



A not-for-profit agency  
of the Government of Ontario  
Un organisme à but non lucratif  
relevant du gouvernement de l'Ontario

## Sir Sandford Fleming 1827-1915

On Friday, September 21, 1973, a provincial historical plaque commemorating Sir Sandford Fleming was unveiled in Kirkcaldy, Fifeshire, Scotland. This is one of several plaques erected outside of Ontario by the former Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario in its programme of commemorating persons and events of particular significance in the history of the province. That programme is now the responsibility of the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

The unveiling ceremony was arranged by Ontario House, London, and by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities in co-operation with the Royal Burgh of Kirkcaldy. Participants in the event included Mr. William H. Cranston, chairman of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; Mr. Ward Cornell, Agent General for Ontario in the United Kingdom; and Provost John B. Kay, O.B.E., J.P., of Kirkcaldy.

The historical marker reads:

### **SIR SANDFORD FLEMING 1827-1915**

Inventor of Standard Time and pioneer in world communications, Fleming was born in Kirkcaldy and trained in engineering and surveying before emigrating to Canada and settling at Peterborough, Ontario, in 1845. He soon moved to Toronto but retained a lifelong interest in his birthplace which he visited frequently. In 1882 he was made a Burgess and Freeman of the Town. He was the builder of the Intercolonial Railway and as chief engineer of the Canadian Pacific Railway conducted surveys of a transcontinental route. His proposal, presented to the Canadian Institute in 1879, outlining a worldwide uniform system for reckoning time, and his advocacy of a cable route linking Canada with Australia, earned Fleming universal recognition. He was knighted in 1897.

The following day, September 22, 1973, the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board unveiled a second plaque commemorating Sandford Fleming, this time in Fleming Park, in Peterborough, Ontario.

Participants in the unveiling ceremony, which was sponsored by the Peterborough County Historical Society, included Mr. Kenneth Armstrong, president of the society; His Worship Philip Turner, Mayor of Peterborough; Mr. James A. Reynolds, Warden of Peterborough

County; Mr. John Turner, MPP (Peterborough); Professor William Ormsby of Brock University, representing the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; Dr. Russell C. Honey, chairman of the historical society's Plaque Committee; and the Venerable Archdeacon Kenneth Clough of St. John's Anglican Church in Peterborough. The plaque was unveiled by Mr. John S. Fleming of Toronto, a great-grandson of Sandford Fleming.

The historical marker in Peterborough reads:

### **SIR SANDFORD FLEMING 1827-1915**

Inventor of Standard Time and pioneer in world communications, Fleming was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, and trained in engineering and surveying before emigrating to Canada and settling at Peterborough, Ontario, in 1845. He soon moved to Toronto where in 1849 he assisted in the founding of the Canadian Institute and two years later designed the first Canadian postage stamp. He was the builder of the Intercolonial Railway and as chief engineer of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1871-1880) conducted surveys of a transcontinental route. His proposal, presented to the Canadian Institute in 1879, outlining a worldwide uniform system for reckoning time, and his advocacy of a cable route linking Canada with Australia, earned Fleming universal recognition. He was knighted in 1897.

### **Historical background**

Sandford Fleming was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, on January 7, 1827, the son of Andrew Greig Fleming and Elizabeth Arnot. It has been reported that he was named after his maternal grandfather Sandford Arnot and an uncle of the same name who was a Sanskrit scholar. Young Sandford received his early education at Kennoway under William Bethune (who later came to Canada and became headmaster at Montreal High School) and in the Kirkcaldy Burgh School. At the age of fourteen he became an articled pupil to John Sang, an engineer and surveyor with whom he worked for three years, during which time he gained experience in harbour construction, waterworks and railway surveys.

In 1845, Fleming left Scotland aboard the sailing ship the *Brilliant* and landed at Quebec about six weeks later. On June 17 of that year he arrived in Peterborough, Canada West, where he settled and secured employment as a land surveyor. Four years later he obtained a license as a deputy provincial surveyor. During a period of some four years at Peterborough, he made the first map of that town, as well as of Newcastle and Cobourg. Later he made and printed a complete plan of Toronto, did nautical surveys of harbours on Lake Ontario and Lake Huron, and engraved the first Canadian postage stamp (the three-penny beaver, issued 1851).

About 1851 he began his career as a railway engineer, serving for three years as assistant and eight years as chief (succeeding Frederic Cumberland) of the Northern Railway line running from Toronto to Collingwood. The 100-mile line, the first railway to operate in Ontario, reached Collingwood in 1855, and in doing so,

... not only tied fertile new farming districts to the city, but also opened the rich forest resources of Simcoe, Georgian Bay, and ultimately Muskoka, to rapid exploitation for the American market. It played a significant role in the expanding north-south trade under reciprocity and helped to make Toronto a major lumber port.

In 1865, Fleming was appointed chief engineer of the Intercolonial Railway surveys, a railway project linking Quebec with the maritime colonies of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. He remained in charge of the work on the Intercolonial throughout the surveys and the period of construction, making his home in Halifax for five years before moving to Ottawa. The Intercolonial was completed in 1876. Meanwhile, in 1871, Fleming, who had presented the Canadian government with the “first carefully worked plan for building a railroad to the Pacific”, had been appointed engineer-in-chief of the surveys for the Canadian Pacific Railway, the first transcontinental road in North America. He remained in charge until 1880 when the work was given over to a private syndicate.

An indefatigable worker, Fleming devoted a substantial amount of his time to issues of public importance. He championed the cause of the Red River settlers in their efforts to convince the Canadian and British governments of the need to provide adequate transportation facilities between the provinces of the east and the Red River settlement. In presenting the case of the settlers, Fleming stressed the agricultural possibilities of the country, emphasized the dangers of American expansion, and outlined the advantages of a transportation route by Lake Superior.

Sandford Fleming had been one of the moving spirits behind the establishment of the Canadian Institute, a society, according to its Act of Incorporation, “for the encouragement and general advancement of the Physical Sciences, the Arts and the Manufactures in this part of our dominions”. His enthusiastic efforts did much to assist the society in obtaining a royal charter in 1851. The published transactions of the Institute contain many valuable contributions from Fleming. A prolific writer, he also contributed to many other contemporary journals. His longer works include *The Intercolonial* and *England and Canada: a summer tour between old and New Westminster*. As well, his trip through the prairies and Yellowhead Pass in 1872 provided some of the material for the well-known travel classic by George M. Grant, *Ocean to Ocean*; the author had acted as Fleming’s secretary.

A present-day writer has aptly described Fleming as a “dedicated amateur whose interests ran the gamut from early steamboats to colour-blindness”. His activities were indeed innumerable.

Fleming represented Canada at numerous conferences in Venice, London and Australia. He served as president of the Royal Society of Canada, as a member of the Canadian Landmarks Association, and the Ottawa Improvement Commission. He was a director of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Pacific Railway. Fleming received numerous honours: he was made a Doctor of Laws by four universities, he received the Confederation Medal for services as an engineer, and he was a Fellow of the Royal Historical, Royal Geographical, and the Geological Societies. Admitted to the Order of St. Michael and St. George in 1877, Fleming was promoted to Knight Commander twenty years later. In 1880 he was elected Chancellor of Queen's University at Kingston, an office he retained until his death thirty-five years later.

One of Sandford Fleming's most far-sighted dreams was a system of state-owned submarine cables and land telegraphs connecting all the scattered territories of the British Empire. Although he did not live to see the realization of this Imperial telegraph (the "all-red route"), he had the satisfaction of seeing the completion in 1902 of a Pacific submarine cable laid from Vancouver Island to New Zealand and Australia.

Sandford Fleming is probably best remembered as the "Father of Standard Time". In a paper read to the Canadian Institute on February 8, 1879, Fleming outlined his concept of a worldwide uniform system for reckoning time. This proposal gave rise to the International Prime Meridian Conference at Washington in 1884 (attended by twenty-five independent nations), at which the basis of today's system of Standard Time was adopted.

Despite the hectic pace at which he lived, Fleming found time to maintain a close connection with his birthplace in Scotland. He visited the town frequently, offered annual prizes for students in schools there, and in 1882 was made a burgess and freeman of Kirkcaldy.

Sir Sandford and Lady Fleming, the former Ann Jean Hall of Peterborough when he had married in 1855, regarded "Winterholme" in Ottawa as their principal residence, but spent as much time as Fleming's busy life allowed at their summer house in Halifax. There, Sandford Fleming died on July 22, 1915.



© [Ontario Heritage Foundation](#), 1973, 1991