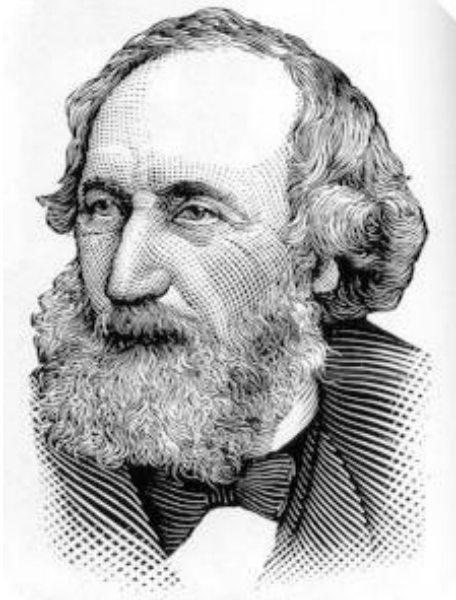


# Cyrus Field

Born 1819. Builder of the first transatlantic cable.  
Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)



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# 1. Introduction

*This life story was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the PBS website at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org). Additional images were archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the History of the Atlantic Cable & Undersea Communications website at [www.atlantic-cable.com](http://www.atlantic-cable.com).*



*Cyrus Field.*

The father of the transatlantic cable, Cyrus Field was a savvy paper merchant who knew nothing about telegraphy but readily understood the commercial possibilities of connecting Europe and America. Driven to succeed yet patient in times of failure, Field kept the cable project going for twelve long years, crossing the Atlantic more than 30 times in an effort to raise money, solve problems, and make his cable a reality. His ultimate success ushered in a new era of international communications.

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## 2. Good Business Sense

Cyrus Field was one of ten children of the Reverend David Dudley Field, four of whom, like their father, would ultimately find a place in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Apprenticed at age 16 to New York City dry goods store owner A. T. Stewart, Cyrus did well enough that his salary was doubled each year until he left to join the paper wholesaler E. Root and Company. When that company foundered, Field acquired its stock and settled E. Root's debts even though he was not legally required to do so, a move that cemented his growing reputation.

Soon wealthy enough to build a large house in Gramercy Park, Field grew bored with the paper business. When his brother Matthew introduced him in January 1854 to telegraph company owner Frederick Gisborne (right), Field was all ears.

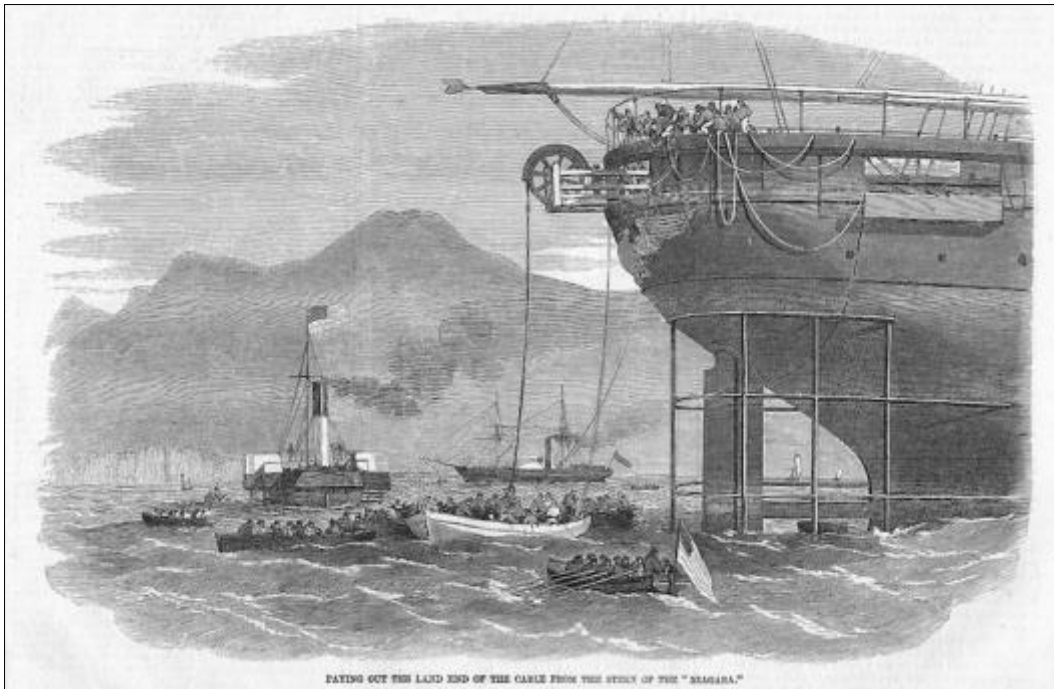
After hearing Gisborne's proposal to build a telegraph connecting Newfoundland and Nova Scotia, Field took the idea one step further and proposed a cable from Ireland to Newfoundland that would shorten the time for communications from Europe to America by about two weeks.





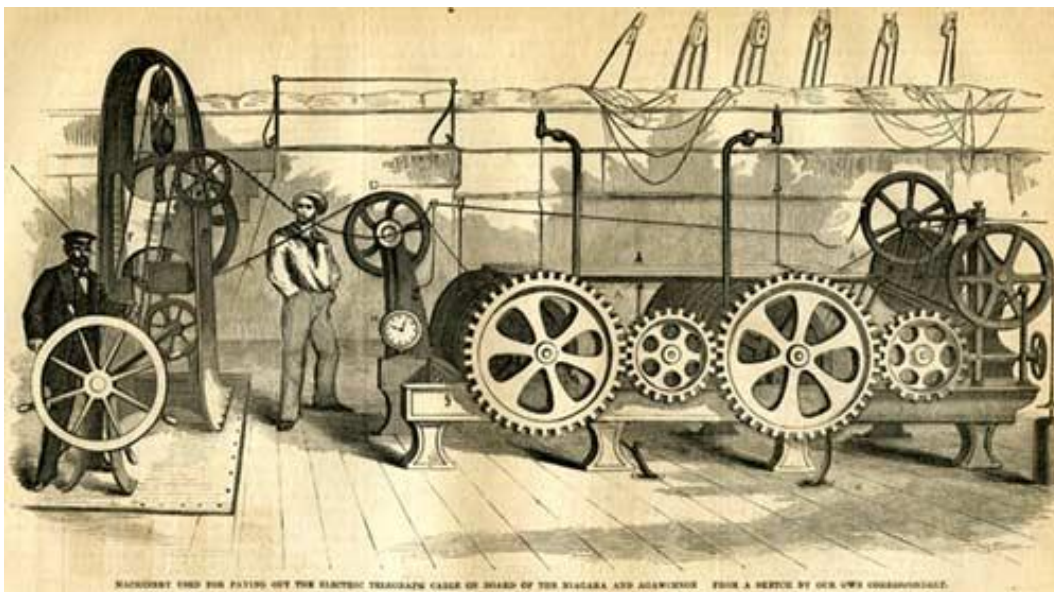


## 4. The First Attempts

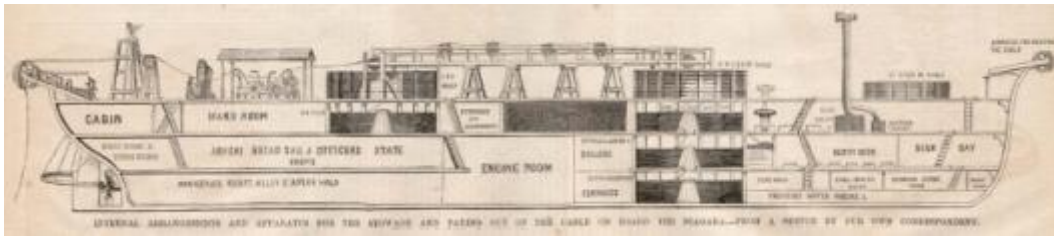


*The U.S.S. Niagara paying out the land end of the cable.*

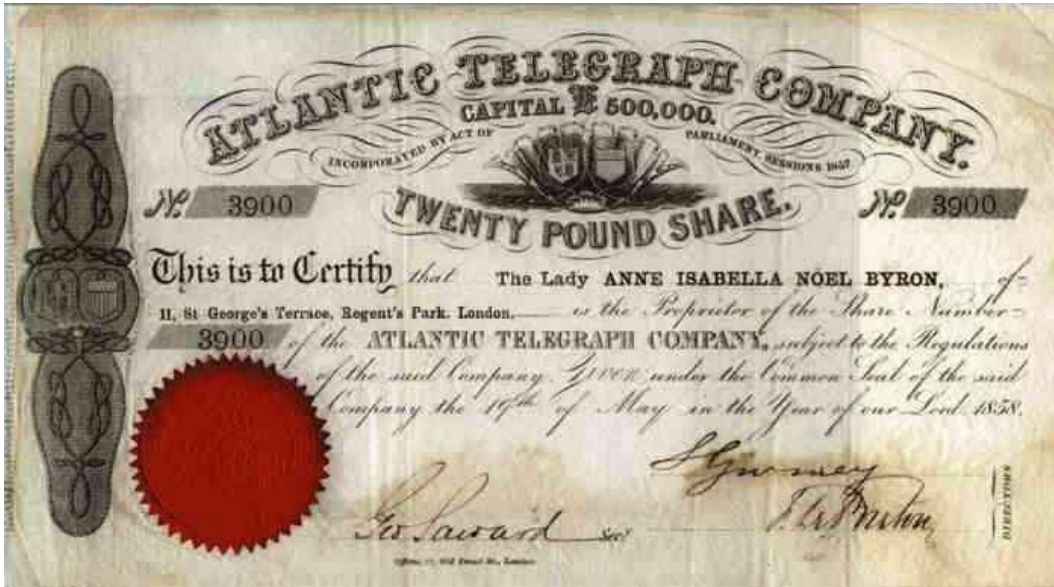
By the summer of 1857, the first cable had been constructed and loaded on the U.S.S. *Niagara* and the H.M.S. *Agamemnon*. On August 5, Field spoke at a magnificent send-off on the shores of Valentia Bay, Ireland. "I have no words," he said, "to express the feelings which fill my heart tonight — it beats with love and affection for every man, woman, and child who hears me." In a sort of benediction for the transatlantic cable, Field turned to the Bible: "What God has joined together, let no man put asunder."



*Machinery used for paying out the electric telegraph cable on board the Niagara and Agamemnon.*

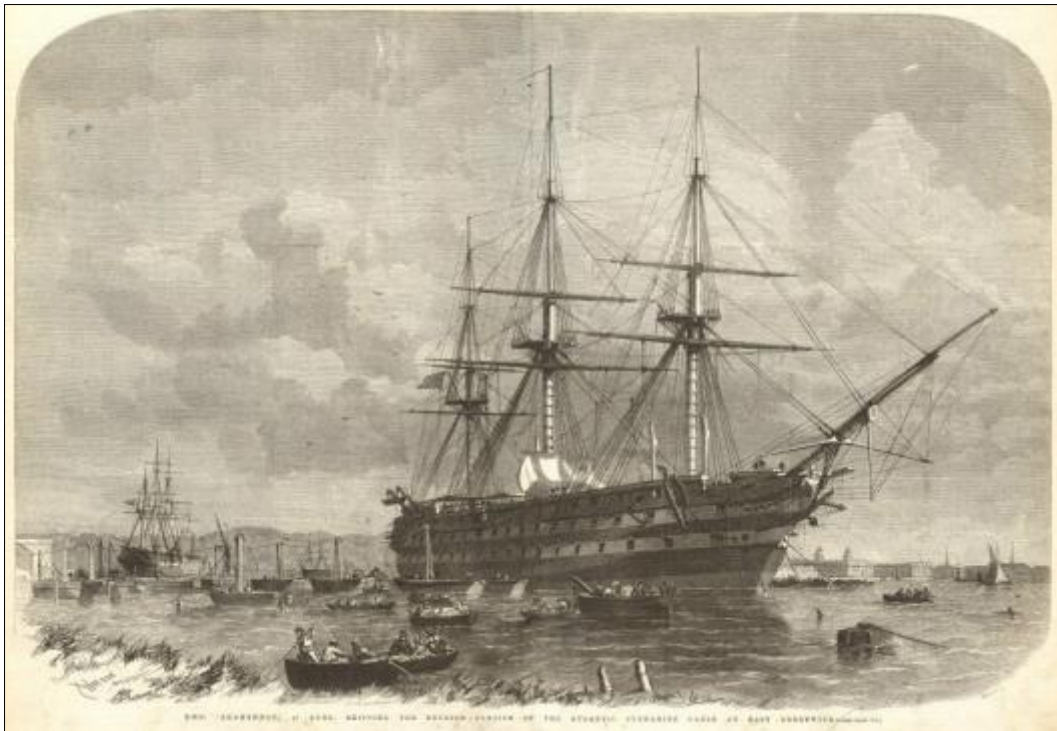


*Cross section of the Niagara.*



*Share certificate for the Atlantic Telegraph Company.*

## 5. Determination



*H.M.S. Agamemnon.*



*An contemporary artist's impression of the Agamemnon, with the Atlantic cable on board, in the great storm on the 20th and 21st June, 1858.*

The next twelve months tested Field's confidence. The 1857 attempt failed when the cable snapped about 200 miles from shore. When Field replaced the lost cable and tried again in June 1858, a ferocious storm nearly sank the *Agamemnon*, and then her cable snapped after she had traveled only about 100 miles from the mid-Atlantic starting point.

When a third expedition began in July 1858, Field was beginning to feel the strain. "When I thought of all that we had passed through, of the hopes thus far disappointed, of the friends saddened by our reverses.... I felt a load at my heart almost too heavy to bear." He wasn't ready to give up, though: "My confidence was firm and my determination fixed."

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## 6. A Fallen Hero



*One robust fireworks celebration, honouring the laying of the Atlantic cable, caught the roof of City Hall on fire in 1858, causing extensive damage.*

On August 4, 1858, Cyrus Field and the *Niagara* reached Trinity Bay, Newfoundland. Soon the transatlantic cable was operational, and pandemonium erupted in New York.

In the words of Field's Gramercy Park neighbor George Templeton Strong, "Newspapers vie with each other in gas and grandiloquence. Yesterday's *Herald* said that the cable (or perhaps Cyrus W. Field, uncertain which) is undoubtedly the Angel in the Book of Revelation with

one foot on sea and on foot on land, proclaiming Time is no longer." A commemorative fireworks display set New York's City Hall on fire, and Tiffany & Company sold off excess pieces of the cable.

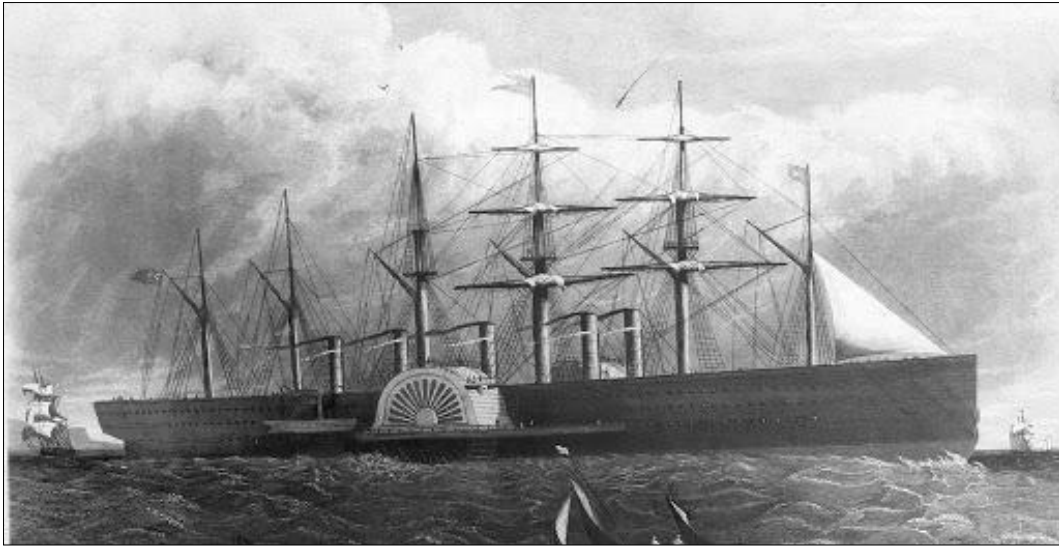


*Excess sections of the first transatlantic cable sold by Tiffany & Co as souvenirs.*

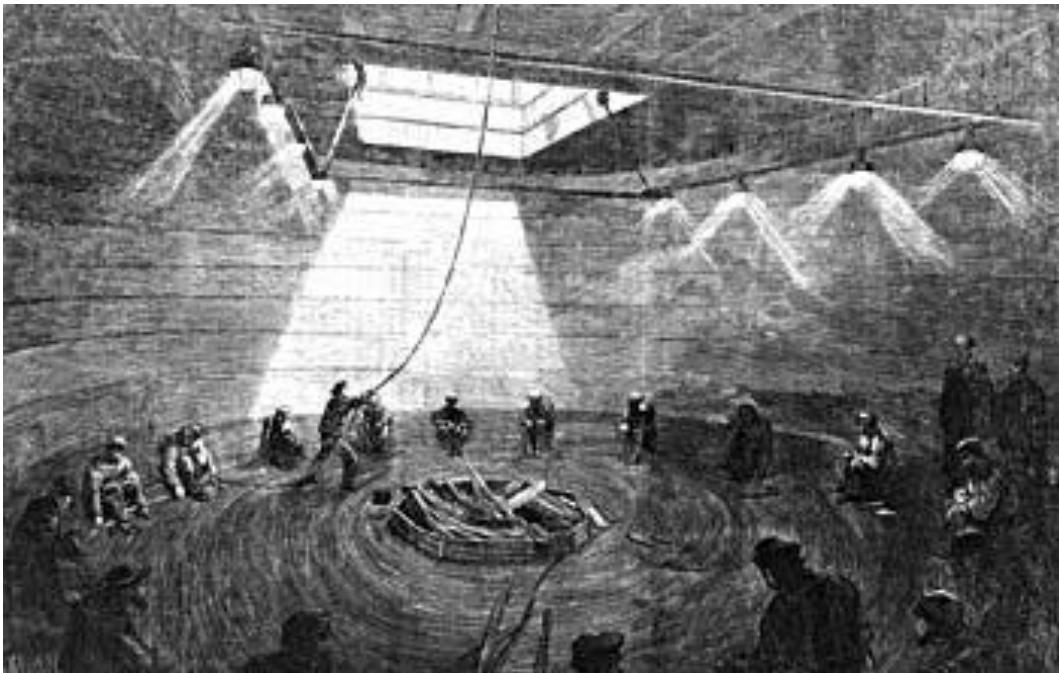
But the cheering stopped when the cable signal failed a few weeks later, and Field became as vilified as he had previously been revered.

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## 7. Courage, Energy and Perseverance



*The S.S. Great Eastern.*



*Cable being paid out from within the hold of the Great Eastern.*

The next few years were difficult. The Civil War delayed the cable project, and Field still needed more money. A committee of inquiry laid some of the blame for failure at Field's feet; his haste had resulted in a faulty cable, badly prepared to reach all the way across the Atlantic. But Field would not abandon his dream. By July of 1865, he was able to mount another expedition. This time he had a better cable and the *Great Eastern*, a ship capable of carrying the entire load.

When a freak accident ended the expedition just 600 miles from Newfoundland, Field remained upbeat. "We've learned a great deal," he said, "and next summer we'll lay the cable without a doubt." In this Field was man of his word. In July 1866 the second transatlantic cable was successfully laid and this time it would not give out.

Field (right) was hailed as a hero, and among other honors, given a gold medal by Congress. When he died at the age of 72, having lost his fortune to Wall Street, the simple epitaph on his tombstone nicely summarized his monumental achievement: "Cyrus West Field, To whose courage, energy and perseverance, the world owes the Atlantic telegraph."

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