What Number? A Brief History of the Telephone in Boylston

By Carrie Crane

On April 3rd, 1973 the first cell phone call was made in New York city. By 2022, there were over 5.4 billion, yes *billion*, cellphone subscribers globally.[1] While mobile phone technology differs greatly from that of the wired telephone, the growth from novel technology to ubiquity is similar with both. Even in our somewhat rural town, cell service is readily available (with only a few exceptions). Communication was not always so easy. Let's go back to the early days of the telephone.

Several inventors are credited with the development of early models of what we now know as the telephone; Antonio Meucci, Italian and Charles Bourseul, French. But it was Alexander Graham Bell, beginning his research in earnest in 1876, who was able to acquire the first patent for the instrument and find sufficient financial backing to bring it to market. For this reason, he tends to get most of the credit.

By 1878, telephone lines, piggy backing on telegraph poles, were being installed throughout the country and public phones and switchboards were being set up in such communal locations as post offices and general stores. The first single phone line came to Boylston in 1898 and was located in the G.R. Hastings and Sons General Store in the center of town, now the Boylston Deli. This pay station line connected to the Worcester exchange (and from there to any other phone east of the Mississippi River) and remained the sole phone in town until 1903.
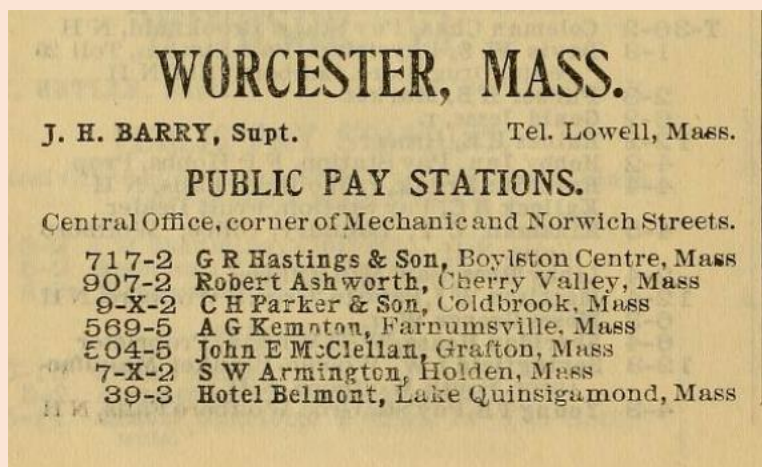

Figure 1: **Listing showing Boylston's new public pay Stations in the Worcester MA Exchange** from the *Official directory long distance telephone,* New England Telephone and Telegraph, 1898.

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[1] https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/04/charted-there-are-more-phones-than-people-in-the-world/

Lillian (Ethel Brunker) Vickery (1877-1973), born in Boston, moved to Boylston in 1903 to "get away from the east wind"[2] and soon thereafter married her husband, George Vickery (1881-1930). George, along with being a carpenter in town, was instrumental in forming the Boylston Light Department. In 1905 he expanded telephone service in Boylston by installing the first Boylston switchboard in their home on Central Street. Mrs. Vickery worked as the very first town telephone operator overseeing 15 subscribers. One year later, Mr. Herbert H. French, a Boylston blacksmith, took over responsibility for the exchange, moving it to their home also on Central St. and his wife, Mrs. Mary E French (1863-1949) became the operator, a job that lasted until 1939.

Figure 2: **Booklets about the Telephone**
Telephone Topics, October 1938 vol.32, number 6;
The Miracle of Talking by Phone, by F. Barrows Colton,
National Geographic Magazine, October 1937;
The Magic of Communication, A tell You How Story, by John Mills,
American Telephone and Telegraph Company
Donated to the Historical Society by Estate of Lillian Vickery in 1974

The telephone operators' job was critical to the success of the connection between two callers. In a large exchange, the operator might be responsible for memorizing hundreds of subscriber's names and numbers. A rural operator like Mary French would have it a little easier but as the primary operator with the switchboard in her home, there was never any time off.

Because it might seem unfamiliar to some, here are the calling rules as published in the New England Telephone and Telegraph Official Directory from 1898.

Rules for Calling Subscribers Connected with Boston and Suburban Exchanges.

When the office is called, the operator will say, "What number?" naming her Exchange. For example, "What number? Boston." You will then give the name of the exchange and the number of the subscriber wanted. [For Boylston, which was part of the Worcester exchange, you would have said, "Worcester 717-2"] The operators in all cases will repeat the number and name of the exchange required.

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[2] Robert Backus, Boylston's Oldest Resident Still Serves Town, unidentified newspaper, 11/6/72

If the line is found in use, the operator will answer "Line busy." Otherwise, she will make the connection and say "Line Connected," and the way will be open for conversation as soon as the subscriber answers the call. If the station connected fails to answer within 30 seconds, hang the telephone on the hook, and give one sharp ring. The operator will inquire "Finished?".

Lillian Vickery, displays some of the cane she uses to cane chairs.

Mrs. Mary E. French

Figure 1 Left: **Mrs. Lillian Vickery** as photographed for the article, *Boylston's Oldest Resident Still Serves Town*, Robert Backus, November 6, 1972.
Right: **Mrs. Mary E French** as photographed for the article *Boylston Cut Over to Dial Telephone*, March 1939 (publication unknown).

On March 8, 1939, after 33 years as the town operator, Mary French stepped away from the switchboard. At exactly 12:15 on that day the line to her board was cut and direct dial service for all the now 190 subscribers was initiated. It was an end of an era for Mrs. French, the town of Boylston and the telephone industry. In the press release saved in the scrapbook Mrs. French's kept for telephone topics, the author says, "Many are the thrilling and amusing incidents that Mrs. French can recall during the past thirty-three years that she has given telephone service. Mrs. French's good nature still is unfailing, but all she will say about herself is that "It's a pleasure to do one's duty and to have been of service to the public."" She was loyal to the job and the privacy of her subscribers to the end and we will never know the details of those thrilling and amusing incidents.