

expansion took place in New York City, but Bell officials in the 1920s steadily moved the enterprise offshore . . . of the Hudson River, that is. Telephone experimentation (and experimentation of any kind, for that matter) was complicated by the busyness of the city. By buying up land in docile New Jersey, those experiments could carry on without distraction. Bell opened more than 20 facilities, mostly in the northern part of the state, to serve as a collective incubator for all types of telecommunications developments.

Through cooperation with AT&T archives, Morven's curators attracted an intriguing set of Bell artifacts to the museum. The first such item greets visitors just outside the facility's entrance: a humble telephone booth. For those born since the year 2000, the public phone stands as perhaps a mere curiosity. But for those of us old enough to remember the phone booth's ubiquity in American society, it serves as a reminder for how Bell's technology had become as embedded in

daily life as electric lights and the automobile. The booth provides a fine primer for the museum's main event, and a nice photo-op spot as well.

The exhibit itself begins on the Morven mansion's second-floor landing. Nicely lit and inviting, visitors are appropriately greeted by placards explaining the invention of the telephone and Alexander Graham Bell's early experiments with electronic sound. One then steps into the first of five rooms detailing some element of Bell's history. The first, focused on the telephone system's growth, provides some of the most striking early artifacts.



Wooden telephone switchboard, circa 1897

An intact oak telephone switchboard from 1897, which permitted nationwide connections to Bell network subscribers, stands prominently in the room. As explained, these switchboards represented technological marvels in their own right, while becoming mechanisms of female professional advancement in Bell's early years, as many flocked to the company to work as operators.

Other rooms highlight different arms of the Bell story, including the rise of the company's extensive telephone infrastructure, radio technology, and perhaps most important for today, the modern transistor. The final room profiles the company's late contributions to space technology, and subtly nods to Bell's demise in the 1980s after its antitrust breakup. Perhaps the most striking of the space-technology artifacts has been set aside in a room all its own. In the mansion's



Unlaunched Telstar I satellite, circa 1962

conservatory sits one of the unlaunched Telstar I satellites built by Bell in 1962, adorned with thousands of small solar cells to power the still-futuristic device while in orbit. Indeed, exhibit organizers deserve praise for effectively chronicling the long *durée* from Bell's first telephone experiments to its ventures in outer space, doing so all in the span of a few rooms.

While "Ma Bell" wisely downplays the full-on "interactive" museum experience, some well-placed screens serve as a welcome contrast from the text-centric displays. In what can only be accurately described as one of the most ironic interactive

museum displays of all time, the exhibit features a digital screen simulating the function of an analog telephone switchboard. The display invites visitors to “plug” various cables into their proper places to make desired phone connections. I was unable to perform the quick connections in a manner that would have hired me at Bell, but the exercise is the most memorable activity in the entire exhibit.

One major takeaway from *Ma Bell* is the sheer quantity of technological pioneers employed by the firm during the twentieth century. From Claude Shannon (computer programming), Karl Jansky (radio), and Charles Townes (microwaves and lasers), Bell’s alumni list is exceptional no matter how you cut it. The various rooms neatly integrate their individual stories into the wider history of the company. If these individuals were any indication, clearly something was in the water in New Jersey in those days, and the world of technology forever changed thanks to their innovations.

The final touch on the eminently pleasing *Ma Bell* appears at the end of the exhibit. Under the appeal “Do You have a Ma Bell Memory? Share It Below!” visitors are ushered to write a line or two on a publicly displayed note card about their personal experiences with the company. Here, one can see Bell’s deeply human effects on the region’s families. Visitors recalled meeting their spouses while working for Bell, remembering their parents who served as linemen, and retelling the thrill of using the company’s many advanced consumer products.

Historians will be pleased to see how curators balanced various scales of analysis for the story they wished to convey. The rooms that make up the attraction are well appointed, highlighting in relatively even quantity Bell’s important individuals, the technology itself, and New Jersey’s place through it all. Nicely drawn maps adorn the museum’s walls to help guests identify exactly where in the state the noted developments took place. All in, visitors certainly

come away from the exhibit with a comprehensive understanding of what Bell stood for, and why it continues to matter to so many in the Garden State.

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One example of the well-organized and easy-to-follow displays. This example covers Bell's important early radio experiments with the U.S. military.