

What's News?

(Zattu Cushing, the Risley, Brigham, and Cobb families, and early communication systems in Fredonia.

By Douglas Shepard / Barker Historical Museum (1998)

A community such as ours can be examined and analyzed from a variety of perspectives – ethnic diversity, income level, building types, church affiliations, clubs and service organizations, transportation patterns – the list is endless.

Once such aspect is communication. From **1804** when **Thomas McClintock** asked **Zattu Cushing** to deliver a letter to the Holland Land Co. agent, **Joseph Ellicott**, in Batavia, mail was the most important means the little community of Canadaway had to hear from, or speak to, the outside world.

It is interesting to realize that delivery of the mail has really not changed all that much since ancient times. Once an alphabet was invented many thousands of years ago, and writing developed, it was inevitable that information, questions and instruction in written form would be sent to a recipient. Writing on a piece of papyrus, parchment, wax tablet, or paper would be handed to someone with instructions and an address, and that person would walk, run, ride and/or float to a destination and deliver the mail. Nothing much has changed. Coaches, canal boats, trains, automobiles and airplanes may have speeded up the process, and added many more people to the chain, but basically you still hand a letter over to someone and, at the other end, someone hands the letter to a person or an address.

Fredonia has seen all of these changes in style, if not in substance, and we may some day go into that history in some detail. This essay is not about the postal service, however, but about communication itself.

For a good, long time, except for travelers accounts, letters and newspapers hand delivered from “outside” were the *only* sources of local information. Then came the telegraph. Not easily, but it did finally arrive.

S.F.B. Morse, painter, teacher of the deaf, and inventor, first demonstrated a very simple telegraphic machine in 1838 and then obtained an appropriation from Congress in **1844** to build a line between Baltimore and Washington. With that success, many telegraph companies were formed, some with licenses from **Morse** to use his system, others using a print out version.

Of course, the major population centers were first – New York, Philadelphia, Boston – but by July 1846 the “Magnetic Telegraph [was] completed from Albany to Buffalo” and the pressure to establish local access increased.

In November **1846** “The Lake Erie Telegraph Company” was formed to build a line from Buffalo to Detroit along the Lake Erie shore. With the rights to use **Morse’s** patent

secured, the company began soliciting subscriptions from individuals and companies along the route.

The Erie & Michigan Telegraph Company was the first stage in the Buffalo to Detroit connection. It was headed by “**Messrs. Livingston and Wells** (of the express line) [who] have just concluded with patentee of **Morse’s** Electro Magnetic Telegraph, an agreement for the exclusive right of using it between Buffalo and Detroit.” Significantly, they employed **Mr. William G. Fargo**, one of the firm of **Wells & Co’s** Western Express. Clearly, **Wells Fargo** recognized the communication potential in this new technology that might eclipse their mail-coach business.

The *Fredonia Censor* editor, ever alive to the needs of his community, recognized it too. “We suggest to our citizens that some movement for the purpose of procuring the establishment of a Telegraphic station in this village, is timely now. The advantage of such a connection our business men will readily appreciate. Shall we not, therefore, do something toward that end?”

Fredonians were cautious at first about this new invention, but the large company interest had no doubts. **H.B. Ely**, who had the Buffalo to Detroit contract, was also working on a branch line between Cleveland and Pittsburgh. He stopped in Fredonia on 17 March **1847** and was able to get \$1,200 toward a goal of \$3,000 subscribed by local businessmen. He expected the line between Buffalo and Erie to be completed by June, and he urged Fredonians to subscribe. Otherwise “the line will pass us without a station.”

Of course work did not go as rapidly as planned. By mid-August **1847** the route from Buffalo here had been surveyed and marked, and about ten miles’ worth of post holes had been dug from Buffalo west. But the excitement mounted. “We may therefore soon expect communications with Buffalo and the various telegraphic stations eastward, by the novel and mysterious medium of *lightening*.” **Ben Franklin** would have approved.

Still the nay-sayers hung back. The *Censor* editor scolded in October **1847**:

While the obvious advantages arising from the use of the Telegraph are thus sought with so much eagerness, to what are we to attribute the indifference manifested in our backwardness to secure its benefits in our midst? While, unlike a donation, as many have seemed to regard subscriptions of stock, the capital thus invested bids fair to afford a handsome return, besides securing to our business men unprecedented facilities for the early reception of intelligence and transmission of business communication this reluctance is wholly unaccountable. The terms upon which a station can be secured here are favorable. The amount necessary would scarcely affect our pecuniary resources....

Finally, it was done. Enough subscriptions were received to guarantee a station in the Village. One of the prime movers here must have been the very successful **Risley Brothers**, technically **E. Risley & Co**. The station was located on the second floor over the **Risley’s store** at 32 West Main Street where **Jacob D. Chalmers** had had his tailoring establishment, perhaps forced out by the new tenant.

The specially-trained telegraph operators manning the station were **Messrs. Cornell and Cobb**. **Cornell** may have been the company's specialist brought in to train the local operators because he was gone pretty quickly. However, **Emery Cobb** continued for some years. Early in 1849 he was joined by **George F. Brigham**, just 21, grandson of **Elijah Risley** and son of **James and Fanny (Risley) Brigham**. The telegraph office apparently began as very much a family affair.

On the Fourth of March **1848**, for the first time, "Communications *by lightning* were made between this Village and Buffalo." The *Censor* proudly added, "It will be seen that we have Buffalo, New York and Washington new of *yesterday*." This was a startling change for a community that had been receiving such items a week or so after the event.

There is no doubt that the **Risleys** and other local businessmen immediately changed their procurement and selling techniques to utilize this new and marvelous method. Success, of course, spawned imitators. With the Buffalo to Detroit line in operation, proposals were made to add a line from New York along the New York & Erie Railroad right-of-way to intersect the earlier telegraph line at Fredonia. A **Col. J.J. Speed** was in the Village when the first station was just beginning to operate, already soliciting subscriptions for the new line.

A year later "**Pew's** Erie & Allegany Telegraph line" was operating between Fredonia, Sinclairville and Warren, "and doing considerable business." Within two weeks it was expected that the New York to Erie line would be up and running. Near the end of April, **1848** it was. When that line and the Allegany & Erie connections were made at Fredonia in April **1849**, as we have seen, **George Brigham** joined **Emery Cobb** to handle the increased traffic.

Canada came on board in May **1849**. St. Louis was soon to be added as was the Fredonia to Pittsburgh line. By December a new line from Cincinnati, Columbia and Cleveland was being run to Fredonia. Another important company, because it already covered numerous cities in the United States, was **O'Reilly's** Atlantic, Lake and Mississippi Line which opened an office in the Post Office in December 1848 and moved to the *Censor* building on Center Street one year later.

The telegraph continued to be a vital link, especially for businessmen, well into the 20th Century with Western Union Telegraph Co. an important service for many years. However, it was during their heyday that a rival cloud began to loom on the telegraphic horizon – **Alexander Graham Bell** demonstrated his telephone in **1876** and a new industry that was to have profound social consequences was born.

But that is another story. [*For further information, visit the Barker Historical Museum and the DFT Telecommunications Museum, both in Fredonia.*]