

**THE TRANS-ATLANTIC SUBMARINE
TELEGRAPH: A BRIEF NARRATIVE
OF THE PRINCIPAL INCIDENTS IN
THE HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC
TELEGRAPH COMPANY**

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The trans-Atlantic submarine telegraph: a brief narrative of the principal incidents in the history of the Atlantic Telegraph Company by George Saward

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GEORGE SAWARD

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THE
TRANS-ATLANTIC SUBMARINE
TELEGRAPH:

A BRIEF NARRATIVE OF THE PRINCIPAL
INCIDENTS IN THE HISTORY

OF THE
ATLANTIC TELEGRAPH COMPANY.

COMPILED FROM AUTHENTIC AND
OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

BY THE LATE GEORGE SAWARD,
SECRETARY TO THE COMPANY.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION.

1878.

P R E F A C E.

My husband, during the last two years of his life, was much interested in putting together some authentic particulars of the history of the Atlantic Telegraph, in which he took so prominent a part. Therefore, out of respect for his memory, I have determined to publish them.

I think that this history will be an agreeable recollection to any of the Directors who are now living, and an interesting story to all. And I am sure that those who worked with my husband will bear testimony to the modesty that he displays when he speaks of the part he took in the great enterprise.

HARRIET SAWARD.

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THE TRANSATLANTIC SUBMARINE TELEGRAPH.

CHAPTER I.

IN the month of November, 1850, Bishop Mullock, at that time the head of the Roman Catholic Church in Newfoundland, addressed to the *Courier*, an American newspaper, a letter in which he advocated the establishment of a line of telegraphic communication from Newfoundland to New York, so that under proper arrangements the news of the mail steamers could be intercepted in passing Newfoundland and sent forward by telegraph to New York, while, on the other hand, news occurring in New York, subsequent to the sailing of each mail, could be telegraphed on to Newfoundland, and there sent out to meet the steamer passing on its way to Europe—thus shortening the time of communication between the two countries by several days.

The Bishop suggested the construction of a land telegraph from St. John's to Cape Ray, to be continued by submarine cable to St. Paul's Island, and from the latter place to Cape North (Cape Breton), thence by the best route to the mainland of America, there to unite with existing telegraphs, and by these means to complete the communication to New York. A year later the idea of carrying such a scheme into practice appears to have occurred either as an original notion, or from the perusal of the above-mentioned letter, to a Mr. F. N. Gisborne, an English telegraph engineer, who, in 1851, was living in Nova Scotia.

Mr. Gisborne visited Newfoundland for the purpose of explaining his plan to the Legislature of that colony, with a view to their possible assistance in carrying it out.

His project was at once to erect an overland telegraph from St. John's to Cape Ray, and as there was at that period much doubt as to the practicability of submarine cables he proposed to establish a temporary communication from Cape Ray to Cape Breton by means of steamers and carrier pigeons, until it should have been proved to be possible to lay a submarine cable across the sea between those places.

It was hoped at the time that these important arrangements might ultimately lead to the running of steamers from Galway to America,

calling at St. John's. The establishment of these steamers had been mooted previously, and the scheme having thus a local interest for Newfoundland, Mr. Gisborne's plans were favourably received, and met with such assistance as enabled him to survey a line from St. John's to Carbonear. In 1852 the local Legislature of Newfoundland gave further encouragement to the project by granting to Mr. Gisborne an Act of Incorporation which conferred, under certain conditions, upon a projected Company, important concessions of land, and the exclusive right of erecting telegraphs in the colony during a period of thirty years.

Furnished with this authority Mr. Gisborne proceeded to New York for the purpose of introducing his plans and his Act of Parliament to the notice of capitalists there. In this endeavour he was to some extent successful, for he met with a Mr. Tebbits, through whom he obtained some subscriptions, and promises of further help in the same direction.

Mr. Gisborne then set to work upon the line to Cape Ray, and, in spite of formidable engineering difficulties, and great personal dangers and privations, he bravely persevered in making a survey of the hitherto unexplored country westward of St. John's, and commenced the erection of an electric telegraph by land in the direction of Cape Ray.

By this time several submarine cables had been laid in Europe, and the idea of the steamer and the carrier pigeons was consequently now laid aside. Mr. Gisborne now proceeded to England, where he purchased and shipped a submarine cable, which he succeeded in submerging successfully from Prince Edward's Island to New Brunswick, this being the first cable of any importance ever laid in America. Unfortunately this cable was shortly afterwards broken, and, owing to the want of experience, could not at that period be recovered.

Undaunted by this untoward circumstance Mr. Gisborne proceeded with his land lines towards Cape Ray, and was pushing forward with great energy when his progress was suddenly arrested, owing to the necessary funds for the payment of wages and expenses not being forthcoming from New York. This catastrophe involved Mr. Gisborne personally in great pecuniary loss and liability for debts incurred in the Island of Newfoundland, and it was not till January, 1854, that he was able again to take up the matter.

He then went to New York to see some of his American friends, in order to ascertain if anything further could be done to resuscitate and complete the half-finished project. He was long unsuccessful in this, and while meditating on the best course to relieve him from his embarrassment he became acquainted with Mr. Matthew D. Field, an engineer, by whom he was introduced to Mr. Cyrus W. Field, whose name and exertions are so well known in connection with this enterprise.

Mr. Cyrus Field, having carefully considered the history of Mr. Gisborne's proceedings, decided at once not to attempt to complete Mr. Gisborne's unfinished enterprise, inasmuch as during his consideration of the matter the idea of a much larger project had dawned upon his own mind. It had struck him that if it were possible to succeed in establishing a submarine telegraphic communication across the Atlantic Ocean a grand scheme of international telegraph would be formed by combining this larger enterprise with the original project of Mr. Gisborne. The recent success of the cable between Dover and Calais in 1851, and the consequent confidence thence arising in Europe as to the indefinite extension of submarine telegraphy, gave great encouragement to this idea. Mr. Field accordingly took measures for obtaining the opinions of the highest scientific authorities in America :—

First, as to the possibility of stretching a telegraphic cable across the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean without mechanical injury; and, secondly, as to whether a submarine cable could be so constituted electrically, having regard to its conductivity and insulation, as to be capable of transmitting telegraphic signals with speed and accuracy between Europe and America.

From Lieutenant Maury, of the National Observatory at Washington, he received satisfactory assurances as to the mechanical question, and the further information, founded upon the soundings of Lieutenant Berryman, of the United States brig *Dolphin*, that between Ireland and Newfoundland there existed a line of equable soundings and a character of sea bottom admirably adapted for the purpose of receiving a telegraphic cable.

From Professor Morse he obtained equally encouraging assurances as to the practicability of the electrical portion of the work, and, thus supported by scientific opinions, Mr. Field decided upon making an attempt to combine in one grand undertaking the project of Mr. Gisborne and the important supplement to that project which had been conceived by himself.

From that hour to the final consummation of the great work, during a period of twelve years of wearing trial and disappointment, Mr. Field never lost heart, but devoted himself with untiring energy to the work of which he from thenceforth became the apostle.

The object of these pages being to narrate in a plain way some of the principal incidents in the history of a famous enterprise, without presuming to adjust the various claims to praise among the many meritorious persons who were concerned in bringing it to completion, it must not be supposed that injustice is intended to Mr. Field, or other labourers in the work, if their separate efforts are not dwelt upon as often or as fully as some might think due to them.

As regards Mr. Cyrus W. Field, his great services have fortunately found an eloquent exponent in the person of the Rev. Henry Field, who, in a very interesting work, entitled "The Atlantic Telegraph," has more particularly dwelt upon the important part fulfilled by his distinguished relative.

Supported by the authority of Professor Morse, Captain Maury, and other eminent authorities, Mr. Field agreed, on certain terms, to assist Mr. Gisborne, and the better to carry out his views he, with his brother Mr. Dudley Field, obtained the co-operation of certain capitalists, viz., Mr. Peter Cooper, Mr. Moses Taylor, Mr. Marshall O. Roberts, and Mr. Chandler White, all of New York.

These gentlemen, in conjunction with the Messrs. Field, agreed, at their mutual expense, to promote and carry out a certain Company, to be called "The New York, Newfoundland, and London Telegraph Company," provided that an Act of Incorporation could be obtained from the Legislature of Newfoundland in its favour, conferring and confirming certain privileges upon the shareholders in the event of their completion of various telegraphic works, more especially of a cable across the Atlantic.

Mr. Cyrus Field and Mr. Dudley Field therefore proceeded to Newfoundland, and having acquired a surrender of Mr. Gisborne's charter they eventually obtained from the Newfoundland Legislature a new and most important Act of Parliament (which was duly confirmed by the Colonial Department of the Home Government), incorporating their project, under the title of "The New York, Newfoundland, and London Telegraph Company."

This Act conferred upon the promoters, during a term of forty years, the exclusive right of landing cables in Newfoundland and Labrador, together with the fee simple of fifty square miles of unappropriated land on completion of certain land telegraphs, and of a further fifty square miles on the completion of the submarine cable to Europe.

The Act also confirmed a guarantee by the Newfoundland Government of interest on £50,000 worth of the new Company's Bonds, and took upon itself the payment of £5,000 in cash towards the construction of a bridle path along the line of the land telegraph.

This Colonial Act having been secured and confirmed, the promoters at once discharged the debts of the old Newfoundland Company, the Act incorporating which was repealed by that obtained by Mr. Field.

The new Company soon completed the line from St. John's to Cape Ray, with a branch to Cape Race, and, after losing one cable, they finally succeeded in establishing submarine communication between Cape Ray (Newfoundland) and Ashpee Bay in Cape Breton, and also connected Nova Scotia with Cape Breton by a cable across the Gut of Kanso.