

Moses Gerrish Farmer Biography

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Biography

Moses Gerrish Farmer (1820-1893), an American inventor and manufacturer, pioneered in the practical applications of electricity.

Moses Farmer was born in Boscawen, N.H., where his father was a farmer and prosperous merchant. After his father died in 1837, Moses attended preparatory school and then Dartmouth College. He gave piano lessons to earn money for school, but the combination of work and study made him ill and brought his schooling to an end. He taught for several years in Maine and New Hampshire.

While teaching, Farmer pursued his interest in mechanical problems. He built a machine to manufacture printed-paper window shades, which proved a modest success. In 1845 he turned his attention to the problems of electricity. One of his first projects was an electric railroad, powered by batteries, which he built and operated at home in 1847. This invention was typical of much of his subsequent work in the field—ingenious and forward-looking but not profitable.

Farmer gave up teaching and in 1847 became a wire examiner for a telegraph line between Boston and Worcester. While on this job he studied telegraphy and the following year was made an operator at Salem, Mass. About this time he began the work that led to his invention of an electric fire alarm system. In 1851, with William F. Channing, he installed his system in Boston, the first such system in the United States. Farmer became its superintendent. He resigned this post in 1853 and for many years held a succession of jobs, not all of which were connected with electricity.

Farmer continued to invent, however, and developed such devices as an electric clock, a method of electroplating aluminum, and a self-exciting dynamo. His most dramatic success was lighting a house in Cambridge, Mass., in 1868, with 40 of his incandescent lamps. In 1872 his proposals for detonating naval torpedoes by an electric charge led to his appointment as electrician at the U.S. Torpedo Station in Newport, R.I. He resigned because of ill health in 1881. He died while on a visit to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where he was exhibiting some of his inventions.

Farmer's success as an inventor in the developing field of electricity and yet his failure to benefit financially from his efforts led one sympathetic electrician to comment at his death that he had "invented not wisely, but too well."