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# Speedwell Telegraph Papers: Finding Aid

## Overview of Collection

Creator: Various  
Title: Speedwell Telegraph Papers  
Date: 1840 - 1956  
Quantity: 3 boxes, 1.5 linear feet

## Restrictions

### Important Information for Users of the Collection

This material is open for research with limited restrictions under the conditions of the Morris County Park Commission archives access policy. Records may be copied for use in individual scholarly or personal research; however, as with all materials in the Morris County Park Commission, researchers are responsible for obtaining copyright permission to use material from the collection.

## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Speedwell Telegraph Papers, Courtesy of the Morris County Park Commission.

### Acquisition Information

There are two main acquisitions that comprise the majority of the Collection. HS2012.10 is items which were unprocessed until a Madison High school inventory project in June 2012. The second is a donation by Alfred S. Vail of the J. C. Vail Research Notebook Contents. As additional donations are made they are evaluated for inclusion in this Collection, including the donations of Carol & Ralph Swinburne (HS2017.1.5) and the Estate of Frederick Bartenstein, Jr. (HS2018.5).

### Processing Information

Sorted, inventoried, and organized by Melanie Bump and Chris Rain, June 2012.  
Described by Melanie Bump, August 2013.  
Finding Aid updated by Katie Humphreys, June 2020.  
**FONDS Parent Record: HS2013.025**

## Historical Note

Visiting his New York University in September 1837, Alfred attended one of Samuel F. B. Morse's early telegraph experiments. Vail negotiated an arrangement with Morse to develop the technology at

Speedwell Ironworks at his own expense in return for 25% of the proceeds. Alfred split his share with his brother George Vail. When Morse took on Francis O. J. Smith, a congressman from Maine, as a partner, he reduced the Vails' share to one-eighth. Morse retained patent rights to everything Vail developed although Alfred's father Stephen paid the patent filing fees.

After securing his father's financial backing, Vail refined Morse's crude prototype to make it suitable for public demonstration and commercial operation. The first successful completion of a transmission with this system was at the Speedwell Iron Works on January 8, 1838, across two miles of wiring in the National Historic Landmark Factory Building at what is today Historic Speedwell. The message read "A patient waiter is no loser." Over the next few months Morse and Vail demonstrated the telegraph to Philadelphia's Franklin Institute, members of Congress, and President Martin Van Buren and his cabinet. Demonstrations such as these were crucial to Morse's obtaining a Congressional appropriation of \$30,000 to build his first line in 1844 from Washington to Baltimore where Vail sent the "What hath God wrought" message to Morse.

Alfred Vail spent the decade between 1838 and 1848 researching, improving, and writing about the electromagnetic telegraph, including his 1845 book *The Electromagnetic Telegraph with the Reports to Congress and a Description of all Telegraphs Known* in 1845. Vail retired from the telegraph operations in 1848 and moved back to Morristown. In the decades following Vail's death in 1851 controversy erupted regarding proper credit for the machinery of the telegraph and Morse Code itself. Research and writings about the topic have continued since, including work done by Alfred's son James Cummings Vail.

## Scope and Content Note

The materials of the Speedwell Telegraph Papers) relate to the history of the telegraph, Alfred Vail, and the efforts of the family to advocate for Alfred Vail's involvement in the history of the telegraph after his death. These documents are an excellent source of information for researchers interested in the history of the telegraph, the development of telegraph technology, and its inventors. Materials range in dates from 1840 – 1956 and include articles and publications produced during the centennial of the telegraph in 1938. Additional materials include telegram and manual illustrating the early use of the telegraph for communication in military application, fire alarm and general public communication. The second main component is research in the form of correspondence, journals and articles collected or created by James Cummings Vail. These materials add to the overall interpretation of the history of the telegraph and the efforts of the family to promote Alfred Vail's involvement in the development of the telegraph.

## Associated Image Collection

The Speedwell Image Collection has been indexed and has its own [Finding Aid](#). The Collection represents examples from nearly all types of photography from the earliest daguerreotypes in the 1840s through modern digital photography and the subjects include the Vail Family, their descendants, the development and eventual decline of the Speedwell Ironworks.

## Arrangement

The arrangement of the collection reflects the natural groupings found within the Collection: History of the Telegraph (Telegrams, Articles, Publications and Manuals related to the telegraph), and the Vail family Telegraph Research (James Cummings Vail Research Notebook and other research activities).

## Series 1: History of the Telegraph

Telegrams, telegraph manuals and books related to the use of the telegraph and its history.

## Series 2: Vail Family Telegraph Research

Correspondence, journals and articles collected or created by James Cummings Vail.

## Container List

### Series 1: *History of the Telegraph (Telegrams and Manuals)*

Box	Folder	Folder Description
1	1	Telegraph manuals and books: <i>The Electromagnetic Telegraph</i> by Alfred Vail; <i>Henry's Contribution to the Electromagnetic Telegraph</i> by William Taylor; <i>The Electromagnetic Telegraph</i> by Dr. Lardner, 1845-1879.
	2	Memorial Document (testimony over patent rights) Alfred Vail and the electric telegraph, date unknown.
	3	Copy of first telegram (hundred year anniversary), various telegram messages, 1865-1866.
	4	Various Military Telegrams, 1862-1865.
	5	Various Western Union Telegrams, 1865-1928.
	6	Telegram, August 1850, electro Magnetic Telegraph Company, Morris Line. (HS2011.12)
	7	History of the First Telegraph Office, excerpts from Stephen Vail diary, 1910.
	8	Articles on Origins of Dot and Dash Alphabet, ca. 1900-1920.
	9-10	Newspaper clippings on centennial of telegraph, 1938; telegraph development, 1860-1991; Alfred Vail contributions to the development of the telegraph.
	11	Booklets on Telecommunications History, Telegraph postcard mailed to Curator at Speedwell with envelope.
	12	"Early History of Electricity in America" (Article), p. 27-56.
	13	Various documents on Alexander Graham Bell and the telephone.
	14	Advertisement showing fire alarm apparatus from 19 <sup>th</sup> century, 1956.
	15	<i>American Electromagnetic Telegraph</i> booklet by Alfred Vail, 1914.
	16	Various newspaper articles and booklets regarding the first telegraph centennial, 1938.
	17	Telegraph Facts Script, centennial, 1938.
	18	Telephone Almanac, (Bell System Telephone American Telephone & Telegraph Co.) 1935 (HS2017.1.5)
	19	Commemorative Stamps Mint Plate Blocks of 4: U.S. #923 3¢ Steamship Savannah (1944) and U.S. #924 3¢ Telegraph Centenary (1944); HS2022.4
2	1	Century Magazine: "American Inventors of the Telegraph", Nov. 1887-1888.

- 2 "Alfred Vail: His Connection with the American Electromagnetic Telegram," 1914.
- 3a-b Alfred Vail Papers (NJ Historical Society), copies of letters, 1838-1913, Jan. 1891 copied 1971.
- 4a-b Samuel Morse: Correspondence-negatives, copies, typed/cut, newspapers/journals (copies, originals), 1838-1983. Correspondence: to James Cummings Vail. Re: articles left to Morse in Alfred Vail's Will, Ink. 1/24/1870 Samuel Morse response letter sent to Stockwell Esq. Boston 1/10/1862.
- 5 Book: *The Electromagnetic Telegraph with the Reports to Congress and a Description of all Telegraphs Known 1845* by Alfred Vail, both hardcover and paperback bindings, Postcard, image, envelope, announcement, 1838-1944.
- 6 Joseph Henry - Publications Related to the History of the Telegraph, 1885-1879
- 7 Book: *Publications Regarding Electromagnetic Telegraph Companies*, 1 Bound Volume, hardcover, 1832-1849
- 8 Book: *Western Union Telegraph Company*, soft cover, 1901
- 9 Book: *Shaffner's Telegraph Companion, Devoted to the Science and Art of the Morse American Telegraph, Vol II, No 1., January, 1855.* (HS2017.7.1)

**Series 2: Vail Family Telegraph History (James C. Vail Telegraph Research Notebook Contents)**

<b>Box</b>	<b>Folder</b>	<b>Folder Description</b>
3	1	Book Cover Private Correspondence, 1915
	2	Architectural Drawings, Vail History Articles, ca. 1840-1930
	3	Envelopes, Parker Studio. Telegraph and Telephone Age
	4	Invitations-1944 Telegraph Centennial, 1944
	5	Empty Green Notebook
	6	Envelope 1906, Newspaper clippings T.C. Montgomery, 1894-1910
	7	Messages on Telegraph Copies, Telegraph notes
	8	Will of Jeremy Veale, transcription, 1685
	9	Article on Alfred Vail, 1939
	10	Note on Portrait/Will/Estate of Judge S.V., Newspaper clippings on Morse Centennial, 1950s
	11	J.C. Vail correspondence re: Telegraph Journal, contents, 1915
	12	Journal Book Cover (Journal notes removed)
	13	J.C. Vail telegraph research including telegraph alphabet diagrams and letters, 1910-1920
	14	J.C. Vail telegraph research including articles and letters, 1900-1920
	15	Photo and letter concerning SFB Morse Statue at Smithsonian, 1917

**Existence of related materials in other Collections:**

North Jersey History & Genealogy Center, Morristown & Morris Township Library  
<http://www.jfpl.org/NJHistoryHome.cfm>

Vail Telegraph Collection, Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C.  
[http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris\\_arc\\_217214](http://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_217214)

Alfred Vail genealogical research papers  
The New York Public Library Humanities and Social Sciences Library the Irma and Paul Milstein Division  
of United States History, Local History and Genealogy  
<http://www.newyorkpubliclibrary.com/sites/default/files/archivalcollections/pdf/nygbcoll166.pdf>

Alfred Vail (1807-1859), Inventor, Papers, The New Jersey Historical Society  
<http://www.jerseyhistory.org/findingaiddirnb.php?dir=EAD/faid0500&aid=mg0050>