

THE FORERUNNER OF TEXT MESSAGING: THE TELEGRAPH

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November 4, 2015



Morse recorder, from the mid-19th century. This device received Morse code signals. Canadian Museum of History, CN-75 a

Long before the invention of cellular telephones, our forebears sent one another instant

messages by telegraph. Beginning in 1846, coded messages could be sent in Canada in the Morse alphabet: a code made up of short and long impulses (also known as “dots and dashes”). These messages were transmitted over long distances by cable, using telegraph technology and simple electrical current. Unlike today’s text messages, however, messages sent by telegraph were hard to keep private. Sending a telegram required a qualified operator, who would need to transcribe the messages being sent and decode the messages received. Beginning in the 1850s, the upper middle class had become used to exchanging wishes and news by telegram. Some even enjoyed playing chess this way, sending one another telegrams indicating their last moves. It was the press, however, that would popularize the use of the telegraph, so much so that, towards the end of the 19th century, Canadians in some cities would mob telegraph offices to get the latest news, before publication of the next day’s newspaper.

In Canada, telegraph lines were strung along railways, using available electric lines. As a result, the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) company offered telegraph services. Partly thanks to the CPR, a trans-Canada telegraph line was completed in 1886 between Nova Scotia and British Columbia —one year after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, which also stretched from Nova Scotia to British Columbia. It was, in fact, via an official telegram sent on November 7, 1885 by William Cornelius Van Horne, Director General of Canadian Pacific, that Sir John A. Macdonald, then-Prime Minister of Canada, learned that the last spike had been driven into the transcontinental railroad.

OTTAWA.

Patent
Cox's Patent INFOLD. Canada, Nov. 10th, 1853; U.S., May 27th, 1854.
To open, tear off the colored label at the perforated mark.

THE GREAT NORTH WESTERN TELEGRAPH COMPANY OF CANADA.

OPERATING THE LINES OF THE MONTREAL DOMINION AND MANITOBA TELEGRAPH COMPANIES.

53567

This Company transmits and delivers messages only on conditions limiting its liability, which have been assented to by the sender of the following message.

Errors can be guarded against only by repeating a message back to the sending station for comparison, and the Company will not hold itself liable for errors or delays in transmission or delivery of un-repeated messages, beyond the amount of tolls paid thereon, nor in any case where the claim is not presented in writing within sixty days after sending the message.

This is an un-repeated message, and is delivered by request of the sender, under the conditions named above.

H. P. DWIGHT, General Manager.

ERASTUS WIMAN, President.

Money orders by telegraph between principal telegraph offices in Canada and the United States.

TELEGRAM.

Use this space for Continuation of Lengthy Addresses, OR INSTRUCTIONS TO MESSENGER.



To
Hon Sir
J. A. Macdonald
K C B

RC
No. *3* Check *27* ps
Sumas

REC'D No.	FROM	SENT	REC'D BY	TIME
<i>2</i>	<i>A C D me</i>		<i>me</i>	<i>3 1/2</i>

From *Ottawa,* 188
Craigellachie Eagle pass BC 7

Thanks to your far seeing policy and unwavering support the Canadian Pacific Railway is completed the last rail was laid this (Saturday) morning at 9:22
W. C. Van Horne

Telegram announcing the driving of the last spike of the Canadian Pacific Railway (William Cornelius Van Horne, November 7, 1885 — Ink on paper, Library and Archives Canada, e000009485).

The first attempt at transatlantic telecommunication occurred in 1858, but it was not until 1866

that a functional telegraph cable was permanently laid between Europe and North America. At a time when ships took more than 10 days to cross the Atlantic, telegraph messages now took, in optimal conditions, only a few minutes.



Section of transatlantic telegraph cable made in 1857 by Newall and Co. and used during the first telegraphic transmission between Europe and North America, in 1858. Canadian Museum of History, 2011.38.1

The next advance, at the beginning of the 20th century, was wireless telegraphy, invented by physicist and businessman Guglielmo Marconi (1874–1937). It would prove particularly useful for communication between ships at sea. When the *Titanic* sank in 1912, the transmission of an SOS message resulted in the rescue of no less than 700 passengers. From then on, seagoing vessels were obliged to use wireless telegraphy.





Battery for a telegraph from the Empress of Ireland. Canadian Museum of History, 2012.21.499

Closer to home, when the *Empress of Ireland* sank at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River on

May 29, 1914, although 1,012 people perished, 465 people would be saved, thanks in part to the use of this new device. The Canadian Museum of History has many such objects in its collection, including a battery used by a telegraph on the *Empress of Ireland*, bearing witness to that tragedy.

Never underestimate the historical role of the telegraph!

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