

I, SCIENCE

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ENERGY

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THE TESLA ANGLE

McKenna Castleberry writes about her research into Nikola Tesla and his mysterious "death ray".

There is one picture of Nikola Tesla that has mesmerized me since I was a child. Tesla is sitting under a large Faraday cage with a Tesla coil on top of it. The picture, while in black and white, shows the streaks of white-hot electric sparks shooting out from the coil. Tesla is calmly sitting under this cage, as if it's just another Sunday morning of doing a crossword puzzle. I can imagine the whirring and sizzling of the coil above, filling the thick silence with electricity.

How did Tesla get there? And was he really safe under the electric shower of his invention? I later found out that this picture was taken using double exposure, overlaying Tesla's portrait with the activity of his machine. Even knowing that, I still found the photograph mesmerizing.

From first seeing that picture, I was hooked on Tesla. I wanted to know everything about him, and his all-too-famous fight with Thomas Edison. There was one thing that seemed to be missing from my research. What happened to Tesla after his moments of fame? Tesla seemed to just vanish after his famous debut at the first Chicago World's fair, demonstrating the powers of electricity. He also worked with Marconi and helped develop the radio for later use. It didn't make any sense to me. How could someone just disappear after such achievements?

I did some digging, and found various articles on the mysteries surrounding Tesla's death. My pulse quickened as I scrolled through the article on History.com. It turns out that Tesla spent his last few decades living in one hotel room in New York City, after a lab fire humiliated him in the press. He became more deranged as his health declined, becoming obsessed with the number three, and constantly washing himself and his clothes. The few times he wasn't in his hotel room, he was out feeding, and (as he claimed) communicating with the pigeons of New York.

It seemed to me that Tesla may have been hiding something during this time period, perhaps a new invention. In his later pictures, Tesla's eyes seemed to be gloating, almost mischievously hinting that he knew

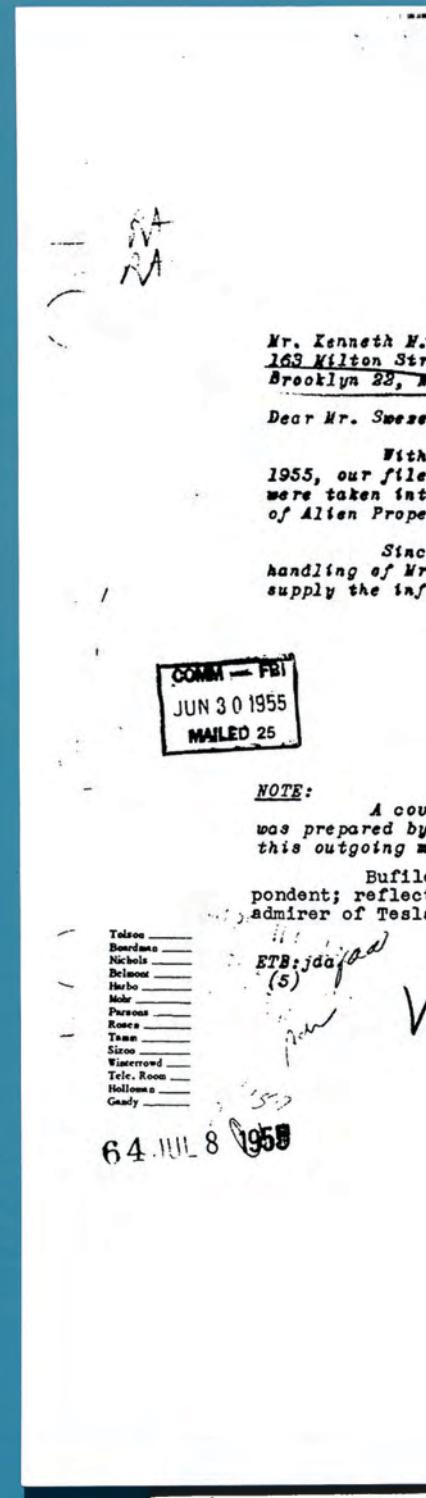
something I didn't. I imagined him hunched over in his hotel room, an antique dresser used as a lab bench as he continued to play with ideas that had haunted him throughout his life. His eyes were sallow and bloodshot. Nights staying up working had taken their toll on him.

Tesla died on January 7th, 1943 in his hotel room, and rumors swirled that immediately after his passing, the U.S. Office of Alien Property broke into his safe and took all his work. I had to reread the sentence in the History.com article. The U.S. Office of Alien property? What could Tesla be working on that this government office had to immediately take away all his work? I scrolled down hastily, and almost missed the next paragraph in the article because I was so excited. As my eyes ran over the page, I held my breath.

Tesla had apparently invented a sort of "death ray" that would have been used to fight enemy forces during World War II. The government didn't want the invention falling into the wrong hands, and immediately took possession of Tesla's technology. The U.S. government has held Tesla's work ever since. It was only recently that they planned to ship it back to Belgrade in Serbia, Tesla's hometown, for the Nikola Tesla Museum. The article stated that apparently 80 boxes of Tesla's notebooks, lab journals, and other documents had been shipped, but only 60 boxes actually made it. My eyebrows furrowed.

What happened to the other 20?

The article seemed to finish on a questioning tone, and I scrolled up frustrated that there weren't more answers. At the top of the page was a link to an article titled "The Missing Tesla Files: the FBI declassifies..." with the rest of the title cut off. Curious, I clicked, and was brought to a new article explaining that in 2016, the FBI declassified some of Tesla's work according to the Freedom of Information Act. I couldn't believe my luck when there was a link to the FBI vault itself. I gasped as I found full PDFs with Tesla's handwriting, scribbles, and notes from J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, himself, discussing Tesla's work. For the next two hours I





Mr. Belmont
Mr. Boardman

June 30, 1955

INFORMATION CONTAINED
HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
(Original) JTE 22-80 BY SP4 Jan/106

Swanson
et
BB Tork

reference to your letter of June 25,
disclose the effects of Nikola Tesla
in custody after his death by the Office
of the Director and not by this Bureau.

We did not participate in the
Tesla's effects, we are unable to
provide you requested.

Sincerely yours,

J. Edgar Hoover

John Edgar Hoover

Director

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24 JUL 1 1955

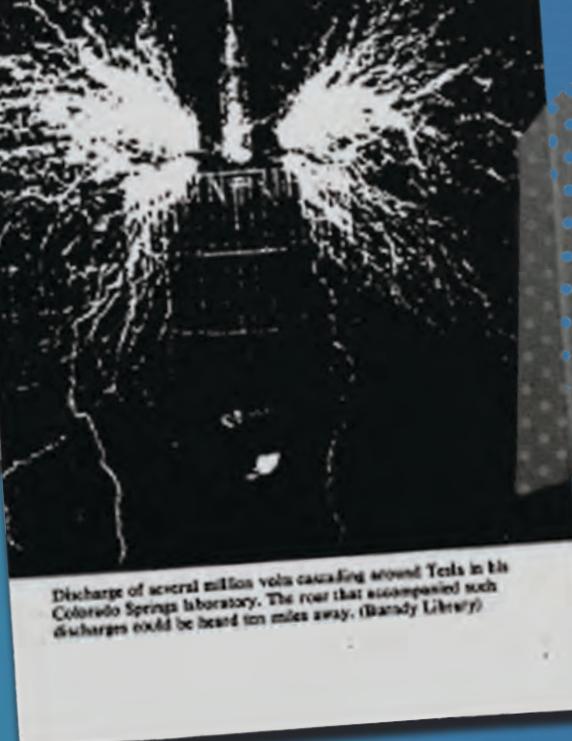
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city of Gosic. There, he
brought up and perfected his car-
inventions." Of these, his fa-

eye so vividly—and in such minute
detail—that often he had trouble
telling the real from the imaginary.



Discharge of several million volts cascading around Tesla in his Colorado Springs laboratory. The roar that accompanied such discharges could be heard ten miles away. (Bandy Library)

scrolled through the FBI files, trying to find some mention of Tesla's "death ray" or any other reason that these secrets were being held.

"I couldn't believe
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was a **link to the FBI
vault itself.**"

The documents within the FBI files ranged from 1945 to approximately 1969. A lot of them were blacked out with marker or written over with notes. In the margins, someone had scribbled the word "secret" over and over again, as if to remind me. Many of the PDFs were either scanned in or microfilm, making it hard to read. The parts I could read discussed the use of the Tesla "death ray", but no mention of whether such an invention was working. Oddly enough, every few pages of the Tesla files were newspaper clippings about Nikola Tesla. Why would the FBI store newspaper clippings in their vaults? The clippings were retelling the facts of Tesla's inventions, with few of them mentioning his new "death ray." There were also a few interviews with J. Edgar Hoover and other political figures discussing the possession of Tesla's work. I tried to read them, but the printing was smeared. Perhaps that's why the FBI released these documents after all. You can barely read them.

I can only imagine Tesla having a laugh as he watches the government struggle to understand his work. Perhaps they kept all of it just to be safe, and the items they did release are merely decoys for Tesla's real work, still sitting safely six feet underground in a vault with thick walls and a locked door. ■

