

HISTORY FROM OHA

Number, Please:

The History of the CNY Telephone and Telegraph Company

Alexander Graham Bell is credited with the invention of the telephone, though numerous individuals had worked on variations for years before Bell exhibited his creation at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1876.

BY KAREN Y. COONEY

After viewing that exhibit, local locksmith, Frederick Brower, brought the first telephone back to Syracuse. He installed a line between his business on East Genesee Street and his home over three blocks away. The city became enthralled with this invention and it was determined that there was a genuine need for a local telephone service. The company motto "Stay at home and travel by telephone" was adopted quickly by the citizens of Syracuse.

The first location for the Central New York Telephone and Telegraph Company was an office building constructed at 311 Montgomery St. The building was originally designed with four floors, but local fireman, Hamilton White, suggested that a fifth floor be built to include the installation of a central fire-alarm system. The 311 building was originally built to serve the needs of the company for years to come. However, in the early 1900s, the New York Telephone Company commissioned New York City architects Cyrus Eidlitz and Alexander McKenzie to design and build a larger facility located down the block at 321 Montgomery St. In July 1904, construction of the original U-shape of the telephone building began and the full operation moved into the new facilities in 1906. Meanwhile, the original telephone building was sold to the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) to be used as a history museum and research center.

The new five story building at 321 Montgomery met the highest standards with each floor serving

distinct purposes. This building was also designed with the thought that it would suit the growth needs of the telephone company for at least the next 20 years. However, the telephone company once again experienced tremendous growth, and by World War I, an addition in the same style as the original was constructed — turning the building into a hollow square.

The first floor contained the business office and the "public pay station." Customers could settle their bills or use the pay station to conduct out-of-town (long distance) conversations privately. The Contract Department, also located on the first floor, handled requests for new telephone installations and extensions and determined telephone rates. A kitchen was available for cooking employee meals and offering coffee, tea, and cocoa to all employees without charge.

The Auditing Department, with 80 employees at its peak, was housed on a separate floor and was responsible for all the company correspondence, files, and records. Also located on that floor was the Engineering Department. This department mapped out future company plans for CNY Telephone and Telegraph Co., Empire State Telephone and Telegraph Co., and the NY and Pennsylvania Telephone and Telegraph Company.

The telephone company was one of the first businesses to recognize the value of female employees — specifically, as switchboard operators. It was found that women were generally more polite and efficient than male operators. Multiple supervisors were assigned to monitor the operators. The

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Bell Telephone switchboard operators at 321 Montgomery St.

321 Montgomery St. building housed the largest switchboard for the entire Bell Telephone Company at that time. About 80,000 city calls were "switched" daily. Each operator was responsible for a board consisting of tiny light bulbs, plugs, and switches. When a bulb lit up, the operator inserted a plug into the receptacle above it and asked "number, please." Once the number was given, the operator plugged the cord into the number requested — making the connection for the customer. In another area of the building, a separate switchboard was dedicated to toll and long-distance calls. Underground cables, composed of hundreds of pairs of copper wires served as electrified 'streets' for each of these conversations. These cables attached to the switchboards, ran through the building into a large vault located underground and then via large ducts throughout the city. The wellbeing of the employees was important to the company and a "retiring room" was available for breaks. Comfortable chairs and the latest reading materials were provided. A dining room and locker room also adjoined this area.

The terminal room was the home to the extensive and complicated equipment necessary for the smooth operation of the switchboard. The "Wire Chief" monitored all the employees in charge of the upkeep and repair of this equipment. He was the ultimate decision-maker in assigning emergency tasks to competent linemen, installers, signalmen, and splicers to remedy any trouble and eliminate the threat of any service interruption. They prioritized the circuits to be recovered and restored, so that emergency circuits would perform under demanding situations of weather, climate, or man-made mishap. The terminal room had rack after



Telephone repairman splicing lines.

rack of equipment containing the relays that operated the bulbs on the switchboard, the storage batteries, charging and ringing machines plus additional apparatus that ensured that the service would continue without interruption. Each piece of apparatus was protected from fire and electrical damage.

NY Telephone continued to grow and subsequently had to move again into larger facilities. History repeated itself when, in the 1980s, Onondaga County offered OHA the opportunity to occupy this "newer" telephone company building at 321 Montgomery where vestiges of the original inhabitants still exist today.

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