

The First Phone Book

New Haven, Connecticut was a city of 150,000 people when, in 1878, it became the home of one of the world's first telephone exchanges.

The District Telephone Company of New Haven was founded by George W. Coy, a former telegraph operator and the inventor of the commercial switchboard. In order to realize his dream of starting a telephone company, he borrowed six hundred dollars to fund the venture, then drafted an advertising circular which explained the potential benefits of telephone subscription. He mailed a thousand copies to the residents of New Haven. From the thousand letters, Coy received only one subscription.

Undeterred, he hired a team of salesmen, each of whom was paid \$1.50 for every new customer. This worked a little better, and soon Coy had twenty more subscribers. Installation of the telephones began in November of 1877; lines were strung up informally, attached to trees, roofs or any other handy spot. By January of the next year the world's first telephone exchange was in operation.

This progenitor of today's telecommunications firms consisted of a small office where Coy himself sat on a soapbox and operated the switchboard he had personally designed and built. The switchboard was referred to as "Coy's chicken" because of the squawking noises it made, and it rested on top of a kitchen table. The only other office furniture was a packing box which served as the office desk, and an old armchair for visitors. Company records from the time list the value of all the office goods, including the switchboard, at \$39.50.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, the District Telephone Company of New Haven was a pioneer in American telecommunications. The company, which changed its name to the Southern New England Telephone Company (SNET) in 1882, was responsible for the world's first telephone booth (1878), the first pay phone (1879), and the nation's first school for telephone operators (1907).

And it produced the world's first telephone directory. In February of 1878, just a month into operations, the District Telephone Company released a printed list of its telephone subscribers. This list is today considered the world's first phone book. Although other businesses had used telephones before, and even printed lists of subscribers, the New Haven specimen's claim to primacy rests on the fact that it is the first such list to include private customers as well as business lines.

This phone "book" did not list telephone numbers, only names. Early telephone directories existed solely for the purpose of alerting customers to the existence of other telephone subscribers. To make a call, the telephone user would pick up the phone and tell the operator (all of whom, at this early stage, were male) the name of the person to ring up.

The first New Haven directory lists as the entirety of its contents three physicians, two dentists, two boarding stables, twenty stores and factories, four meat and fish markets, eleven residences, and eight places marked "miscellaneous."

Although there are many reprints of this famous document, of the 150 copies originally printed only one survives. It is kept at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut. The New Haven exchange itself is long gone. The location, at the intersection of State and Chapel streets, was awarded landmark status in 1964, and then torn down in 1973 by the New Haven Redevelopment Agency to make way for a parking garage.

A slightly newer version of the New Haven directory, from November 1878, was auctioned by Christie's in May of 2008 and sold for \$170,500.