U.S. TELEGRAPHY: 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 through consolidations, mergers and acquisitions. 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, it's 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.

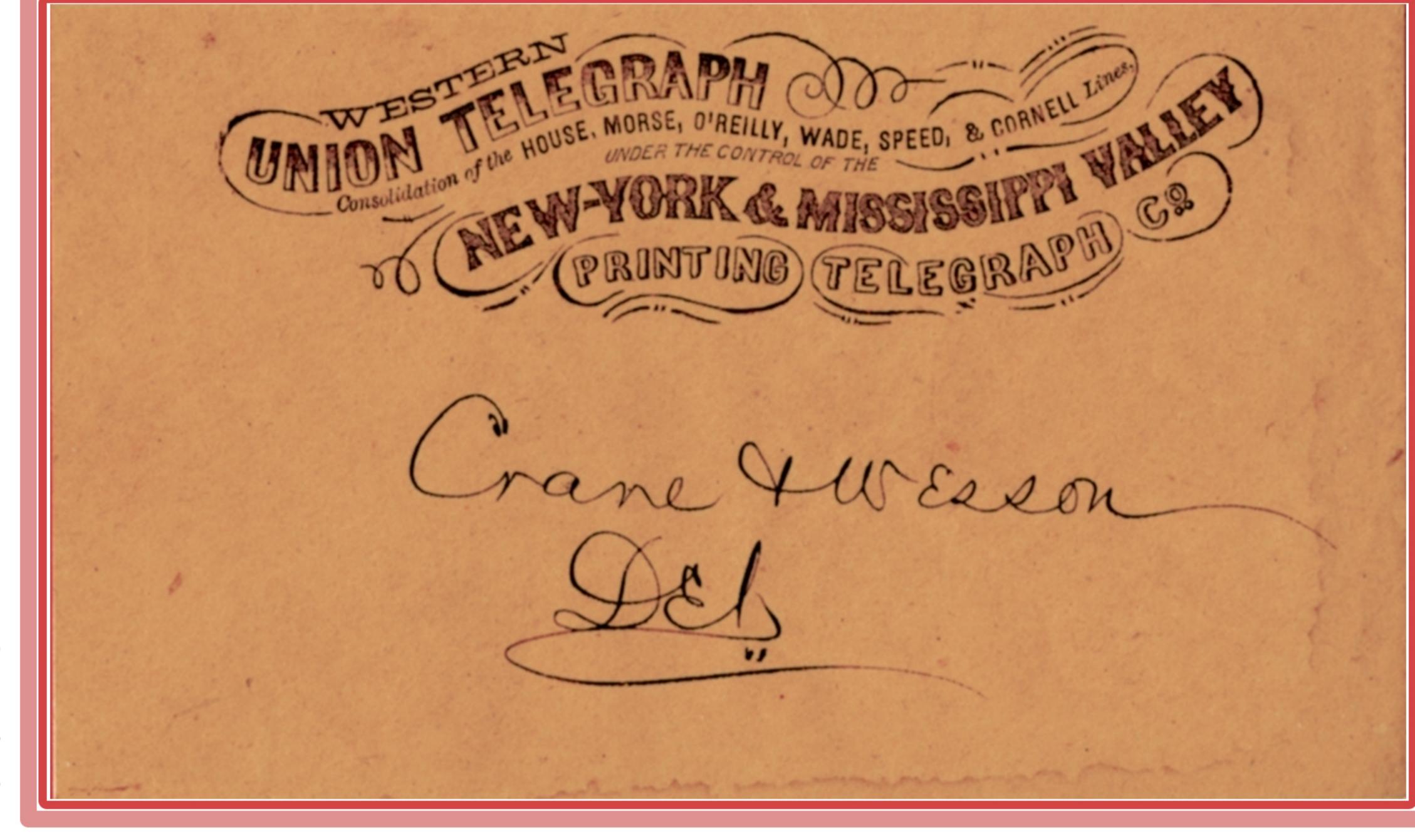
BACKGROUND:

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. 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, Western Union could not keep pace with competing high-speed technologies and during the last quarter of the 20th Century 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 rarity of many exhibit items derives from the exhibitor's personal knowledge and extensive research. Included are many rare and seldom found pieces, and several items in the exhibit are the only known copies.

Western Union Telegraph ca. 1856 Consolidation of Telegraph Companies 4 Reported covers



ORGANIZATION:

- 1. Origins of Telegraphy telegraph inventions, pioneer companies and consolidations leading to the creation of the Western Union Telegraph Company.
- 2. Continental Expansion transcontinental and transatlantic telegraph lines, financial services, transcontinental railroad, railroad postal and telegraph offices.
- 3. Civil War Era President Lincoln's use of the telegraph as a tactical military tool, the Army Signal Corps, telegraph and express revenue issues, Union and Confederate usage, telegraph rates, the impact of the Post Roads Act of 1866 and opposition to Western Union's monopoly.
- **4. Philatelic Telegraphy 19th Century -** introduction of complimentary telegraph franks and prepayment stamps.
- **5. Technologies and Innovations** invention of the telephone, wireless radio telegraph, typewriter, teleprinter, wirephoto, automobile, airplane, streetcar RPOs and other innovations that impacted the telegraph industry.
- **6. Telegraphers -** Western Union telegraphers, railroad telegraphy, wireless message relay services, airmail and marine radiotelegraphy.
- 7. Philatelic Telegraphy 20th Century Postal Telegraph-Cable and Western Union railroad partnerships and philatelic issues.
- 8. World War Era military usage, soldiers mail, special rate services, international and post-war usage.
- 9. Modern Telegraphy social messaging, final telegraph prepayment stamps, political usage, advanced digital technologies, and a Post Script.

EXHIBIT STRUCTURE:

The exhibit is arranged by the sections listed in the table above, and in the section headers on the upper left of each page. The sub-header on each page at upper right identifies the category, type and year of items displayed. Boldface, italicized statements describe important items, including reported census data or based on the exhibitor's experience. Especially rare or important items are highlighted in a red box, as shown to the left.

IMPORTANT REFERENCES:

- Some Notes on the Telegraph Companies of the United States; their Stamps and Franks, Joseph S. Rich (Private Printing, 1900)
- Western Union Telegraph Company 1851-1901 (J. Kempster Print, New York, 1901)
- United States Telegraph Stamps and Franks, George Jay Kramer (The Collectors Club, New York, 1992)
- Stampless Telegraph Cover Catalog, ASCC Vol. 3, 4th Ed., Robert Dalton Harris David G. Phillips Publishing Co., 1993)
- Western Union Telegraph Company Records 1851-1985 (Archives Center, 2014)