

EXHIBIT SYNOPSIS
**U.S. Telegraph --
Origins, Consolidations and Technologies**

Purpose and Scope:

This exhibit explores the history of U.S. telegraphy, with particular focus on the Western Union Telegraph Company, which became the largest and most powerful telegraph company in the United States, and its influence stretched throughout the world. The exhibit spans the years 1835 to 1975, from the invention of the electric telegraph to its obsolescence brought on by the introduction of high-speed computer and digital communications technologies. The exhibit consists of telegraph and postal issues, franks, stationary, forms, cards, receipts, envelopes and ephemera. Included are items from Western Union Telegraph Company and its many competitors which were eventually acquired by Western Union or failed. Also included are items from related technologies that impacted telegraphy.

Historical Significance:

Samuel Finley Morse's 1835 invention of the electric telegraph and his groundbreaking Morse Code reshaped the globe. From 1844, its commercial use marked a seismic shift in communication technology, rivaled only by Gutenberg's printing press 400 years prior. With the telegraph, human connection transcended borders and oceans, revolutionizing trade, connectivity, and society itself. No longer confined to the sluggish pace of mail delivery by horse, train or ship, telegraph stations exchanged messages almost instantly, uniting distant lands and peoples as never before.

Background:

Morse licensed his telegraph patent to anyone willing to invest in the technology. By 1850, many small "pioneer" telegraph companies were created, often utilizing a single line that connected cities within a state or small region. In 1856, the Western Union Telegraph Company emerged from the consolidation of several pioneer networks. By 1880, the company had consumed hundreds of the pioneer networks to create the nation's first industrial monopoly, operating over 100,000 miles of wire. Western Union could deliver messages within a matter of hours utilizing its corps of "telegraph delivery boys."

By 1900, Western Union controlled millions of miles of telegraph lines and owned two international undersea cables, but the invention of the telephone in 1876 and wireless radiotelegraph in 1895 introduced formidable new competition. Western Union's position as the communications leader was bolstered by the railroads, with which it forged a strong alliance, and the company developed a number of groundbreaking inventions. However, in the 20th Century Western Union could not keep pace with competing high-speed technologies and abandoned the communications sector altogether to focus exclusively on money transfer services that it had invented in 1872.

Rarity and Condition:

The difficulty of acquisition and condition of items in this exhibit is extraordinary. Early matching telegraph forms and covers rarely survived significant deterioration or destruction. Census data was seldom recorded, except for control numbered stamps and franks from 1871 to 1914. The census data in this exhibit originates from three general sources: Statements *recorded* in illustrated books or catalogues; *reported* in published articles or journals without illustration; or *known* from the exhibitor's personal knowledge and extensive research of historical writings, auction catalogs, price lists, expert certificates, and other available information. These three research terms are used throughout the exhibit.

Telegraphy Elements:

Care has been taken to include as many elements as possible to cover historical aspects. Included are: telegraph and postal issues, franks, stampless covers, cancels and various rates, trial color, die and plate proof, plate margin markings, stationary, forms, cards, receipts and envelopes.

Material Availability:

Telegraph stamps, franks, covers, forms and ephemera were collected over a period of 65 years by my father, a former employee of Western Union Telegraph Co., who passed the collection on to me upon his death in 2020. As an avid, third generation stamp collector, I have continued to expand the telegraphy collection from various sources, including private collectors, auctions and philatelic dealers. Included are many rare and seldom found pieces, and several items in the exhibit are the only known copies.

Personal Research:

This exhibit is the culmination of meticulous personal research over a period of fifteen years, spanning archival investigations, historical analyses, records of the Western Union Telegraph Company, U.S. Library of Congress, National Postal Museum of the Smithsonian Institute's Museum of American History, expert consultations and extensive research online. Through this rigorous exploration, the exhibitor has unearthed the historical and cultural significance of telegraphy, revealing its profound impact on shaping history, trade and the culture as a whole.

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