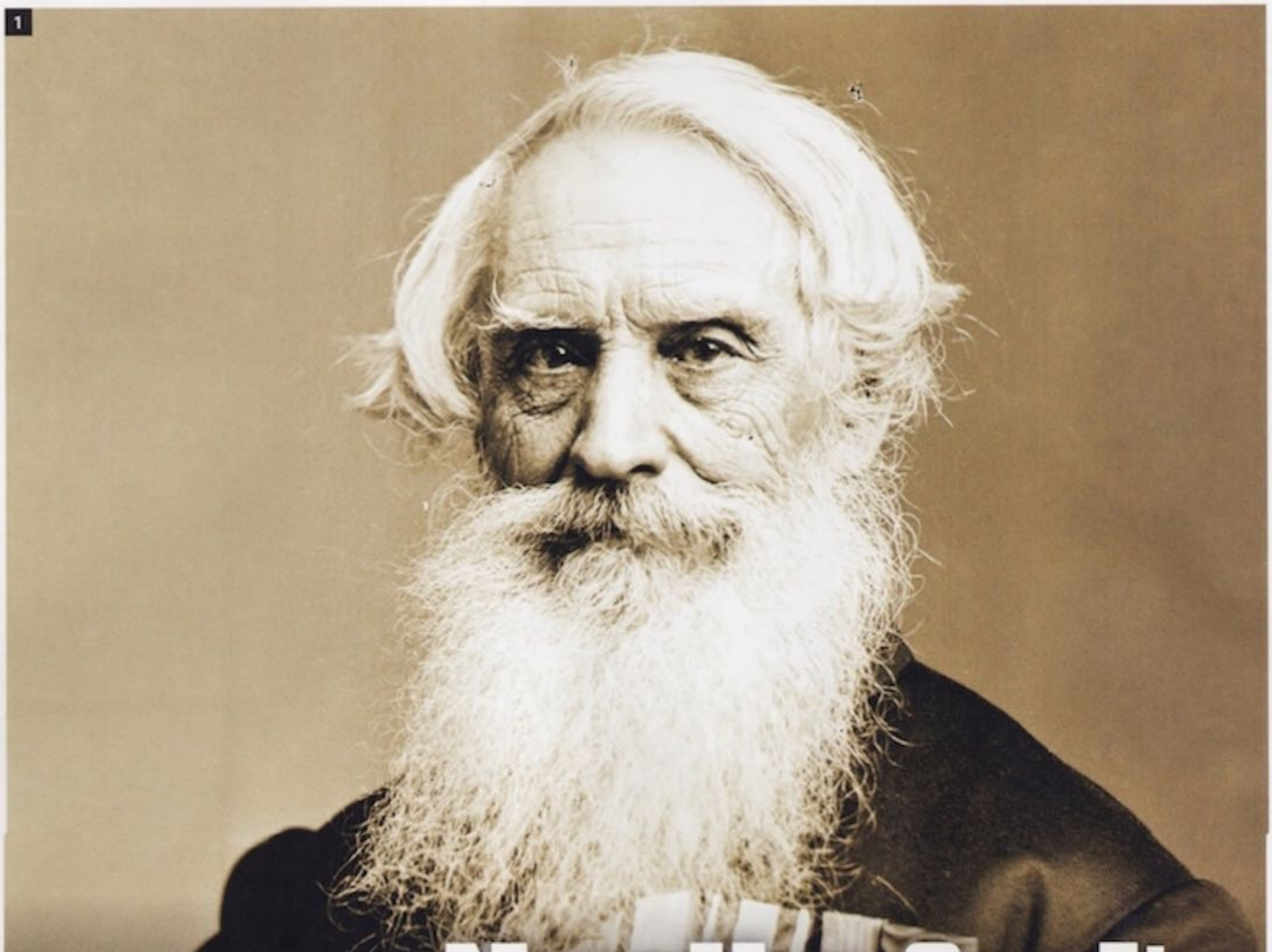

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Now You See It, Now You Don't

Tony Smith offers an object lesson in radio lore taking as his point of departure the statue of Samuel Finley Breese Morse in New York, erected in a specific historical context

Last year my grandson, when visiting New York, made a special visit to Central Park on my behalf to photograph the statue of the great American painter and inventor Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872, Fig. 1). Disappointingly for both of us, the statue was missing (Fig. 2). There was just the plinth with an adjacent notice saying that the statue had been removed for extensive conservation. On reflection, however, it was not too disappointing. This important historic statue had been standing in the park for 158 years and must have needed quite a lot of attention if it were to continue to commemorate and honour its subject for many more years to come.

Celebrations

The bronze statue (Fig. 3) depicts Morse standing with one hand resting on the original telegraph register (receiver) designed by his partner, Alfred Vail, while the other one holds a scroll bearing the American Morse code. It stands at Inventor's Gate, on Fifth Avenue and 72nd Street and is one of just two statues in the Park that relate to the profession of a named gate. It was erected in 1871 in honour of Morse's 80th birthday and was paid for by donations from the telegraph fraternity throughout the USA and Canada. Due to unavoidable delays, the celebrations were deferred from 27th April, Morse's birthday, to the 10th of June of that year.

Last Message

According to the *New York Tribune*, some 10,000 people, including many telegraphers with their families, came to Central Park for the unveiling (Fig. 4). Morse felt it inappropriate to be present for the ceremony, but that evening he attended a

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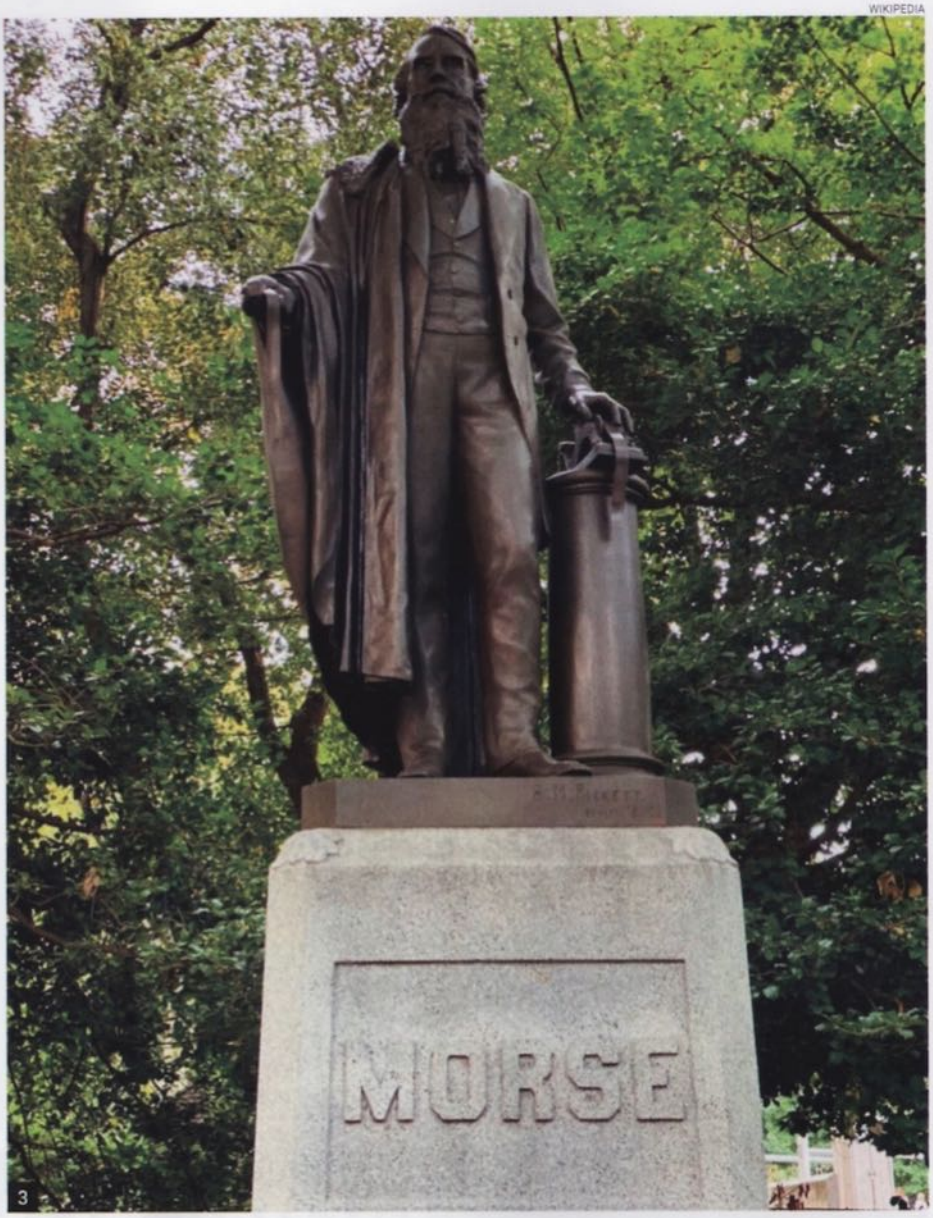

packed meeting at the Academy of Music in New York to hear speeches paying tribute to his achievements. Western Union then cleared the lines to all principal telegraph offices in North America and many others overseas. On the stage, and using an original telegraph key from the first Morse line of 1844, a young lady telegraphist, Miss Sadie Cromwell (Fig. 5), keyed a special message to the fraternity from the man they were honouring. *"Greetings and thanks to the Telegraph Fraternity throughout the world. Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, goodwill to men."*

The Early Struggles

Morse took his place at the table to key his name at the end of the message and was overcome with emotion as he received a standing ovation from the assembly. By return, congratulatory messages flooded in, direct from American and Canadian offices and relayed from overseas stations. Morse concluded the evening with a speech recalling his early struggles and paying tribute by name to all, and especially Alfred Vail, who had helped him bring his dream to reality. He died less than a year later, on 2nd April 1872. As a measure of the regard in which he was held, James Reid, Editor of the Journal of the *Telegraph*, wrote: *"Professor Morse, the father of the American Telegraph system, our own beloved friend and father, has gone to his rest. The telegraph, the child of his own brain, has long since whispered to every home in all the civilized world that the great inventor has passed away. Men, as they pass each other on the street, say, with the subdued voice of personal sorrow, 'Morse is dead. Yet to us he lives. If he is dead, it is only to those who did not know him."*

Fig. 1: The artist Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872). Fig. 2: The sign near the temporarily removed statue. Fig. 3: The inventor's statue where it should be: In New York's Central Park.

Some Compensation

In 1858, having previously failed to obtain patents in any European country, Morse had received an award of 400,000 francs (approximately US$60,000) from Austria, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, the Papal States, Piedmont, Russia, Sweden, Turkey, and Tuscany, in recognition of the use of his invention in those countries without his consent. Each country paid 311.55 francs for every Morse telegraph instrument it had in use. At first sight, this seemed to be a generous award but, after disbursements to his partners and Vail's widow, Morse's share was only $19,000. Although somewhat disappointed at the outcome, he accepted it with dignity. However, his business agent, Amos Kendall, was indignant, writing to Morse: *"... I had set the sum at half a million dollars as the least that they could feel to be at all compatible with their dignity. I hope you will acknowledge it more as a tribute to the merits of your invention than as an adequate reward for it..."* and in a further letter he wrote: *"...As an indemnity, it is niggardly and mean."*

High Honours

Morse was also awarded several high honours, including the French Legion of Honour; The Scientific Gold Medal of Prussia; The Scientific Gold Medal of Austria; and similar awards from Spain,

Fig. 4: The original unveiling of the monument, on 10th June 1871. Fig. 5: A celebratory message, 10 June 1871. Fig. 6: The *Congressional Record* of 27th April 1991, recognising Morse's achievements on the 200th Anniversary of his birth.

Portugal, Italy, Würrtemberg, Turkey, and Denmark; he was also made a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences of Sweden and the Institute of France. He had now received the international recognition that he fully deserved. His telegraph was now in widespread use across Europe, using variations of a German version of his code devised by Friedrich Clemens Gerke (1801-1888) who, in 1848, had set up and managed the first Morse line on the continent, linking the cities of Hamburg and Cuxhaven.

Eight years later, a slightly modified version of that code, renamed the *International Morse Code*, was formally adopted by the International Telegraph Union for use in all countries for cross border telegraphic communication; dispensing with the various national versions of the code previously used. However, despite having received international recognition and the accolades of the worldwide telegraph fraternity, there was no formal recognition of his achievements by the United States government.

Finally, on the 200th anniversary of his birth, on 27th April 1991 the *Congressional Record* (Fig. 6), the official record of the proceedings and debates of the United States Congress, placed on record a formal recognition of, *"his role in the revolutionary early development of electrical communication and his momentous contributions to the economic, social and industrial development of the United States."*

Experiments in 'Wireless' Telegraphy

Morse saw his electro-magnetic telegraph grow from a primitive home-made instrument into a sophisticated system of communication spanning the world by landline or undersea cable. He also conducted experiments in short distance inductive 'wire-less' telegraphy across water, but he did not live to see the even greater achievements that were made possible following the subsequent invention of radio.

He would surely have been delighted that his landline telegraph led on to a professional radio telegraph system with an amateur radio system evolving parallel with it, both using the international version of his code. Professional radiotelegraphy died in 1999 when maritime radio was abolished, but Morse telegraphy is still kept alive by radio amateurs around the world, keeping not only the code but the memory of its founder alive. Long may they do so!

The Statue is Back!

On a further visit to New York, my grandson found that the statue was now back on its plinth, looking refreshed and as new. The original sponsors would have been pleased with the outcome, as are today's amateur enthusiasts who still keep Morse's code alive. His statue can continue now as a lasting memorial to the Father of the Telegraph.

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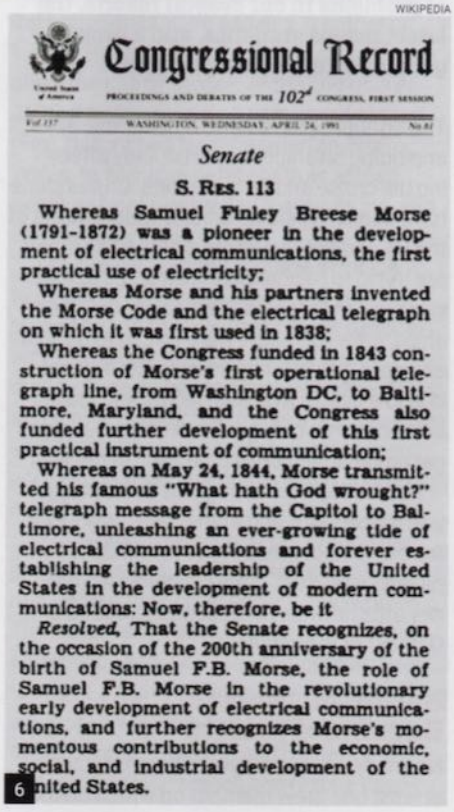

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 102d CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

WASHINGTON, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 24, 1991

Senate

S. Res. 113

Whereas Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872) was a pioneer in the development of electrical communications, the first practical use of electricity;

Whereas Morse and his partners invented the Morse Code and the electrical telegraph on which it was first used in 1838;

Whereas the Congress funded in 1843 construction of Morse's first operational telegraph line, from Washington DC, to Baltimore, Maryland, and the Congress also funded further development of this first practical instrument of communication;

Whereas on May 24, 1844, Morse transmitted his famous "What hath God wrought?" telegraph message from the Capitol to Baltimore, unleashing an ever-growing tide of electrical communications and forever establishing the leadership of the United States in the development of modern communications: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Senate recognizes, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Samuel F.B. Morse, the role of Samuel F.B. Morse in the revolutionary early development of electrical communications, and further recognizes Morse's momentous contributions to the economic, social, and industrial development of the United States.

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Further Reading

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Morse, Edward Lind, Ed. (1914), *Samuel F.B. Morse, His Letters and Journals* (2 Vols., Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston & New York)
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Silverman, Kenneth (2004), *Lightning Man. The Accursed Life of Samuel F.B. Morse.* (Da Capo Press, Boston Ma.).

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