

Charles Morrison.
Scots Magazine.

An Electric Telegraph in 1753.
and the Inventor's connection with Virginia.

By CHARLES R. GIBSON, F. R. S. E.

(Lynton, Mansewood, Nr. Pollokshaws.)

The electric current was not discovered till the year 1800, and yet an electric telegraph was invented in 1753 at a time when the only known means of producing electrical effects was to charge a body with electricity and cause it to discharge again.

In the small town of Renfrew, which is situated on the River Clyde near Glasgow, Charles Morrison set up an electric telegraph, of which he sent a description to the Scots Magazine in 1753. He connected his cottage to a distant one by 26 insulated wires, each of which he could charge with electricity at will. It was well known that any body charged with electricity would attract any light object towards it. One may demonstrate this electrical attraction by rubbing the vulcanite case of a fountain pen on one's sleeve, and then holding it over any small bits of paper, when these will be seen to jump towards the electrified pen.

From the end of each of the 26 wires, Morrison suspended a small brass ball, and beneath each ball he placed a small piece of paper, bearing one letter of the alphabet. By electrifying the distant end of the first wire, by means of a primitive frictional electric machine, he charged that wire with electricity, so that the paper at the other end of the wire was attracted, thus indicating that the distant operator desired to signal the letter A. In this manner intelligible messages could be transmitted.

Charles Morrison even suggested that bells of different tones might be placed near the ends of the electrified wires, and that signals might be given by sounds, but the trouble in carrying any such telegraphy into the practice would be the keeping of the electric charge to the wire. Any one who has worked with ~~a dampness on the insulators~~ electrostatic machines knows how the electricity will discharge even with a dampness on the insulators, but in Morrison's invention we have the suggestion of a practical telegraphy.

OVER.

Although this invention was made in Scotland, there is evidence that Charles Morrison emigrated to Virginia. It has been suggested that Morrison, having been considered by his neighbours to be a wizard, fled to Virginia, but the writer of the present article does not accept this theory, as Morrison was still in Scotland in 1791, a date forty years after his invention was made known. As Morrison had connection with the tobacco trade in Glasgow, it seems more reasonable to suppose that it was this connection which would induce him to emigrate. Unfortunately we have no knowledge here of Charles Morrison's life in Virginia, and as Sir William Osler, Bart. of Oxford is at present seeking information concerning this inventor, it occurs to the present writer that there may be some evidence still obtainable in Virginia.

We have no knowledge of what age Morrison was, or what the date was, when he arrived in Virginia, but the writer estimates Morrison's age to be somewhere about 60 years, and the date to be between 1790 and 1800. Morrison's death in Virginia would probably be not later than 1810.

If any reader can find any mention of Charles Morrison in connection with the tobacco trade about that time, or any mention of his death, perhaps they would be good enough to communicate with Charles R. Gibson, Mansewood, by Pollokshaws, Scotland.