Publication of The Papers of Thomas A. Edison represents the effort of a team of historical editors to bring to the public and the scholarly community an intimate view of the personal, entrepreneurial, and creative activities of America's greatest inventor. Out of a documentary record comprising over three and a half million pages, the edition will provide the pieces to the puzzle that is Edison's place in history. These documents reveal high moments of inventive genius and times of intricate business transaction, encounters with a host of powerful leaders in their esteemed places and with day laborers in dirty machine shops, and the consequences of Edison's many successes and his equally many failures. The neglect of generations of scholars has left a mist of popular myth surrounding the historical Edison. This edition provides for the first time the resources that can significantly enhance public knowledge and encourage scholarly research into the technical creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship that propelled the United States into a position of industrial leadership. Such research is vital for understanding American history and for evaluating critical technical and economic issues today and in the future.

In a sixty-year inventive career from the end of the Civil War to the onset of the Great Depression, Edison obtained 1,093 patents from the United States Patent Office, by far the largest number ever issued to a single individual. At the dawning of the era of mass production, he and his "invention factory" set an enduring record for output of patents. To this day, people immediately associate his name with the electric light—an artifact that has come to symbolize creative in-
sight—and his association with the phonograph and motion picture is nearly as strong.

Less well known is the diversity of Edison's other significant achievements. He contributed notably to telegraph, telephone, mimeograph, electric power systems, electric traction, ore concentration, electric batteries, chemical production, cement manufacture, and home appliances. In an era of rapid industrialization and growth in scale of enterprise, Edison enlisted a group of able technical associates and demonstrated to financiers and corporate executives the efficacy of team industrial research. He pursued many of his inventions from conception through development and into the marketplace, establishing large companies at home and abroad for their exploitation. He was a storyteller out of the American Midwest, and the press exploited this eager raconteur for an adoring audience that accepted him as a hero of mythic proportions.

To historians, social scientists, scientists, engineers, and business people, Edison's cascade of technical achievements raises critical questions. Was he a genius? How could any one person achieve so much? How original were his ideas? Did he steal ideas from his laboratory associates and others? Was he just lucky—"born at the right time"—a time when many technical and business opportunities were uniquely ripe for the plucking? Do his designs reveal his own distinctive technical marks? Do they reflect an indigenous style of his era? What influence did his European associates have on his work in the laboratory? How effective was he as a business person? Are there lessons that educators and policymakers can learn that would help foster future Edisons?

The Edison Papers project at Rutgers University was established to help answer such questions through publication of selective microfilm and book editions. The indexed microfilm edition, for specialist researchers, will eventually include about four hundred thousand documents, offering access to a substantial body of the most important documentary evidence while freeing the researcher from the morass of peripheral material that has impeded scholars in the past.

The book edition is intended for a broader audience, including not only specialist researchers but others who seek documentary evidence: general historians preparing textbooks and related materials; scientists, engineers, and business persons seeking to understand the details of Edison's technologies and entrepreneurship; social scientists and ad-
ministrators concerned with the context and processes of creative activity; and students of all fields. To meet the requirements of such an audience, the book edition reflects the diversity and evolution of Edison's expansive career in an annotated selection of documents that includes the inventor's personal and business correspondence, patent records, business contracts, and related materials. However, Edison's fundamental historical significance lies in his technical creativity, and this edition necessarily focuses upon those achievements and their context—experimental notes and drawings, laboratory and production models, and other technical material.

Such a focus presents at once wonderful opportunities and special burdens: translating the visual and technical languages involved, comprehending the problems and issues Edison was addressing, and understanding the work of his peers in America and Europe. For the editors, issues of interpretation and annotation also are a particular concern. The canons of traditional documentary editing discourage editorial interpretation. Although this poses little problem for editors of a comprehensive documentary edition in a field already well researched, it presents a quandary for editors of a highly selective edition of documents in a field as little explored as the history of technology. Selection itself presupposes interpretation. Moreover, Edison's work in recondite, abandoned technologies, as well as the paucity of contextual scholarship, necessitate further interpretation. This explanatory material appears in chapter introductions, headnotes, endnotes, and illustrations, all of which are intended to help the reader understand the documents' content and context.

The edition is designed so that readers may select the level at which they wish to use it. Chapter introductions and headnotes allow nontechnical readers to follow at a general level Edison's activities and to select the documents they wish to pursue in detail. Endnotes to both headnotes and documents identify persons and issues, elucidate technical points, and direct the reader to related material. The initial statement in an explanatory endnote is general; subsequent information is more detailed and technical. The editors hope that everyone interested in Thomas Edison will find illumination in this record of his life, work, and world.

The Thomas A. Edison Papers project has benefited from substantial assistance, ranging from the sponsorship and financial support of major institutions to research assistance
and documentary information from scholars, archivists, collectors, administrators, and students. From its inception in the mid-1970s, the project has been a team effort. Leaders from the New Jersey Historical Commission, including John T. Cunningham, Bernard Bush, Paul A. Stellhorn, Richard Waldron, and Ronald Grele, initiated discussions with Arthur Reed Abel, William Binnewies, Lynn Wightman, and Elizabeth Albro of the National Park Service’s Edison National Historic Site. The two groups soon attracted the participation of Brooke Hindle and Bernard Finn of the Smithsonian Institution. With financial aid from the Edison Electric Institute, they then engaged James Brittain, a distinguished historian of technology at the Georgia Institute of Technology, to prepare a feasibility study. After considering Brittain’s recommendations, the representatives of the National Park Service, the New Jersey Historical Commission, and the Smithsonian Institution invited Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey to join in cosponsoring the Thomas A. Edison Papers project. President Edward Bloustein, Paul Pearson, Richard P. McCormick, James Kirby Martin, and Tilden Edelstein of Rutgers responded with enthusiasm, and in 1978 the project began its work with headquarters at Rutgers University in New Brunswick and a second office at the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange.

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