Meucci acknowledged as telephone inventor, June 11, 2002

Suzanne Deffree - June 11, 2019

On June, 11, 2002, the United States Congress acknowledged Italian immigrant Antonio Meucci as the true inventor of the telephone.

The declaration, approved by the House of Representatives, was made to little fanfare in the US. Meucci’s hometown of Florence, where he was recognized as the telephone inventor without such political support, is said to have celebrated the acknowledgement.

Meucci began developing the design of a “telegrafo parlante” or talking telegraph in 1849. He and his wife moved to Staten Island, NY, in 1850, where he continued his work mostly from a home lab.

In 1871, he filed a caveat for his design, but he faced financial hardship due to his wife’s health and struggled to navigate the business community without being fluent in English, and could not renew the caveat when it expired.

As most engineers know, credit often goes to the person with the patent and history recorded Alexander Graham Bell as the inventor of the telephone after Bell was awarded US Patent Number 174,465, Improvement on Telegraphy, on March 7, 1876.

Further clouding history, Elisha Gray, a professor at Oberlin College, applied for a patent on the same day as Bell but arrived at the office later that day (February 14, 1876). Bell’s was the fifth entry of the day; Gray’s was the 39th.

Adding some scandal, the Western Union affiliate laboratory Meucci had been working with lost the functioning models of his invention. Statements made to Congress in June 2002 pointed out that Bell conducted experiments in the same laboratory where Meucci’s materials had been stored.

In January 1887, Bell’s patent came into question in court and a move to annul the patent was issued on the grounds of fraud and misrepresentation. The case was discontinued as moot when Meucci died in October 1889 and the Bell patent was set to expire in January 1893.

Meucci died penniless and remains virtually unknown in the US today.

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Editor's note: This article was originally posted on June 11, 2012, and edited on June 11, 2019.