

Looking Back

The First Stitch

Millions of miles of cables now knit together the modern world, crossing and looping the globe so that a word whispered anywhere can be heard everywhere at once. This summer marks the sesquicentennial of the first strand to stitch the Old World to the New—the first transatlantic cable.

The first-ever city-to-city telegraph message was transmitted from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore, Maryland in 1844. One decade later, in 1854, Cyrus West Field, an American who made a fortune in the paper business, began planning to lay a telegraph cable across the ocean floor from Newfoundland to Ireland. With a combination of private and government support, and with the advice of several scientific luminaries—including William Thomson, the great British physicist remembered as Lord Kelvin—Field arranged to have two warships adapted to carry and let out miles of cable. The first attempt, in 1857, failed after the cable twice broke. A second attempt, in the summer of 1858, succeeded despite more breaks, and the first telegraph message across the submarine cable was sent on August 5, 1858—a simple message from one ship to another announcing that the cable was complete.

The event was hailed with excitement on both sides of the ocean. On August 16, 1858, Queen Victoria and President James Buchanan exchanged congratulatory messages, and a few days later, Cyrus Field told an admiring Massachusetts crowd that he hoped the cable would “remain forever and ever to bear the messages of ‘Peace on earth and Good Will toward men.’”

While that first cable did not last forever—it failed just a month after it was finished—it proved that instantaneous transatlantic communication was possible. A permanent connection was established 1866; a half-century later, radio signals were zipping across the Atlantic; a half-century after that, they were bouncing off satellites in space.

Around the same time Cyrus Field began planning his grand project, Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden* that “We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate... We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.” Critics of the modern mass media culture made possible by the vast network of wires might consider Thoreau’s derisive pessimism prescient, but it is worth remembering that our knit-together world makes possible not just frivolity, but fellowship; not just entertainment, but enlightenment; not just global fear and terror, but peace and good will toward men.