

Two New Telegraph instruments for the RadioCentral Museum

By Bart Lee, CHRS Archivist

Before there was wireless telegraphy (thanks to Bill Marconi, etc.)...

There was wired telegraphy (thanks to Samuel Morse, etc.) starting in the U.S. about 1844 (with similar work going on in Europe, including Russia). The “Morse code” vastly simplified sending and receiving messages, which could be taken by ear as well as recorded on paper tapes.



CHRS now has a new 19th Century telegraph sounder (above), from the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. J. H. Bunnell & Co., the preeminent telegraph equipment manufacturer of the era, made it.

Bunnell Sounder Tag; NB 37.5 Ohms



Note the 37.5 ohms figure. Failure to apply Ohms Law could burn out the sounder coils.

The National Capital Radio and Television Museum has provided this to CHRS for its permanent collection. We thank Curator Brian Belanger for his courtesy in making it available to CHRS.

CHRS has access to an even earlier artifact of the early telegraph era: A “register” by the J. W. Norton Company from 1851, just a few years after Morse took to the wires. S.F.B. Morse himself designed it. The Norton Company supplied instruments to the New York & Erie Railroad. A register uses a paper tape to record the telegraphic impulses it receives. Few of these survive.



John Jenkins of the Spark Museum in Bellingham, WA says:

“Norton was the first telegraph manufacturer in New York City and worked at this address in 1851. He was also on the first board of directors of the Magnetic Telegraph company in 1846. In Samuel F.B. Morse, His Life and Letters (edited by Morse's son Edward Lind Morse), the frontispiece photograph in Vol. 2 is of S.F.B. Morse holding this exact Norton register in his hand. Original hand made chain is also present on this register.”

<http://www.sparkmuseum.com/TELEGRAPH.HTM>



The CHRS RadioCentral museum has a number of early telegraph instruments, already donated. The present plan is to provide visitors with a display of early telegraph equipment and operations. (The AWA museum in New York finds its telegraph displays very popular). The clicking of Morse code telegraph instruments can add realism to the museum soundscape.

The museum has enough of the old telegraph-pole glass insulators to run a wire from the front to the back. Perhaps visitors will be able to send (and record on the paper tape of the register) telegraph messages as part of their museum experience.



Telegraph Pole Glass Insulators — Bart Lee Collection

However primitive it may seem in this era of petabytes of data flying around the Internet, the telegraph knit together the country as much as did the railroads of the 19th Century.



At least one Western Union Telegraph Company manhole cover has long sat on a street in San Francisco – it may still be there.



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