

This Day in History... March 7, 1876

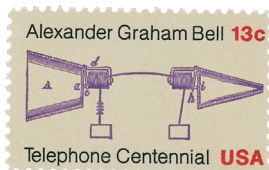
Alexander Graham Bell Patents Telephone

On March 7, 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received the patent for the telephone.

Alexander Graham Bell was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on March 3, 1847. His father taught speech and invented “Visible Speech,” a type of written code that made it easier for deaf mutes to learn to speak.

While a young adult, Bell enrolled as a student teacher at Weston House. There, he taught speech and music in exchange for the opportunity to study other subjects. After completing his academic work at Weston House, Bell studied at the Universities of Edinburgh and London. While at the University of London, he used “Visible Speech” to teach a class of deaf students.

It was Bell’s early work with deaf children that would eventually lead to his work to develop the telephone. In the 1870s, he moved to Boston to teach at the Pemberton Avenue School for the Deaf. It was around this time he grew interested in transmitting speech over wires. The invention of the telegraph in 1843 made it possible for people to communicate over long distances, but only one message could be sent at a time via telegraph and hand-delivered messages were still necessary. Bell began working on a “harmonic telegraph,” which combined parts of the telegraph and record player.



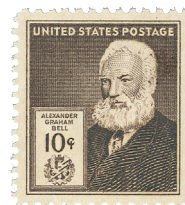
Stamp issued on the 100th anniversary of Bell's famous first call.

Later, Bell met Gardiner Greene Hubbard, the father of one of his students. A critic of Western Union, Hubbard provided financial backing for Bell’s research. Bell began working with machine shop employee Thomas A. Watson to develop a prototype of his invention. One day, while making refinements to his harmonic telegraph, Bell detected the first human voice sounds coming over the telegraph wire. After several more months of experimenting, Bell drew up the first specifications for the telephone and applied for the patent on February 14,

1876. The patent was issued to Bell on March 7.

Three days later, Bell transmitted the first recognizable words over a telephone line, though the exact phrase is debated by historians. According to one story, while his partner, Watson, was in a different room, Bell spilled battery acid on his clothes and said, “Mr. Watson, come here. I need you!” Incredibly, the words carried over the telephone wire into the next room. Bell popularized his invention by giving public demonstrations.

When Bell filed his patent on February 14, his submission was recorded just two hours ahead of that of Elisha Gray, a fellow inventor with a similar claim. Gray and Thomas Edison worked with Western Union Telegraph Company to develop their own telephone. Bell sued them, with the Supreme Court upholding his patent rights. The Bell Company faced similar battles in the coming years before emerging as American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), one of the nation’s leading communication companies.



Bell stamp from the 1940 Famous Americans Series

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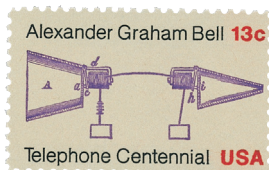
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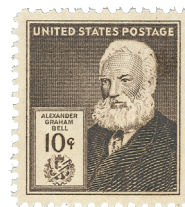
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