# The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all – freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.




Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Nine


# Samuel Morse

LESSON IDEA

To describe the invention and development of the telegraph, and to show the disappointments, delays, and tragedies its inventor had to overcome to achieve success.

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"I FIND myself without sympathy or help from anyone," Samuel Morse told a friend in 1842. "For nearly two years past, I have given all my time and scanty means, denying myself all pleasure and even necessary food. I am crushed. Unless I have the means from some source, I shall be compelled to give up the matter. Nothing but the knowledge that I have an invention which is to contribute to the happiness of millions has sustained me."

Morse had good reason to be downhearted. For several years he had been trying to persuade the Congress of the United States to appropriate $30,000 for construction of an experimental model of his invention. Do you know what it was? Yes, it was the telegraph.

In March of 1843 – at long last – Congress scheduled the Telegraph Bill for a vote, although it was placed at the bottom of a list of 140 others. Morse sat alone in the gallery listening all day to debates and waiting for the one that would decide his future. When a reporter asked him how he felt about the upcoming vote, Morse replied: "I have spent seven years in perfecting this invention, and all that I had; if it succeeds, I am a made man; if it fails, I am ruined." It was that simple.

This predicament, however, was not unusual for Morse. Throughout his fifty-two years, he had known only occasional success; more often than not, he lived barely above poverty.

In his youth, however, Morse was considered "a man with a future." As a student at Yale, he had distinguished himself in his academic studies and developed an artistic talent for portrait painting that made him both popular and financially solvent. In fact, Morse's talents with brush and canvas were so remarkable that he received praise from Washington Allston and Gilbert Stuart, two of America's most famous artists of the time.

This praise was enough to convince his parents that they should further his development by sending him to Europe to study under Allston. While pursuing his studies in London, an idealistic Morse wrote home: "My passion for my art is so firmly rooted, that I am confident no human power could destroy it. The more I study, the greater I think is its claim to the appellation of *divine* . . . ."

After nearly three years in Europe, Morse returned to the United States, confident that he would be "one of those who shall revive the splendor of the Fifteenth Century" with his paintings.

He promptly established an art gallery in Boston and then anxiously awaited the thousands of customers he imagined would rush to buy his works. But few Bostonians walked through his gallery and fewer purchased any paintings. He finally closed its doors after a year and decided to become an

itinerant artist, traveling from town to town, painting whatever customers would pay for.

In Charleston, South Carolina, Morse did find some markets for his talents, but not enough to keep the creditors from hounding him. To supplement his meager income, he worked with his brother on the development of a new water pump for fire engines – which proved to be a financial disaster.

"The machine business . . . I am heartily sick of," wrote Morse to his parents in 1818, "it yields much vexation, labor, and expense, and no profit. Yet I will not abandon it. I will do as well as I can with it; but I will make it subservient to my painting, as I am sure of a support . . . if I pursue it diligently." [*Ask members of your family to describe which character traits best depict Samuel Morse. Do they agree that tenacity and perseverance are necessary today to achieve a goal?*]

DESPITE THE FACT that financial rewards eluded him during these years, Morse succeeded in romance – and married Lucretia Pickering Walker in 1818. They had two children, but tragically, the second died shortly after birth.

As Morse's earning power continued to slide downhill, he was forced to leave his family with his parents in Massachusetts while he went to New York to find buyers for his paintings. His greatest success during the next two years was a commission to paint a large portrait of the famous Marquis de Lafayette, who had fought at Washington's side in the War for Independence. But before the portrait was finished, and he could be reunited with his family, his wife died. He had barely recovered from this tragic loss when, a year later, his father died – and only two years after that, his mother.

Overwhelmed by grief and its haunting memories, Morse left the United States again for Europe. He spent three years abroad, touring the marble art galleries, hoping to find some new inspiration with which to rebuild his life. When he boarded the ship *Sully* in October 1832, for the return trip to the United States, he still had found no answers, no direction for his shattered life. But that would quickly change.

At a casual dinner party on board ship, he struck up a conversation with Charles Thomas Jackson, a physician from Boston. Jackson was returning from France after studying the amazing properties of electricity. Morse, who had developed a casual interest in electricity while at Yale, asked Jackson if he thought an electrical impulse could reach every point along a wire instantaneously – regardless of the distance involved. Jackson replied that he believed that was true.

An extraordinary thought occurred to Morse. "If this be so," he said to Jackson, "and the presence of electricity can be made visible to any desired part of the circuit, I see no reason why intelligence might not be instantaneously transmitted by electricity to any distance."

After dinner Morse hurried to his room and began sketching a crude transmitting device – the forerunner of his telegraph. By the time the *Sully* docked in New York, he had a definite plan formulated for a workable telegraph system, but no money to develop it. To fill the financial gap, he took a job at the University of the City of New York, teaching art – but now art was of secondary importance to him. He had become obsessed with the idea of perfecting a device which would permit men miles apart to communicate with one another instantly. [*At this time, how was news and information communicated from town to town and state to state? Discuss two or three methods from previous lessons, such as the railroad, newspaper, and the postal system.*]

Morse's first working model of his invention was a clumsy contraption built with an old wooden picture frame, several wooden drums, an electromagnet, and a pencil. "Rude as it was," said the inventor, "I was enabled to and did mark down telegraphic intelligible signs, and to make and did make distinguishable sounds for telegraphing . . ." But the device was too weak to send electrical impulses great distances – a problem he immediately remedied by circuits and batteries to boost the power.

The artist-turned-inventor was making progress, yet not enough to satisfy him. According to Morse:

### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

As an interesting study, choose any useful item in your home – such as the radio, television, or washing machine – and trace its development from the first crude invention to today's sophisticated product.

"Up to the autumn of 1837 my telegraphic apparatus existed in so rude a form that I felt a reluctance to have it seen. My means were very limited – so limited as to preclude the possibility of constructing an apparatus of such mechanical finish as to warrant my success in venturing upon its public exhibition. I had no wish to expose to ridicule the representative of so many hours of laborious thought."

Sacrificing better jobs, higher pay, and often even the necessities of life, Morse continued to improve the system. Sometime he barely had enough to eat. "Indeed," wrote Morse, "so straitened were my circumstances that, in order to save time to carry out my invention and to economize my scanty means, I had for many months lodged and eaten in my studio, procuring any food in small quantities from some grocery, and preparing it myself. To conceal from my friends, the stinted manner in which I lived, I was in the habit of bringing my food to my room in the evenings, and this was my mode of life for many years." [*Ask members of your family if they would be willing to make similar sacrifices to pursue a goal they thought worthwhile. How many people would?*]

Five years after his inspiration on the *Sully*, and after countless disappointments, frustrations, and experiments, Morse finally perfected a suitable model for exhibition. In February of 1838 he approached members of the Committee on Commerce of the United States House of Representatives, hoping to interest the Congress in appropriating money for the construction of a telegraph line. Some members of the committee seemed impressed with the invention, and Congressman F.O.J. Smith even offered a bill to Congress which would give Morse $30,000 to string a telegraph line from Baltimore to Washington D.C.

Certain that the appropriations bill would pass, Morse sailed off to Europe to try to interest other nations in his invention. But he was met with a mixture of suspicion and ridicule, and he returned to America disillusioned.

Four years passed and still there was no definite action in Congress. Nor could he find any private funds to finance further development. Morse wrote to a friend: "The reason of . . . [*the telegraph's*] not being in operation is not the fault of the invention nor is it my neglect. My faith is not only unshaken in its eventual adoption throughout the world, but it is confirmed by every new discovery in the science of electricity."

Finally, in December of 1842, Morse went to Washington to make one last attempt to renew Congressional interest in his invention. In a dramatic demonstration of its practicality, he strung a telegraph line between two committee rooms and successfully sent a message from one room to the other. The effect was as dynamic as Morse envisioned, but still there was no action. Months passed with nothing done.

The Congress was about to adjourn when, as Morse reports: "A bill appropriating thirty thousand dollars for my purpose . . . passed the House, and was before the Senate for concurrence, waiting its turn on the calendar. On the last day of the session (3rd of March, 1843), I had spent the whole day and part of the evening in the Senate chamber, anxiously watching the progress of the passing of the various bills, of which there were, in the morning of that day, over one hundred and forty to be acted upon, before the one in which I was interested would be reached . . . As evening approached, there seemed to be little chance that the Telegraph Bill would be reached before the adjournment, and consequently I had the prospect of the delay of another year, with the loss of time, and all my means already expended."

Feeling totally defeated, Morse left the gallery before the session closed to return to his room and pack.

The next morning, however, Annie Ellsworth, the daughter of one of his old schoolmates, called to congratulate him on the passage of the telegraph appropriations bill. Morse was both surprised and shocked. At first he thought she was mistaken, but Annie insisted: ". . . it is you that are mistaken. Father was there at the adjournment at midnight, and saw the President put his name to your bill; and I asked Father if I might come and tell you and he gave me leave. Am I the first to tell you?"

"Yes, Annie," replied the delighted inventor, "you are the first to inform me; and now I am going to make you a promise; the first dispatch on the completed line from Washington to Baltimore shall be yours."

As soon as Morse was able to get a construction crew organized, he began laying an underground

telegraph line from the railroad station in Baltimore to the Supreme Court chamber in Washington, D.C. When faulty insulation around the wires rendered the entire project useless, he solved the problem in a unique and imaginative fashion by erecting the telegraph poles at regular intervals along the route.

This proved successful, and on the 24th day of May, 1844, a group of distinguished statesmen gathered in the Supreme Court chamber for the historic demonstration of the new invention. Morse had not forgotten his promise to Annie Ellsworth. The first words tapped out on the line and decoded seconds later in Baltimore were the ones Annie had chosen: "What hath God wrought!"

And to that, Morse later wrote: "I need only add that no words could have been selected more expressive of the disposition of my own mind at that time, to ascribe all the honor to Him to whom it truly belongs."

A new communications system had been born! Its potential was so revolutionary that no one knew how to use it or what to expect from it. One of the first uses was to transmit chess games over the line between prominent players in Baltimore and Washington. But soon someone had the bright idea of transmitting news dispatches over it. From there, the telegraph's use spread rapidly. In fact, within four years, every state east of the Mississippi River (with the exception of Florida) was served by telegraph. By the end of the War Between the States, over 200,000 miles of telegraph wires criss-crossed our nation.

Samuel Morse was pleased with the demand for his invention and confidently predicted: "Man will not be satisfied to stop here. Telegraph cables will someday connect Europe and America. Startling as this may now seem, I am confident the time will come when it will happen." And he was right. Within a decade, a wealthy businessman named Cyrus Field was attempting to lay the Atlantic cable as a telegraph link between the continents of America and Europe. On August 17, 1858, the following message flashed thousands of miles under the Atlantic: "Europe and America are united by telegraph. Glory to God in the highest; on earth peace, and good will toward men." Even though the Atlantic cable broke several times after that, it was operating smoothly by 1866.

By this time, Samuel Morse – an artist turned inventor– was doing quite well. Foreign nations had given him a total of $80,000 to show their appreciation for his invention; foreign dignitaries presented him with gold and diamond medals in lavish ceremonies; colleges awarded him honorary degrees; and scientific groups invited him for speeches and dinners. After years of poverty and defeat, marked by an abnormal number of personal tragedies, Morse had finally succeeded. And in the process, he made a lasting contribution to mankind. Samuel Morse died in New York City on April 2, 1872, content that his invention had been worth every effort and all of his sacrifices.

## DURING THE WEEK

Make it a family project to find out more about the Morse code, the dots and dashes used to transmit messages by telegraph, and to use the code in place of written notes or conversation between family members during the week. An empty stapler, for example, might be used to produce the dots and dashes. Other common household objects will serve equally as well. Encourage family members to use their imagination in discovering such objects, and to compete with each other in speed and accuracy of messages received and sent by Morse code.

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