

Faster communication

By Doc Halliday
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Lucretia Pickering Walker was born on July 15, 1799, in Concord, New Hampshire. At the age of 19, she married Samuel on Sept. 29, 1818, in Charleston, Massachusetts. Of course, she adopted Samuel's last name after the marriage.

Samuel was a painter. He was not a house painter, but rather an artist. And he was a good painter at that. There is even a statue erected in his honor in New York's Central Park, but not because he was an artist. He painted the Hall of Congress, among other works.

On Jan. 17, 1825, Lucretia gave birth to her fourth child in New Haven, Connecticut. Sam was actually painting the portrait of the Marquis de Lafayette in Washington, D.C. as commissioned by the city of New York, when he received word that his wife was ill after the birth of their fourth child. That letter was delivered by a rider on horseback. By the time Sam reached New Haven, his wife was already dead and buried. She had died on Feb. 7, 1825, three weeks after the birth of their fourth child.

Sam was grief-stricken. If there had only been a faster means of communication, he could have been notified of his wife's illness sooner, and arrived at her side prior to her death. He would give up painting, and dedicate his life to finding a means of faster long-distance communication. He did.

On Jan. 6, 1838, Sam made the initial open demonstration of a machine that would transform the way the world communicated. In that same year, Samuel Finley Breese Morse received a patent for the telegraph and his code. He offered his invention to the new nation of the Republic of Texas. Samuel Morse did not receive an answer to his offer, and later rescinded it.

Morse needed funding and government support in order to develop the invention. It took six years of heavily lobbying Congress to obtain support. It was Morse's Yale classmate, Henry Ellsworth, the first commissioner of the United States Patent Office who obtained funding and support for Sam. As a sign of appreciation, Morse allowed Ellsworth's 17-year-old daughter to choose the words of the alleged first message. Many messages had been previously sent in tests, but this was celebrated as the first.

The message "What hath God wrought?" was sent on May 23, 1844, more than 40 miles of wire from Washington to Baltimore, Maryland. Annie Ellsworth was rumored to have been infatuated with the older widower, Samuel Morse.

Competing patents were issued beginning in 1846. One patent covered a more exact device that printed out letters as opposed to the dots and dashes of Morse code. This is the code that many of us more experienced citizens learned in school, the Boy Scouts (in my case, it was the Civil Air Patrol) or the military. I believe it is no longer being taught in the military. Do you know what three dots, followed by three dashes, and then another three dots means? Another competing patent (Bain) covered a method of coloring paper to send the message.

Telegraph lines quickly started to cross the country even next to each other. The competition rapidly helped to reduce the cost for the service as they attempted to out price each other. The Census Bureau reported in 1851 that 75 companies with 21,147 miles of wire were operating.

In a historic 1852 decision (O'Reilly vs. Morse) the Supreme Court declared the Bain telegraph an infringement on Morse's patent, and Bain lines merged with Morse lines across the country. The Court heard more than 12 hours of oral arguments in late 1852, and then continued with both printed and oral arguments over another year before rendering its decision in early 1854. Many legal scholars now say that Chief Justice Taney rendered the wrong decision. That O'Reilly did in fact intentionally infringe upon the patents held by Morse.

Marshall became the first city in Texas with a telegraph line. On Jan. 5, 1854, the Texas and Red River Co. was chartered in Texas. It opened its Marshall office on Feb. 14 of that year, with links to New Orleans via Shreveport and Alexandria, Louisiana, and Natchez, Mississippi. The company closed its Marshall office, which was then part of Western Union, in 1972. In 1870 it was reported that telegrams in Texas cost 25 cents for distances of less than 25 miles.

On the Northeast corner of the Courthouse Square sits Telegraph Park. It was renamed in 2010 from Rotary Park to reflect the makeover. It now has a stage and benches as well as the state historical marker and statue. If you live in Marshall, I would ask when you were last at the park. Why don't you visit on the second Saturday of the month? If you are not a resident, why don't you visit? Perhaps you will see me there. Telegraph Park is just one of the many historical places to visit in this city and the surrounding area.

In a column on the Seven Flags of Marshall published on July 30, I mentioned the exploration by the army of Hernando de Soto. In 1936 Congress created the Hernando de Soto Commission to locate DeSoto's North American Trail. Published in 1939, the Final Report of the United States DeSoto Expedition Commission relied upon the Henry R. Schoolcraft DeSoto Trail theory of 1857, which was hypothesized and has been proven inaccurate.

The following information is from "The De Soto Chronicles, The Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543," edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore, published by the University of Alabama Press.

On May 21, 1542 Hernando de Soto died in Lake Village, Arkansas. His army under the command of Luis de Moscoso continued on. They moved southwest, camping east of present day Bastrop, Louisiana, before moving on through Monroe, Ruston, Minden, Bossier City and arriving in Shreveport. On July 20 the Spaniards left Shreveport, camping that day at Cypress Bayou below Keithville. They moved south to Logansport on the Sabine River which was swollen preventing a crossing.

On Aug. 17, 1542, the army did cross the Sabine River and spent several days at present day Center before moving further Southwest. The army spent two months exploring Texas to Austin and returning along the same route. They had contact with Caddo Indians at least on the west side of the Sabine River.

The closest the Spaniards came to Marshall was Shreveport, Louisiana (40 miles) or Center, Texas (56 miles).

Next week we will discuss commitments.

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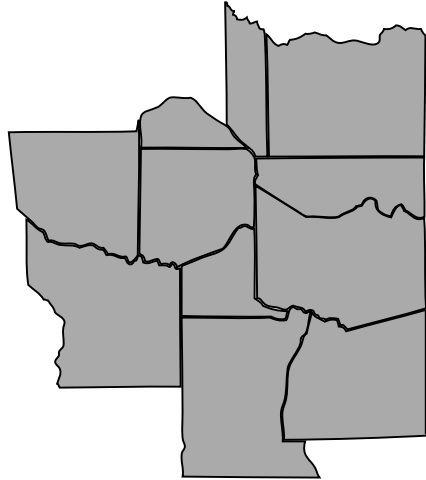
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