

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Seventy-Nine

Samuel Morse

LESSON IDEA

To describe the invention and development of the telegraph, and to show the disappointments, delays, and tragedies its inventor had to overcome to achieve success.

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“I FIND myself without sympathy or help from anyone,” Samuel Morse told a friend in 1842. “For nearly two years past, I have given all my time and scanty means, denying myself all pleasure and even necessary food. I am crushed. Unless I have the means from some source, I shall be compelled to give up the matter. Nothing but the knowledge that I have an invention which is to contribute to the happiness of millions has sustained me.”

Morse had good reason to be downhearted. For several years he had been trying to persuade the Congress of the United States to appropriate \$30,000 for construction of an experimental model of his invention. Do you know what it was? Yes, it was the telegraph.

In March of 1843 — at long last — Congress scheduled the Telegraph Bill for a vote, although it was placed at the bottom of a list of 140 others. Morse sat alone in the gallery listening all day to debates and waiting for the one that would decide his future. When a reporter asked him how he felt about the upcoming vote, Morse replied: “I have spent seven years in perfecting this invention, and all that I had; if it succeeds, I am a made man; if it fails, I am ruined.” It was that simple.

This predicament, however, was not unusual for Morse. Throughout his fifty-two years, he had known only occasional success; more often than not, he lived barely above poverty.

In his youth, however, Morse was considered “a man with a future.” As a student at Yale, he had distinguished himself in his academic studies and developed an artistic talent for portrait painting that made him both popular and financially solvent. In fact, Morse’s talents with brush and canvas were so remarkable that he received praise from Washington Allston and Gilbert Stuart, two of America’s most famous artists of the time.

This praise was enough to convince his parents that they should further his development by sending him to Europe to study under Allston. While pursuing his studies in London, an idealistic Morse wrote home: “My passion for my art is so firmly rooted, that I am confident no human power could destroy it. The more I study, the greater I think is its claim to the appellation of *divine*”

After nearly three years in Europe, Morse returned to the United States, confident that he would be “one of those who shall revive the splendor of the Fifteenth Century” with his paintings.

He promptly established an art gallery in Boston and then anxiously awaited the thousands of customers he imagined would rush to buy his works. But few Bostonians walked through his gallery and fewer purchased any paintings. He finally closed its doors after a year and decided to become an

itinerant artist, traveling from town to town, painting whatever customers would pay for.

In Charleston, South Carolina, Morse did find some markets for his talents, but not enough to keep the creditors from hounding him. To supplement his meager income, he worked with his brother on the development of a new water pump for fire engines – which proved to be a financial disaster.

“The machine business . . . I am heartily sick of,” wrote Morse to his parents in 1818, “it yields much vexation, labor, and expense, and no profit. Yet I will not abandon it. I will do as well as I can with it; but I will make it subservient to my painting, as I am sure of a support . . . if I pursue it diligently.” [Ask members of your family to describe which character traits best depict Samuel Morse. Do they agree that tenacity and perseverance are necessary today to achieve a goal?]

DESPITE THE FACT that financial rewards eluded him during these years, Morse succeeded in romance – and married Lucretia Pickering Walker in 1818. They had two children, but tragically, the second died shortly after birth.

As Morse’s earning power continued to slide downhill, he was forced to leave his family with his parents in Massachusetts while he went to New York to find buyers for his paintings. His greatest success during the next two years was a commission to paint a large portrait of the famous Marquis de Lafayette, who had fought at Washington’s side in the War for Independence. But before the portrait was finished, and he could be reunited with his family, his wife died. He had barely recovered from this tragic loss when, a year later, his father died – and only two years after that, his mother.

Overwhelmed by grief and its haunting memories, Morse left the United States again for Europe. He spent three years abroad, touring the marble art galleries, hoping to find some new inspiration with which to rebuild his life. When he boarded the ship *Sully* in October 1832, for the return trip to the United States, he still had found no answers, no direction for his shattered life. But that would quickly change.

At a casual dinner party on board ship, he struck up a conversation with Charles Thomas Jackson, a physician from Boston. Jackson was returning from

France after studying the amazing properties of electricity. Morse, who had developed a casual interest in electricity while at Yale, asked Jackson if he thought an electrical impulse could reach every point along a wire instantaneously – regardless of the distance involved. Jackson replied that he believed that was true.

An extraordinary thought occurred to Morse. “If this be so,” he said to Jackson, “and the presence of electricity can be made visible to any desired part of the circuit, I see no reason why intelligence might not be instantaneously transmitted by electricity to any distance.”

After dinner Morse hurried to his room and began sketching a crude transmitting device – the forerunner of his telegraph. By the time the *Sully* docked in New York, he had a definite plan formulated for a workable telegraph system, but no money to develop it. To fill the financial gap, he took a job at the University of the City of New York, teaching art – but now art was of secondary importance to him. He had become obsessed with the idea of perfecting a device which would permit men miles apart to communicate with one another instantly. [At this time, how was news and information communicated from town to town and state to state? Discuss two or three methods from previous lessons, such as the railroad, newspaper, and the postal system.]

Morse’s first working model of his invention was a clumsy contraption built with an old wooden picture frame, several wooden drums, an electromagnet, and a pencil. “Rude as it was,” said the inventor, “I was enabled to and did mark down telegraphic intelligible signs, and to make and did make distinguishable sounds for telegraphing . . .” But the device was too weak to send electrical impulses great distances – a problem he immediately remedied by circuits and batteries to boost the power.

The artist-turned-inventor was making progress, yet not enough to satisfy him. According to Morse:

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

As an interesting study, choose any useful item in your home – such as the radio, television, or washing machine – and trace its development from the first crude invention to today’s sophisticated product.

