

Scenes from the Past

Noted American telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) built his house at 1331 Connecticut Avenue beginning in June of 1891 at an impressive cost of \$31,000. Like many inventors, he integrated new technology and experiments into the design, including what was one of the earliest experiments in household air conditioning.

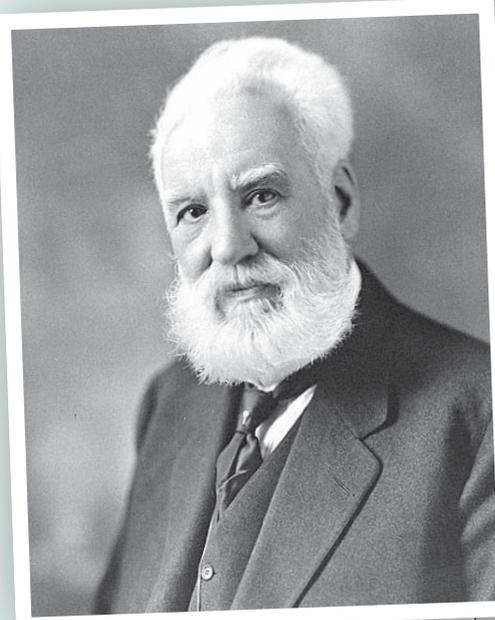
Bell had been born in Scotland, but immigrated along with his parents to Canada in 1870, when he had already been working as a teacher to deaf-mutes through his 1864 “invisible speech” method. Several years later, young Bell began to teach at Boston University, where he met his future wife, Mabel Hubbard. She had become deaf due to scarlet fever, and was the daughter of wealthy lawyer Gardiner Green Hubbard (1822-1897), who owned a house nearby about the time he became the first president of the National Geographic Society.

In 1877, after their marriage, Hubbard became Bell’s business manager and the first president of the Bell Telephone Company. Alexander and Mabel first moved into a newly purchased house at 1500 Rhode Island Avenue, just a year



The Alexander Graham Bell mansion, built in 1891 at 1331 Connecticut Avenue.

photo—Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division.



photo—Library and Archives Canada.

Alexander Graham Bell, photographed about 1914.

after becoming internationally famous for demonstrating the telephone in public at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition with the words “Watson, come here; I want you” to his lab assistant Thomas Watson. After the Rhode Island Avenue house was damaged by fire they had it rebuilt and sold it to Vice President Levi P. Morton, following which they began construction of 1331 Connecticut Avenue.

In 1893 He had architects Hornblower and Marshall design a wing on the Connecticut Avenue house for his famous “Wednesday Evenings” that entertained scientists and society for decades.

At the house, Bell also experimented with an early form of air conditioning: On a hot summer day, he placed a block of ice in the attic covered with salt, to which he connected a large diameter tube extending to his office; by opening the upper windows, he reduced the temperature of the room from 90 degrees to 65 degrees.

The house was also designed with a large rear yard that led to the two houses



Early view of the Volta Bureau building in the 3400 block of Volta Place in Georgetown.

photo—courtesy Kelsey & Associates private collection.

of his daughters, facing 18th Street. After his death, the house was inherited by his daughter, Mrs. Gilbert Grosvenor (wife of the founder of the National Geographic Society), who ran it as an antique shop and tea room. It was razed in 1930 for an office building.

Bell was also responsible for having established the Volta Bureau in Georgetown in 1880 to serve as a center

of information for deaf and hard of hearing persons. Initially located in his father’s house in the 1500 block of 35th Street, NW, in 1893 he had built across the street the structure that is still in use by the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, which had taken over the work of the Volta Bureau in 1908.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

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