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From Dots and Dashes to Fiber Optic Cable: 151 Front St. Spans the History of Technology

Three dots. Three dashes. Three dots. On a cold, winter night a ship desperately called for help. Astounded Scottish coast guard listeners were so surprised. They confessed that they thought the distress call was a joke. It was January 1999 and eleven years earlier the world's sea-going nations had agreed to replace the Morse system with a satellite setup.

However, for much of the previous century, SOS signals were far from a joke. Morse code and the telegraph played an incalculable part in the development of communications and global trade. It all commenced with the invention of the electric telegraph and the code to accompany it. The device's snowballing career was initiated by a successful demonstration Samuel F.B. Morse gave to American officials on May 24, 1844. Using overhead wire, Morse sent the biblical phrase "What Hath God Wrought" from the Capitol Building in Washington to Baltimore. Telegraphy won the appreciation of Americans and the network of cables expanded quickly around the world—to what is now Canada and throughout the British Empire of which it was a part.

Two years later, at what is now the location of 151 Front St. W., Canada's first telegraph company was formed. On December 19, 1846 two operators from Hamilton and Toronto spoke: "How does your machine work?" "First rate. How does yours?" "Rather stiff". This first commercial conversation in Canada was facilitated by the Toronto, Hamilton and Niagara Electro-Magnetic Telegraph Company, whose lines ran from the nearby CN Rail tracks in downtown Toronto into the Front St. location (A historical plaque inside the company's boardroom commemorates this history). The length of installed wires begun to grow rapidly, mostly along the rail lines, where cables still span the country to this day. In 1886 Montreal-based Canadian Pacific Railway made available the first coast-to-coast commercial telegram and news service. The official inaugural message was sent from Westminster, British Columbia, to Canso, Nova Scotia, in three minutes, and was then sent onward to Great Britain by submarine cable. During the first year of the service the company conveyed 567,840 telegrams in Canada.

The railway companies positively influenced a fast development of telegraph system in North America. The railroads first agreed to build the lines along their tracks so they could use them for train signaling. Since 1851 the telegraph was utilized to determine the location and progress of trains along the line and to transmit train orders to expedite traffic. Most railway stations were therefore accompanied by switching stations for telegraph communication. This rail/telegraph connection was the origin of 151 Front Street—whose present structure erected in 1954 by CN/CP Telecommunications. Its status today as Canada's pre-eminent telecommunications carrier hotel and data storage facility in Canada derives from this early history, massively upgraded over time.

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In these days of the internet, mobile phones and satellite communications the idea of using the telegraph is best described as “quaint”. However, its impact on worldwide communications was incalculable. The telegraph and its outgrowth, the telex, were used to give the world some of the best, cheerful and horrific news in history. Everyone was sending telegrams: kings, generals, journalists, spies, speculators and average Joes. It reported the death of Abraham Lincoln, Confederation, the sinking of the Titanic, war news and everything in between. It also gave today’s telecommunications and data storage industry a sound footing as secure structures like 151 Front St. came into existence as a result of the demands of what was the high-tech communications system of another day. Dot-dash-dash-dash…signing off with the number 30 (still used to close news stories to this day).