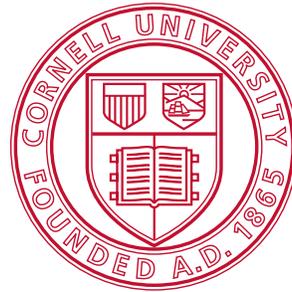


“I Would Found an Institution” The Ezra Cornell Bicentennial

<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/ezra/exhibition/telegraph/index.html>
<http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/ezra/exhibition/newagriculture/index.html>



From an Exhibit by the Division of Rare
and Manuscript Collections
Cornell University Libraries

*The Telegraph*¹

“While traveling in Maine, Ezra Cornell met F. O. J. Smith, editor of the *Maine Farmer*. When Congress appropriated \$30,000 for the laying of a test telegraph cable between Washington, D. C. and Baltimore, Smith had taken a contract from the inventor, Samuel F. B. Morse, to lay the lead pipe that enclosed the telegraph wires. In the summer of 1843, on his second trip to Maine, Cornell visited Smith’s office and found him struggling to design a machine to lay the cable underground. At Smith’s request, Cornell created a plow² that would both dig the trench and lay the cable. Morse came to Maine for a demonstration of the machine, approved it, and hired Cornell to lay the cable for the test line. In October 1843, Cornell went to Washington to begin laying the telegraph line. As the work proceeded, he became concerned that the insulation of the wires was defective. He notified Morse, who ordered the work stopped. Cornell then devised a machine for withdrawing the wires from the pipes and re-insulating them.

“Cornell spent that winter in Washington, studying works on electricity and magnetism in the Patent Office library and the Library of Congress. His reading convinced him that underground wiring was impractical and that the wires should be strung on glass-insulated poles. He was retained as Morse’s assistant at the pay of \$1000 per year. In the spring of 1844, Cornell built the overhead line from Washington to Baltimore, and on May 24, Morse tapped out the historic message: “What hath God Wrought.” Some of Cornell’s earliest telegraph communications relayed the results of the 1844 Whig and Democratic Conventions, which nominated Henry Clay and James K. Polk, respectively.

“Ezra Cornell’s story is the story of the telegraph in America. Always confident of its great commercial future, he enthusiastically demonstrated it, enlisted capital, and built lines. Although doing so frequently left his family destitute, he always took a large part of his pay in stocks, and invested in the first telegraph company, which connected New York City and Washington. He built lines from the Hudson to Philadelphia and from New York to Albany, as well as lines in other parts of New York State, Vermont and Quebec, and west to Cleveland, Detroit, Chicago, and Milwaukee. He was involved in the rapid construction of subsidiary lines, especially in the Midwest, where the telegraph preceded rather than followed the railroad.

“The early days of the telegraph industry were tumultuous. Many companies were formed, operated briefly, and died. Stronger companies managed to survive despite conflicts, deception, and numerous lawsuits. Service on

1 <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/ezra/exhibition/telegraph/index.html>

2 See Ezra Cornell’s patent for a “Machine for cutting trenches and laying pipes”

the hastily-built lines was frequently unreliable. In 1851, the New York & Mississippi Valley Printing Telegraph Company was organized in Rochester by Hiram Sibley and others, with the goal of creating one great system with unified and efficient operations. Meanwhile, Cornell had bought back one of his bankrupt companies and renamed it the New York & Western Union Telegraph Company. Originally fierce competitors, by 1855 both groups were finally convinced that consolidation was their only alternative for progress. The merged company was named The Western Union Telegraph Company at Cornell's insistence. Western Union rapidly expanded operations to most parts of the United States and Canada. While Cornell now took a less active role, he continued to have great faith in the telegraph. He held on to his Western Union stock, and for more than fifteen years was the company's largest stockholder.

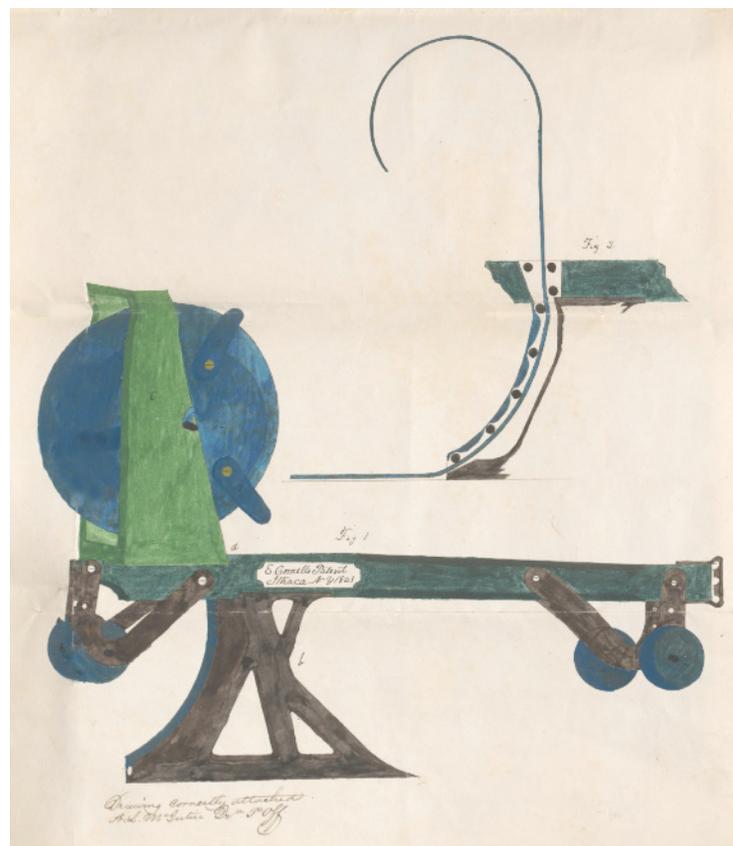


Figure from Ezra Cornell's *patent for a "Machine for cutting trenches and laying pipes."*

*Towards a New Agriculture*¹

Ezra Cornell's family owned a ten-acre farm in De Ruyter. As an adult in Ithaca, he resumed his interest in farming. He began by raising sheep and hogs, and wrote letters to the *Ithaca Chronicle* and the *Ithaca Journal* on agricultural subjects. His interest in livestock breeding led to his purchase of a pureblooded Shorthorn Durham bull. Early in 1840, he called for the revival of a county agricultural society. He was named marshal of the 1841 Tompkins County Fair and one of the judges at the New York State Fair in Syracuse. ***In 1842, Cornell purchased patent rights for Barnaby & Mooers' new plow for both side-hill and level-land use, and traveled through Maine and Georgia displaying it at fairs, auctions, and plowing matches.*** His letters during those travels comment extensively on agricultural conditions.

Early in 1857, Cornell purchased the 300-acre De Witt farm between Fall Creek Gorge and Cascadilla Gorge. He named it Forest Park, and decided to concentrate on raising purebred cattle there. He also worked to improve the general level of agriculture in the county. In letters to the *Ithaca Journal*, he surveyed the county's farm records from the 1855 State census and discussed agricultural improvement. In 1858, he became president of the Tompkins County Agricultural Society. He was instrumental in the formation of a Farmers' Club and an Agricultural Reading Room. Before long, he had moved into the front ranks of American Shorthorn breeders. In 1861 he was elected vice president of the New York State Agricultural Society, and a year later, became its president.



¹ <http://tmc.library.cornell.edu/ezra/exhibition/newagriculture/index.html>