

KEY AND TELEGRAPH



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The Centennial of the Vibroplex Co., Inc.

And their first home at 253 Broadway, New York

This year marks the true centennial of the Vibroplex Company. The firm was formed and incorporated in the state of New York on March 12, 1915. Several writers over the years have documented the company's beginnings at other times, with the most common being in the year 1890. Others documented the startup on the date of the introduction of the Vibroplex key itself or the date that Vibroplex inventor Horace G. Martin, received his first patent.

As a compliment to the article, "The Centennial of the Martin Vibroplex," written for the Spring 2005 issue of *The AWA Journal*, I thought it would be appropriate to dig deeper into the actual beginning of this iconic company and show the reasons for the confusion about the start dates.

The primary reason for the confusion comes from the dates stated in ads placed by James E. Albright, the first owner and general manager of Vibroplex. Albright's main business throughout his career was as a typewriter dealer operating as J. E. Albright & Co. Vibroplex was a separate enterprise and was mainly a mail order business.

It is important to note that during the entire Albright era of ownership of the Vibroplex Company, 1915 to 1964, J.E. Albright & Co. and the Vibroplex Co., Inc. operated separately but from the same address. The early start dates identified for both of his businesses were dates when Albright claimed to have entered the typewriter business. Over the years, Albright stated various start dates, including 1890, 1896 and 1901. He did this primarily in reaction to claims made by other companies in the competitive New York City area typewriter market.

James Albright and his younger brother William, natives of North Carolina, were both accomplished telegraphers. The Albright brothers, like most telegraphers of this time, aspired to work in larger and busier offices and moved around frequently. New York City was considered to be the largest telegraph hub at that time and was a magnet



The Postal Telegraph Building at 253 Broadway, New York City (at center of picture). This was the first home of the Vibroplex Company. Library of Congress.

for young telegraphers like the Albrights. The city was also the headquarters of both the Western Union and Postal Telegraph Companies.

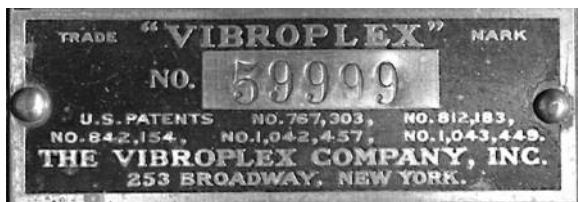
The brothers appear to have first arrived in New York City in 1899 and were employed by the Postal Telegraph Company. In addition to their normal daytime duties, both worked occasionally at night on Postal's high-speed, high-volume, press wires coming from *The New York Herald*. William was also a Wire Chief at Postal for several years.

It is interesting to note that the first use of typewriters by the Postal Telegraph Company was around 1890. Telegraphers were required to purchase their own typewriters. In order to help their telegraphers pay for this equipment and encourage its use, Postal increased its telegrapher's pay by \$5.00 a month. The \$5.00 went directly to the cost of the typewriter until it was paid-off. Thereafter, the \$5.00 went to the telegrapher.

This program continued until typewriters became commonly used. Thereafter, Postal discontinued the payment but still required operators to supply their own typewriters. The company did provide typewriter ribbons and storage lockers. The lockers were sometimes built right into the telegrapher's tables or operating positions.

Western Union began to encourage typewriter usage around 1893. No payment was made to telegraphers but they did provide ribbons and lockers. This arrangement lasted until around 1912, when Western Union started to supply the typewriters.

The increasing need of the large telegraph companies for telegraphers proficient in using typewriters and the increased pay they could receive created a growing market for the machines. Albright recognized this



The first style of the Vibroplex Company name plate, showing the Postal Telegraph Building address.

business opportunity and followed what some other enterprising telegraphers had begun to do—informally starting to supply telegraphers with typewriters as a side job. Albright conducted his typewriter business from the relatively new Postal Telegraph building at 253 Broadway in New York City where both brothers were working.

The 14-story Postal Telegraph Cable building was built during the years 1892-1894. The subbasement housed the boiler rooms, engine, pump rooms and the dynamos that supplied power for Postal's telegraph circuits. Above the sub-basement was a twelve-foot-high basement for Postal's storage, supplies and the linemen's and messenger's rooms. The first floor, at the street level, was designed to receive the company's local traffic. Customers walking through the entrance faced a large Commercial Cable globe that was in front of a cluster of incandescent lamps.

The second through tenth floors were leased to local businesses. The eleventh floor housed the executive offices including



A Postal Telegraph "Octet" operator's table containing eight closets for storing a telegrapher's typewriter (four on each side).

the office of John W. Mackay. The entire telegraph operating department was on the twelfth floor. This floor had large windows and an 18-foot pitched ceiling. The thirteenth floor had miscellaneous Postal offices and coat rooms. And the fourteenth floor was home to the “parlors” of the Hardware Club of New York.

It was not until 1910 that Albright formally set up his business. It was housed on the fifth floor of the Postal Telegraph building in room 528. From this location, he sold, rented and exchanged typewriters. The location was convenient not only for other Postal telegraphers but for any telegrapher working in New York City. The 253 Broadway address became associated with Albright’s typewriter, and later Vibroplex, businesses for several years.

Also during this period, companies offered higher pay to telegraphers who could not only produce clear copy but also handle large volumes of messages. Both Western Union and Postal Telegraph companies had contracts with select telegraphers who could send large numbers of messages in the shortest period of time. Achieving higher sending speeds, and at the same time protecting the health and longevity of a telegrapher’s arm, led to the art of semi-automatic telegraphy developed by Horace G Martin and new key designs by several inventors.

Albright recognized this business opportunity and seemed to have modeled his operation on that of former Postal telegrapher, O.T. Anderson, who was based in Chicago. Anderson also operated a typewriter exchange business and he was also was an early agent for the most popular transmitters at that time, the Mecograph and Martin’s Autoplex and Vibroplex. These transmitters, like typewriters, were being commonly supplied by telegraphers.

The Albright brothers

operated their business while working as telegraphers for Postal. Fellow Postal telegraphers could come downstairs to make purchases and the Albrights were also allowed to serve telegraphers up on the twelfth floor and try out new instruments on Postal’s wires.

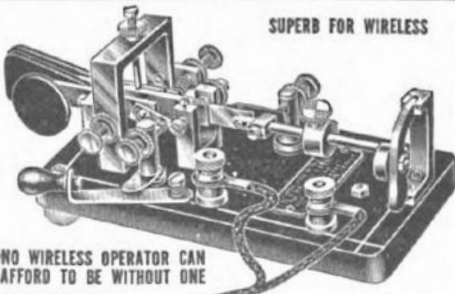
In September of 1910, Albright began advertising to a larger telegrapher market by placing ads in national magazines. In his first ad he claimed the “lowest prices in typewriters in the United States” and having “all makes of sending machines.” The first key he advertised was not a Vibroplex but a Dunnuplex invented by Thomas J. Dunn.

Dunn was an early partner of Horace Martin. Meanwhile, during this period, Horace Martin had returned to New York in December of 1909 after his United Electrical Manufacturing Co. (UEM) folded in Georgia. His two patent suits with the Mecograph Company were finally settled by the U.S. Court of Appeals with each party winning their respective suit resulting in a out-of-court settlement.

Albright first started to highlight the Martin Vibroplex in his March 1911 ads and by October was listed as being Martin’s sole selling agent. It was around this same time, when Albright became the “sole agent,” that Albright purchased the patents

MARTIN'S VIBROPLEX
TRADE MARK

SUPERB FOR WIRELESS



NO WIRELESS OPERATOR CAN AFFORD TO BE WITHOUT ONE

Beware of infringements, see that the name MARTIN is on machine.

The Climax of Transmitter Design

J. E. ALBRIGHT, Agent 253 Broadway, NEW YORK

Black Japanned Base Price, \$12.00	Handsome Polished Dark Oak Carrying Case, \$1.25 Extra	Nickel Plated Base Price, \$14.00
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One of the first Vibroplex ads targeting wireless applications. From Modern Electrics & Mechanics, June 1914.

owned to date from Horace Martin and set up a business arrangement with him. Up until this time Martin sold and manufactured his own keys. From this point forward, Martin was the manufacturer and Albright was the sole selling agent and took on the role of defending the patents. Martin set up shop as a separate entity manufacturing his Vibroplex models a few blocks away at 51 Cliff St.

In November of 1913, Albright was able to acquire Mecograph's William Coffe patent from the Benjamin F. Bellows family of Ohio. The Coffe patent was the first mechanical transmitter patent. Along with Martin's patent, it was critical for the defense of any future patent litigation. All new Mecograph production was to be done by Martin. After this acquisition, Albright began to state that he was the sole agent for both the Vibroplex and the Mecograph. Albright's consolidation of all the major patents and interests in the semi-automatic transmitter field was the basis for the forming of the Vibroplex Company.

On March 11, 1915 a certificate of incorporation was filed to create The Vibroplex Company. The company was owned by three members of the Albright family. James owned 80% and his younger brother William and older sister Estelle each owned 10%. They operated out of the Albright's fifth floor room in the Postal Telegraph building. Albright continued to operate and expand his typewriter business separately, from the same address, as J. E. Albright & Co. A year later he started to advertise beyond telegraphers to the general New York City area typewriter market. By the way, in 1915, both Vibroplex and J. E. Albright & Co. had the same phone number, Barclay 6624.

In 1915, Vibroplex still had decades of telegrapher business ahead of it. Yet to develop was decades of business from thousands of professional, military and amateur wireless operators. Albright recognized this potential market and began advertising to wireless operators as early as 1914. The Vibroplex Company's success can be attributed to Albright's business skills and instincts. Also, the company was essentially operated by two professional telegraphers selling great keys that were manufactured by another professional telegrapher who invented the Vibroplex and the art itself.

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