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United States Patent [19] Forbes

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- [54] **FLASH MEMORY WITH NANOCRYSTALLINE SILICON FILM FLOATING GATE**
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- [51] **Int. Cl.⁶** **H01L 29/788**
- [52] **U.S. Cl.** **257/315; 257/316; 257/321**
- [58] **Field of Search** **257/315, 316, 257/314, 321, 325, 322, 324**

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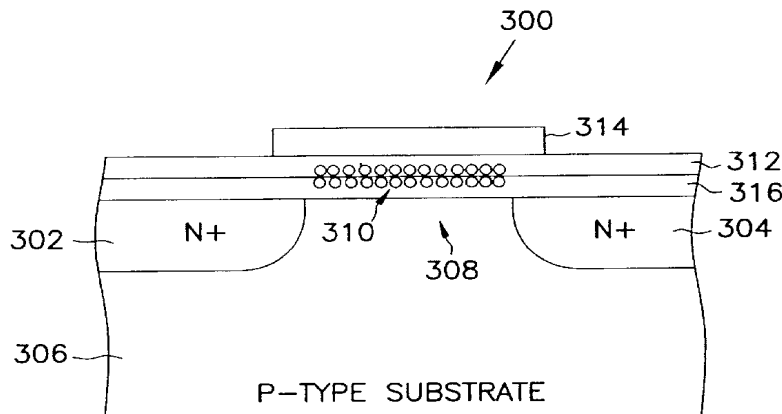
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[57] **ABSTRACT**

A memory is described which has memory cells that store data using hot electron injection. The data is erased through electron tunneling. The memory cells are described as floating gate transistors wherein the floating gate is fabricated using a conductive layer of nanocrystalline silicon particles. Each nanocrystalline silicon particle has a diameter of about 10 Å to 100 Å. The nanocrystalline silicon particles are in contact such that a charge stored on the floating gate is shared between the particles. The floating gate has a reduced electron affinity to allow for data erase operations using lower voltages.

7 Claims, 3 Drawing Sheets



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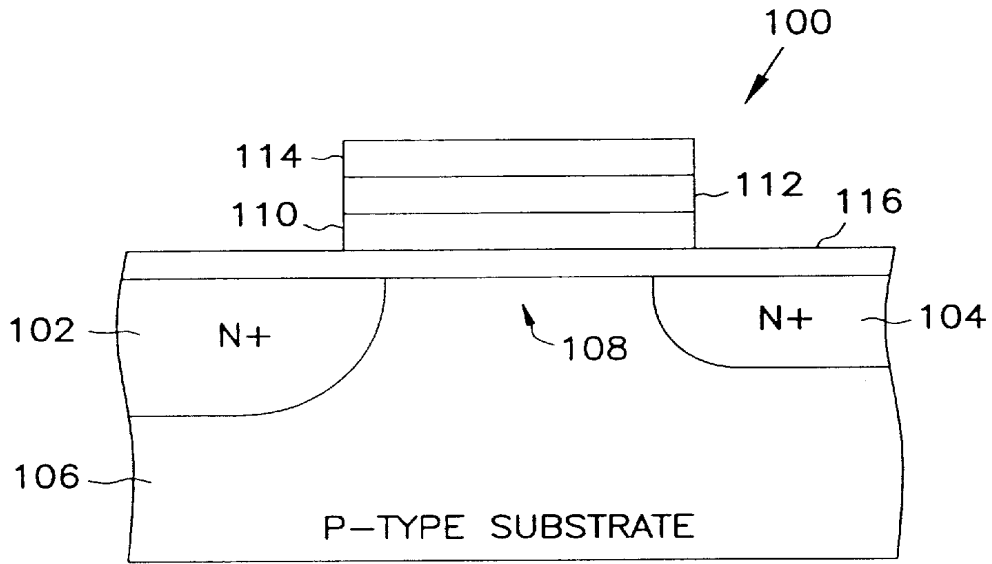


FIG. 1 (PRIOR ART)

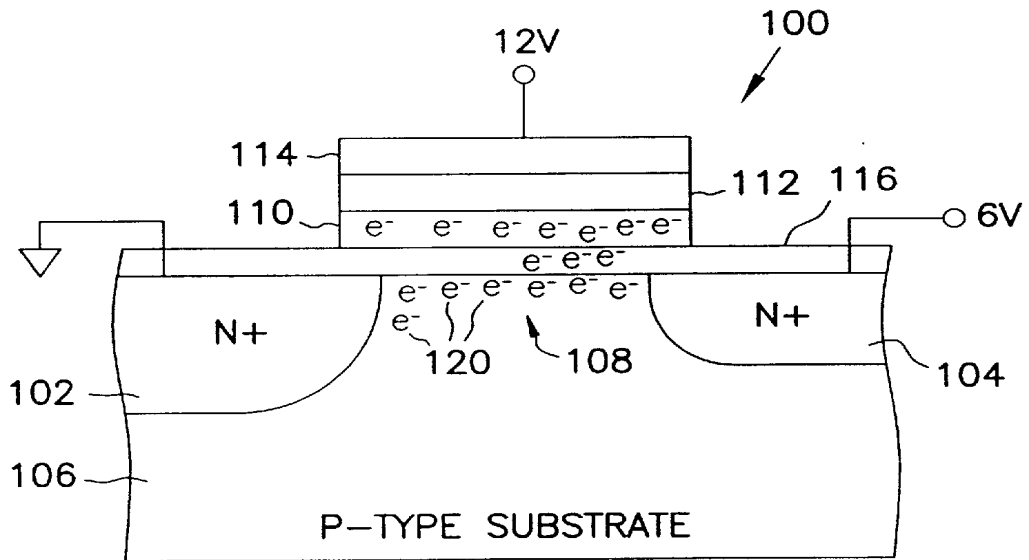


FIG. 2 (PRIOR ART)

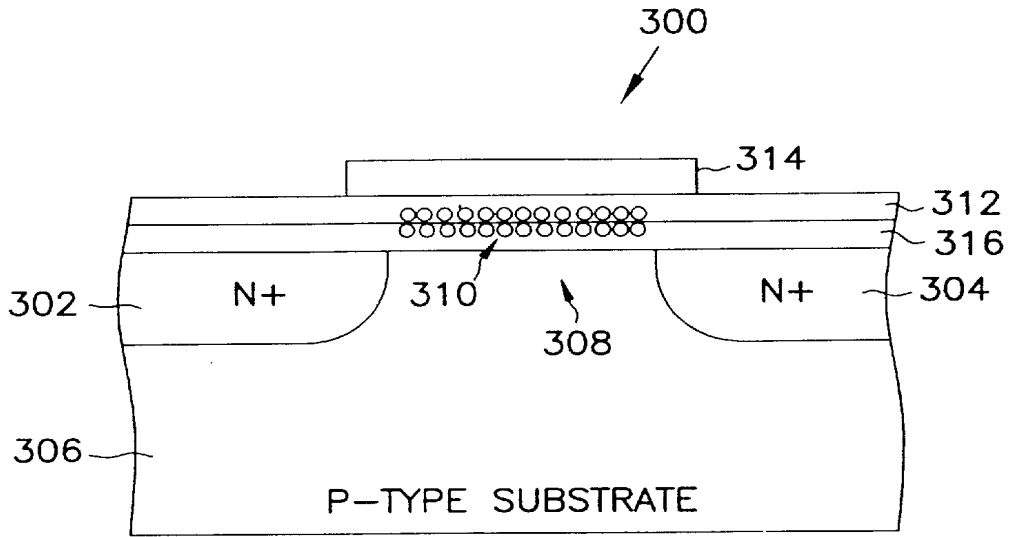


FIG. 3

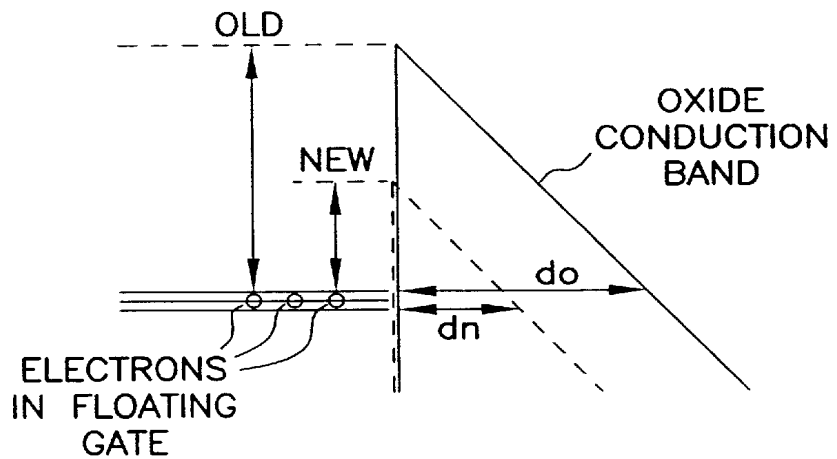


FIG. 4

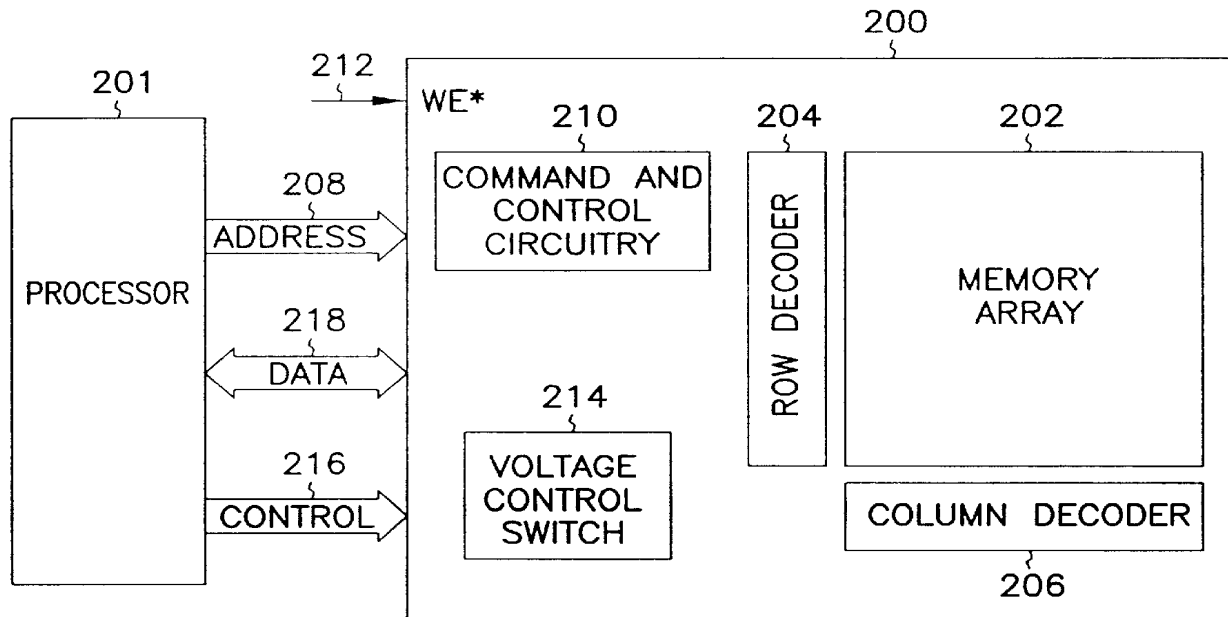


FIG. 5

FLASH MEMORY WITH NANOCRYSTALLINE SILICON FILM FLOATING GATE

TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to memory circuits and in particular the present invention relates to floating gate memory cells.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Non-volatile memory such as electrically programmable read-only memory (EPROM) and electrically-erasable programmable read-only memory (EEPROM) are extensively used for storing data in computer systems. EPROM and EEPROM comprise a large number of memory cells having electrically isolated gates, referred to as floating gates. Data is stored in the memory cells in the form of charge on the floating gates. Charge is transported to or removed from the floating gates by program and erase operations, respectively.

Another type of non-volatile memory is flash memory. Flash memory is a derivative of EPROM and EEPROM. Although flash memory shares many characteristics with EPROM and EEPROM, the current generation of flash memory differs in that erase operations are done in blocks.

A typical flash memory comprises a memory array which includes a large number of memory cells arranged in row and column fashion. Each of the memory cells include a floating gate field-effect transistor capable of holding a charge. The cells are usually grouped into blocks. Each of the cells within a block can be electrically programmed in a random basis by charging the floating gate. The charge can be removed from the floating gate by a block erase operation. The data in a cell is determined by the presence or absence of the charge in the floating gate.

Flash memories have the potential of replacing hard storage disk drives in computer systems. The advantages would be replacing a complex and delicate mechanical system with a rugged and easily portable small solid-state non-volatile memory system. There is also the possibilities that given their very high potential densities that given more speed of operation particularly in the erase operation that flash memories might be used to replace DRAMs. Flash memories might then have the ability to fill all memory needs in future computer systems.

One flash memory is described in S. Tiwari et al., "Volatile and Non-volatile Memories in Silicon with Nano-Crystal Storage," Abstr. of IEEE Int. Electron Device Meeting, pp. 521-524 (1995), which uses confined nano-crystal particles in a floating gate memory cell. The individual nano-crystals are not in electrical contact with each other, and therefore cannot share a common charge. As referred to in the art, the memory has a thin gate oxide and uses a tunnel-tunnel process for writing and reading data. A memory designed to use a tunnel-tunnel process typically has a gate oxide thickness of about 15-20 Å which can be degraded over time resulting in a defective memory.

For the reasons stated above, and for other reasons stated below which will become apparent to those skilled in the art upon reading and understanding the present specification, there is a need in the art for a fast flash memory having a floating gate memory cell which in which the floating gate has a reduced electron affinity, can share a common charge, or does not use a tunnel-tunnel process.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The above mentioned problems with memory devices and other problems are addressed by the present invention and

which will be understood by reading and studying the following specification. A memory cell is described which uses a film of nanocrystalline silicon as a floating gate.

In particular, the present invention describes an integrated circuit memory cell comprising a transistor having a source, drain, gate and a floating gate, the floating gate comprising a film of nanocrystalline silicon particles. The nanocrystalline silicon particles are in contact to form a conductive film.

In another embodiment, an integrated circuit field effect transistor is described. The transistor comprises a conductive channel separating source and drain regions, a floating gate comprising a conductive film of nanocrystalline silicon particles. The floating gate is located adjacent the channel and separated therefrom by a first insulating layer. A gate is provided adjacent the floating gate and separated therefrom by a second insulating layer.

In yet another embodiment, a memory device is described which has an array of memory cells. Each of the memory cells comprise a source region, a drain region, a conductive channel separating the source and drain regions, and a floating gate comprising a conductive film of nanocrystalline silicon particles. The floating gate is located adjacent the channel and separated therefrom by a first insulating layer. A gate is also located adjacent the floating gate and separated therefrom by a second insulating layer. The memory further comprises addressing circuitry for addressing the array of memory cells, and control circuitry for controlling read and write operations of the memory device.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a cross-sectional view of a prior art memory cell;

FIG. 2 is the memory cell of FIG. 1 during programming;

FIG. 3 is a cross-section of a memory cell incorporating a film of nanocrystalline silicon as a floating gate;

FIG. 4 is a graph of barrier height versus tunneling distance; and

FIG. 5 is a simplified block diagram of a typical flash memory incorporating the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

In the following detailed description of the preferred embodiments, reference is made to the accompanying drawings which form a part hereof, and in which is shown by way of illustration specific preferred embodiments in which the inventions may be practiced. These embodiments are described in sufficient detail to enable those skilled in the art to practice the invention, and it is to be understood that other embodiments may be utilized and that logical, mechanical and electrical changes may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the present inventions. The following detailed description is, therefore, not to be taken in a limiting sense, and the scope of the present inventions is defined only by the appended claims.

FIG. 1 is a cross-sectional view of a typical memory cell, such as a used in a flash memory. Memory cell **100** comprises a region of a source **102** and a region of a drain **104**. Source **102** and drain **104** are constructed from an N+ type of high impurity concentration which are formed in a P-type semiconductor substrate **106** of low impurity concentration. Source **102** and drain **104** are separated by a predetermined space of a channel region **108**. Memory **100** further includes a floating gate **110** formed by a first polysilicon (poly) layer, and a control gate **114** formed by a second poly layer. Floating gate **110** is isolated from control gate **114** by an

interpoly dielectric layer **112** and from channel region **108** by a thin oxide layer **116** approximately 100 angstroms (Å) thick.

FIG. 2 is the memory cell of FIG. 1 during a programming operation. During programming, a positive programming voltage of about 12 volts is applied to control gate **114**. This positive programming voltage attracts electrons **120** from P-type substrate **106** and causes them to accumulate at the surface of channel region **108**. A voltage on drain **104** is increased to about 6 volts, and the source **102** is connected to ground. As the drain-to-source voltage increases, electrons **120** flow from source **102** to drain **104** via channel region **108**. As electrons **120** travel toward drain **104**, they acquire substantially large kinetic energy and are referred to as hot electrons.

The voltages at control gate **114** and drain **104** creates an electric field in oxide layer **116**, this electric field attracts the hot electrons and accelerates them toward the floating gate **110**. At this point, floating gate **110** begins to trap and accumulate the hot electrons and starts a charging process. Gradually, as the charge on the floating gate increases, the electric field in oxide layer **116** decreases and eventually loses its capability of attracting any more of the hot electrons to floating gate **110**. At this point, floating gate **110** is fully charged. The negative charge from the hot electrons collected in the floating gate **110** raises the cell's threshold voltage (V_t) above a logic 1 voltage. When a voltage on control gate **114** is brought to a logic 1 during a read operation, the cell will barely turn on. Sense amplifiers are used in the memory to detect and amplify the state of the memory cell during a read operation. Thus, data is read from a memory cell based upon its "on" characteristics.

Electrons are removed from the floating gate to erase the memory cell. Many memories, including flash memories, use Fowler-Nordheim (FN) tunneling to erase a memory cell. The erase procedure is accomplished by electrically floating the drain, grounding the source, and applying a high negative voltage (-12 volts) to the control gate. This creates an electric field across the gate oxide and forces electrons off of the floating gate which then tunnel through the gate oxide. For a general description of how a flash memory having floating gate memory cells operates see B. Dipert et al., "Flash Memory Goes Mainstream," IEEE Spectrum, pp. 48-52 (Oct. 1993), and incorporated herein by reference.

One of the difficulties with flash memories has been the erase operation using Fowler-Nordheim tunneling. The erase operation requires high voltages, and is relatively slow. Further, an erratic over erase can be induced as a result of the very high erase voltages used. These very high erase voltages are a fundamental problem arising from the high electron affinity of bulk silicon or large grain polysilicon particles used as the floating gate. This creates a very high tunneling barrier. Even with high negative voltages applied to the gate, a large tunneling distance is experienced with a very low tunneling probability for electrons attempting to leave the floating gate. This results in long erase times since the net flux of electrons leaving the gate is low. Thus, the tunneling current discharging the gate is low. In addition, other phenomena result as a consequence of this very high negative voltage. Hole injection into the oxide is experienced which can result in erratic over erase, damage to the gate oxide itself, and the introduction of trapping states.

The solution to these problems is to use a floating gate having a lower electron affinity for electrons. Thus, a lower barrier is provided for electrons to escape over, or through by tunneling. Lower barriers require lower voltages and

result in smaller tunneling distances for the electrons during the erase operation. This results in much faster erase times and much less damage. The possibility of a secondary problem occurring in the gate oxide are also reduced, such as electron traps and hole injection.

The present invention describes the use of nanocrystalline silicon films as a floating gate in flash memories rather than the large bulky and thick polysilicon normally used. The nanocrystalline silicon films form in silicon rich oxide after silicon implantation into the oxide and appropriate anneal conditions. The silicon crystals can be made in a variety of sizes with a uniform distribution in particle sizes by appropriate anneal conditions. Although the particles may not be formed in a uniform sphere, they can be described as having a general diameter of approximately 10 Å to 100 Å. They can also be formed by chemical vapor deposition, by rapid thermal anneal of amorphous silicon layers or by other known techniques.

The primary advantage of a nanocrystalline film floating gate is that these nanoscale particles have a larger bandgap than bulk silicon due to confinement in the small particles. A quantum mechanical effect is experienced which results in a different band structure and widening of the bandgap. A wider bandgap results in a lower barrier for the electrons at the surface of the silicon particle and a much larger tunneling probability when negative potentials are applied during the write operation. The barrier of course can not be made too small or electrons might be thermally excited over the barrier at high operating temperatures and the stored charge leak off of the floating gate in long time periods at high temperature. Normally this is not a problem in flash memories, the barrier is so high as to result in extremely long retention times, far in excess of any requirement. The problem is that the barrier is too high and results in FN tunneling discharge times which are too long and require voltages which are too high. Reducing the barrier between the silicon gate particles and the gate oxide serves to significantly improve flash memories. These nanocrystalline silicon films are quite conductive even when intrinsic and can be made more conductive by the appropriate doping as is done with larger grain polysilicon films currently used as the gate structure in flash memories. These floating gate films, however, need not be very conductive since they are not used elsewhere for wiring and need only be conductive enough to allow for a redistribution of carriers in the floating gate structure itself.

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of a transistor **300** of the present invention. Transistor **300** comprises a region of a source **302** and a region of a drain **304**. Source **302** and drain **304** are constructed from an N+ type of high impurity concentration which are formed in a P-type semiconductor substrate **306** of low impurity concentration. Source **302** and drain **304** are separated by a predetermined space of a channel region **308**. Transistor **300** further includes a floating gate **310** formed as a silicon nanocrystalline film. A control gate **314** is formed by a polysilicon layer. Floating gate **310** is isolated from control gate **314** by an interpoly dielectric layer **312** and from channel region **308** by a thin gate oxide layer **316**. The floating gate silicon nanocrystalline film is comprised of nanocrystalline particles which can be embedded in either dielectric layer **312** or **316**. These particles have a diameter in the size range of approximately 10 Å to 100 Å and are in a uniform size distribution for a particular set of processing conditions. The particles are in contact with each other and form as a result of annealing the silicon rich oxide which follows silicon implantation into the gate oxide or deposition of silicon and appropriate anneal

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conditions to grow nanocrystalline particles of silicon which then form a film. This film is patterned using standard techniques known to those skilled in the art to form the floating gates. When used as a memory cell, the drain of the transistor is typically coupled to a bit line, and the control gate is coupled to a word line.

Using these silicon nanocrystals in a conductive film is distinctly different than other techniques of using isolated silicon nanocrystals to observe trapping of single electrons on these isolated crystals, as described above. Here the nanocrystals are used as a conductive film to replace the coarse grain polysilicon floating gate structure in a conventional flash memory structured with hot electron injection as the write mechanism and tunneling as the erase mechanism.

FIG. 4 illustrates how the smaller barrier at the surface of the floating gate silicon storing electrons results in a shorter tunneling distance through a gate oxide insulating layer and consequently a much higher tunneling probability. Tunneling distance "do" represents the tunneling distance experienced in typical transistor having a polysilicon floating gate. Tunneling distance "dn" represents the tunneling distance experienced in a transistor having a floating gate as described in FIG. 3. The tunneling probability is an exponential function of the reciprocal tunneling distance and even a small reduction in the tunneling distance results in tunneling probabilities which are orders of magnitude higher and tunneling time which are orders of magnitudes smaller.

The result then is a memory cell with a much faster and much easier erase operation due to the lower barrier height for the electrons to tunnel through in leaving the floating gate structures. Also, the thick polysilicon floating gate structure is replaced by a much thinner film of nanocrystals of silicon particles embedded in an oxide region. This results in a much more compact device, and a memory cell with a planar structure having less stray sidewall capacitive coupling.

FIG. 5 is a simplified block diagram of a typical system having a flash memory incorporating the present invention. Memory 200 comprises a memory array 202 having memory cells. A row decoder 204 and a column decoder 206 are designed to decode and select addresses provided on address lines 208 to access appropriate memory cells. Command and control circuitry 210 is designed to control the operation of memory 200 in response to incoming command and control signals from a processor 201, including a write enable signal 212 (WE*), control lines 216 and data communication lines 218. Furthermore, a voltage control switch 214 is provided to apply appropriate voltages to the memory cells during programming operation. It will be appreciated by those skilled in the art that the memory of FIG. 5 has been simplified for the purpose of illustrating the present invention and is not intended to be a complete description of a flash memory.

Conclusion

A memory device is described which has fast read, write and erase operations. The memory uses memory cell floating gate transistors with a floating fabricated of a conductive layer of nano-size silicon crystals. Although the floating gate is conductive, it need only be conductive enough to allow for a redistribution of carriers in the floating gate structure itself. The memory cell has a lower electron affinity than conventional memory cells having a floating gate fabricated from polysilicon.

Although specific embodiments have been illustrated and described herein, it will be appreciated by those of ordinary

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skill in the art that any arrangement which is calculated to achieve the same purpose may be substituted for the specific embodiment shown. This application is intended to cover any adaptations or variations of the present invention. Therefore, it is manifestly intended that this invention be limited only by the claims and the equivalents thereof.

What is claimed is:

1. An integrated circuit memory cell comprising:

a transistor having a source, drain, control gate and a floating gate, the floating gate comprising a film of nanocrystalline silicon particles embedded in an insulating layer, the nanocrystalline silicon particles being in contact to form a conductive film, wherein the film of nanocrystalline silicon comprises a plurality of nanoscale silicon particles each have a general diameter in the range of about 10 Å to 100 Å.

2. An integrated circuit memory cell comprising:

a transistor having a source, drain, control gate and a floating gate, the floating gate comprising a conductive film of nanocrystalline silicon particles embedded in an insulating layer.

3. An integrated circuit field effect transistor comprising:

a source region;

a drain region;

a conductive channel separating the source and drain regions;

a floating gate comprising a conductive film of nanocrystalline silicon particles, the floating gate located adjacent the channel and separated therefrom by a first insulating layer; and

a control gate located adjacent the floating gate and separated therefrom by a second insulating layer, wherein the film of nanocrystalline silicon comprises a plurality of nanoscale silicon particles each having a general diameter in the range of about 10 Å to 100 Å;

wherein the first and second insulating layers are comprised of oxide and the floating gate is embedded in either the first or second insulating layer.

4. A memory device comprising:

an array of memory cells, each of the memory cells comprising:

a source region,

a drain region coupled to a bit line,

a conductive channel separating the source and drain regions,

a floating gate comprising a conductive film of nanocrystalline silicon particles, the floating gate located adjacent the channel and embedded in a first insulating layer wherein the nanocrystalline silicon particles each have a general diameter in the range of about 10 Å to 100 Å, and

a control gate located adjacent the floating gate and separated therefrom by a second insulating layer, the control gate is coupled to a word line; addressing circuitry for addressing the array of memory cells; and control circuitry for controlling read and write operations of the memory device.

5. The memory device of claim 4, wherein the memory device is a flash memory.

6. A memory device comprising:

an array of memory cells, each of the memory cells comprising:

a source region,

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a drain region coupled to a bit line,
a conductive channel separating the source and drain regions,
a floating gate comprising a conductive film of nanocrystalline silicon particles embedded in a first layer of insulating material, wherein the nanocrystalline silicon particles each have a general diameter in the range of about 10 Å to 100 Å, and
a control gate located adjacent the floating gate and separated therefrom, the control gate is coupled to a word line;
addressing circuitry for addressing the array of memory cells; and

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control circuitry for controlling read and write operations of the memory device.

7. A non-volatile cell comprising:

a transistor having a source, drain, control gate and a floating gate, the floating gate comprising a film of nanocrystalline silicon particles embedded in an insulating layer and in contact to form a conductive film, wherein the film of nanocrystalline silicon comprises a plurality of nanoscale silicon particles each have a general diameter in the range of about 10 Å to 100 Å such that the floating gate has a low electron affinity to allow for low voltage erase operations.

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