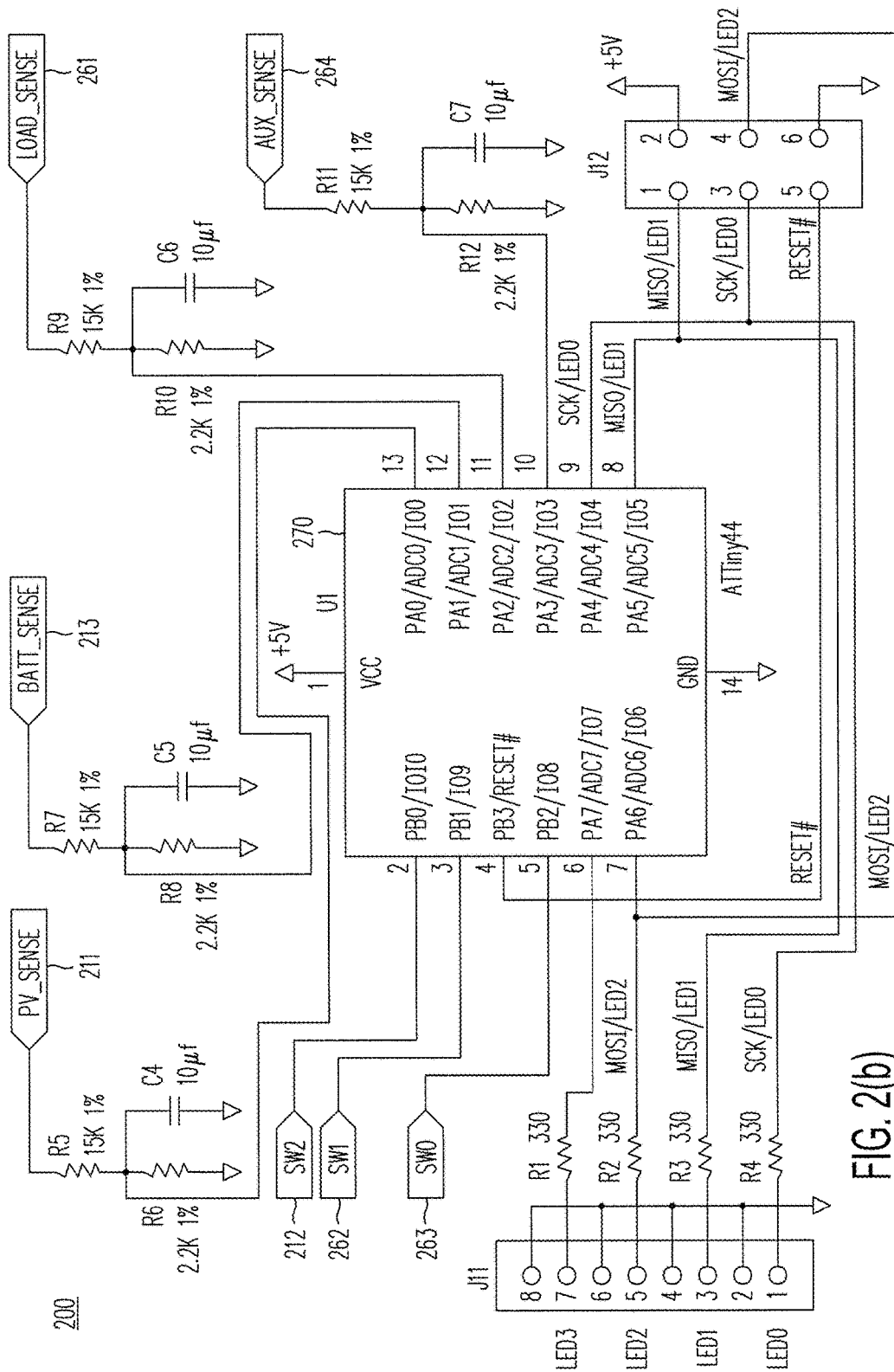
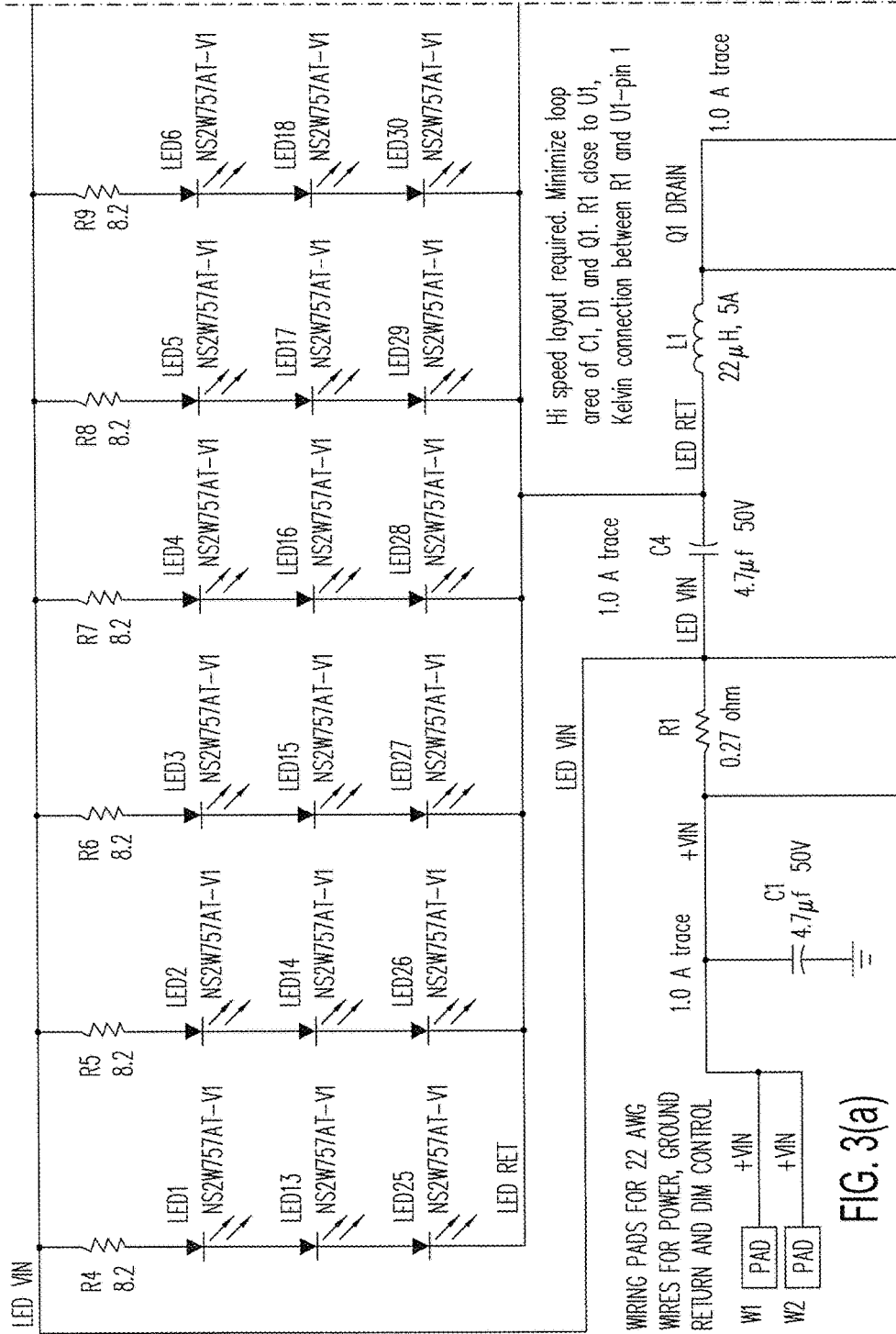
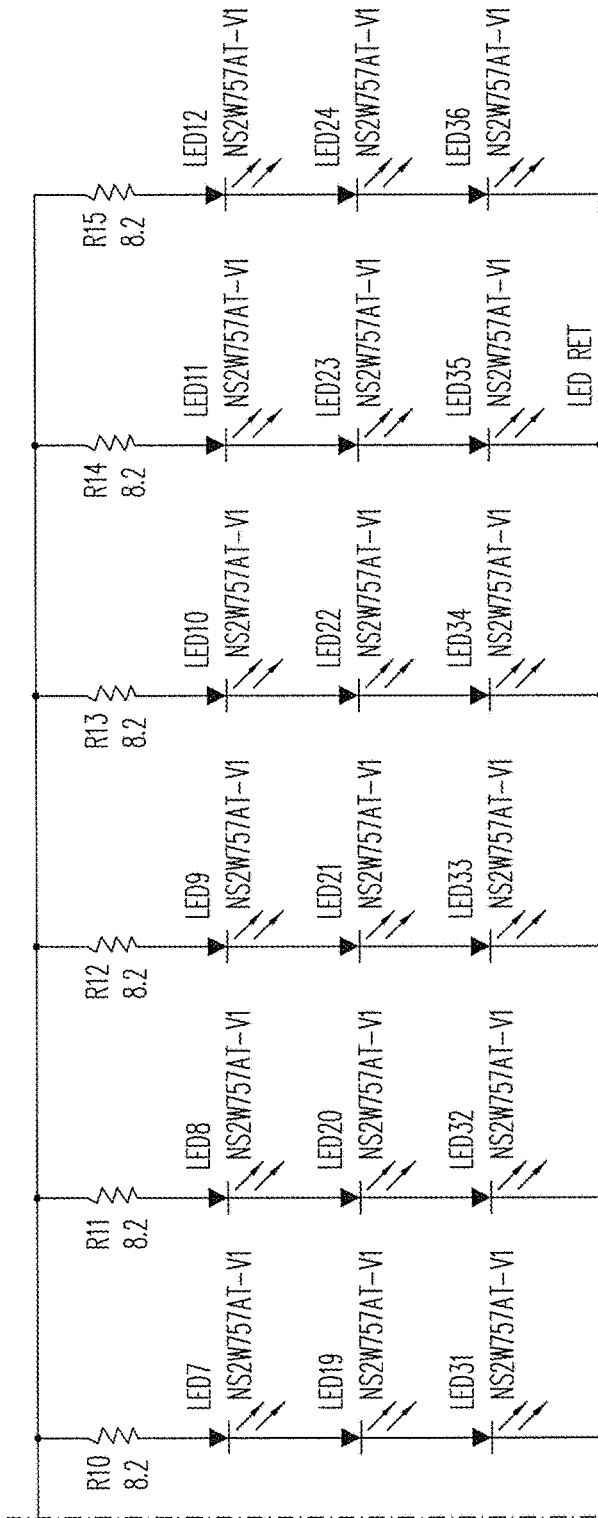


FIG. 2(b)

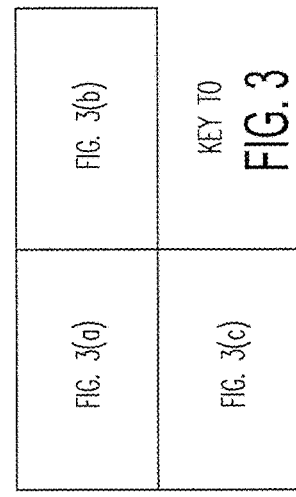
200





320

FIG. 3(b)



KEY TO
FIG. 3

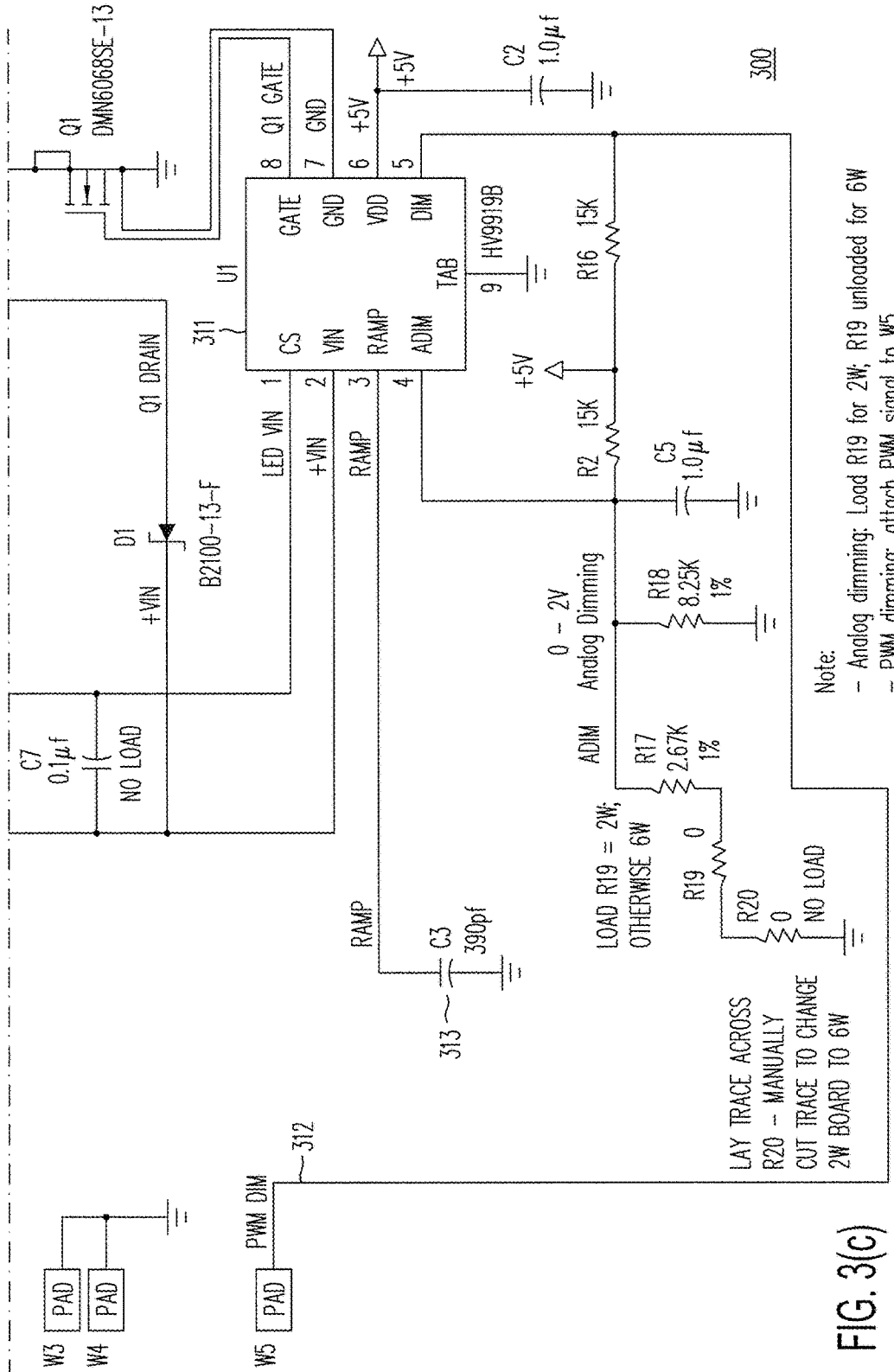


FIG. 3(c)

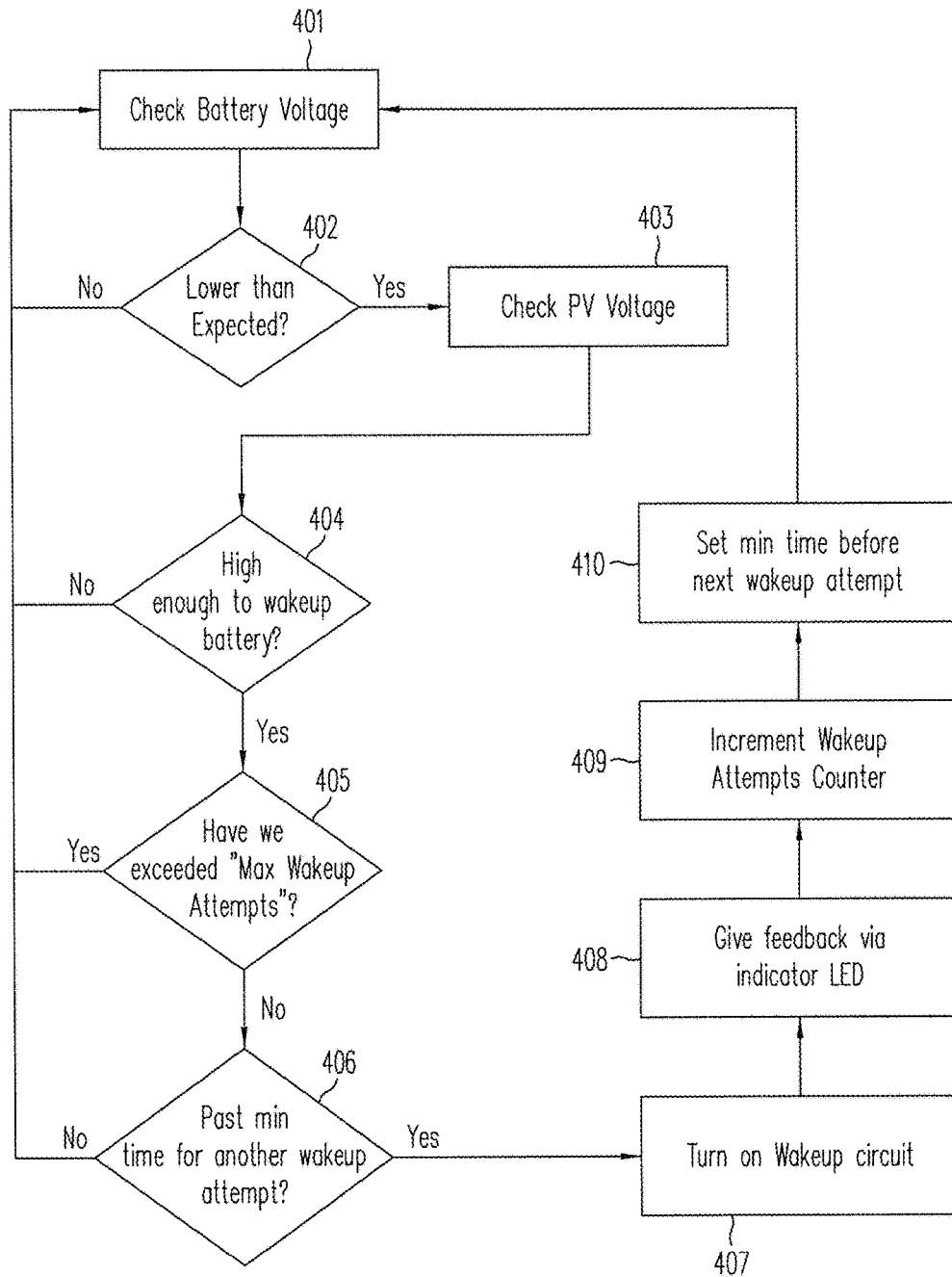


FIG. 4

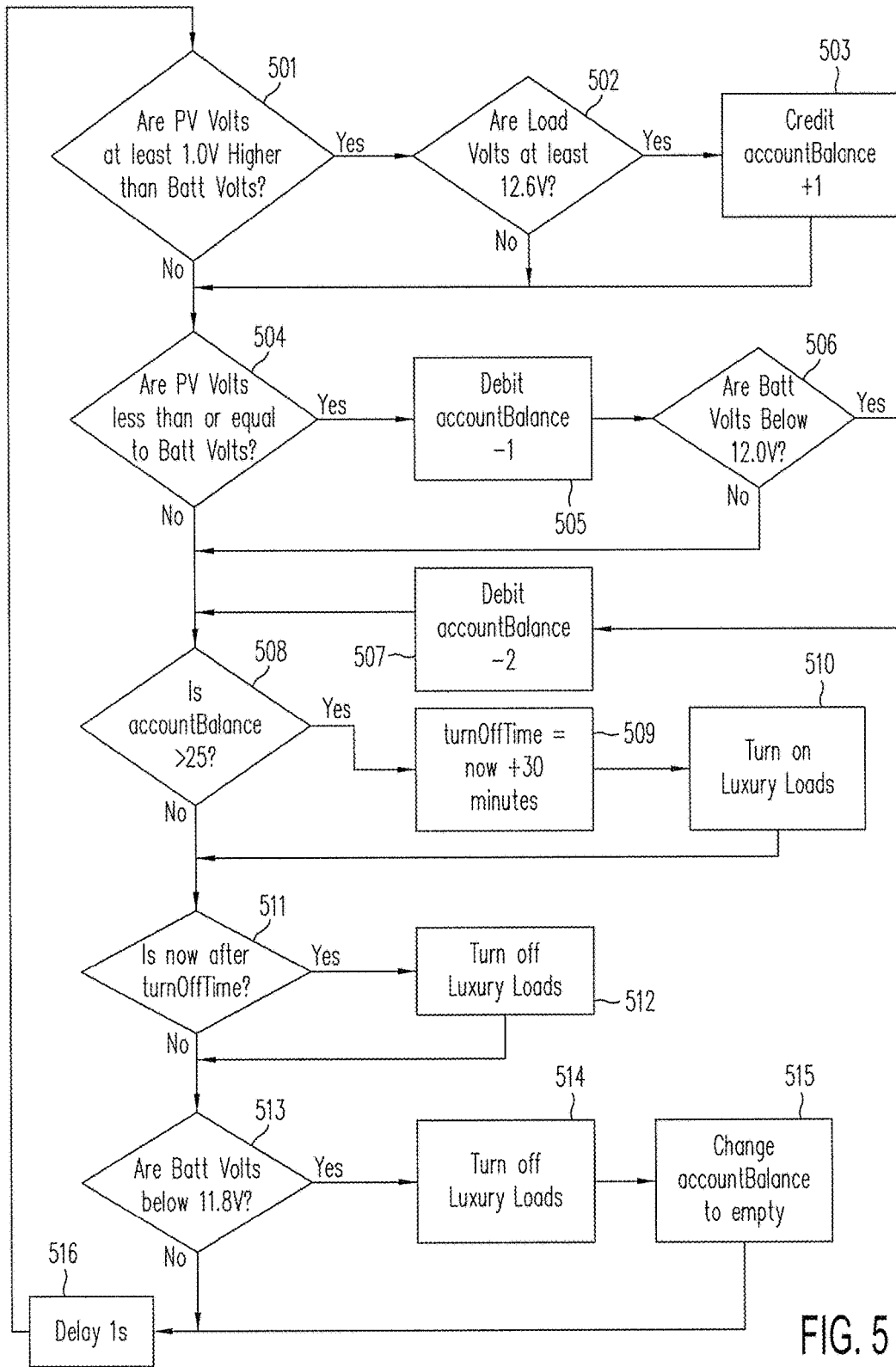
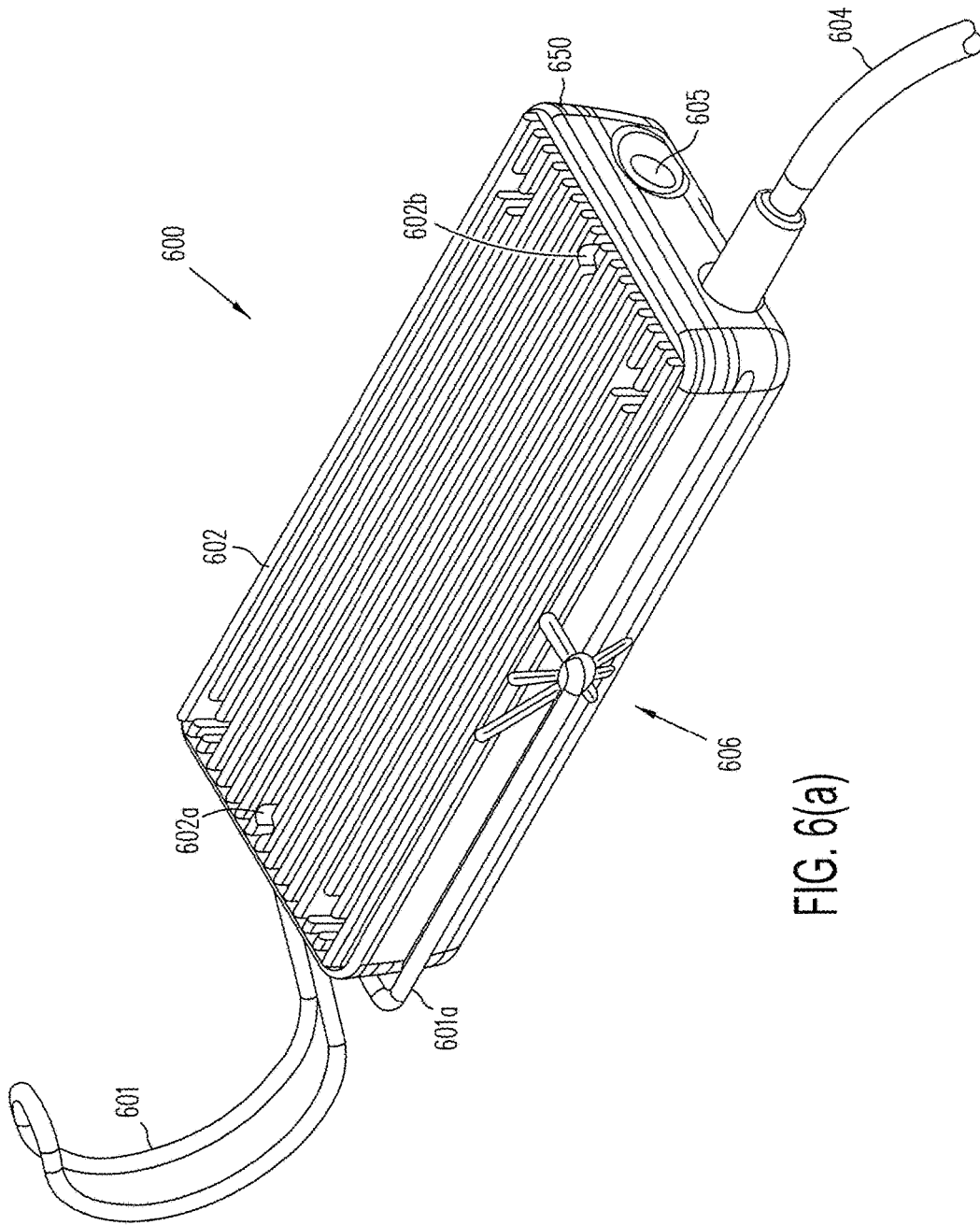


FIG. 5



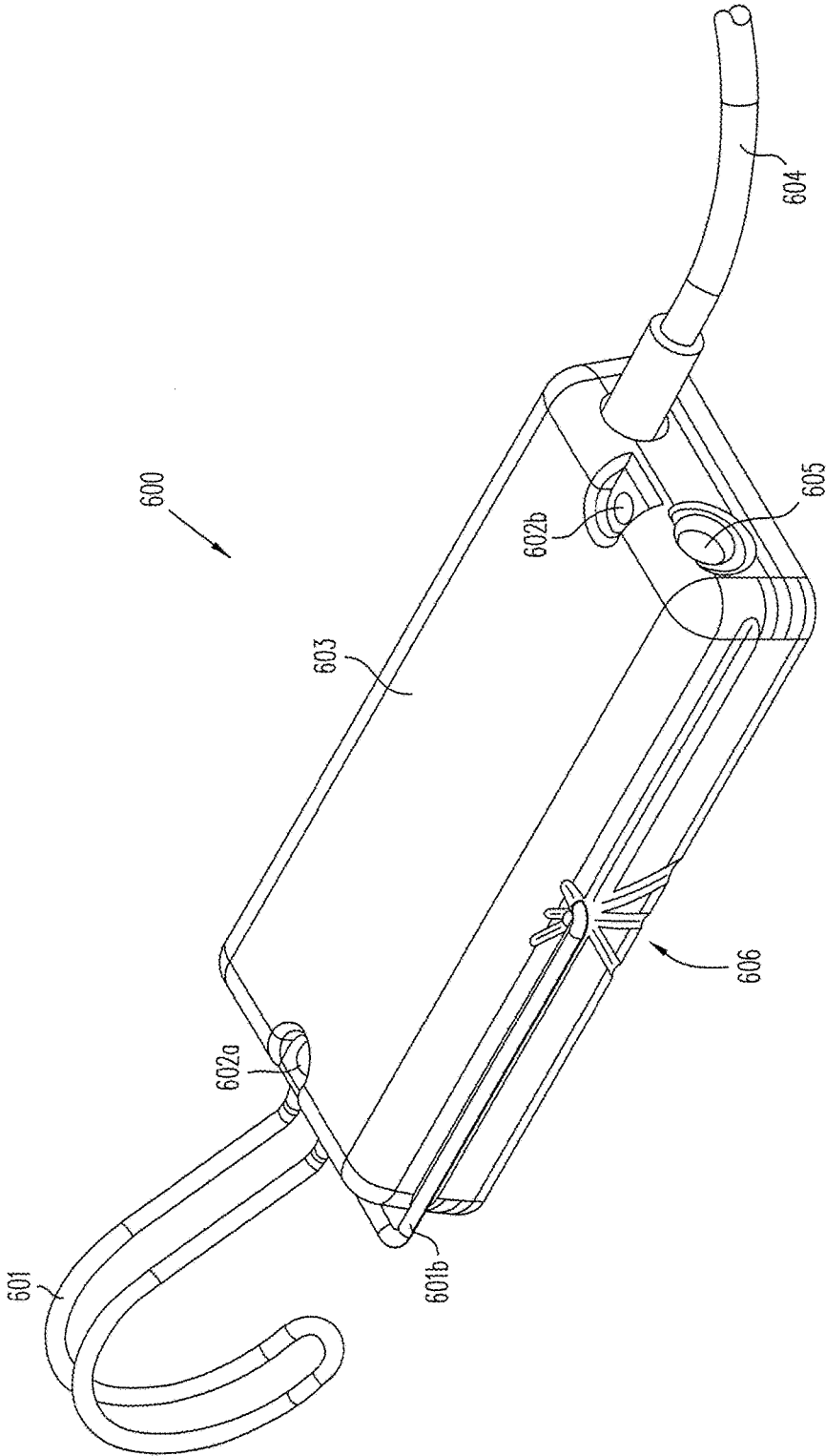


FIG. 6(b)

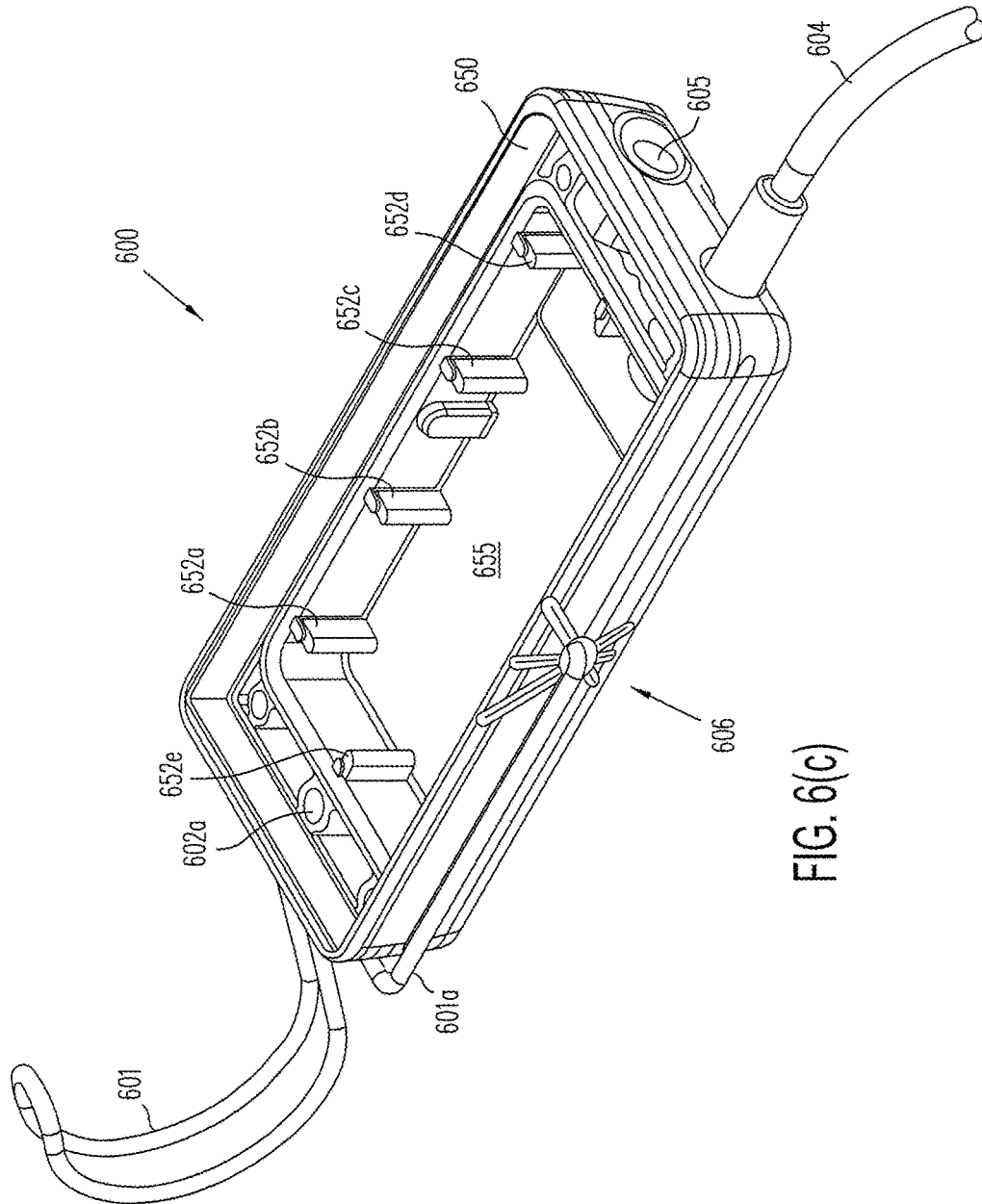


FIG. 6(c)

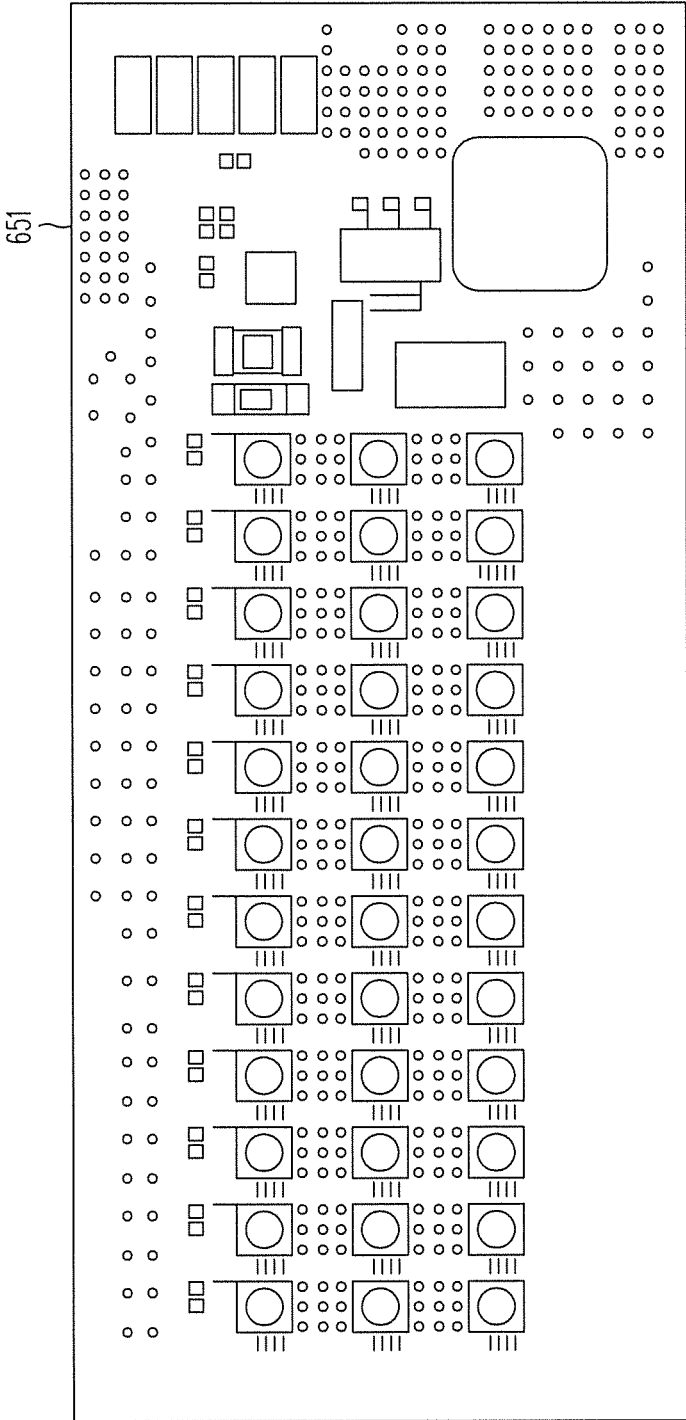


FIG. 6(d)

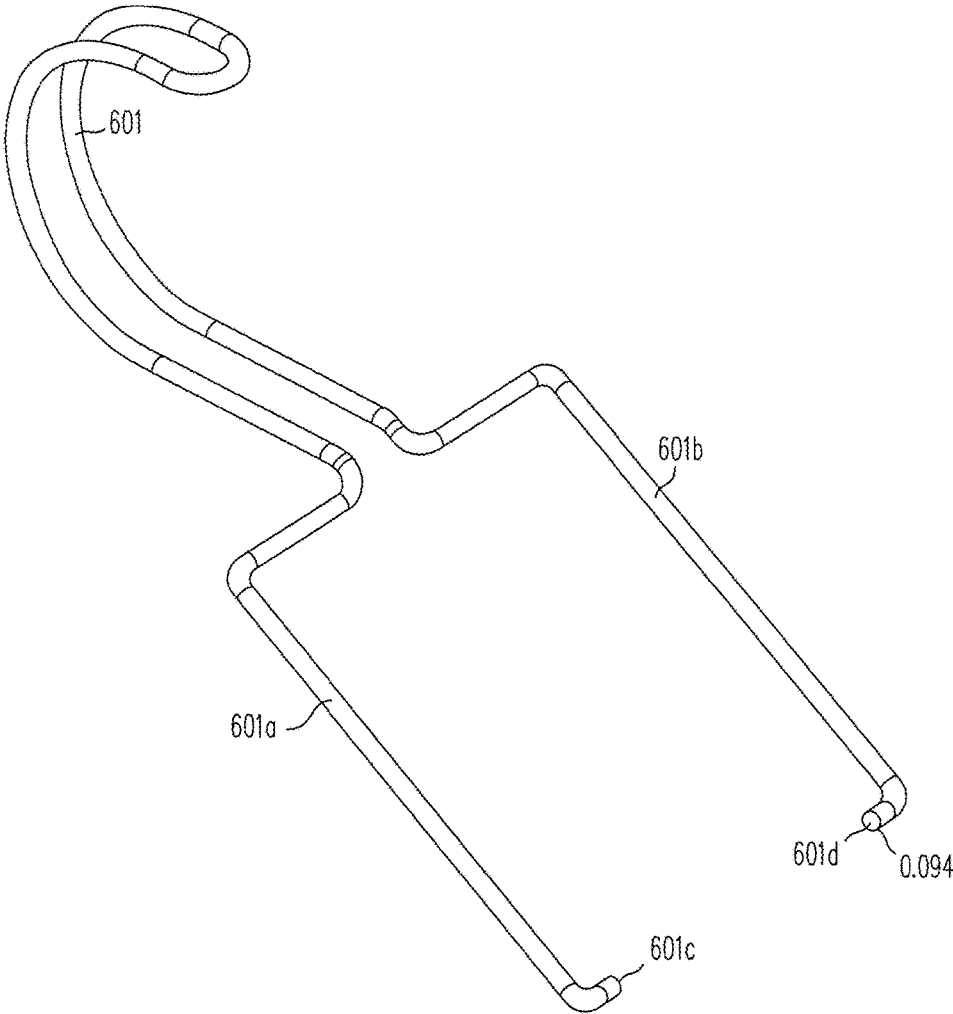


FIG. 6(e)

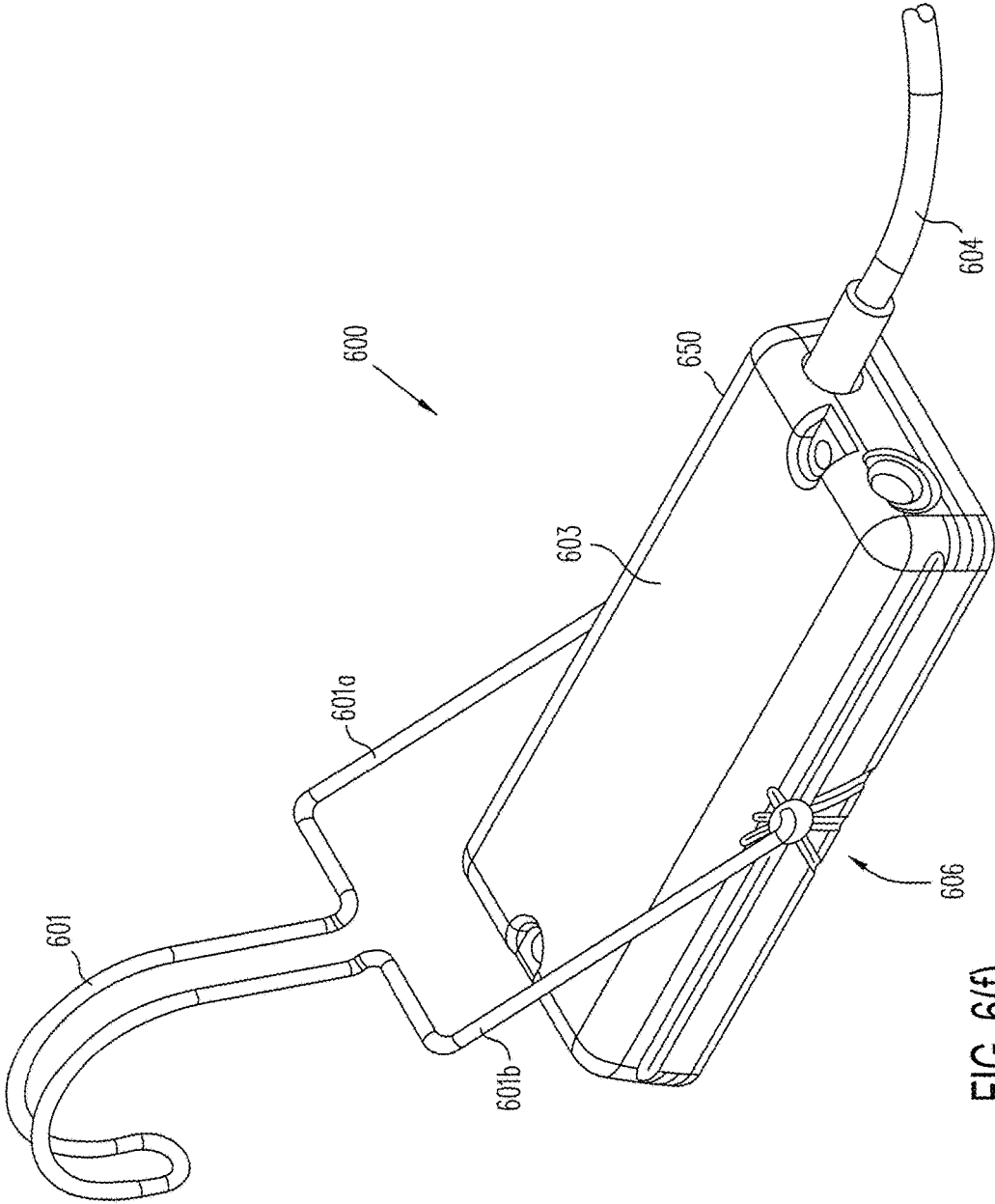


FIG. 6(f)

PORTABLE SOLAR POWER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a portable system for energy management; in particular, the present invention relates to a portable system for capturing and managing solar energy for use in lighting and other applications of a health care facility in a rural area.

2. Discussion of the Related Art

Many parts of the world still lack a reliable source of electricity for supporting essential health care services (e.g., mid-wife services or other emergency services) provided after dark. The required source of electricity is essential to provide adequate lighting for patient examination and power to operate simple diagnostic devices or to perform simple medical procedures. In the past, diesel or gasoline-powered local generators were often used. However, such systems are not only costly to acquire and maintain, their operations also depend on fuel being reliably accessible and available, which is often not the case. In addition, these local generation systems require some level of expertise to operate, which may not be readily available in many locations. Consequently, such local generation systems are seldom efficiently used, or are able to remain serviceable over even a significant fraction of their expected lifespan. These local generation systems also require the facility to provide infrastructure support (e.g., semi-permanent wiring), as they are not portable. Thus, the fact still remains that after-dark essential health care services are denied to many communities because of a lack of reliable source of electricity.

Therefore, there is a long-felt need for a portable power management system (e.g., one that can be transported in a protective container, such as a suitcase) that can provide adequate lighting for patient examination, and power to operate simple diagnostic devices or to perform simple medical procedures.

SUMMARY

According to one embodiment of the present invention, a power management system includes (i) a solar panel interface to one or more solar panels, the solar panel interface providing wiring for: (a) receiving solar panel sensing signal representative of a voltage in the solar panels and (b) conducting one or more electrical currents received from the solar panels; (ii) an energy storage interface to one or more energy storage devices, the energy storage interface providing wiring for: (a) receiving an energy storage sensing signal representative of a voltage in the energy storage devices and (b) conducting one or more electrical currents received from or provided to the energy storage devices; (iii) a charging circuit which routes the electrical currents from the solar panels to the wiring for conducting electrical currents received from or provided to the energy storage devices; (iv) a load interface to one or more load devices, the load interface providing wiring for: (a) receiving a load sensing signal representative of a voltage in the load devices and (b) conducting one or more electrical currents in each of a primary load circuit and a secondary load circuit; and a (v) controller for operating the solar panel interface, the energy storage interface, the charging circuit and the load interface.

According to one embodiment of the present invention, the power management system further includes (i) a programmable controller in the secondary load circuit receiving

the solar panel sensing signal, the energy storage sensing signal and the load sensing signal; and (ii) a load control circuit which routes the electrical currents from the energy storage devices to the wiring for conducting electrical signals in the load interface, the load control circuit being capable of activating or deactivating the secondary load circuit independently of the primary load circuit. Based on the states of these signals, the programmable controller activates and deactivates power supplied to load devices in the secondary load circuit.

The power management system may include a housing that encloses the solar panel interface, the energy storage interface, the charging circuit, the load interface, the controller, at least one of the solar panels and at least one of the energy storage devices. In that configuration, the management system is portable. In one embodiment, the housing further encloses the programmable controller and the load control circuit. The energy storage devices may be provided by one or more lead acid batteries or lithium ion batteries. According to one embodiment of the present invention, for lithium ion batteries, the programmable controller may execute a method for waking up the battery. The method may perform the battery wake-up operation when one or more of the following conditions are satisfied: (a) the suitcase battery does not present a usable voltage; (b) the solar panel sensing signal indicates a voltage suitable for performing a charging operation on the battery; (c) previous wake-up operations have not exceed a predetermined maximum number; and (d) an elapsed time between the wake-up operation and an immediately preceding wake-up operation exceeds a predetermined time period.

In one embodiment, to ensure that priority is given to lighting, the programmable controller maintains a score relevant to determining whether to activate or to deactivate the secondary load circuit. The score may be increased when the solar panel sensing signal and the load sensing signal both indicate a favorable power condition. The score may be decreased when the solar panel sensing signal and the energy storage sensing signal together indicate an unfavorable condition for charging the energy storage devices, or when the energy storage sensing signal indicates that the energy stored in the energy storage devices is less than a predetermined value. In one instance, the secondary load circuit is activated for a predetermined time period when the score exceeds a predetermined value. In addition, the secondary load circuit may be deactivated when the energy storage sensing signal indicates that the energy stored in the energy storage devices is less than a predetermined value. Under that condition, the score is set to zero upon deactivating the secondary load circuit.

According to one embodiment of the present invention, the power management system includes one or more light emitting diode-based (LED) lights operating on the primary load circuit. In that example, each of the LED lights is capable of being dimmed in response to a control signal from the controller. In one example, the amount of dimming depends on the duty cycle of the control signal. The controller determines the duty cycle based on the solar panel sensing signal, the energy storage sensing signal and the load sensing signal. In addition, each of the LED lights is capable of being programmed to be dimmed to a predetermined minimum brightness.

The present invention is better understood upon consideration of the detailed description below, in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1(a) shows a block diagram of portable power management system 100, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 1(b) shows a block diagram of circuit 200, which is an implementation of an optional plug-in accessory to circuit 152 of power management system 100, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. 2(a1), 2(a2), 2(a3) and 2(b) show smart box circuit 200 in further detail schematically, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. 3(a), 3(b) and 3(c) show circuit 300, which represents an LED light that can be actively dimmed under computer control, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 4 illustrates a method executed in CPU 270 for asserting control signal 212, which activates battery charging circuit 201, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 5 illustrates a method for ensuring priority is given to using the battery's energy to provide lighting, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

FIGS. 6(a) and 6(b) show, respectively, back and front views of an LED light assembly 600, according to one embodiment of the present invention.

FIG. 6(c) provides the back view of housing 650 with back plate 602 and a printed circuit board (PCB) removed.

FIG. 6(d) shows PCB 651 on which numerous LED devices may be mounted; PCB 651 may be mounted on housing 650.

FIG. 6(e) shows hanger 601 by itself.

FIG. 6(f) shows housing 650 being fixed to one of the grooves in pattern 606, with back surface 603 forming a 45° angle relative to arms 601a and 601b.

To facilitate cross-referencing among the figures, like elements are assigned like reference numerals.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

To overcome the deficiencies of the prior art, the present invention provides a portable solar power management system that receives and stores solar energy in the daytime, and which dispenses power during the day and after dark. Such a portable power management system is suitable for use at a small to medium size health center (HC) in certain parts of the developing world. Typically, such an HC may be on or off a power grid. Thus, the solar power management system may be relied upon as a primary source of energy, a back-up system, or a cost-reduction device for a room in such a facility. In this detailed description, portable solar power management systems designed for maternal and child health (MCH) applications are used to illustrate the present invention. In a MCH application, the portable solar power management system provides sufficient power for illumination and sufficient power to perform delivery services or C-sections. The present invention is, of course, not so limited. As the systems according to the present invention are portable, they can be easily transported to support emergency response after a natural disaster, or to be used in any temporary installation.

FIG. 1(a) shows a block diagram of portable power management system 100, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. Portable power management system 100 is designed to allow its components and selected accessories to be packed in a suitcase for portability. In one

embodiment, the suitcase measures approximately 20 by 16 by 8 inches and weighs about 35 pounds. In general, such a suitcase may be considered portable if it can be transported manually without difficulty using no more than two average able-bodied adults. As shown in FIG. 1, portable power management system includes one or more solar panels 101 that are expected to be kept in the sunlight to capture solar power during operation and are sized to fit also in the suitcase during transportation. Each of solar panels 101 may be built out of photovoltaic cells to provide a maximum output power of approximately 20 watts, at a nominal output voltage of at least about 12 volts. Under control of controller 102, output currents of the solar panels 101 may be used to charge energy storage devices 106 and 107. In one implementation, energy storage device 106 is a battery built into the suitcase, while storage device 107 may be an optional additional battery that can be connected to portable power management system 100. Each of storage devices 106 and 107 may be a commercially available sealed lead acid battery or a lithium iron phosphate battery. These batteries also operate at approximately 12 volts. To prevent an over-voltage condition in the battery charging circuit, the input terminals of the batteries (and, hence, also the output terminals of solar panels 101) are limited by charge controller 102. When the battery is a type of lithium ion battery, a protective method to recover from battery over-discharge by "waking up" the battery may be provided, in accordance with the present invention, as illustrated in detail by flow chart 400 of FIG. 4, which is discussed in further detail below. Other batteries may also be used, with controller 102 providing suitable control of the charging process.

The power stored in the batteries is used to supply power to circuits 151 and 152. Circuit 151 is designed for supplying power to lighting. In one embodiment, circuit 151 may provide high-efficiency, rugged and water-resistant light emitting diode (LED) lights. Typically, each such light may provide very bright white spectrum light (e.g., 5400° to 5600° K) at 2-8 watts, suitable for medical procedure use. As providing lighting after dark is an important purpose for the present invention, to avoid inadvertent inappropriate use or abuse, circuit 151 supplies only sockets for special lighting connectors (e.g., M12 light connectors). In FIG. 1(a), these sockets are represented by primary circuits 103. In one embodiment, additional circuit sockets, represented extension circuits 108, may be provided by connecting a satellite kit on which the additional sockets are mounted. The satellite kit may be used to provide lighting, for example, in an adjacent room without its own portable power management system.

Circuit 152 is provided to provide power to operate low-power electronic devices, such as handheld medical diagnostic devices, cellular telephones, and portable computers. As after-dark lighting is deemed more essential, circuit 200 is included to activate circuit 152 only when an adequate level of energy has been stored in the batteries. This operation is discussed in further detail below in conjunction with FIG. 5. Circuit 152 may supply power through various outlets of different convenient voltages, represented in FIG. 1(a) by secondary circuit 105. These power outlets may be, for example, automotive power outlets (e.g., 12 volts standard cigarette lighter sockets), 12-volt binding posts, and USB sockets. These sockets may supply power to communication or computation devices (e.g., cellular telephones, tablet or notebook computers), or medical or diagnostic equipment (e.g., portable fetal heart rate Doppler sensor, examination headlamps, blood pressure meters).

Communication devices have become increasingly useful as diagnostic devices because remote diagnostic techniques have come into greater use.

Power switch **104** is prominently located to ensure easy access should system shut down be necessary under emergency conditions.

Controller **102** also provides a user interface for communicating operational information regarding power management system **100**. For example, portable power management system **100** includes LED lights to indicate battery charging and battery charge status. In addition, a liquid crystal display (LCD) panel may also be provided to indicate the current output voltage of the batteries, the charging current from solar panels **101**, and the total output currents being drawn in circuits **103**, **151**, and **152**.

In one embodiment, circuit **152** may include an optional "plug-in" accessory ("smart box") that provides control to "luxury load" and to waking-up an over-discharged lithium ion battery. FIG. **1(b)** is a block diagram of circuit **200**, which is an implementation of the smart box according to one embodiment of the present invention. As shown in FIG. **1(b)**, circuit **200** interfaces circuit **152** through connector **172**, which includes solar panel sensing signal **181**, battery sensing signal **182**, and load sensing signal **183**. In one embodiment, (i) solar panel sensing signal **181** indicates a voltage supplied by solar panels **101**, which may be between 0 and 25 volts; (ii) battery sensing signal **182** indicates a voltage supplied by energy storage devices **106** or **107**, which may be between 0 and 14 volts; and load sensing signal **183** indicates a voltage of load devices, which may be between 0 and 14 volts. The sensing signals are received in to microcontroller **176**, which controls lithium battery wake-up circuit **171** for waking-up an over-discharged lithium battery and luxury load switch **174**. Luxury load switch **174** activates circuit **152** in accordance with the load management method described below in conjunction with FIG. **5**. Power supply circuit **163** provides a supply voltage to operate microcontroller **176**. The operation of microcontroller **176** augments the control operations of controller **102** of FIG. **1(a)**.

FIGS. **2(a1)**, **2(a2)**, **2(a3)** and **2(b)** show smart box circuit **200** in further detail schematically, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. FIG. **2(b)** shows a programmable controller in circuit **200** which is implemented using central processing unit (CPU) **270**. FIG. **2(a1)**, **2(a2)**, **2(a3)** shows the remainder of circuit **200**, including lithium battery wakeup circuit **201**, secondary load circuit **251** and auxiliary input circuit **275**. As shown in FIG. **2(a)**, battery wakeup circuit **201** is activated by control signal **212** (when conditions illustrated by flow chart **400** of FIG. **4** are met).

As shown in FIG. **2(b)**, after appropriate low pass filtering, CPU **270** receives sensing signals from (i) the batteries (at terminal **213**), (ii) solar panels (at terminal **211**), (iii) load circuit **251** (at terminal **261**) and auxiliary input circuit **275** (at terminal **264**), and sending out control signals to activate lithium battery wakeup circuit **201** (at terminal **212**), the secondary load circuit (at terminal **262**) and auxiliary input circuit (at terminal **263**). As shown in FIGS. **2(a1)**, **2(a2)**, **2(a3)**, each of the sensing signals is low-pass filtered to eliminate glitches. CPU **270** may be implemented, for example, by a microcontroller, such as the ATtiny44, available from Atmel Corporation, San Jose, Calif.

Secondary load circuit **105** ("luxury loads") receives power via secondary load circuit **251** only when solar panels **101** provides an output voltage at terminal **214** that is greater than the battery voltage at terminal **215**. The voltage of solar

panels **101** at terminal **215** and the voltage of the battery at terminal **215** are provided to CPU **270** at terminals **211** and **213**, respectively, and are used in the algorithm depicted in flowchart **500** of FIG. **5**. When conditions discussed in flowchart **500** are met, secondary load circuit **251** is activated by the control signal from CPU **270** at terminal **262**, thereby enabling power to become available to circuit **105** (FIG. **1**).

Circuit **200** includes power circuit **280**, which supplies the power necessary to operate circuit **200**. As shown in FIGS. **2(a1)**, **2(a2)**, **2(a3)**, circuit **280** includes a buffer circuit which limits power loss over the wide range of input voltages from the solar power source. Circuit **280** may power circuit **280** from the load (terminal **216**, solar panels (terminal **214**), or the batteries (terminal **215**).

Auxiliary circuit **275**, which is activated by a control signal at terminal **263** from CPU **270**, switches auxiliary loads as needed. Auxiliary sensing signal at terminal **217** may be an external input signal to circuit **200**, which may be used in conjunction with or separately from auxiliary load circuit **275**, as needed.

According to one embodiment of the present invention, an LED light that can be actively dimmed to under computer control may be provided, as illustrated by circuit **300** FIGS. **3(a)**, **3(b)** and **3(c)**. As shown in FIGS. **3(a)**, **3(b)** and **3(c)**, circuit **300** includes an array of LEDs **310** being controlled by high-brightness LED driver **311**. High-brightness LED driver **311** may be provided, for example, by a high-brightness LED driver integrated circuit, such as the HV9919, available from Supertex Inc., Sunnyvale Calif., High-brightness LED driver **311** receives a pulse-width modulated (PWM) control signal at terminal **312** whose duty cycles control the brightness of LED **310**. In addition, high-brightness LED driver **311** can be programmed using resistors **R17**, **R18**, **R19**, and **R20** to provide a minimum brightness. CPU **270** may be programmed to provide the PWM controls signal at terminal **312**.

FIGS. **6(a)** and **6(b)** show, respectively, back and front views of an LED light assembly **600**, according to one embodiment of the present invention. As shown in FIGS. **6(a)** and **6(b)**, light assembly **600** includes housing **650** and hanger **601**. As shown in FIG. **6(a)**, back plate **602** provides a covering to housing **650**. Housing **650** encloses a printed circuit board (PCB) on which numerous LED devices may be mounted. One example of such a PCB is provided by PCB **651** shown in FIG. **6(d)**. As shown in FIG. **6(d)**, PCB **651** includes, for example, a 3x12 array of LED devices, together with circuitry for driving the LEDs. PCB **651** may implement, for example, circuit **300** of FIG. **3**. Cable assembly **604** electrically connects PCB **651** to circuit **151** of FIG. **1(a)** via a through-hole in housing **650**. FIG. **6(c)** provides the back view of housing **650** with back plate **602** and PCB **651** removed. As shown in FIG. **6(c)**, housing **650** includes cavity **655** for accommodating PCB **651**, with set-offs **652a-652d** for mounting PCB **651**. Back plate **602** may be a thermally conductive plate (e.g., anodized aluminum), which is designed to contact PCB **651** (e.g., press against a surface of PCB **651**) to allow heat from the electronics and the LED devices to dissipate through back plate **602**. As shown in FIG. **6(a)**, back plate **602** is formed with heat sink features (e.g., the parallel raised portions or ridges) to provide increased surface area, so as to facilitate heat dissipation. In one embodiment, front surface **603** is integrally formed on housing **650** using a clear material (e.g., acrylic glass), so that front surface **603** may act as a lens for projection of light from the LED devices in the direction where illumination is desired. A proper treatment of front

surface **603** may provide uniform and diffused light from the LED devices. Housing **650** includes through holes **602a** and **602b**, so that housing **650** may be fixedly mounted on a flat surface, such as a ceiling. Housing **650** also includes threaded hole **605** to allow housing **650** to be screw-mounted in a number of ways, such as a tripod or clamped on to a table top via a “clamp and flexible goose-neck” assembly.

As shown in FIGS. **6(a)** and **6(b)**, housing **650** is attached to hanger **601**, which is independently shown in FIG. **6(e)**. Hanger **601** allows LED assembly **600** to be relatively portable and be hung at any suitable height to provide illumination. As shown in FIG. **6(e)**, hanger **601** includes a curved portion for attachment to, for example, a horizontal hanger bar. Hanger **601** also includes arms **601a** and **601b** which extend to elbow portions **601c** and **601d**, respectively. Elbows **601c** and **601d** are designed to be inserted into corresponding openings provided on opposite sides of housing **650**, as shown in FIGS. **6(a)** and **6(b)**. In hanger **601**'s relaxed state, i.e., when not attached to housing **650**, the distance between arms **601a** and **601b** at elbows **601c** and **601d** is slightly less than the distance between these openings of housing **650**. Radiating from the openings on housing **650** where elbows **601c** and **601d** are to be attached is a pattern of grooves. In FIGS. **6(a)** and **6(b)**, the grooves are labeled pattern **606**. Each groove in pattern **606** is designed to accommodate one of the arms **601a** and **601b**. For example, when arms **601a** and **601b** are formed with a circular cross section, each groove is formed with a semi-circular cross section with a diameter matching the diameter of arms **601a** and **601b**. (Arms **601a** and **601b** need not have a circular cross section). To attach hanger **601** to housing **650**, arms **601a** and **601b** are pulled apart slightly to insert elbows **601c** and **601d** into the corresponding openings on housing **650**, so that a spring action in arms **601a** and **601b** provides a compressive force to secure arms **601a** and **601b** to their respective grooves on housing **650**, and thereby to lock housing **650** to a fixed position suitable for providing illumination from a desired angle. As shown in FIGS. **6(a)** and **6(b)**, pattern **606** includes grooves that are 45° apart, so that housing **650** may be fixed at any of eight different positions. For example, FIG. **6(f)** shows housing **650** being fixed to one of the grooves in pattern **606**, with front surface **603** forming a 45° angle relative to arms **601a** and **601b**.

As mentioned above, FIG. **4** shows a method which recovers from over-discharge of the battery. When a lithium ion battery pack is fully discharged, a conventional charging circuit may fail to recharge the battery. This is a situation frequently seen in an off-grid solar power system. Accordingly, circuit **200** has built-in lithium ion battery waking up circuit **201** that allows circuit **200** to run on either battery power or solar power. When the lithium ion battery is fully depleted and is unable to be charged by the conventional charging circuit under control of controller **102**, battery ion waking-up circuit **201** is energized to allow solar power to flow into the battery pack, until normal solar charging can resume.

As shown in FIG. **4**, step **401** represents a monitoring step in which the battery's voltage is checked. At step **402**, if the battery's voltage is found to have dropped below a predetermined threshold (e.g., 3 volts), the voltage at the output terminal of solar panels **101** is checked at step **403**. If the voltage at the output terminal of solar panels **101** is found to be sufficiently high (i.e., exceeding a threshold above which battery charging is feasible), the method proceeds to step **405**. Otherwise, the wake-up procedure is postponed until the next time the battery voltage is checked at step **401**. At

step **405**, a “wake up attempt” counter is checked to determine if the battery has undergone more than a maximum number of wake-up attempts. (This maximum number is set to a value that should not be reached under normal usage conditions). If the battery has not reached this maximum number of wake-up attempts, the elapsed time since the last wake-up attempt is checked at step **406**. A battery fault condition is indicated if the elapsed time between wake-up attempts is too short (i.e., the battery's voltage is dropping too quickly to the over-discharged state). The elapsed time may be determined, for example, from a down-counter set at the end of the last wake-up attempt. If the fault condition is not indicated, i.e., the down-counter has not reached zero, the wake-up procedure is initiated to bring the battery to the boosted voltage. Activation of the wake-up procedure is indicated by an LED controlled by circuit **200** at step **408**. At step **409**, the wake up attempt counter is incremented to account for the current attempt. At step **410**, the down-counter is set at the minimum elapsed time between wake-up attempts.

To ensure priority is given to using the battery's energy to provide lighting, a method that is based on a “power credit” system is provided in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. This method is illustrated by flow chart **500** in FIG. **5**. As shown in FIG. **5**, at step **501**, the solar panel's output voltage is checked to determine if it is at least one volt higher than the battery's voltage. The higher solar panel voltage—a favorable condition—indicates that battery charging is complete or nearly complete. If the solar panel voltage is favorable, at step **502**, the voltage across the load is checked if it is at least a predetermined value (e.g., 12.6 volts). This ensures that the battery is full or nearly full. Under that condition, at step **503**, a small value (e.g., 1) is added to a power credit account to indicate the favorable energy condition.

Next, step **504** determines if the solar panel voltage is actually less than the battery voltage. If so, a small value (e.g., 1) is deducted from the power credit account. At step **506**, if the battery voltage is also less than, for example, 12 volts, a greater value (e.g., 2) is deducted from the power credit account.

At step **508**, the power account balance is checked to see if there is sufficient power credit to allow non-lighting applications. For example, to allow non-lighting applications, the power credit account must have a value exceeding **25**. At steps **509** and **510**, the circuit supplying the non-lighting applications (“the luxury circuit”) is activated for a predetermined time period (e.g., 30 minutes). Steps **511** and **512** deactivate secondary load circuit **251** at the end of the predetermined time period. At any time during the predetermined time period, step **513** determines if the battery voltage falls below a predetermined threshold (e.g., 11.5 volts). If so, secondary load circuit **251** is also deactivated (step **514**) and the power credit account is set to zero (step **515**), as the rapid battery voltage drop indicates an unfavorable condition. After a period of delay (e.g., one second, at step **516**), the method returns to step **501**.

In one embodiment, a power management system of the present invention may provide at least 350 watt-hours (wh) of power per day and up to about 600 wh per day. In one embodiment, one configuration of a power management system of the present invention may be, for example:

TABLE I

Descriptive power consumption		Daytime energy	Night time energy (wh)
Lights	2 lights-300 lumens-12 hours per night 1 light-100 lumens-12	32	132 wh
Computer	1 computer fully charged per day	100	0
Tablet	1 tablet fully charged per day	30	
Cell phones	5 dumb phones (5 wh) + 2 smart phones (15 wh) charged per day	55	
Cell phones	2 dumb phone	0	10 wh
Fetal Doppler	Device charged for 3 uses per day; 30 minutes total	2	
Headlamps	Rechargeable daily-use 2 Headlamps (total) (full battery)	20	
Total		239 wh	142 wh

The power management system of the present invention requires little to no understanding by the user of the operation of a solar energy system, as key visual indicators are provided to inform the user whether or not the system is functioning properly and the level of power available. In addition, with the sensing signals provided to the controller, the controller can be easily programmed to provide a real time estimate of how much power remains at the current rate of power usage. The ability of a controller of the present invention to automatically vary the brightness of the lighting based on the instant power condition through the dimmer circuits allows efficient management of available power.

The above detailed description is provided to illustrate specific embodiments of the present invention and is not intended to be limiting. Numerous modifications and variations within the scope of the present invention are possible. The present invention is set forth in the accompanying claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. A power management system, comprising:

a solar panel interface to one or more solar panels, the solar panel interface comprising wiring for: (a) receiving solar panel sensing signal representative of a voltage in the solar panels and (b) conducting one or more electrical currents received from the solar panels;

an energy storage interface to one or more energy storage devices, the energy storage interface comprising wiring for: (a) receiving an energy storage sensing signal representative of a voltage in the energy storage devices and (b) conducting one or more electrical currents received from or provided to the energy storage devices;

a charging circuit which routes the electrical currents from the solar panels to the wiring for conducting electrical currents received from or provided to the energy storage devices;

a load interface to a plurality of load devices, each load device being connected to either a primary load circuit or a secondary load circuit, the load interface comprising wiring for: (a) receiving a load sensing signal representative of a voltage in the load devices and (b) conducting electrical currents to the primary load circuit and to the secondary load circuit;

a controller for operating the solar panel interface, the energy storage interface, the charging circuit and the load interface,

a programmable controller which executes a method for waking up the one or more energy storage devices, wherein the method performs a wake-up operation on the one or more energy storage devices when an

elapsed time between the wake-up operation and an immediately preceding wake-up operation exceeds a predetermined time period; and

a secondary load control circuit which routes the electrical currents from the energy storage devices to the wiring for conducting electrical signals in the load interface, the secondary load control circuit being capable of activating or deactivating the secondary load circuit independently of the primary load circuit.

2. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the programmable controller receives the solar panel sensing signal, the energy storage sensing signal and the load sensing signal, and wherein the programmable controller directs the secondary load control circuit to activate or deactivate the secondary load circuit based on the solar panel sensing signal, the energy storage sensing signal and the load sensing signal.

3. The power management system of claim 1, further comprising a lithium ion battery wake-up circuit.

4. The power management system of claim 1, further comprising a housing for enclosing the solar panel interface, the energy storage interface, the charging circuit, the load interface, the secondary load control circuit, the programmable controller, at least one of the solar panels and at least one of the energy storage devices.

5. The power management system of claim 4, wherein the secondary load control circuit and the programmable controller are provided as an optional plug-in module.

6. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the power management system is portable.

7. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the energy storage devices include one or more lead acid batteries.

8. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the energy storage devices comprises a battery based on lithium ions.

9. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the method performs a wake-up operation on the battery when the solar panel sensing signal and battery sensing signals indicate voltages suitable for performing a charging operation on the battery.

10. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the method performs a wake-up operation on the battery when previous wake-up operations have not exceed a predetermined maximum number.

11. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the secondary load control circuit comprises a low-dropout voltage regulator for supplying a regulated voltage to control circuitry.

12. The power management system of claim 1, wherein the programmable controller maintains a score relevant to determining whether to activate or to deactivate the secondary load circuit.

13. The power management system of claim 12, wherein the programmable controller increases the score when the solar panel sensing signal and the load sensing signal both indicate a favorable power condition.

14. The power management system of claim 12, wherein the programmable controller decreases the score when the solar panel sensing signal and the energy storage sensing signal together indicate an unfavorable condition for charging the energy storage devices.

15. The power management system of claim 14, wherein the programmable controller further decreases the score when the energy storage sensing signal indicates that the energy stored in the energy storage devices is less than a predetermined value.

16. The power management system of claim 12, wherein the secondary load circuit is activated when the score exceeds a predetermined value.

17. The power management system of claim 16, wherein the secondary load circuit is activated for a predetermined time period. 5

18. The power management system of claim 16, wherein the secondary load circuit is deactivated when the energy storage sensing signal indicates that the energy stored in the energy storage devices is less than a predetermined value. 10

19. The power management system of claim 18, wherein the score is set to zero upon deactivating the secondary load circuit.

20. The power management system of claim 1, further comprising one or more light emitting diode-based (LED) lights operating on the primary load circuit. 15

21. The power management system of claim 20, wherein each of the LED lights is capable of being dimmed in response to a control signal from the programmable controller. 20

22. The power management system of claim 20, wherein each of the LED lights is capable of being programmed to be dimmed to a predetermined minimum brightness.

23. The power management system of claim 20, wherein each LED light is dimmed by an amount related to a duty cycle of the control signal. 25

24. The power management system of claim 23, wherein the programmable controller determines the duty cycle of the control signal in response to the solar panel sensing signal, the energy storage sensing signal and the load sensing signal. 30

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