

Alexander Graham Bell and the North Shore

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There are many cities that want to claim some part of Alexander Graham Bell's distinction as the inventor of one of the most important technological developments of all time, the telephone. Three of those locations are Boston and Salem in Massachusetts and Brantford, Ontario, in Canada. They each have strong rationales to consider themselves the birthplace of the telephone.

Alexander Graham Bell's journey to his monumental invention began when he took on 5-year-old George Sanders of Salem as a pupil on Oct. 1, 1872. The boy was born totally deaf and had never spoken a word in his life.

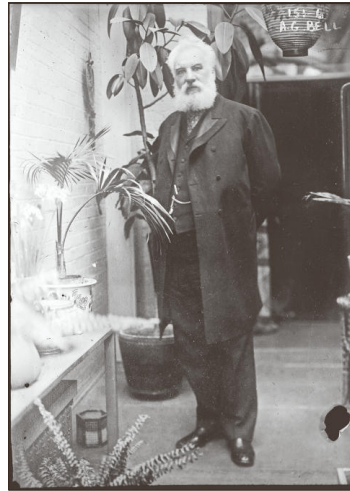
Alec Bell, as he was called, came from a family steeped in developing methods to teach the deaf to communicate. So, the 25-year-old Bell was well qualified for the task. His pupil was the son of Thomas Sanders, a wealthy leather merchant who was to become a key financial investor in Bell's telephone technology. Eventually, Alec moved from Boston, where he was teaching, into a room at Sanders' mother's house at 242 Essex St. in Salem so he could be near the boy.

Bell had always been interested in technology. He learned that the telegraph industry was desperate to have the capability to transmit multiple messages over a single wire. He investigated the field and started to conduct experiments at night in the Sanders house after finishing his day's work tutoring young George. These developments would ultimately lead to the design of the telephone, so Salem can claim a key role in its birth.

While looking to buy apparatus for his experiments, he heard about a laboratory in Boston owned by Charles Williams. On a visit to Williams' operation at 109 Court St., he met Thomas A. Watson, a Salem native and resident. The young man was an accomplished machinist and electrical worker and could be a great help to Bell. Being very impressed with Watson, Bell invited the young man to work with him on the multiple message telegraph project. Thus began the most important collaboration of Bell's life.

In the summer of 1874, Alec was visiting with his parents in Brantford, Ontario. It was then that he decided to drop his work on the telegraphy development and turn his attention to transmitting voice over a wire. He put together all he had learned from the telegraph experiments and about the physics of sound from teaching the deaf and came up with the basic idea of the telephone. Many years later, in a 1916 Boston speech, Bell recalled that moment as the birth of the telephone. And, so Brantford feels justified in naming itself the Telephone City.

But it was to take a considerable amount of work over the next two years in Bell's Boston laboratory to get the device to work. The lab was in an attic space above Charles Williams' shop on Court Street. As



Library of Congress photo

Alexander Graham Bell in his later years.

Bell and Watson started closing in on a working model of the telephone, they became concerned about the security of their design. So, they moved to a more private location at 5 Exeter Place, about one half mile from the Williams operation. It was there on March 10, 1876, when Bell spoke his famous first sentence ever heard over a telephone. According to Mr. Bell's journal in the Library of Congress, the sentence was "Mr. Watson come here, I want to see you." So Boston holds a preeminent claim as the birthplace of the telephone.

Salem played another role in the development of telephone technology. On Feb. 12, 1877, almost one year after the first sentence was spoken over the device, Bell did the first public demonstration of his invention. The site was the Salem Lyceum, now Turner's restaurant on Church Street. He called Watson over a telegraph line to the offices of the Boston Globe, about 35 miles away. Watson spoke to the audience, and even sang to them. Later that night, a Boston Globe reporter used the telephone in Salem to call in a story to the paper. That was the first instance where the telephone was used for such a purpose.

The Salem Lyceum demonstration of a long-distance call, however, was not the first. On Aug. 10, 1876, six months earlier, Bell made a private test call from his parent's home in Brantford, Ontario to Mr. Watson in a neighboring town, Paris, Ontario. It was about eight miles away and the test used an existing telegraph line.

Bell's fame and wealth grew over the next few years as he worked with his investors to secure his patent and to establish his telephone company. Now that he was earning a substantial living, on July 11, 1877, he married his long-time sweetheart and pupil, Mabel Hubbard. She was the daughter of one of his investors, Gardner Hubbard, a prominent Boston patent attorney.

The Bells had two daughters, Elsie and Marian, better known as Daisy. They also had two sons; both unfortunately died at a young age. One of the boys

was born in Rockport. Here is how that happened.

In the summer of 1881, Bell was called to Washington. He was asked to quickly develop a metal detection device. It was to be used to find the bullet lodged in President Garfield, who had been shot by an assassin. Although his detector was not able to help the president, it was used successfully for many years, before X-ray machines, to find bullets lodged in victims and save their lives.

While Alec was working in Washington, Mabel, who was pregnant, was living with their daughters in Cambridge. In the middle of August, that summer of 1881, Bell came home to take his wife and the girls for a seaside vacation.

They stayed at a house on Granite Street in Rockport across from Pigeon Cove. The house is still there and is marked with a sign proclaiming Bell's visit.

On Aug. 15, a few days after they arrived, Mabel gave birth prematurely to a son. Unfortunately, the boy died from breathing problems three hours after his birth. The event was noted in a telegram Bell sent to his father from Pigeon Cove. This tragedy set the inventor off on a project to develop an artificial breathing apparatus for children such as his son. He eventually succeeded in coming up with a design for the first "iron lung."

The Bells loved spending summers by the sea. A few years later, during the summer of 1884, they vacationed in a house on the Magnolia coast. The exact location is not clear. It was described as being in sight of Norman's Woe. This would put it close to the current location of Hammond castle on Hesperus Avenue.

Alexander Graham Bell is one of the most famous and influential inventors of the 19th century, right up there with Thomas Edison. The North Shore of Boston played an important role in his life. Salem was where he started his technology developments that led to the invention of the telephone. And Rockport was where he began work on his creation of the first iron lung, as a way to mourn the loss of his son.

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