



Telephone Exchanges, Dials and Buttons

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Some people under 30 don't know how to use a dial telephone. 75 years ago, most people of any age didn't know how to use a dial telephone. In the intervening span, few people could imagine any other kind of phone.

The first conversation over a telephone exchange in Jamestown took place 127 years ago. On February 18, 1880 pharmacist Fred E. Hatch called his friend Dr. William P. Bemus. Thus Jamestown's first telephone exchange was established with a switchboard in the Hatch and Preston Drug Store at 9 E. Third St. The first operator was Mr. Hatch who carried out his operator duties while tending to the drug store.

In the earliest years, some people had direct lines between their home and business, but as soon as exchanges were introduced, so people could call any other telephone subscriber, there had to be a way of making the various connections. This was done by operators, women employed to connect one phone with another with wires on a plug board.

The dial system with automatic electrical relays to replace the human operators for local calls was a dramatic innovation. Somebody had to explain this unprecedented and rather tricky device to the telephone users. We don't know if we have an example here of a note to customers or a draft of a printed version that was sent out with the bills or even someone's memory supplementing note to himself.

We also don't know where this note is from. The change took place in Jamestown October 11, 1930, but Jamestown didn't have the prestigious sounding named exchanges like Plaza and Butterfield. These were simply mnemonics, memory aids, because it is more natural to remember a name than a string of numbers. In larger cities where phone numbers had to be longer, the exchanges were given these attractive names. They employed the obvious childhood game style number-letter substitution code.

A recent donation of a handwritten pencil note from the 1920s given by Sydney Baker of Westfield illustrates this.

“Directions for Using new Dial Telephone

**On the new telephone is a dial with letters to indicate the exchange wanted
“S” stand for South. “P” for Plaza. “O” for Operator, etc.**

If South is wanted, put finger in “S” hole; for Plaza put finger in “P” hole; if operator is wanted put finger in Operator’s hole and work finger until she comes and she will give you the desired connections.

General Manager”

At midnight on October 11, 1930 the Jamestown telephone company upgraded to an automatic system. The Jamestown area's phone numbers changed overnight. For example, Active Furniture Co.'s phone number went from 2538-W to 43-802. The new telephone directory was published for use the next day. The Jamestown Telephone Co. operator's duty was now to connect long distance calls – not to connect every call as before. As automation increased, the need for human operators decreased.

Direct Distance Dialing (DDD), which eliminated even more human assisted toll calls, was introduced on June 1, 1962. The first “DDD” call from Jamestown was made to Lucille Ball in Hollywood, California. Universal all number calling necessitating a seven-digit system began November 1, 1964. Today we routinely dial ten numbers and twelve or more for international calls plus a daunting phone card identification number. And we do it all on touch-tone push button phones rather than rotary dial telephones. The pictured rotary dial phone from the 1930s and the donated note were signs of advancing technology in their day. On the dial phone the numbers and the letter equivalents can be plainly seen. Eventually, when even push button phones are forgotten, the Fenton collection will hold an iPhone and Voice Over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technologies