

Oberlin Inventors

Oberlin has produced two well-known inventors, both of whom invented items still commonly in use today: Elisha Gray and Charles Martin Hall.

Elisha Gray attended Oberlin College for two years, but did not officially graduate, although he did receive an honorary degree in 1878. During his student years at Oberlin College, he became interested in the study of electricity, and began experimenting. In 1867, he received his first patent, for an improved telegraph relay. In 1876, he filed a caveat--that is, a legal document indicating intent to file a patent, and establishing the date of filing as the equivalent of actually filing a patent on that date--for his invention of the telephone. The caveat arrived two hours after Alexander Graham Bell's patent application. Bell was awarded the patent to the telephone, despite the fact that the invention described in Bell's typed application would not have worked, whereas that in Gray's caveat would. (Bell had amended, in handwriting, his application to make the necessary adjustments; however, there have been rumors to the effect that these changes were made after Bell had seen Gray's application.) At any rate, Gray independently invented the telephone, and during the course of his life, he earned more than 70 patents. He also spent a period of time after his retirement at Oberlin College as a professor of electricity.



Charles Martin Hall is perhaps better known than Elisha Gray. Hall was an Oberlin resident who also studied at Oberlin College, graduating with the class of 1885. One of his pet research interests was the pursuit of an inexpensive method of producing aluminum: the process used at that time was so difficult and expensive that aluminum was considered a semi-precious metal, as expensive as gold! About eight months after his graduation, Charles, with help from his sister Julia, succeeded in producing aluminum through a new electrolytic process. (This process was also independently invented by Paul Héroult of France, leading the process to be known as the Hall-Héroult process.) This invention reduced the cost of production by 90%, making it possible for aluminum to be used for many purposes. (Incidentally, in his patent, Hall spelled the metal "aluminium," as it was known at the time. In fact, only in America today is it known as "aluminum," without the second "i.") Hall received 22 other patents, mostly aluminum-related, founded ALCOA, and

became very wealthy, upon his death leaving a considerable bequest to a number of institutions, among them Oberlin College and the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization, today's Oberlin Heritage Center.