Thomas A. Edison Birthplace

Milan, Ohio

Prepared by
E. Sydney Bradford
Staff Historian
Northeast Region
August 6, 1964

Thomas A. Edison Birthplace,

Ohio

Location: Milan

Ownership: Mrs. J. E. Sloane, President, Edison Birthplace Association, Llewellyn Park, West Orange, New Jersey

Significance

When Thomas A. Edison was born on February 11, 1847, in Milan, Ohio, Milan was a prosperous grain center. But changing conditions adversely affected the economy of the town shortly after Edison's birth, and the village is now largely significant because of the attractive brick cottage that was Edison's home until 1854, when his father moved to Port Huron, Michigan.

Little is known about Edison's childhood in Milan. Even that information is based mainly on recollections of some of his youthful experiences--such as watching wagons passing through Milan on their way to California, visiting the shipyards on the canal, near the town, sitting on a nest of goose eggs to see if he could hatch them, and burning down a barn. Some biographers saw in those incidents portents of the inventor's subsequent career, one author describing the destruction of the barn as Edison's "first spectacular experiment."[1] On the other hand, perhaps Henry Ford, a great admirer and friend of Edison's, wrote more realistically about his friend when he stated

---

[1]Mary C. Nerney, Thomas A. Edison, A Modern Olympian (New York, 1934), 22.

that "Nothing, . . . , appears to have happened at Milan particularly to impress Edison."[2] That these early years were important, as they are for all men, is undeniable; but that they had any marked or direct influence on his later productive years cannot be demonstrated. Edison's rise to prominence after his family's move to Port Huron is well known. Although uninterested in formal schooling, he worked hard at educating himself, and by the age of sixteen had already made several inventions in telegraphy. In 1869, after much travel, a variety of jobs, and constant experimenting, the young man secured a good position in New York. However, he was employed only a short time, leaving the company in order to establish his own concern. In creating it, he gathered around himself a group of talented individuals, and together they formed what has been termed the first "invention factory," which produced numerous new products, particularly for the telegraph and telephone.

The scope and success of Edison's undertaking caused him to look for larger quarters, and in 1877 he moved from New York to Menlo Park, New Jersey. Here he remained for a decade in the new laboratory, until in 1887, he constructed an even larger factory in West Orange. Meanwhile, numerous discoveries and developments had come from Edison and his colleagues: the incandescent lamp in 1879, the Pearl Street power plant in New York in 1882, and the "Edison effect" in 1883. After he had moved to West Orange, the inventor continued to startle

---

[2]Henry Ford (in collaboration with Samuel Crowther), Edison As I Know Him (New York, 1930), 19.

America with new things, such as his development of motion pictures in the 1890's.

Besides his inventive ability, Edison possessed an unusual talent for organizing. He formed numerous special companies to produce his inventions, as he felt there was little profit in devising new products if they were not put to use. Today's mammoth General Electric Company, for example, in large part traces its ancestry back to concerns organized by Edison.

Even in his last years, Edison remained an insatiable worker, exhausting others by being able to concentrate for long hours on a problem. The tremendous benefit resulting from his unremitting labors was recognized by the nation in 1928, when Congress awarded him a gold medal for his contributions to mankind. Three years later, on October 18, 1931, Milan's most famous son died.

Condition of the Site

The Edison birthplace, erected around 1841, is a gabled brick house that has a basement, first floor, and attic. The room in which Edison was born is on the south end of the first floor, just off the living room. A parlor occupies the north side, except for a small room opening off it. Mementos of Edison and his family are exhibited in these rooms and in the bedrooms in the attic. There are only a few of the original furnishings in the house at the present time.

After the Edisons moved from Milan in 1854, the house passed out of the family until a sister of Edison's purchased it in 1894. In 1906,

Edison became the building's owner, and following his death in 1931, the Edison Birthplace Association, Inc., assumed control of the property. The Association restored the birthplace in 1947 and now maintains it as a memorial to the inventor.

Because its historical associations are limited to the first seven years of the inventor's life, and those years seem to have had little demonstrable affect on his later life, it is doubtful that the great inventor's birthplace possesses exceptional value within the meaning of the criteria for the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings.

References: Dictionary of American Biography; George S. Bryan, Edison, the Man and His Work (New York, 1926), 5-6; J. G. Crowther, Famous American Men of Science (New York, 1937), 325-26; Edison Birthplace Association, "Birthplace of Thomas Alva Edison," (n.p., n.d.); Henry Ford (in collaboration with Samuel Crowther), Edison As I Know Him (New York, 1930), 19; Matthew Josephson, Edison (New York, 1959), 13-18; Francis T. Miller, Thomas A. Edison, Benefactor of Mankind (Philadelphia, 1831), 32, 35, 36-39, 42; Mary C. Nerney, Thomas A. Edison, A Modern Olympian (New York, 1934), 22-24.

The Thomas A. Edison Birthplace, Milan, Ohio, in the early 1880's.

Courtesy Edison Birthplace Association, Inc.

The living room in the
Edison Birthplace

Courtesy Edison Birthplace
Association, Inc.

The Edison Birthplace today.

National Park Service Photo
1963