

or could not. He tried to explain to Mabel why he worked such long hours, refusing to stop to eat or rest. He had, he said, a "sort of telephonic under-current" in his brain that was constantly humming. "My mind concentrates itself on the subject that happens to occupy it," he wrote, "and then all things else in the Universe—including father—mother—wife—children—*life itself*—become for the time being of secondary importance."

By 1880, so frustrated had Bell become with the Bell Telephone Company—the time it stole from his laboratory work and the battles that he now realized it would always be fighting—that he simply quit. "I have been almost as much surprised as grieved at the course you have taken," his father-in-law, who had become the company's president, wrote him that summer. "My mortification and grief are only tempered by the hope that you do not realize what you have done." Bell, however, understood exactly what he had done, and he would never regret it.

Renting a small house in Washington, D.C., where his parents had settled, Bell at first tried to write a history of the telephone, to at least acknowledge the singular role it had played in his life. To no one's surprise, however, the temptation to return to his work quickly became too strong to resist. "However hard and faithfully Alec may work on his book," Mabel wrote, "he cannot prevent ideas from entering and overflowing his brain." Before long, Bell had opened a new laboratory.

In February of 1881, just a month before Garfield's inauguration, Bell eagerly moved his equipment and notebooks into a small, two-story brick building that stood in the middle of a large, open stretch of land on Connecticut Avenue. He christened the building the Volta Laboratory, in honor of the science prize that Napoleon Bonaparte had created at the beginning of the century and that Bell had won that past summer. Along with the prize had come a substantial sum—50,000 francs, or \$10,000. With the money, he was able not only to lease the building but to hire an impressive young inventor named Charles Sumner Tainter. Bell had found Tainter in Charles Williams's electrical shop in Boston, the same shop where he had met Thomas Watson six years earlier. Watson had left the