

The Cipher Wheel Exhibit



This enciphering and deciphering device was acquired from West Virginia by NSA in the early 1980s. It was first thought to have been a model of the "Jefferson cipher wheel," so called because Thomas Jefferson described a similar device in his writings. We believe it to be the oldest extant device in the world, but the connection with Jefferson is unproven. Such devices are known to have been described by writers as early as Francis Bacon in 1605, and may have been fairly common among the arcane "black chambers" of European governments. This cipher wheel was evidently for use with the French language, which was the world's diplomatic language up through World War I. How it came to be in West Virginia is unknown.