

Prof. S.F.B. Morse

by Harry Lewis

"Canst thou send lightnings that they may go and say unto thee: Here we are!" Said the Lord from the whirlwind to afflicted Job, who remained dumb for he could not answer. The question has been answered in the affirmative in our day by the perfector of the electro-magnetic telegraph, the late Professor Morse, by whose invention the promise has been fulfilled: "I'll put a girdle around the globe in forty minutes."

Samuel Finly Breese Morse was born in Charleston, Massachusetts, April 27th, 1791. His father was the first person to publish geographies in America. His father was also a celebrated Congregational minister, spending much of his time in religious controversy, in maintaining the orthodox faith throughout the New England churches and against Unitarianism. He was prominent among those who founded Andover Theological Seminary, and published many religious periodicals.

S. F. B. Morse was a graduate from Yale at the age of nineteen, and soon went to England for the purpose of studying painting. At the end of two years he received the gold medal of the Adelpia Society of Arts for an original model of a "Dying Hercules," his first attempt at sculpture. The following year he exhibited "The Judgment of Jupiter," a painting praised by his teacher, Mr. West. Becoming quite proficient in painting and sculpture, he returned home in 1815, following his profession in Boston, Charleston, South Carolina, and later in New York city. At the latter place, in connection with other artists, he organized a drawing association, which resulted in the establishment of the National Academy of Design. Prof. Morse was chosen its first President, and was continued in that office for the following sixteen years. He painted a great many portraits, among which was a full length portrait of Lafayette, which was highly prized and commended by the Association. In 1829 he visited Europe a second time to complete his studies in art reading for more than three years in the principal cities of the continent. During his absence abroad he was elected Professor of the literature of the Arts of Design in the University of New York; and in 1835 he delivered a course of lectures before that school on the affinity of those arts.

While in college Mr. Morse had paid special attention to chemistry and natural philosophy; but his love of art seemed to be the stronger; later, however, these sciences became a dominant pursuit with him. As far back as 1826-'7, he and Prof. J. Freeman Dana had been colleague lecturers at the Athenæum in the City of New York, the former lecturing on the fine arts, and the latter upon electro-magnetism. They were intimate friends, and in their conversation the subject of electro-magnetism was made familiar to the mind of Morse. The electro-magnet on Sturgeon's principle—the first ever shown in the United States—was exhibited and explained in Dana's lectures, and at a later date, by gift of Prof. Torrey, came into Morse's possession. Dana even then suggested, by his spiral volute coil, the electro-magnet of the present day; this was the magnet in use when Morse returned from Europe, and it is now used in every Morse telegraph throughout both hemispheres.

On his second return to the United States he embarked from Havre on the packet ship Sully, in the autumn of 1832 and in a casual conversation with some of the passengers on the then recent discovery in France of the means of obtaining the electric spark from the magnet, showing the identity or relation of electricity and magnetism, Morse's mind conceived, not merely the idea of an electric telegraph, but of an electro-magnetic and chemical recording telegraph; substantially and essentially as it now exists. The testimony to the paternity of the idea in Morse's mind, and to his acts and drawings

on board the ship is ample. His own testimony was corroborated by all the passengers with a single exception, Thomas Jackson, who claimed to have originated the idea and imparted the same to Morse. However, there is little controversy in regard to this matter at the present day as the courts decided irrevocably in favor of Morse. The year 1832 is fixed as the date of Morse's conception and realization, also, so far as drawings could embody the conception of the telegraph system; which now bears his name. A part of the apparatus was constructed in New York before the close of the first year, but circumstances prevented its completion before 1835, when he put up a-half mile of wire in coil around a room and exhibited the telegraph in operation. Two years later he exhibited the operation of his system before the University of New York.

From the greater publicity of this exhibition the date of Morse's invention has erroneously been fixed in the autumn of 1837, whereas he operated successfully with the first single instrument in November, 1835. In 1837 he filed his caveat in the Patent Office in Washington, and asked Congress for aid to build an experimental line from that city to Baltimore. The House Committee on Commerce gave a favorable report, but the session closed without action, and Morse went to Europe in the hope of interesting foreign governments in his invention. The result was a refusal to grant him letters patent in England, and the obtaining of a useless *brevet d'invention* in France, and no exclusive privileges in any other country. He returned home to struggle again with scanty means for four years, during which he continued his appeals at Washington. His hope had expired on the last evening of the session of 1842-3; but in the morning, March 4th, he was startled with the announcement that the desired aid of Congress had been obtained in the midnight hour of the expiring session, and \$30,000 placed at his disposal for his experimental essay between Washington and Baltimore. In 1844 the work was completed, and demonstrated to the world the practicability and the utility of the Morse system of electro-magnetic telegraphing. Violations of his patents and assumption of his rights by rival companies involved him in a long series of law suits; but these were eventually decided in his favor, and he reaped the benefits to which his invention entitled him.

It is doubtful if any American ever before received so many marks of distinction. In 1846 Yale College conferred on him the degree of LL.D.; in 1848 he received the decoration of the *Nishan Iftikur* in diamonds from the Sultan of Turkey; gold medals of scientific merit were awarded him by the king of Prussia; the king of Wurtemberg, and the Emperor of Austria. In 1856 he received from the Emperor of the French the cross of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor; in 1857 from the King of Denmark the cross of Knight Commander of the First Class of the Danebrog; in 1858 from the Queen of Spain the cross of Knight Commander of the Order of Isabella the Catholic; from the king of Italy the cross of the Order of SS. Maurice and Lazarus, and from the king of Portugal the cross of the Order of the Tower and Sword. In 1856 the telegraph companies of Great Britain gave him a banquet in London; and in Paris, in 1858, another banquet was given him by Americans numbering more than 100, and representing almost every State in the Union. In the latter year, at the instance of Napoleon III, representatives of France, Russia, Sweden, Belgium, Holland, Austria, Sardinia, Tuscany, the Holy See, and Turkey met in Paris to decide upon a collective testimonial to him, and the result was a vote of 400,000 francs as a personal reward for his labors. On December 29th, 1868, the citizens of New York gave him a public dinner. In June, 1871, a bronze statue of him, erected by the voluntary contributions of telegraph employes, was formally unveiled in Central Park, New York, by William Cullen Bryant, and in the evening a reception was held in the Academy of Music, at which Prof. Morse telegraphed, by means of one of the instruments used on the original line between New York and Washington, a message of greeting to all the cities of the continent.

The last public service which he performed was the unveiling of the statue of Franklin in Printing House Square, New York, on January 17th, 1872. Submarine telegraphy also originated with

Prof. Morse, who laid the first sub-marine lines, in New York harbor in 1842, and received at the time from the American Institute a gold medal. He died in the city of New York April 2nd, 1872. While in Paris in 1839 he made the acquaintance of Daguerre, and from drawings furnished him by the latter, he constructed, on his return, the first daguerreotype apparatus, and took the first sun pictures ever taken in America. He was also an author and poet of some standing.

Source:

Lewis, Harry. "Prof. S.F.B. Morse." *Hidden Treasures*. Cleveland: Moses, Lewis & Co., 1887. 460 – 465. Electronic.