

## EARLY ADOPTERS

### Perth's First Telephone

On a brisk autumn afternoon in the second week of November 1877, workers completed stringing 250 meters of piano wire through the trees, along back yard fences, and across rooftops between #11 D'Arcy Street and #39 Foster Street at Perth. By sundown, a 'butter-stamp' model receiver-transmitter<sup>1</sup> had been attached to each end of that wire completing Perth's first, and one of Canada's earliest, private telephone connection.

That Perth should be the locale of such a seminal event in telecommunications history arises from a story that begins in the late 1860s, in the home of University Professor Alexander Melville Bell (1810-1905), in Edinburgh, Scotland.



*Alexander Melville Bell (1810-1905)*

Bell, who's wife Eliza Grace Symonds (1809-1897) was partially deaf, was a teacher of the deaf and a lecturer in physiological phonetics, orthoepy<sup>2</sup> and elocution at the University of Edinburgh (1843-1865) and the University of London (1865-1870).

In 1867 tuberculosis killed Bell's 19-year-old son Edward Charles, followed by Charles' 26-year-old brother Melville James in 1870. Over the same years the health of middle son, Alexander Graham (1847-1922), also began to fail. Having himself suffered a debilitating illness as a young man, and having regained his health by a convalescence in Newfoundland, Alexander Melville Bell looked across the Atlantic for refuge from the coal smoke of Britain's cities. Rather than returning to St. John's, however, Bell was encouraged by his one-time Edinburgh neighbor and long-time friend Reverend Thomas Philip Henderson (1816-1887) to join him in Canada at Paris, Brant County, Ontario.

The Bell family arrived in Canada on August 1, 1870 and, after a few days as guests of Reverend Henderson at Paris, they purchased a home on the outskirts of nearby Brantford. Although having chosen to relocate in Canada, Alexander Melville and his son Alexander Graham were both soon alternating between academic work at Boston, Massachusetts, and summers at Brantford.

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<sup>1</sup> So-called because its shape resembled a dairy stamp for marking butter.

<sup>2</sup> The study of pronunciation of a particular language.

In 1870 and 1871 Bell Sr. lectured at the Lowell Institute in Boston, Massachusetts, and, in 1871, was appointed lecturer on philology at Queen's College, Kingston. From April 1871 Bell Jr. was training instructors at the Boston School for the Deaf and teaching at his own Boston School of Vocal Physiology and Mechanics of Speech<sup>3</sup>. Bell Jr. also became professor of Vocal Physiology and Elocution at the Boston University School of Oratory in 1872.

In the cellar of his lodgings at Boston during the school term, and in a carriage-house workshop at Brantford each summer, Alexander Graham Bell advanced experiments he had first contemplated in Scotland toward the transmission of the human voice electrically over distance. Both Canada and the United States claim the inventor and the invention, but Bell later wrote that "... *it so happens that the telephone was invented in Brantford during my visit to my father and mother in 1874*".<sup>4</sup> By 'invented', Bell probably meant full conception of the idea<sup>5</sup>, because he was back in his Boston laboratory when, on March 10, 1876, his assistant Thomas Augustus Watson (1854-1934) heard the famous words "*Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you*", over the first experimental telephone.



*Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922)*

Returning to Canada, Bell continued to make improvements and, five months later, on August 10, 1876, made the first call over distance, using a telegraph line from the family homestead at Brantford to the telegraph office in Robert White's Boot and Shoe Store at Paris, 13 kilometers away (although the call covered a real distance of 93 kilometers because it was routed through Toronto to take advantage of the battery power there).<sup>6</sup>

After further improvements his telephone device secured its key U.S. patent on January 30, 1877. Bell, however, considered himself a scientist and, rather than engage in monetizing his invention, preferred to pursue new research projects. In the United States he left manufacturing and marketing of his invention to his investor-partners<sup>7</sup>. In Canada, on July 10, 1877, he sold a 75% interest in the Canadian patent to his father for the sum of \$1.00. Then, having disinvested himself of business concerns, the following day he married Mable Gardner Hubbert (1857-1923). A month later he left for an extended European honeymoon.

As Bell the younger set sail, Alexander Melville Bell undertook to promote and market his son's invention in Canada. Finding that, as an academic, he was not predisposed to a career as a salesman and businessman, he turned for help to Reverend Thomas Henderson, the man who had advised him to come to Canada seven years earlier. Henderson accepted the offer, resigned his position as a Baptist minister and dedicated the remainder of his life to the telephone.

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<sup>3</sup> Where he taught Helen Keller (1880-1968) to speak.

<sup>4</sup> *Nature* magazine, June 28, 1947, quoting a letter written by Bell in 1904.

<sup>5</sup> As recorded in his father's diaries.

<sup>6</sup> This was a one-way call. At this point Bell's telephone was not reciprocal. The first two-way call took place between Boston and Cambridge on October 9, 1876.

<sup>7</sup> Bell's investors became millionaires and he also fared well from residuals, amassing assets of about one million dollars.



**Rev. Thomas Philip Henderson (1817-1887)**  
(Photo courtesy of Bell Homestead National  
Historic Site)

Thomas Philip Henderson was born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1817 and emigrated to Canada with his wife and family<sup>8</sup> in 1858. His first pastoral charge in Canada was at Kingston, Ontario, and then, between 1862 and 1865 he served the Baptist Congregation at Perth. During that time, in 1864, his daughter Sarah (1841-1899) married Perth dentist, Dr. Joseph Fleming Lamont 'James' Kennedy (1841-1917). From Perth, Henderson moved to a pastoral charge at Paris, Ontario, where he was living when he urged the Bell family to join him in Canada.

Bell and Henderson began their new venture by organizing a speaking tour to explain and market telephones. In the summer of 1877, they had no plans to form a company; their plan was simply to rent out telephones at \$40 a pair for use as 'private lines', providing simple point-to-point service. Switch boards or 'telephone centrals' had yet to be developed. Church ministers, teachers and physicians were offered a reduced rate. Subscribers were told that, in place of stringing dedicated lines, they could connect their equipment by means of the wire of metal fences, a common practice in the infancy of North American telephony.

In mid August they stopped off at Perth to visit Henderson's daughter and son-in-law, who still lived in the stone house at #11 D'Arcy Street that had been rented as the church manse when Henderson occupied the pulpit at Perth Baptist Church a decade earlier.<sup>9</sup> On August 23rd they took the opportunity to stage a public demonstration of the new communications invention. Under the heading "*The Telephone*" the *Perth Courier* reported that,

*A trial of this interesting invention was made here on Thursday of last week, Professor A. Melville Bell managing. One instrument was connected with the telegraph wire at Seeley's office<sup>10</sup>, and another on the wire at the station<sup>11</sup>.*

*A gathering was present at each place, and the result was gratifying – Talking, singing, and whistling were distinctly heard, at the length of the wire<sup>12</sup>, and peculiarities of voices etc. plainly distinguishable. Mr. J. F. Kennedy is getting two of the telephones for use here.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Henderson arrived in Canada with a wife Anne Davidson (1818-1873), and children Sarah (1841-1899), Thomas (b.1856) and David (b.1857). Another daughter, Eliza (b.1858) was born in Canada. Henderson was widowed in about 1873 and in 1874 married Catharine Barclay Campbell (b.1844) at Toronto. Catharine bore Henderson four more children; Eliza (b.1860), Annie Charlotte (b.1875), Ellen Mary (b.1877) and Mabel Bell (b.1879).

<sup>9</sup> In the 1860s the Perth Baptist Church stood on the same D'Arcy Street site as the present-day church, but the structure was a frame building built in 1841. It was replaced by the present brick church which opened in 1889.

<sup>10</sup> The office of Alfred E. Seeley, Express, Telegraph, Railway and Steamship Agent, 56 Gore Street East, Ground Floor. Also, dealer in pianos, organs and sewing Machines.

<sup>11</sup> The Canadian Pacific Railway station at the east end of Herriott Street.

<sup>12</sup> Less than a kilometer.

<sup>13</sup> *Perth Courier*, August 31, 1877.



*An 1877 'butter-stamp' model telephone kit of the type used by Bell and Henderson at the Perth demonstration of August 23rd and installed that November between the home and office of Dr. J. F. L. Kennedy.*

The *Perth Expositor* reporter went into greater detail in describing his first impression of the novel device.

*On Thursday last, Professor A. M. Bell, the father of the Inventor, gave an exhibition of this new instrument between the Town and Station offices of the Montreal Telegraph Company. The telephone consists principally of a powerful magnet enclosed in wood about 5" long. At one end two wires are attached, one to the line and the other to go to the ground to complete the circle of the electric current. At the other end of the magnet is a thin metal disc which is enclosed with wood with an opening to speak into or hear from.*

*In speaking, the instrument, which weighs perhaps half a pound, is held about an inch from the mouth and the talker speaks into it slowly and distinctly. At the other end of the wire the listener holds the instrument close to his ear. At first it is difficult to make out what was said, unless you know what is coming, as in the case of a well known song, but after some practice it becomes easier to distinguish the words especially if they are spoken slowly and distinctly.*

*The voice heard makes a curious impression on the hearer. The best idea that we can give of it is to place the hand over the mouth and whisper a sentence slowly and distinctly. You will then have some notion of what the message by telephone sounds like. The telephone is evidently still capable of great improvement.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>14</sup> *Perth Expositor*, August 30, 1877.

At the time of their visit to Perth in August 1877, Bell and Henderson equipped Henderson's son-in-law, Dr. J. F. L. Kennedy, with a telephone set to connect his home at #11 D'Arcy Street and his dental clinic two blocks away at #39 Foster Street. For some reason, however, installation of that gear was delayed for more than two months. On November 5, 1877, in a general article about the Town of Perth, the *Ottawa Citizen*, mentioned that,

*Mr. J. F. Kennedy is the only dentist. By the way, it is worth noting that gentleman has one of Professor Bell's telephones, which will be in operation between his house and his office next week.*

In the meantime, on October 18, 1877, three Hamilton, Ontario, businessmen leased and installed the first permanent and private<sup>15</sup> telephone connection in Canada<sup>16</sup>. Hugh Cossart Baker Jr., T. C. Mewburn and C. D. Cory, linked their respective offices for the novelty of playing chess by wire. Henderson's telephone at Perth, installed a month later, became the second permanent and private telephone connection in Canada.



*Dr. Kennedy's Office, #39 Foster Street*



*Kennedy's Residence, #11 D'Arcy Street*

When they reached Ottawa on December 3, 1877, the telephone promoters leased equipment for the third 'private line' connection in Canada. According to *Invisible Empire: A History of the Telecommunications Industry in Canada*,

*Bell and Henderson managed to rent a pair of telephones to Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie<sup>17</sup>, linking his office to the residence of the Governor General, Lord Dufferin<sup>18,19</sup>*

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<sup>15</sup> 'Permanent and Private' as opposed to temporary links for experimental or demonstration purposes such as the connection between Brantford and Paris of August 10, 1876 and the Perth demonstration of August 23, 1877.

<sup>16</sup> *Invisible Empire: A History of the Telecommunications Industry in Canada, 1846-1956*, by Jean-Guy Rens (2001).

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Mackenzie (1822-1892), Prime Minister of Canada 1873-1878.

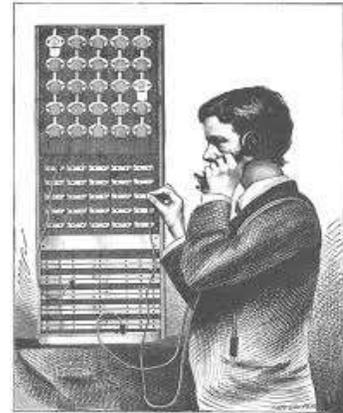
<sup>18</sup> Frederick Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, 1st Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, Governor General of Canada 1872-1878.

<sup>19</sup> *Invisible Empire: A History of the Telecommunications Industry in Canada, 1846-1956*, by Jean-Guy Rens (2001).

In addition to marketing telephones themselves, Bell and Henderson recruited agents to help solicit subscribers and Perth's Dr. Kennedy was appointed one of their first representatives. Leasing telephone units for individual point-to-point connection proved an untenable business model, however, and was soon abandoned. Failing to find a Canadian buyer for their patents, in 1880 the Bells sold out to the National Bell Telephone Company of Boston (today, American Telephone and Telegraph Company – AT&T) and its offspring, Bell Canada, operated as a subsidiary of the American Bell system for the next 95 years.

Meanwhile the telephone switchboard had been invented in 1878 and by 1880 was sufficiently developed for practical use. In 1885 the first switchboard went into service at Perth, with Dr. J. F. L. Kennedy serving as 'Agent' in charge of the local 'Bell Telephone Company Office' and the switchboard apparatus located in his D'Arcy Street home.

In August 1887 the first list of Perth telephone service subscribers was published by Bell Canada in a small pocket-sized directory containing the names and addresses of all telephone users in Eastern Ontario and Quebec<sup>20</sup>. All of the 19 subscribers listed at Perth were businesses and five of them were lawyers.



*Telephone Switchboard c1880*

Allan House Gore Street	Elliott and Rogers, Barristers Foster Street	Kellock, J. F., Druggist Gore Street
Allen, J. A., Barrister Gore Street	Farmer's Hotel Foster Street	Malloch, E. G., Barrister Foster Street
Bank of Montreal Gore Street	Hicks House Gore Street	Meighen Bros., Merchants Gore and Foster Streets
Canadian Pacific Railway Depot	Inland Revenue Office Gore Street	Merchants Bank Foster Street
Court House	Kellock, Dr. J. D. D'Arcy and Gore Streets	Radenhurst, W. H., Barrister Gore Street
Electric Light Company Gore Street		

Curiously, Dr. Kennedy was not listed among the 19; perhaps it was assumed everyone in town knew that to reach him, one just called the switchboard.

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<sup>20</sup> Preserved in Bell Canada's Telephone Historical Collection, 1050 Beaver Hall Hill, Montreal, Quebec.

The limited number of units in Perth in 1887 precluded the need for telephone numbers. A caller simply asked the switchboard operator for a connection by subscriber name. A notice prominent in bold-face type at the bottom of various pages throughout the book, reminded callers that *“The name of the party wanted should be spoken with especial distinctness to prevent mistakes”*. Another foot-note warned *“Do not attempt to use the telephone on the approach or during a thunderstorm”*.

Alexander Graham Bell went on to co-found the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T) in 1885 and to produced ground-breaking scientific work in the fields of optical telecommunications, hydrofoils and aeronautics. He was also the second president of the National Geographic Society in the United States. Bell died on August 2, 1922, at his private estate in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, at age 75.

After selling the Canadian telephone patents, Alexander Melville Bell moved to the United States where he returned to research and teaching work related to the deaf. He was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Educational Institute in Scotland and of the Royal Scottish Society of Arts. Melville Bell died on August 7, 1905 at age 86 and was buried at Washington, D.C., USA.



*Dr. J. F. L. Kennedy (1841-1917)*

Dr. Joseph Flemming Lamont ‘James’ Kennedy, pioneer adopter of telephone technology, died at Perth, Ontario, on May 5, 1917 and was buried in Elmwood Cemetery. A brass plaque mounted beside the front door of his former home at #11 D’Arcy Street memorializes his part in telecommunications history.



### *Early Telephone 1877*

*Alexander Melville Bell, Father of the Inventor of the Telephone, Visited Here Frequently And Supplied the Primitive Phones Which Linked This, Dr. J. F. Kennedy's Home With His Dental Office On Foster St. It was Mrs. Kennedy's Father, Rev. Thomas Philip Henderson, Baptist Minister In Perth 1862-65 Who Persuaded The Bell Family to Come to Canada From Scotland In 1870*

*Erected 1967 By Colin S. Farmer<sup>21</sup>*

<sup>21</sup> Colin Samuel Farmer (1900-1990), a later owner of the property.

After serving as Alexander Melville Bell's 'General Agent for the Dominion of Canada' from 1877 through 1880, Reverend Thomas Philip Henderson became an employee of the Bell Telephone Company of Canada. He worked for the remainder of his life at Bell Canada's Montreal headquarters as purchasing agent, storekeeper and supervisor of the telephone manufacturing operation at Brantford<sup>22</sup>. Henderson died at Montreal on March 26, 1887.

On June 12, 1954, the Society of Telephone Pioneers<sup>23</sup> honored Henderson by unveiling a memorial plaque in Perth's Elmwood Cemetery. As reported by the *Perth Courier*,

*Approximately 30 officers and several dozen members of the Pioneers paid homage to a former and original telephone pioneer, Reverend Thomas Philip Henderson ... The Telephone Pioneers who attended were principally from the 7,900-member division of the Pioneer's Charles Fleetford Sise Chapter in Ontario and Quebec, attending a three-day conference at Perth where Henderson was interred after his death in 1887. Approximately 200 Pioneers and other dignitaries attended the graveside memorial service ...*<sup>24</sup>



*In Memory Of  
The Reverend Thomas Philip Henderson  
February 1, 1816 – March 26, 1887*

*Native of Scotland, friend and advisor of Professor Alexander Melville Bell, he persuaded that family to come to Canada in 1870 to restore the health of their son, Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone.*

*Mr. Henderson retired from the Baptist Ministry in 1877 to pioneer the telephone business throughout Canada as Melville Bell's first general agent. In 1880 he entered the newly formed Bell Telephone Company of Canada where he served faithfully until his death.*

*Erected by the Charles Fleetford Sise Chapter  
Telephone Pioneers of America  
June 12, 1954*

That plaque, however, is mounted atop the gravestone of his daughter Sarah and son-in-law Dr. J. F. L. Kennedy because no other marker at Elmwood indicates the last resting place of Reverend Thomas Henderson. He apparently shares the Kennedy plot.<sup>25</sup>

- Ron W. Shaw (2020)

<sup>22</sup> Although he also served as Minister at Montreal's First Baptist Church 1885-1887.

<sup>23</sup> An organization of retired Bell Canada employees with particular interest in the history of telecommunications in Canada.

<sup>24</sup> *Perth Courier*, June 17, 1954.

<sup>25</sup> The records of First Baptist Church, Montreal (see Centre d'archives de Montréal, CE 601, S85), show that Henderson was buried in Cimetière Mont-Royal, Outremont, Montreal. However, a history of Perth's Baptist Church (*Perth Courier*, November 16, 1917) says, "Mr. Henderson's body lies in Elmwood Cemetery". In *Perth Remembered*, Larry Turner (1967) wrote that "Rev. Henderson is buried in Elmwood Cemetery. A bronze memorial plaque ... marks his grave". *Findagrave.com* shows Henderson buried in both Mount Royal (memorial ID 108167462) and Elmwood (memorial ID 46188361).