

# THE TELEPHONE IN EASTERN CANADA

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*When I first started writing this it was to be part of my history of Halifax Coast Guard Radio the radio station I was operating at the time. We were living in Sambro Head and some of this history can still be found on my [www.ve1bc.com](http://www.ve1bc.com) site.*

When the telegraph and telephone first went into service, a good many people became involved in many companies, to produce and operate these new gadgets. During the first years of their use they were owned, operated, sold, and maintained by many companies. Many of these first companies were amalgamated to form the companies we know today. Just as many went broke financially and disappeared without leaving any noticeable record of their existence. There were many financial wars between various forms of business to control the operation of these pieces of equipment. Therefore this installation rotated as much or more on the amount of money available as it did on the actual service it would provide to people in general.

To invent the telephone, telegraph, and later wireless telegraphy and make them functional was something but to sell same to the average person was something else. Several units, or even two, might be practical in an area but one unit by itself would be useless. Therefore the first telephones were purchased by fairly large organizations to use as an intercom between their various offices, homes, warehouses, and so on.

The late Mr. J. Furber Marshall, Historian/Archivist, Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company Limited stated:

"The telephone first came to Nova Scotia in August 1877 and over the next two years pairs of telephones appeared in various Nova Scotia communities as intercom systems between home and office, store and warehouse, and the like. In the fall of 1879 a Toronto firm, the Dominion Telegraph Company, converted part of its Halifax network of telegraph lines into a telephone exchange. For the first time, Nova Scotia telephone users could ask an operator for a telephone connection. The rival Western Union Telegraph Company quickly followed with a competing exchange in Halifax.

In 1880 the Bell Telephone Company of Canada was formed and within the year they moved into Halifax and took over both telephone companies, those of the Dominion Telegraph Company and Western Union Telegraph Company. Bell operated in Nova Scotia for about seven years during which time the telephone became better known and businessmen from Cape Breton to Yarmouth, realizing its potential began organizing local and regional companies. By 1887, it was obvious that Bell was overextended and would not be making the investments in Nova Scotia necessary to provide a provincial network. This produced the incorporation of the Nova Scotia Telephone Company, and they began the consolidation of all the telephone companies in the province, a process which was not completed in 1910 when Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company was formed with even wider areas of consolidation in mind.

There is no known record of the Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company ever having used telegraph within its operations. When the Company was named, it was a practice to obtain as wide corporate powers as possible at the time of incorporation as a hedge against the telegraph companies later obtaining legal injunction against the telephone company's operations. Being first in the field of wire communications, the cable and telegraph companies were powerful enemies in the early days of the telephone business. Maritime Telegraph and Telephone have traditionally offered private wire telegraph services to allow their customers to communicate by key-and-sounder and teletypewriter, first on a private wire basis and more recently on a dial-up exchange basis (TWX). One technical reason in the earlier days was that a Morse leg could be superimposed on existing telephone circuits with little or no degradation to the voice path with little effort and expense. Further, these Morse Legs could be tandem-linked together through

mechanical repeaters to cover great distances when voice transmission was limited through lack of the vacuum-tube amplifier.”

Mel Saunders retired several years ago from a lifetime as a telegraph operator on the landline through the Annapolis Valley. His most distant direct contact was Calgary, Alberta. At the time Mel was operating at Windsor and had the Wire Chief of each line connect him direct to Calgary for some long messages he had been asked to deliver. He said he had a very good clear line all the way to Calgary and had no trouble delivering these long messages.



*Harold Bailey Collection*

This is the Government Wharf at Kingsport, Nova Scotia shortly after a Cornwallis Valley Railroad train was able to back down on to this wharf. The CVR opened this line in 1890 and this photograph may have been taken as much as ten years later in 1900. This was the terminus of the railroad line from Kentville to Kingsport, where the trains met the small steam packets that landed passengers and freight from Saint John, New Brunswick. The one meeting this train could be the BRUNSWICK, but I was unable to identify either it or the tern schooner outbound. There is a ramp at this site in 2007 for launching boats.

Another good example of what Mr. Marshall states was the railroad from Kentville through Centreville to Weston and from Centreville in the other direction as far as the wharf at Kingsport, which has now disappeared. This line was constructed with horses and wagons, quite a feat when you look at some of the rough terrain that had to be filled and levelled. The line to Weston was constructed in 1913 and the various stations along the route were fitted with telegraph and the corresponding lines. A very severe snow and ice storm did much damage and destroyed these lines on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1913. For some reason when these lines were repaired, they were used for telephones and not telegraph. Possibly the cost of renting this telephone intercom system was more attractive than hiring telegraph operators for this line. Most of the railway stations on this line had no agent for many of the years they were in operation. Any business was carried out with the conductor of the train involved. Centreville did have a telegraph and had call code CV. The Grafton station on this line had an emergency type telegraph key and sounder.

This one was complete with long poles in order to attach this unit to the wires passing nearby without having to climb a telegraph pole.

During the time the telegraph was the main means of communication for the railroads and many of the villages these railroads served, the majority (if not all) of the various elements on these lines carried these emergency units. Many an incident took place for example where someone working on the tracks became injured. The Foreman of the job would then get out his sounder and key, climb up the closest telegraph pole and connect same. He then sent down the line the nature of his request (or requests) and could if need be alert the next train to stop and take the injured person to the closest medical centre. Naturally any request could be made over such a unit and most people in such positions knew enough of the operation in order to make this communication. Now this is handled by mobile radiotelephones and the cell phone has probably taken over a lot of this communication.

During the time the Grafton station and the others making up this railroad line were in service, if for any reason the telephone equipment became inoperative, communications could be established via telegraph over the same lines providing the lines were not totally disrupted because of a serious break.

Mr. Marshall continues:

“The earliest known telephone directory for the Camperdown area is that of May 1900. While it has no listings for any subscribers in this area, it does have toll rates covering Chebucto Head Lighthouse, Ferguson’s Cove, Sambro, and Herring Cove. This would indicate there was public service of some description in the area, probably what were called toll stations or in modern terminology, pay phones. The first reference to telephone services in Nova Scotia communities are the Station Statistics in the company magazine, starting in January 1908. There Sambro appears as an exchange in January 1908 with four telephones and steadily grows until, with the first Maritime Telegraph and Telephone directory, for 1911, list the Marconi Wireless Station at Camperdown, pay stations at Chebucto Head, Duncan’s Cove, Herring Cove, and Sambro, plus ten private telephones. There are no telephone numbers for any of them and the exchange Agent is listed as Mr. Brown, the manager at Halifax. This indicates that there really was no exchange at Sambro, merely a long party line out of the main Halifax exchange, St. Paul, on Salter Street at the head of Granville Street. This exchange existed from 1892 until 1916, and was replaced by the Bishop Exchange on Sackville Street. This arrangement lasted about forty-five years, until the Lorne Exchange dial service was extended to the area, succeeded in 1963 by Spryfield Exchange service and still later by the Ketch Harbour Exchange.”

Therefore from the time the telephone was installed at the Camperdown Signal Station until this station closed in 1953, it remained nothing more than a party line. This line had the Chebucto Head Lighthouse, the Pilotage Office in Halifax, the Citadel Hill Signal Station while it remained in service, the Signal Station on the top of the Post Office building on George Street which replaced it, and the Camperdown Wireless Station after it entered service. Places like that, which provided that type of service.

The telephone was introduced on the southeast side of St. Mary’s Bay for the area of Digby and Yarmouth counties of Nova Scotia in 1886 and through the peninsula of Digby neck to Westport in 1888. These telephones would have been connected with the other telephones in the province shortly after this date.

This is from the Fall Newsletter of the Gilberts Cove and District Historical Society, Nova Scotia December 2017.

#### *The Telephone*

Telephones arrived in Digby County, Nova Scotia in the early 1900's. In the beginning it was mostly businesses and professionals that needed this new and fast method of communication. In 1936 the Weymouth Exchange was one of only six in the Province to be converted to rotary dial.

Prior to that you simply picked up the phone and asked the operator to connect you to the party you were calling. In the 1940's families were offered a less expensive option in the form of "party lines". This meant that several houses would be on the same phone line. When the phone rang, it rang in each house at the same time but each residence was assigned a separate signal alerting them to who should pick up the phone. While this phone set-up was less expensive than having a "private line", there were a few pitfalls to using the party line. Nosey neighbours could easily pick up the phone and listen in on a conversation another party line member was having. And long winded talkers could tie up all phones on the line for a long duration so it would be necessary to pick up and tell them to get off the phone in an emergency.

I have no record of Great Grandfather Spicer sailing into Halifax in SILVER LEAF. The procedure they would have followed would have been no different than that followed by so many for so many years. On entering the harbour approaches they would have flown the Canadian Red Ensign and more than likely just below it, the letters TQMF in a vertical line. Flying these signal letters was known, and still is, as "Making her Number". On her foremast she would have flown the flag of the country she was coming from. If this had been the United States – the United States flag, if she had been coming from another port in the province she would have flown either the Canadian Red Ensign or the Union Flag. Likewise for whatever port it involved.

When SILVER LEAF was sighted by the signal station at Camperdown the duty signalman would make note of this, look her up in his code books and pass the word along to the appropriate authorities. For years this was done by visual signals. Now that the telephone was in use it was done via telephone. If there had been any questions he would have signalled to SILVER LEAF passing along the questions or answers. Naturally SILVER LEAF could have made any queries to him that she felt necessary. For many years the Citadel Hill station would fly the house flag corresponding to the approaching vessel. The Shipping Agents and the citizens of Halifax became accustomed to keeping a close watch on this signal tower. They would then know of any arrival and naturally those involved were forewarned and able to do all necessary for berthing the vessel on arrival, seeing to the discharging of cargo, loading cargo if necessary, and in general, helping to speed up the arrival and departure of any vessel.

One of the first telephones installed in the village of Sambro was that of James L. Hart, the local postmaster and storekeeper. This enterprise was taken over by his son C. W. Hart and was taken over from him by Helen and Alfred Gray in 1970. Helen learned the Post Office routine while working for C. W. Hart and thereby knew the routine well when she and husband Alfred took over.

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*Douglas Hale*

This is Mrs. Jim Moody talking on a telephone at Grafton, Nova Scotia, February 1955. This telephone was in the Berwick telephone exchange and is the telephone in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Hale. Mrs. Hale was Mrs. Moody's daughter Jennie. Jennie was a telephone operator for the Farmers Telephone Company at Grafton before she was married. The Farmers Telephone Company was formed in 1898 and was one of the many small telephone companies that operated throughout Nova Scotia.

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*Waterville Village Memories*

This is the home of the farmer's telephone company at Buckley's Corner in Grafton. The telephone switchboard was in the upstairs of this store and that is probably one of the telephone operators in the upstairs window.

I feel confident that this photograph was taken before electricity had been installed but I have no idea why there are so many insulators on the cross trees of the poles. Because there are so many one wonders if each telephone had its own wire.

The Nova Scotia Telephone Company began the consolidation of all the telephone companies in the province, a process which was not completed in 1910 when Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company was formed with even wider areas of consolidation in mind. I must quote Mr. Marshall:

"Mrs. Moody is using the magnetic wall telephone which was listed as 247-22 on the Berwick Exchange. It is the standard Type 1317E or 1317CG built by Northern Electric from original designs of Western Electric in the United States going back to around 1900.

The three dry cell batteries used to power the transmitter required half the size of this telephone.

The signaling was done by turning a crank on the right side of the box to operate a "Five-bar" AC generator inside. This produced about 90 volts of 20 hertz AC current which was sufficient to ring up to 40 sets of telephone bells on a line up to 40 or 50 miles long.

A special arrangement was used to call the operator without ringing all the bells on the line. A small black button (seen in the photo an inch back of the middle hinge) was depressed while turning the crank and the operator's line signal (drop) No. 247 would fall.

Our principal problem with this set was replacing batteries for people who habitually listened in on the line. My old mentor showed me how to prove this fault by checking the black paint on the

back of the transmitter “cup”. If it was worn off it was highly probable the users were holding the heel of one hand over the “funnel” mouthpiece to block out background sounds and the fingers of that hand extended over the back of the transmitter cup, gradually wearing the paint. At the same time they were listening – and draining the batteries.

The upper telephone is a Type 1293GP, common battery dial wall set (as opposed to “local battery, magneto”). Again this is a Western Electric design of the 1900 era, first built without the dial for the “lift-the-receiver” system. The dial was added around 1919 and would have been the “big seller” in 1921 in North End Halifax.

The drastic reduction in size was accomplished through elimination of the generator and batteries, as all current required for both transmitter energy and signaling came in over the line from a large bank of glass storage cells in the exchange.

Lifting the receiver closed an internal switch to “turn on” the set and, if the system was “manual” using switchboards, a light in front of the operator. If the system was dial, the closing, or “looping”, of the line pulled up a relay in the dial exchange to start the automatic sequence of dial tone, etc.

Berwick skipped the manual stage, moving straight from the magneto to dial on 21 October 1954. So therefore, everybody had two telephones through the late summer of 1954 with instructions to continue using the old one until probably 10 p.m. on that date, therefore changing to the new set.

The Hale’s number and code ring also changed: instead of listening for two longs and two shorts (-22) their new number 474-0 probably gave them long, short, long, or something else not indicated by the suffix “0”.

The new Berwick dial system used three digit numbers for the one party line and three digits plus a code digit for the party lines. I do not have the code conversion table at hand but I would guess the multi-party lines were limited to 10 telephones per line with “split” ringing (five codes audible to each half of the customers on a line). In other words each customer heard his own code ring plus up to four others.”

The Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company (MT&T, later MTT) provided telecommunications solutions to Nova Scotia until 1998 when it merged with Island Telephone Company of Prince Edward Island, NBTel of New Brunswick, and NewTel Communications to form Aliant (now Bell Aliant). Prince Edward Island had the same 902 area code on their phone numbers and Maritime Telegraph and Telephone was their telephone company for years.

Today a telephone provides many functions, a camera, and a vehicle for texting, and so on to the point that many no longer have a phone in their home. They simply use a cellular phone only that they carry with them wherever they go. One can purchase a cell phone from any one of several companies with any number of functions today.

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