

Elisha Gray Biography

Elisha Gray

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Biography

Elisha Gray was Alexander Graham Bell's principle rival, first for invention of the harmonic telegraph and then of the telephone. He was a prolific inventor, granted some seventy patents during his lifetime. Born in Barnesville, Ohio, on August 2, 1835, and brought up on a farm, Gray had to leave school early when his father died but later continued his studies at Oberlin College, where he concentrated on physical sciences, especially electricity, and supported himself as a carpenter.

After leaving Oberlin, Gray continued his electrical experiments, concentrating on telegraphy. In 1867 he patented an improved telegraph relay, and later, a telegraph switch, an "annunciator" for hotels and large business offices, a telegraphic repeater, and a telegraph line printer. He also experimented with ways to transmit multiple, separate messages simultaneously across a single wire, a subject that was also engaging the efforts of Bell. Gray prevailed, filing his harmonic telegraph patent application in February 1875, two days before Bell's similar application.

Gray now began investigating ways to transmit voice messages, soon developing a telephone design that featured a liquid transmitter and variable resistance. In one of the most remarkable coincidences in the history of invention, Gray filed notice of his intent to patent his device on February 14, 1876--just two hours after Bell had filed his own telephone patent at the same office. Western Union Telegraph Company purchased the rights to Gray's telephone and went into the telephone business; the Bell Telephone Company launched a bitter lawsuit in return. After Western Union settled with Bell, Gray renewed his case. The Supreme Court ultimately decided in Bell's favor in 1888.

Meanwhile, Gray had been a founding partner in 1869 of Gray and Barton, an electric-equipment shop in Cleveland, Ohio. This became Western Electric Manufacturing of Chicago in 1872, which evolved into Western Electric Company, which, ironically, became the largest single component of Bell Telephone in 1881.

Despite his disappointment over the telephone patent, Gray continued to experiment with electricity. In 1888 and 1891 Gray patented his TelAutograph, which electrically transmitted handwriting or pictures, using a wide band of paper with a recording pen that moved as if hand-held. Gray demonstrated the TelAutograph at the World's Columbian Exhibition in 1893. From 1880 until his death, Gray was professor of dynamic electricity at Oberlin. Before his death on January 21, 1901 in Newtownville, Massachusetts, he was experimenting with an undersea signaling device.