

July 17, 1846

FROM ALFRED VAIL¹

Henry Papers, Smithsonian Archives

Washington D C July 17th 1846

Dear Sir I have learned within a few days from two different sources, that you had made the observation that in my late work on the Elec. Mag teleg² I had not done you justice. I beg you to believe, that if such is the case it has been done wholly undesigned, and I am not now conscious wherein I have offended whether by act of omission or commission. It has been suggested by Dr Gale,³ on looking over the work with the view of discovering the cause, that it might be in that part of it in which I speak of Magneto Electricity, page 135 & onward.⁴ While engaged on this part of the subject I not only thought of you, but made many enquiries for your labours, and requested a friend that I might be furnished from yourself with an acc^t of them, but I was so unfortunate as never to hear from you, nor to have found them in print. I am not only willing but most desirous to have anything on the subject you may be willing to communicate; for I consider you as standing at the head here of this branch of Science and I wish that ample justice may be done to your labours not only on your own acc^t but on that of the country which also derives honor from them. I am making preparations for another edition & be assured I shall feel it to be a great favor to have error of omission or Commission pointed out & corrected. I ought also to say in justice to prof Morse, to whom I learn you attribute the blame (on the supposition that he revised my labors) that my book was published while he was absent in Europe and was not seen by him.⁵

Resp^t Yours
Alfred Vail⁶

¹ According to a notation in the draft copy in the Samuel F. B. Morse Papers, Library of Congress, this letter was "indited by me [Morse] and copied & sent by Mr Vail on July 22 1846." Morse was wrong about the dating, because the copy sent to Henry is postmarked July 17. The "22" on the draft is a later insertion, so Morse may have been a victim of a faulty memory.

Morse published this letter, with the date of July 22 and the admission he drafted it, in *Shaffner's Telegraph Companion*, 1855, 2:76-77.

² *The American Electro Magnetic Telegraph: With the Reports of Congress, and a Description of All Telegraphs Known Employing Electricity or Galvanism* (Philadelphia, 1845).

³ Leonard Dunnell Gale (1800-1883) was Morse's scientific advisor. He and Henry were old acquaintances. *Henry Papers*, 2:94.

⁴ Page 135 marks the beginning of Vail's discussion of the history of electromagnetic telegraphs, starting with the discovery of magneto-electricity by Faraday and continuing with descriptions of numerous versions of the telegraph. In addition to Faraday, Vail highlighted the contributions of Saxton, Page, Morse, Gauss, Weber, and Wheatstone; in fact, just about every significant figure but Henry. For more on Henry's and A. D. Bache's opinion of this book, see above, Henry to Bache, November 12, 1845, and Bache's reply of November 16, 1845.

⁵ Although Morse was to receive one-quarter of the income from Vail's book and had sup-

July 20, 1846

plied Vail with information on developments in European telegraphy, he had not read the book prior to publication. Carleton Mabee, *The American Leonardo: A Life of Samuel F. B. Morse* (1943; reprint ed., New York, 1969), p. 310; Edward Lind Morse, ed., *Samuel F. B. Morse: His Letters and Journals*, 2 vols. (Boston and New York, 1914), 2:261-262.

^a Beneath the signature Henry wrote:

This letter was written by Prof Morse and copied by Mr Vail. It was addressed to me after the book had been stereotyped. I complained of the injustice done me to Prof Morse who acknowledged the truth of the complaint and promised to rectify the matter in the next edition but this was never done.

Henry never responded to this letter. On October 17, 1846, Morse wrote him, contending that the omission by Vail was unintentional and that Morse had nothing to do with that part of the book (this letter is printed below). According to a memorandum on the back of Morse's draft of the October 17 letter

(Morse dated the draft October 15, 1846, Morse Papers, Library of Congress), he met Henry in Washington, D.C., on or about December 19, 1846. (Henry later recalled the meeting as taking place in January 1847. "Deposition of Joseph Henry, in the Case of Morse vs. O'Reilly, Taken at Boston, September 1849," quoted in *Smithsonian Report for 1857*, p. 115. There is no contemporary documentary evidence regarding the meeting and Henry was in Washington at both times.) In Morse's words, they "had a conversation on matters and came to an understanding." Morse expanded upon what this understanding was in a later account of the meeting. If a second edition of Vail's book was published, Vail would give Henry full and proper credit. When a reprint edition appeared in 1847 with a new publication date but otherwise unrevised, Henry assumed that Morse had gone back on his word. Morse's defense was that this reprinting was not a true second edition. *Shaffner's Telegraph Companion*, 1855, 2:80-81; Edward Lind Morse, *Samuel F. B. Morse*, 2:262. No revised edition was ever printed.

TO HARRIET HENRY

Family Correspondence, Henry Papers, Smithsonian Archives

Theological seminary
near Alexandria July 20th [1846]
monday night

My Dearest

I am still at the station of the coast survey and have been enjoying myself very much. The instrument for measuring the angles is placed in the cupola of the seminary and the work of observation is carried on from about 5 o'clock in the morning until about 8 and then again in the afternoon from about four until 6 o'clock. I have improved in health very much and look with considerable interest for the time of setting the table. I have nothing new to write. We are surrounded with woods and but that the servant starts every morning at 5 o'clock for Washington to bring the mail we would be almost entirely cut off from the world. I have received two letters from you since my leaving home one at Washington containing Wills letter¹ and one at this place.² I expect another tomorrow. We attend church yesterday in the chappel of the seminary but as it is vacation at present there were very few

¹ Of July 13, Family Correspondence, Henry Papers, Smithsonian Archives.

² Not found.