

Telegraph: Early Postal Role

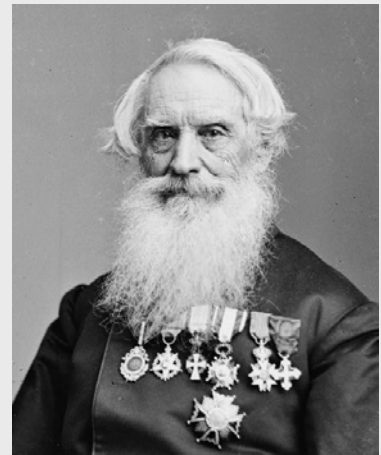
The Post Office Department oversaw the first operation of the public telegraph 150 years ago. Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872), inventor and artist, exhibited his magnetic telegraph to Congress in 1837. But it was not until 1842 that Congress approved a grant of \$30,000 to test the practicability of his electromagnetic telegraph. Under Morse's direction, a line was established between Washington and Baltimore and on May 24, 1844, the well-known message "What hath God wrought," flashed from the Capitol in Washington to the Mount Claire railroad depot in Baltimore.

In 1845, Congress approved \$8,000 for maintenance of the telegraph line, placing it under the superintendence of the Postmaster General with appropriations from Congress. At the end of 1845, Professor Morse offered it to the Government for \$100,000, but Postmaster General Cave Johnson replied that "the operation of the telegraph between [Washington] and Baltimore has not satisfied me that under any rate of postage that can be adopted its revenues can be made equal to its expenditures," and the offer was refused.

By June 30, 1846, the telegraph lines had been extended from New York to Boston, Buffalo, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington. At this time, Postmaster General Johnson was faced with financial problems and unsure of future appropriations, and he effected the sale of the government lines on March 4, 1847.

Morse then chose former Postmaster General Amos Kendall as his agent and attorney and entrusted him with the task of obtaining capital for expansion in the private sector, and within a few years the telegraph had spread to nearly every country of the world.

During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson placed both the telegraph and telephone under the control of the Postmaster General. Although the Post Office Department made a number of improvements in service, such as night letters sent by telegraph being delivered the next morning by postmen, and although the incumbent Postmaster General pleaded with Congress to keep the telegraph as a matter of national welfare, Congress elected, on July 11, 1919, to return it to private industry.



Samuel F. B. Morse, late 1850s
Courtesy Library of Congress



Lineman fixing a telegraph line, circa 1862. To reduce leakage of electrical current, telegraph line wires were tied to insulators attached to poles.
Courtesy Library of Congress