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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

TRIBUTE TO MR. ANTONIO MEUCCI

HON. BILL PASCRELL, JR.

OF NEW JERSEY IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. PASCRELL of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, Alexander Graham Bell is the man most commonly given full credit for the invention of the telephone. The courts awarded him one of the most valuable patents in American history, a patent that made him a millionaire and became the foundation for one of America's largest corporations. Certainly, the telephone has become a tool of modern communications so fundamental that many of today's business and social activities would be inconceivable in its absence. However, Bell's claim that he solely engineered the telephone was hotly disputed by a number of other inventors, one of which I wish to speak of here today.

My motive is not to disparage or discredit the legend of Mr. Bell's findings, but rather to tell the story of Antonio Meucci, an Italian immigrant little known for his far-reaching contributions to our society.

Antonio Meucci was born in San Frediano, near Florence, in April 1808. He studied design and mechanical engineering at Florence's Academy of Fine Arts and then worked in the Teatro della Pergola and various other theaters as a stage technician until 1835. From there, he accepted a job as a scenic designer and stage technician at the Teatro Tacon in Havana, Cuba.

Fascinated by technical research of any kind, Meucci read every scientific missive he could acquire. He spent a great deal of his spare time in Havana on research and he soon gained notoriety for his creative and productive mind. His purported inventions included a new method of galvanizing metal, which was applied to military equipment for the Cuban government. He continued his work in the theater, but science had become his indomitable passion.

One day, in his home, Meucci heard an exclamation of a friend, who was in another room of the house, over a piece of copper wire running between them. He realized immediately that he had something that was more important than any discovery he had ever made. With that realization also came the understanding that to succeed as an inventor, he would need an environment that truly fostered his inquisitive mind and vibrant spirit. He would come to America, to explore this new communication possibility.

He left Cuba for New York in 1850, settling in the Clifton section of Staten Island, a few miles from New York City. Though poor finances and limited English plagued Meucci, he worked tirelessly in his endeavor to bring long distance communication to a practical stage.

In 1855, when his wife became partially paralyzed, Meucci set up a telephone system which joined several rooms of his house with his workshop in another building nearby. This was the first such installation anywhere. In 1860, when the instrument had become practical, Meucci organized a demonstration to attract financial backing in which a singer's voice was clearly heard by spectators a considerable distance away. A description of the apparatus was soon published in one of New York's Italian newspapers and the report with a model

of the invention were taken to Italy with the goal of arranging production there. Unfortunately, the promises of financial support, which were so forthcoming after the original demonstration, never materialized.

Antonio Meucci refused to let this set back destroy his vision. However, the years that followed brought increasing poverty, he continued to produce new designs and specifications. Unable to raise the sum for a definitive patent, Meucci filed a caveat, or notice of intent, that was a preliminary description of his invention with the US Patent Office. His *telegrafo* was registered on December 28, 1871 with the requirement that he file for converting it into a patent in 1874. Fate would deal Meucci a cruel blow, however, as he fell victim to a near fatal boat explosion. While he lay in hospital, destitute and ill, Meucci allowed the provisional patent to lapse.

Two years after the expiration of Meucci's caveat, Bell took out a patent for his voice transmitting electrical device, which he called the telephone. It is possible that sometimes several inventors have the same idea at the same time. In this case, however, what has mattered is not who had the idea for the telephone first, but who first turned the idea into a viable commercial enterprise. As we all know, Bell succeeded in that respect.

For too long Antonio Meucci has been only a footnote in our history books. At many local libraries, a search for Meucci in the card catalogue yields nothing. His legacy deserves more. Remember that a federal court in the 1880's found that Meucci's ideas were significant to the invention of the telephone and the Secretary of State at the time issued a public statement that "there exists sufficient proof to give priority to Meucci in the invention of the telephone."

Mr. Speaker, many people from many different nations have contributed to the greatness of America. Antonio Meucci was indeed one such person. He is an example of someone who worked for the benefit of all. It is fitting that his efforts are recognized here today.

