Guide to the Anglo-American Telegraph Company Records

NMAH.AC.0073
Robert S. Harding and Mumia Shimaka Mbasu
January 1986
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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives Center, National Museum of American History  
Title: Anglo-American Telegraph Company Records  
Identifier: NMAH.AC.0073  
Date: 1862-1947  
Extent: 14 Cubic feet (51 volumes in 44 boxes)  
Creator: Anglo-American Telegraph Company, Ltd.  
Language: English  
Summary: Records relating to the organization of the company, corporate and financial records. Corporate records include two volumes of the company's acts, charters, contracts and agreements, 1862-1883; minutes of board meetings relating to varied subjects, such as agreements between the company and other telegraph companies such as Western Union Telegraph concerning sales of property, details of transactions or purchases undertaken by the company. Financial records consist of nine volumes of "journals" showing monthly records of receipts, 1866-1912; nineteen volumes of ledgers reveal a detailed financial status of the company, 1866-1912; and nine volumes of cash books consist of the financial transactions of the company, 1904-early 1941. See also 1 folder of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company telegrams in the Warshaw Collection under the heading "Telegraphs".

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information  
The initial collection was donated by the TransAtlantic Cable Limited, Bermuda in 1970.

Provenance  
These records were transferred by the Division of Electricity (now the Division of Work and Industry) to the Archives Center on November 11, 1983.

Related Materials  
Materials in the Archives Center  
AC0205, Western Union Telegraph Company Records

Processing Information  
The collection was processed by Robert S. Harding, archivist and Mumia Shimaka-Mbasu, January 1986.
Biographical / Historical

Anglo American Telegraph Company history begins in 1852 when the government of Newfoundland granted an English engineer, F.N. Crisborne, the exclusive right to land cables in Newfoundland for thirty years. This exclusive right was predicated on the condition that a land line be constructed across the country from St. Johns to Cape Ray. Work on the system started in 1852 with the laying of a cable across the Northumberland Strait and the commencement of the construction of the land line across Newfoundland.

The life of the cable was less than a year old and only forty miles of land line were completed before the company went bankrupt. On his visit to New York to raise more money for his company, Crisborne was introduced to Cyrus West Field (1819-1892), a retired American merchant. Field recognized the importance of Crisborne's concession in Newfoundland in connection with a proposed Atlantic cable, found a syndicate among his friends, and arranged for the extension of Crisborne's concession to fifty years from 1856. He then formed a new company called New York, Newfoundland and London Electric Telegraph Company.

On his visit to England at the end of 1854 to order a cable to span the Gulf of St. Lawrence between Cape Ray and Cape North, Field met John Watkins Brett, who, with his brother had been responsible for the first channel cable. Field also met Charles T. Bright of the Magnetic Company. Both Brett and Bright were convinced of the feasibility of an Atlantic cable. The formation of the Atlantic Telegraph Company on October 20, 1856, was a result of a meeting of Field, Brett and Bright. The new company attempted but failed in 1857 to successfully launch the first Atlantic cable due to financial difficulties, but plans were made immediately for a second attempt in 1858. In late 1858, the cable failed after passing 723 messages.

The Atlantic Telegraph Company did not go into liquidation for Field and Bright were still convinced that a working cable could be achieved. In the United States, Field aroused the interest of the board of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company who agreed to take a considerable amount of their payment for the manufacture and laying of a cable in shares of the Atlantic Telegraph Company. The promoters, and, principally, the board of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company, were not daunted by efforts to raise money for yet another attempt in spite of failures. A new company, the
Anglo American Telegraph Company, was formed with the capital Atlantic Telegraph Company raised. This new company took over the New York, Newfoundland and London Telegraph Company until 1873 when the two companies amalgamated under the name Anglo American Telegraph Company, Ltd. Anglo American Telegraph Company operated in part as an agent of the Telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company. But the joint efforts of the two companies effected the completion of the cable in 1866 between London and New York.

During the pioneering years of cable construction, the British cable industry designed, manufactured and laid all major submarine cables. Britain possessed the technology, the necessary capital and the extensive overseas interests fundamental to an ambitious effort in cable expansion. Besides, Britain depended on the cooperation of the European states for external telegraphic communications. The British themselves were, however, familiar and experienced in dealing with large engineering projects, such as railways and other similar ventures. An added advantage for the British was an excess of investment capital in the United Kingdom.

In the United States, similar factors either were absent or did not work to Cyrus Field's advantage. Field was unable to secure the support of prominent American businessmen. Samuel Morse (1791–1872), best remembered for his work on the telegraph and as one of the first Americans to make telegraph commercially viable, was the only prominent scientist who supported the project in the United States. Unlike Britain where it was easier to obtain government support through informal tactics, in the United States, Field had to submit a bill in the Congress. Obtaining support from Congress for the project was a difficult task, especially since the cable joined the two British territories. In addition, there was little precedent for United States government support for large engineering projects, particularly the ones that had an international dimension.

The United States government support for the cable project came largely from Field's unabating conviction that the cable should be an international project and from the expectation of the British government that the United States would provide a guarantee similar to the one Britain had granted: to link North America and Britain by cable. Through the help of William H. Seward (1801–1872) who served as Secretary of State (1860–1869) and favored American expansionism, Cyrus Field's idea of constructing American cable in the Atlantic Ocean to Britain received government support. In fact, Seward favored plans for the United States to also construct cables in the Pacific or Caribbean regions.

Following passage of the bill in Congress, the directors and officers of Atlantic Telegraph Company met to settle the question of how to proceed. As a result of proper planning and hard work, successful functioning of the cable came in 1866, after three failed attempts to launch a cable: 1856–1857, 1858 and 1864–1865. The 1866 success came as a result of the Atlantic Telegraph Company board listening to the views of engineers and electricians who expressed optimism. The board shared the confidence of their technicians. Consequently the board made the decision to raise money to build a new cable, as well as use the material from the previous cable project of 1865.

The Anglo American, as an agent of Atlantic Telegraph Company lay and operated cables. In return, it received 125,000 English pounds annually from Atlantic Telegraph revenues and another 25,000 English pounds annually from revenues of New York, Newfoundland, and London Company a twenty five percent return. The cable laying work began at Valentia Bay on July 13, 1866. By September 8, 1866, Atlantic cable was operating.

The major part of the 1866 cable was renewed by the telegraph Construction and Maintenance Company. The Construction and Maintenance Company and the Western Union Company reached an agreement in 1911 whereby from 1912, the latter company would lease all the Anglo American cable for ninety nine years. Since 1912, all new cables laid in conjunction with the joint system were the property of the Western Union Telegraph Company.

Western Union Telegraph Company terminated the lease prematurely in 1963. The Anglo American Telegraph Company received a substantial payment as compensation. The ownership and operation of
the company was solved by forming a new company, Transatlantic Cables Limited, with their offices in Bermuda.

Scope and Contents

These records consist of material relating to the organization of the company, corporate and financial records. Corporate records include two (2) volumes of the company's acts, charters, contracts and agreements from 1862 to 1883; minutes of board meetings relating to varied subjects, such as agreements between the company and other telegraph companies such as Western Union Telegraph concerning sales of property, details of transactions or purchases undertaken by the company.

Financial records consist of nine (9) volumes of "journals" showing monthly records of receipts for 1866 to 1912; nineteen (19) volumes of ledgers reveal a detailed financial status of the company for the years 1866–1912; and nine (9) volumes of cash books consist of the financial transactions of the company between 1904 and early 1941.

Miscellaneous Records in series 5 include the Log Book of the Heart's Content Station from 1866-1867; printed correspondence from William Orton, president of Western Union, to the company; the company's general orders, 1880; and the Engineer's Final Report, 1880.

References


Arrangement

The collection is arranged into five series and within each series arranged chronologically.

Series 1: Corporate Records, 1862-1947

Series 2: Journals, 1866-1912

Series 3: Ledgers, 1866-1912

Series 4: Cash Books, 1904-1941

Series 5: Miscellaneous Records, 1866-1880
Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:
  Atlantic telegraph cable
  Communications
  Submarine telegraphy
  Telegraph, Wireless

Types of Materials:
  Cashbooks -- 1900-1950
  Journals -- 1860-1920
  Ledgers -- 1860-1920
  Minute books

Names:
  Western Union Telegraph Company
Container Listing

Series 1: Corporate Records, 1862-1947

Box 1 (Series 1)  Acts, Charters, Contracts and Agreements; Volume I, 1862-1883

Box 1 (Series 1)  Acts, Charters, Contracts and Agreements; Volume II, 1862-1883

Box 2 (Series 1), Volume 1  Minute Book, 2/20/1866 - 10/7/1867

Box 2 (Series 1), Volume 1  Minute Book, 2/26/1873 - 6/26/1873

Box 2 (Series 1), Volume 1  Miscellaneous Minutes, 4/1873 - 6/1873

Box 3 (Series 1), Volume 3  Miscellaneous Minutes, 1/3/1879 - 10/24/1890

Box 4 (Series 1), Volume 4  Miscellaneous Minutes, 11/7/1890 - 3/3/1899

Box 5 (Series 1), Volume 5  Miscellaneous Minutes, 3/17/1899 - 3/9/1906

Box 6 (Series 1), Volume 6  Miscellaneous Minutes, 3/23/1906 - 11/13/1914

Box 7 (Series 1), Volume 7  Miscellaneous Minutes, 12/11/1914 - 5/22/1925

Box 8 (Series 1), Volume 8  Miscellaneous Minutes, 6/19/1925 - 10/17/1935

Box 9 (Series 1), Volume 9  Miscellaneous Minutes, 1/21/1935 - 7/23/1947

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## Series 2: Journals
3/27/1866 - 6/1912

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Ledgers, 1868-04-30-1869-10-31

Box 3 (Series 3), Volume 4
Ledgers, 1870-11-15-1872-12-31

Box 4 (Series 3), Volume 5
Ledgers, 1873-01-01-1873-05-31

Box 5 (Series 3), Volume 6
Ledgers, 1874-12-31-1876-12-31

Box 6 (Series 3), Volume 7
Ledgers, 1877-06-30-1878-06-30

Box 7 (Series 3), Volume 8
Ledgers, 1878-12-31-1880-12-31

Box 8 (Series 3), Volume 9
Ledgers, 1881-01-25-1883-12-31

Box 9 (Series 3), Volume 10
Ledgers, 1884-01-17-1886-12-31

Box 10, Volume 11
Ledgers, 1887-01-01-1889-12-31

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Box 14, Volume 15
Ledgers, 1898-01-11-1900-12-31

Box 15, Volume 16
Ledgers, 1901-01-01-1903-12-31

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Log Book of Heart's Content Station, 1866-1867

Box 1 (Series 5), Volume 2
Reprint of letter and related correspondence, From William Orton (President of Western Union Telegraph Company) to the Chairman and Directors of the Anglo-American Telegraph Company, 1877 January 5

Box 1 (Series 5), Volume 3
General Orders, Rules and Regulations for the Anglo-American Telegraph Company, 1880

Box 1 (Series 5), Volume 4
Engineer's Final Report, 1880

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