

This Day in History... August 16, 1858

Start of Transatlantic Cable Service

On August 16, 1858, the first message was sent via the transatlantic cable.

The telegraph was the first device to send messages using electricity. Samuel F. B. Morse is credited with inventing the telegraph. He first demonstrated the telegraph in 1837.

The telegraph soon became an important form of communication in the United States. Railroad companies used the telegraph to coordinate schedules and improve safety. By the 1850s, telegraph offices existed in every major city. Dreams of a cable connecting North America and Europe were born soon after the telegraph was made public.

By 1854, American Cyrus West Field was convinced that a telegraph could be laid across the Atlantic floor. Two years later he founded the Atlantic Telegraph Company and brought his idea to the American and British governments. After having failed once in 1855, in 1856, Field successfully laid a cable across the 68-mile Cabot Strait, connecting Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. The eastern Canadian island turned out to be an ideal location as a connecting point to Europe.

With support from both countries, the first attempts to run a cable across the Atlantic were made in 1857. That summer, two ships, the HMS *Agamemnon* and the USS *Niagara*, sailed from the beach near Ballycarbery Castle in County Kerry, Ireland. The cable broke on the first day, but was repaired. It broke again further out in the ocean, and the project was postponed until the following year.

In 1858, the two ships set out from opposite ends of the ocean with the plan to meet in the middle. More line breaks created difficulties, including one after the two ends were joined. By early August, repairs were made and the final lines were run. The cables were successfully laid by August 5. Over 2,130 miles of cable were laid across the Atlantic Ocean.

The first message was transmitted days later, on August 16, 1858 between Ireland and Newfoundland. The first message took 17 hours to transmit. It said, "Europe and America are united by telegraphy. Glory to God in the highest; on earth, peace and good will towards men." Then Queen Victoria and US President James Buchanan exchanged congratulations.

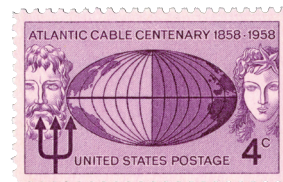
The queen said she hoped the telegraph would be "an additional link between the nations whose friendship is founded on their common interest and reciprocal esteem." President Buchanan responded, "it is a triumph more glorious, because far more useful to mankind, than was ever won by conqueror on the field of battle. May the Atlantic telegraph, under the blessing of Heaven, prove to be a bond of perpetual peace and friendship between the kindred nations, and an instrument destined by Divine Providence to diffuse religion, civilization, liberty, and law throughout the world."

The following day celebrations broke out. In New York City, there was a 100-gun grand salute, the streets were adorned with flags, church bells rang, and the city was lit up that night.

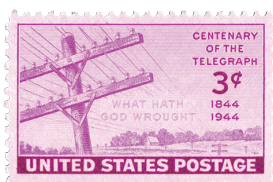
Unfortunately, two of the project's senior members, William Thomson and Wildman Whitehouse, had differing ideas on how the cable should be worked. Whitehouse believed they needed to use a higher voltage, which ultimately ruined the cable's insulation and left it inoperable by early September.

1938 James Buchanan stamp from the Presidential Series.

Field was not deterred and hoped to renew the project, even though the public had largely lost confidence in it. In the coming years, other cables were laid in the Mediterranean and Red Sea, which led to better cable designs. By 1865, Field orchestrated the laying of a new transatlantic cable and within a year, its speed was vastly improved, able to transmit about eight words per minute.



Stamp issued for the 100th anniversary of the cable.



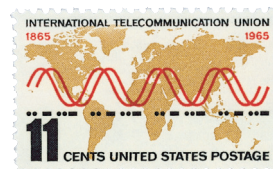
Issued for the 100th anniversary of the first official telegraph.



Queen Victoria on the Penny Black.



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The International Telecommunication Union was originally founded in 1865 as the International Telegraph Convention.

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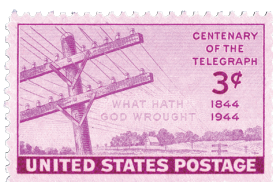
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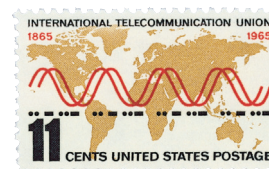
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