

# Thomas A Edison Papers

Thomas A. Edison is America's best-known and most prolific inventor. As an entrepreneur and industrialist whose practical application of scientific principles helped him develop many of the technologies that shaped the modern world, Edison is recognized as one of the true geniuses of modern times. His name is almost synonymous with technological creativity and business innovation. Edison's work laid the foundation for the age of electricity, recorded sound, and motion pictures. In addition, he utilized team research and development with such great success at his Menlo Park and West Orange laboratories that he helped to introduce the era of modern industrial research.

Edison's many accomplishments are documented in approximately three and a half million pages of laboratory notebooks, correspondence, and related papers that have survived the more than fifty years since his death. Access to these papers will be a boon to many areas of study: first and foremost to the history of technology, science, and business, but also to social and labor history, the history of popular culture, film history, and legal history. Because of the massive quantity of material, its dispersal all over the world, and its limited accessibility, these resources have been neglected. Now, through the Thomas A. Edison Papers project, the papers of Edison and his associates are being published for the first time.

## A SELECTIVE MICROFILM EDITION

In preparing the microfilm edition of the *Thomas A. Edison Papers*, the professional staff of the Edison Papers project has already worked more than five years arranging and selecting materials. Another fifteen years remain on the project's twenty-year timetable. During this time, approximately three hundred reels of microfilm will be published, making available the most important 10 percent of the Edison material from the archives of the Edison National Historic Site and from other repositories in the United States and throughout the world. Part I, covering 1850-1878, has been microfilmed, and the printed guide will be ready in February 1985. Work will continue on the remaining five parts, with publication scheduled at intervals of two or three years. All microfilm will conform to ANSI, AII, and NHPRC standards.

Under the direction of Dr. Reese V. Jenkins, a team of historical editors and researchers is now immersed in one of the most ambitious publishing projects ever undertaken. Not only is the quantity of the material vast, but the quality is rich. The thousands of laboratory notebooks, teeming with rough sketches and drawings, illuminate the thinking of Edison and his associates and are perhaps comparable only to the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. While Edison was not an artist, he was at least the technical equal of the great Renaissance inventor, sculptor, and painter. These verbal and visual documents—many of which have been stored in archival vaults and rarely seen since Edison's death—present our generation with the opportunity to explore the creative path followed by this great technical mind.

## EDISON AND BUSINESS

The *Edison Papers* microfilm edition will contain many thousands of pages of Edison's detailed business records, including correspondence, agreements, legal papers, accounts, bills, and receipts. These records document Edison's involvement with many of the prominent financiers and industrialists of his time, including Jay Gould, J.P. Morgan, William H. Vanderbilt, Henry Villard, and Henry Ford. Moreover, the records give us voluminous background information on Edison's own companies, most notably the Edison Phonograph Works, motion picture equipment and production companies, various ore milling and mining enterprises (which absorbed much of Edison's time and funds during the 1890s), and his various electric light companies that later became Edison General Electric (which, after a merger orchestrated by Morgan, was renamed General Electric).

A major reason for the commercial success of Edison's inventions was that he invented with the marketplace in mind. Often interspersed with his notes on inventions are analyses of potential markets. Very early in his career, Edison realized the importance of the international market, and part of his fortune was made from the sale of foreign rights to his inventions. There is a sizable correspondence with agents throughout Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Abroad as well as at home, Edison's marketing was given a considerable boost by the popular press, which, with Edison's collaboration, created the image of the "Wizard of Menlo

Edison signature used with permission of McGraw-Edison Company.

Park." What seemed to be wizardry was, in fact, a new system of invention that depended not so much on a lone genius but on a carefully directed team of talented associates. Because of the valuable contributions of the men who worked with Edison for decades, the *Edison Papers* will include diaries, notes, and correspondence of his closest colleagues, including Charles Batchelor, John and Fred Ott, Samuel Insull, James Adams, Arthur Kennelly, Frank Sprague, Jonas Aylsworth, Reginald Fessenden, Francis Upton, William Dickson, and many others. In addition, the voluminous records offer insights into manufacturing, mass production, and the relationship between manufacturing and invention, while payroll and employment records document the role of labor—providing details on wages, hours, and working conditions, as well as illuminating management-labor relations and specifying the time spent on various projects in the laboratory.

#### **PART I (1850-1878)**

Part I of the *Edison Papers* covers Edison's major inventions in the field of telegraphy, his early chemical experiments, his development of the electric pen, his observation of "etheric force," his invention of the carbon-button transmitter (still one of the basic mechanisms of the telephone), his invention of the phonograph, and his initial work on the incandescent lamp. The microfilm edition of the *Edison Papers* provides the documentary foundation for any study of Edison's life and times. Through his notebooks, diaries, and letters, we can follow Edison from his roots in the Midwest to his inventive work on telegraphy in Boston in 1868; from Boston to New York in 1869, when he made his first contacts with the world of high finance; to Newark in 1870, where he established workshop-laboratories; and to Menlo Park in 1876, where during the next several years he developed many of his most important inventions.

*This inaugural series of the microfilm edition of the Edison Papers is an admirable beginning of a most significant enterprise. Historians of science, technology, business, and general American culture are bound to welcome the publication of this edition, which promises to be the most advanced example of scholarly microform publishing.*

—Dr. Edward C. Carter II  
Librarian

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*The broad scope and careful organization of the new microfilm edition of the Edison Papers will make a key source for the historical study of modern technology widely available. The study of the development of the electrical power and communications industries, among others, must include a careful evaluation of the far-reaching effects of Edison's contributions on changes in technique and on the development of commercial and engineering institutions that have been instruments for technological change. For those concerned with questions of R & D policy, the documentary material in this microfilm edition will be a starting point for understanding the origins of the current structure and operations of industrial research.*

—Dr. Neil H. Wasserman  
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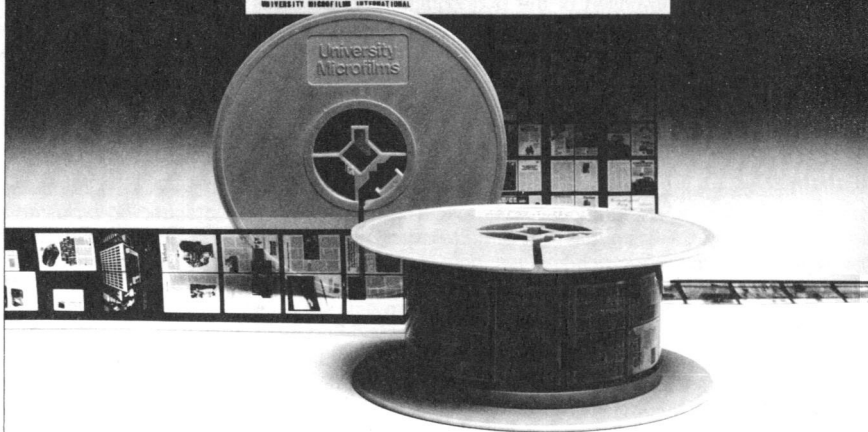
Publication of the *Edison Papers* is sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution, the National Park Service, the New Jersey Historical Commission, and Rutgers University. The staff of the Edison Papers project includes Reese V. Jenkins, director and editor; Thomas E. Jeffrey, microfilm editor and associate editor; Leonard S. Reich, associate director and associate editor; Paul B. Israel and Susan Schultz, assistant editors; and others.

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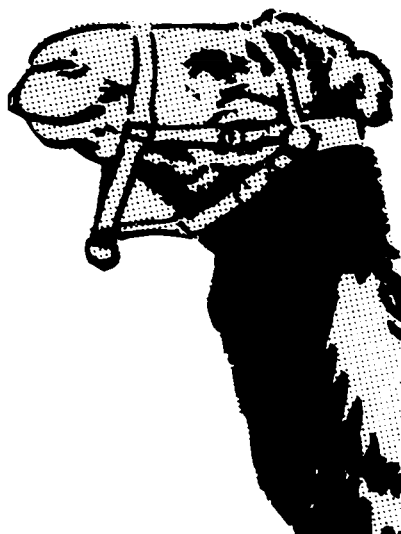
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