

ArtiFactsheet: The Telegraph Key

Early forms of long-distance communication were based primarily on sending codes and symbols using visual indicators. Examples of this include smoke signals and semaphore towers. One of the principal disadvantages of this method was that it required clear line-of-sight, which could be affected by things such as poor weather, as well as natural and man-made structures.

The discovery of electricity made it possible to transmit messages along electrical lines. This spurred considerable research, culminating in the invention of the electric telegraph. The electric telegraph was more versatile and reliable than visual indicators. It also provided instantaneous contact, revolutionizing long-distance communications.

The invention of the electric telegraph in the 1830s is attributed to two groups of researchers: Sir William Cooke and Sir Charles Wheatstone in England; and Samuel Morse, Leonard Gale and Alfred Vail in the U.S.

In Canada, development of the electric telegraph closely followed the U.S., with the first telegraph lines laid in 1847. The telegraph remained popular until the 1920s when its use started to decline due to the increased usage of the telephone.

Many artifacts related to telegraphy, such as the telegraph key pictured on this page, can be found in the collection of Ingenium – Canada's Museums of Science and Innovation: ingeniumcanada.org/ingenium/collection-research/collection.php.

Fun Fact

Samuel Morse wanted to sell the electric telegraph to the U.S. government. The government declined, and subsequent development was handled by private industries.

Artifact Details

Telegraph Key, 1849 – 1869
Manufacturer: Unknown
Artifact no. 1975.0035.001

A telegraph key is used to transmit messages in an electrical telegraph. Telegraph keys come in many different models. The one pictured below is called a Camelback, because of the hump-shaped look of the lever. It is made out of brass and was used in a telegraph office in Metcalfe, Ontario, which opened in 1870 and closed in 1912.

