

Christie's South Kensington Album
Acc. No. 1988-075.

This album was purchased at the Christie's South Kensington sale of 30 April 1987, lot 239. The identity of its owner or compiler has never been attributed, but I believe that the album was assembled by a member of the Frederick N. Gisborne family, possibly by his son Hartley Gisborne, but more likely by Frederick himself. Frederick N. Gisborne (1824-1892) was an inventor and businessman, who proposed underwater telegraphic cables first to link the Atlantic provinces, and then to cross the Atlantic ocean.

Frederic Newton Gisborne was born in Broughton, Lancashire, England, 8 March 1824. His father was Hartley Packer Gisborne; his mother was descended from a half sister of Sir Isaac Newton. Fred Gisborne pioneered the construction of electric telegraph systems and was responsible for the installation of one of the world's earliest underwater electric telegraph cables. As a youth he accompanied his uncle to Tahiti and Mexico, where they attempted to grow gutta percha as insulation for electric wires. He moved with his brother to Canada in 1845 and farmed for two years near St. Eustace, Lower Canada.

Gisborne worked as one of the first operators for the Montreal Telegraph Company, becoming its Chief Operator, then in 1847 was appointed General Manager of the British North American Electric Telegraph Association, which was formed for the purpose of connecting the Maritime provinces with Upper and Lower Canada. From 1849-51 he held the position of Superintendent of Telegraphs in Nova Scotia. During the early 1850s Gisborne began to study the possibility of a submerged transatlantic cable, and interested Joseph Howe and others in the subject. Having received their permission to conduct a preliminary survey, he travelled to the United States to find investors willing to sponsor the development and installation of a submarine line. He enlisted the support of several businessmen and was appointed Engineer of the private company that emerged as a result. After overseeing the establishment of an overland link from Nova Scotia through New Brunswick to the United States, in 1852 he successfully laid an electric telegraph cable under Northumberland Strait, connecting Prince Edward Island with the rapidly-developing North American telegraph system.

Another step in Gisborne's original transatlantic plan had been to build a telegraph line across Newfoundland and under Cabot Strait to Nova Scotia, where it could be connected to the existing continental network. With a small steamer and a crew of six native Indians, he had conducted a preliminary survey across Newfoundland in 1851, hiking through dense forests and surviving much hardship. By 1853 labourers had been hired to clear a path for a cable. Before their work could be completed, however, Gisborne's backers failed. The project was suspended and the labourers' wages were unpaid. Gisborne sold property of his own in an attempt to meet the company's outstanding debts, but his funds were inadequate and he was placed in debtor's prison. To add to his grief, his young wife (Alida Ellen Starr, whom he had married in 1850) died early in 1854, leaving him with two small children to raise.

Gisborne pleaded with the Colonial Government of Newfoundland for his release, asking that he be given the opportunity to form a new company which would assume all outstanding debts and complete the telegraph line from Newfoundland to Nova Scotia. The Government freed him and

passed an act granting a loan towards the salaries of the unpaid labourers. In the winter of 1853-54 Gisborne returned to New York, where he solicited support from Cyrus W. Field and several other investors. The New York, Newfoundland and London Telegraph Company was soon formed, and it covered the debts of the preceding company and obtained partial financial support from the Governments of Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and Maine. Gisborne returned to Newfoundland in May, 1854 as Chief Engineer of the Company and Superintendent of the submarine operation. A first attempt to lay a cable between Cape Ray, Newfoundland and Cape Breton, Nova Scotia was made in 1855 but failed. In 1856 the effort met with success, and Gisborne was offered a permanent position as Superintendent of the new telegraph system. He rejected the terms offered, and his connection with the company ceased.

In 1856 Cyrus Field visited England to garner support for the construction of the transatlantic telegraph system that Gisborne had envisioned earlier in the decade. The Atlantic Telegraph Company, created as a result of Field's trip, finally linked Europe to America by cable in 1858.

Frederic Gisborne was elected President of the Mining Association of Newfoundland in 1857 and devoted himself to mining pursuits for several years, then returned to England as a mines and minerals agent for the Government of Nova Scotia, superintending Nova Scotia's contributions to several World Expositions. In addition, he gave his attention to further scientific inventions (including electrical and signalling devices), for which he received several British medals. He returned to Canada in 1869 as Chief Engineer for an English company which had investments in the coal mines of Cape Breton. In 1879 he accepted the position of Superintendent of the Telegraph and Signal Service of the Dominion Government, where he remained for several years. In that capacity, he was involved in the development of a cable system stretching from Canada to Australia via the Aleutian Islands, Japan and New Guinea. He also visited the NWT of Canada in 1883, where he inspected the government telegraphic services in company with his son Hartley. He returned to the NWT in 1885 as part of the Northwest Field Force.

Frederick Gisborne married his second wife, Henrietta Hernaman, in 1857. They had four children, one of whom, Hartley, later became Superintendent of the Government Telegraph Service in Manitoba and the Northwest Province, settling in North Battleford, Saskatchewan. Another son, Francis, became a barrister in the federal Department of Justice. Frederic Gisborne was a charter member of the Royal Society of Canada, a member of the Council of the Canadian Society of Civil Engineers, and a member of many scientific associations. Frederick Gisborne died in Ottawa on 30 August 1892.

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Jim Burant
22 October 2001