

An Overview of Amateur Call Signs —Past and Present

**There's some history behind that
call sign of yours—check it out!**

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N4MM, KH6IJ, K3LVA, WS1O, United States has a wide variety of amateur call signs. Have you ever wondered how this came about? The history of US call signs goes back 80 years, and their story is more complicated than most amateurs realize. Before we start on our call sign journey, let's make sure we understand the road signs:

The *prefix* refers to the character(s) before the number in a call sign. For example, WB4FDT has a *two-letter* prefix, *WB*.

The *suffix* refers to the character(s) after the number. WB4FDT has a *three-letter* suffix, *FDT*.

A *one-by-two* call sign has one letter in the prefix and two letters in the suffix, such as W3UT. Similarly, a *one-by-three* call sign has one letter in the prefix and three letters in the suffix, such as K4BAI. An example of a *two-by-two* call sign would be KJ4KB; a *two-by-three* call, WB4FDT.

Preferred Call Signs

One-by-two call signs, such as W8IO or K4VX, are considered to be *preferred call signs*, because of the implied status of the holder as an "old-timer" in ham radio. But in pursuing the idea of preferred call signs further, we run into an anomaly: One-by-three call signs that begin with either W or K are also generally thought of as preferred call signs, but one-by-threes that begin with N are *not*, because they have come to indicate the newer generation of hams. (Sure, this is illogical; but when you examine such areas of implied status in any field, you will typically run across such departures from logic!) Call signs with two characters in the prefix, such as WB4FDT, are also considered as being nonpreferred by many hams.

When co-author Phil Sager worked for the FCC in the old Amateur and Citizen's Division in the early 1970s, the Division's biggest headache was amateur call signs. In fact, there was an in-house joke to the effect that *no* amateur was satisfied with his or her call

sign: Hams with WA and WB calls wanted W or K one-by-three call signs. Hams who had one-by-three calls wanted one-by-two call signs. Hams who had one-by-two calls wanted their suffix to be their *initials*! Some amateurs wanted the call sign of a deceased friend or relative. At times it seemed as if every licensed ham was on the FCC's phone trying to get a new call sign!

The situation is somewhat amusing to the disinterested bystander, but for the hams involved, it is very serious business, indeed. It's often difficult for nonhams or newer hams to understand the importance an amateur attaches to his call sign. Call signs are *at least* as important as names, and most amateurs want a short one that is easy for others to remember. Or one that reflects their initials or name. Or one that has a good sound (on phone) or good rhythm (on CW), or *both*.

There is one interesting aspect to the preferred call sign game that is generally overlooked: It often appears that the FCC regards amateurs as somewhat silly for wanting call signs of their individual preference. There have been many periods during the FCC's tenure that the Commission has not been willing to structure call sign assignments to meet the ham community's wish for preferred call signs. Yet, throughout most of the history of commercial broadcast stations, the FCC has cooperated fully with the commercial interests in assigning call signs of their choice, and in enabling one broadcast group to "purchase" a preferred call sign from another station (by the license holder turning the call sign back in to the FCC and being assigned a new call sign, while the call sign turned in is reissued to the station that wanted it. Why? So that, by a stretch of both the phonic rendition of the call sign and the audience's imagination, the radio station can be called "Kiss Radio" or "Light Radio," or some such.

In the beginning...

Prior to 1912, there were no call signs as-

signed by the authorities, simply because there was no licensing of radio stations in the United States. Pioneer amateurs made up their own calls, sometimes using their initials. The ARRL's founder, Hiram Percy Maxim, used the initials SNY for his call sign in 1911.¹ Since the range of the average spark station at that time was usually only a few miles, no further identification was needed, and there were few cases of confusion caused by two or more stations picking the same identifier letters.

With the passage of the Radio Act of 1912, amateurs were required to be licensed and were assigned government-issued call signs. All call signs were issued by the Department of Commerce, which divided the US into nine call sign districts. All amateur call signs consisted of a number followed by two letters, such as 1WH.

The concept of preferred call signs, incidentally, began in the early days of Amateur Radio, as shown by the following story, which Stew Perry, W1BB, used to tell on himself (Stew, now a Silent Key, was a pioneer of 160 meter DXing, a fine operator, and a true gentleman.)

Amateur Radio was shut down for the duration of World War I. The strong identity of hams with their call signs was not recognized by the Department of Commerce, which simply cancelled all amateur licenses for the war, so that hams lost the call signs that had been issued to them a few years earlier. After the war, the Department announced that amateurs would be relicensed, but with new call signs, rather than their previously held call signs. Hams wanted to be assigned call signs at the head of the alphabet, so as to show their early origin in the hobby.

When the Department of Commerce announced that it would begin issuing call signs to amateurs on a certain day, young Stew showed up at the Boston office in the early morning hours, thinking that he would be first in line and, when the office opened, he would be given the call sign 1AA. To his chagrin, over 20 amateurs—all obviously having the same idea—were already in line when he got there, so that Stew was assigned 1BB!

The two-letter suffix call signs quickly ran out, and a third letter was added; 1ANA, for example. Many two-letter suffixed call signs were reissued as they became available, and they were often available upon request. As late as 1927, new amateurs in some call areas were given reissued one-by-two call signs.

Call Signs That Were Reserved or Withheld

When call signs began to be issued by the government, the suffixes that began with X, Y, and Z were reserved for "special classes of stations," such as "experimental stations for the development of radio communications [the X block], technical and training school stations [the Y block], and special land stations [the Z block]." For example, 1ZM was licensed to Hiram Percy Maxim as a "Private (limited commercial and special)

¹Notes appear on page 59.

Special Land Radio Station." The ARRL's co-founder, Clarence D. Tuska, was similarly licensed as 1ZT.

The calls with X, Y, and Z as the first letter of their suffix continued to be blocked from being issued to hams for many years. For example, when experiments began with television broadcasting in 1927, a typical station call sign for experimental television broadcasting was W2XCO, licensed to *Radio Corporation of America*, in New York, as shown in the 1929 call directory. Later, these blocks of call signs were released for assignment to amateurs, which opened up quite a few new preferred call signs. Z-suffixed call signs weren't regularized until 1925 when they appeared in the *Call Book*. Y-suffixed call signs continued to be issued to school stations (W1YK, for example, was issued to Worcester Polytechnic Institute), but were later assigned to individual hams in the 1930s. X-suffixed call signs didn't show for regular amateur use until Extras could request specific one-by-two call signs in 1977, and later when the current call sign assignment system was enacted. There is still one exclusion with respect to X-suffixes: Two-by-three X-suffixed call signs are reserved for experimental stations, and are therefore not issued to amateurs.

There was another group of call signs that were not issued in the early days—those that could be construed by some as being vulgarisms or obscenities. That was a more prudish age, to be sure, and it's amusing to consider some of the call signs that were withheld for such a reason. Eventually, this rule was relaxed and moderated, so that now we can all enjoy W2SEX on Field Day. There are, however, some call signs that have never been issued; you may conduct your own research in your copy of the *Call Book Magazine* to determine what those call signs might be.

Time Marches On...

But, to get back to the chronology of our story, the state of the radio art moved forward, amateurs began experimenting with short-wave frequencies, and international QSOs became more commonplace. Canadian, European and South American amateurs were using the same system of call signs that US hams were using, and it was impossible to identify the country a ham was in by hearing his call sign. To avoid confusion, many amateurs, in about 1923, began using, on an unofficial basis, what they called *international intermediates*, and a one-letter prefix to indicate the country.

In this country, amateurs used *u* (which was rendered in lower case, not the usual capital letter, because it was unofficial) to indicate the United States. Furthermore, they would transmit the call sign on the air with a space between the unofficial prefix and the official call sign—for example, u 6OI—but would write it on QSL cards as u6OI, without the space. A later modification to this unofficial system, in 1927, added another letter to indicate the continent (with *n* being used for North America), so that the call sign would then be sent as nu 6OI. Canadian amateurs

used *nc*, for North America, Canada. There were more details to this unofficial system that seem confusing today, but the hams of the day were being inventive in dealing with an operating problem, and their conventions served them well at the time.²

Where Our Present Prefixes Come From

By the late 1920s, it was obvious that some official system of international call sign prefixes had to be used. The Washington Conference of 1927 assigned prefixes to each country. The United States was assigned the prefixes *K*, *N* and *W* (for commercial, military, and amateur call signs).³ *N* was used by the Navy (you will recall that radio in this country had its beginnings with the Navy and with amateurs, and the Navy continued to be a strong user of radio), and *K* and *W* were used by the civilian services. At the suggestion of the ARRL, the Department of Commerce decided that radio amateurs within the continental US should use the prefix *W*. Thus, 1AW became W1AW. Amateurs in US territories or possessions would use the prefix *K* (K7ADY was an early ham in Alaska, and K6BT was a radio pioneer in Hawaii). These prefixes went into effect in 1928.⁴

The A prefix block was unassigned in 1927.⁵ The AA to AL prefix block was later assigned to the US (but not specifically to amateurs) at the Atlantic City conference of 1947.⁶ In 1975, the FCC reassigned call sign prefixes in the AA to AL block and the N block to amateurs. Amateur-style calls in these blocks had previously been used by the Department of Defense for MARS stations; however, the MARS calls had later taken a different form, and the Department of Defense had no objection to the FCC's reassigning these blocks to amateurs.⁷ The AA to AL prefix block was not used, however, until 1977.

Call Areas

Nine call areas, numbered 1 through 9, had been originally created in 1912 (Figure 1). They were similar to today's call areas in

many ways, but there were some major exceptions. The largest call area, the ninth, contained all of the states in the present tenth (WØ) call area. Four states—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Michigan—were split between two different call areas. Western New York and western Pennsylvania were part of the eighth call area, while eastern New York was in the second call area and eastern Pennsylvania was in the third call area. Michigan was split between the eighth (southern Michigan) and ninth (northern Michigan) call areas and southern New Jersey was part of the third call area, while northern New Jersey was in the second call area.

Some states were in different call areas than they are today. Virginia was part of the third call area, while Kentucky was part of the ninth. Nevada, Utah and Arizona were part of the sixth call area.⁸ Alabama was part of the fifth call area until 1928, when it was moved to the fourth call area.⁹

Tenth Call Area Added

Shortly after the newly formed Federal Communications Commission took over amateur licensing, as a result of the changes indicated by the Communications Act of 1934, it was apparent that the continued growth of Amateur Radio made the existing system of call areas obsolete. Even before WW II, "the bottom of the barrel had been reached in the ninth call area and the FCC found it necessary to resurrect and reassign old call signs that had been vacated by former owners only a few years before."¹⁰

During WW II, the ARRL undertook the study of the future needs of amateur call sign availability, since it was apparent that changes needed to be made, and ARRL felt these changes could best be initiated before amateurs were reactivated after the war. Suggestions from the membership regarding calls were solicited.¹¹ Proposals for remapped call areas were finalized in time for the May 1945 meeting of the ARRL Board of Directors.

At that meeting, the ARRL Board recom-

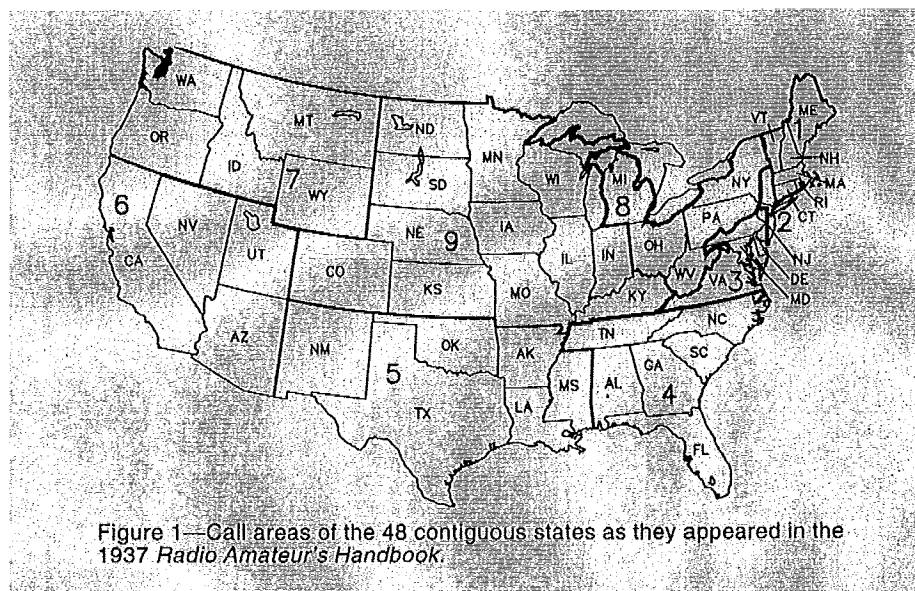


Figure 1—Call areas of the 48 contiguous states as they appeared in the 1937 *Radio Amateur's Handbook*.

mended that splitting of states into two call areas be eliminated and that some states be shifted to different call areas so that each area would contain approximately the same number of amateurs. Also, the Board recommended to the FCC the establishment of the tenth call area.¹²

By the end of the year, the FCC agreed to accept the Board's recommendations, and the call areas that we still use today came into being.¹³

Amateurs who were switched to new call areas had their call signs changed to the new call area when they next renewed their licenses. In many instances, amateurs were able to obtain a "counterpart" call sign, changing only the number. For example, W9BAZ became W4BAZ.¹⁴

At the same time, all US possessions and territories were assigned their own two-letter special prefixes, beginning as before with a K. For example, KG6AA was a call sign from Guam, and KV4AA was a station in the US Virgin Islands. The number in these DX call signs was chosen to be in general alignment with extensions of the mainland call areas. To return to the examples just given, Guam was "offshore" from California—as were Johnston Island, KJ6; Midway Island, KM6; American Samoa, KS6; Wake Island, KW6; etc—so they had the numeral 6 in their call signs. Similarly, the US Virgin Islands (also Swan Island, KS4, and Puerto Rico, KP4), offshore from Florida, had the numeral 4 in their call signs. The Canal Zone was in the extension of the fifth call area, so that it had KZ5 call signs, and the Territory of Alaska was in the extension of the seventh call area and thus had KL7 call signs.¹⁵

At the time, this alignment made the call areas roughly equal in amateur population, no one could foresee the huge population increases in California, New York and Florida. Within a decade, the second, fourth and sixth call areas had far larger populations than did the remaining seven.

During and After World War II

When World War II reached the US, Amateur Radio was shut down (on December 7, 1941), as it was in other countries of the world, for the duration of the hostilities. During the war years, the FCC continued to give examinations for and to issue Amateur Radio licenses, but those licenses were operator licenses only, not station licenses, so that no call signs were issued. Issues of *QST* of that era tagged those hams without call signs as LSPH—licensed since Pearl Harbor. Hams who held station licenses and call signs when the war began were allowed to keep their call signs. Renewals of amateur licenses during the war was not required; all station and operator licenses were grandfathered, so as to be renewable at the end of the war.

Immediately after WW II, K call signs started appearing at various places around the world, as American servicemen who were hams started getting back on the air. Many of those K call signs, although American call signs, were not issued by the FCC; rather, they were issued by local US military gov-

ernments. Examples of such call sign prefixes are KT1, in the US Tangier Zone of Morocco, and KG1, for US personnel in Greenland. Another example is the American troops stationed in Japan, who were issued two-by-two call signs with the KA prefix. (The KA prefix had been used prior to WW II in the Phillipines, which at the time was a US Commonwealth.)

Novice Prefixes

The Novice class license was added to the licensing structure on July 1, 1951.¹⁶ The Commission decided to distinguish Novice licensees by assigning them a two-letter prefix, WN, such as WN4TYU. These calls became commonly known as *two-by-three* calls, because of their two-letter prefix and three-letter suffix. When a Novice upgraded, the N was dropped from the call, so WN4UWA became W4UWA, for example.¹⁷

The popularity of the new Novice license brought such a large number of new hams into our hobby that, after only a few years, the Commission began to run out of K and W call signs in the populous second and sixth districts. Novices were then assigned WV prefixes, which were changed to a WA when the Novice upgraded.¹⁸ For example, WV2AYO appeared in the Winter 1958 edition of the *Radio Amateur Call Book Magazine*, but he later upgraded and his call sign was changed to WA2AYO, as shown in the Spring 1961 edition.

Novices in US territories or possessions did not have an N in their prefix. Instead, their two-letter prefix began with a W instead of a K. When the Novice upgraded, the W would be replaced by a K; for example, Novice WL7BCH became KL7BCH when he upgraded to General class.¹⁹

The FCC stopped issuing distinctive Novice prefixes in 1976, citing difficulties in processing applications. After October 1 of that year, permanent call signs were issued to Novices.²⁰

During this era, an amateur could have two call signs simultaneously—a Novice and a Technician—because the privileges of the two licenses didn't overlap. He would use his Novice call sign on the Novice band, and his Technician call sign on Technician frequencies.

K Prefixes Appear

The first K call signs in the continental US made their appearance in 1947. In the ninth call area, where the bottom of the barrel was being scraped on W calls, a new series was started, beginning with K9AAA. Hawaiian call signs were changed from K6 to KH6 and Alaskan call signs from K7 to KL7, as they were renewed. Hawaiian and Alaskan amateurs with prewar K6 or K7 calls were advised to seek renewal immediately so as to get a call from the new series to prevent confusion with the new K calls from the contiguous 48 states.²¹

By the mid-1950s, other call areas were running short of call signs as the W prefix calls ran out. Even though the FCC had had several options, including issuing two-by-two

calls such as WA1AA, they decided to issue calls beginning with the one-letter prefix K, such as K4BAI, as they had already done in the ninth call area. (Two-letter K prefixes, such as KL7AB, continued to be reserved for US territories and possessions.)²² Novices were assigned KN prefixes, with the N being dropped when the Novice upgraded.²³

Operation Deep Freeze

Operation Deep Freeze was an intensive scientific exploration of the Antarctic region in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It started in 1957, which was called the International Geophysical Year. The FCC assigned the block of two-by-three call signs from KC4AAA to KC4AAZ to the National Science Foundation, which, in turn, issued them to their Antarctic stations. Similarly, the FCC assigned the block from KC4USA to KC4USV to the Navy for their stations.

WA, WB and WD Prefixes Appear

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the FCC had begun to run out of call signs with K prefixes in the most populous call areas, so the first two-by-three call signs with the WA prefix were issued.²⁴ WA2AAE, for example, showed up in the 1958 *Call Book*. Prefixes beginning with WA were generally issued in most call areas between 1960 and 1968, with the major exception being the small third call area, where WA prefixes didn't appear until the 1964 *Call Book*.

At the same time, the FCC discontinued the practice of issuing "counterpart" call signs for hams who moved across call area boundaries (such as 1950s Oklahoma Section Communications Manager W5RST, who previously held W2RST and W0RST), citing workload considerations.²⁵

The first call signs with WB prefixes were issued in 1962 in the second and sixth call areas, followed by the fourth call area in 1965. Most call signs with the WB prefix had been issued prior to 1972, with the exception of the smaller call areas.

Between 1966 and 1969, the Commission began to run out of WB prefixes in the second, fourth and sixth call areas. The Commission reissued vacant WA and WB prefixes in those call areas in the early to mid 1970s. It became possible for newer hams in those districts to be given a call sign with a WA prefix, when their neighbor down the street, who might have been licensed 10 years previously, had a WB prefix! To most amateurs, these assignments made little difference, although some did complain that the new ham down the street had a "more preferred" call sign than the "old-timers" did!

Beginning about 1976 and ending in 1978, new amateurs in the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, ninth and tenth call areas received WD prefixes. These ended in 1978 when the Commission began issuing the now-familiar KA prefixes.

Changing Call Signs—Exceptions to the Rules

Generally, the government has issued call signs systematically and sequentially, but

there were some key exceptions. For example, a look at the FCC Rules in 1954 reveals that the Commission allowed a specific unassigned call sign to be reassigned to a previous holder [Sections 12.81(a)(1) and (2)]. Also, an unassigned two-letter call would be assigned to a previous holder of any two-letter call [Section 12.81(a)(5), FCC Rules, adopted 1946].²⁶ These provisions were carried on the books through 1977.

Amateurs who had dropped out of the hobby for a number of years were thus sometimes able to retrieve their old call signs. Some amateurs, long after they had been Novices, requested and were reissued their old Novice call signs. This is why some WN-prefixed two-by-three calls exist today.

From the late 1960s until 1978, the FCC had an informal practice of issuing, on request, a preferred one-by-three call to a person who had once held the Novice call equivalent but had not previously upgraded; for example, issuing K3ABC when the licensee had held KN3ABC.²⁷

Until the rule changes of 1978, if an amateur moved into another call area, he or she was required to get a new call reflecting his or her new call area. If an amateur wanted to keep his or her old call, the only way to do so was to continue to license the station location within the original call area. Some amateurs did this by licensing the station location at the home of a friend or relative in the desired call area. This game became moot in 1978, when the FCC decided amateurs could continue to keep their calls if they wished, even when they changed call areas.²⁸

Special Calls For Extra Class Licensees: 1968 to 1977

The present Extra Class license has been around since 1952. Other than a special FCC certificate, there was no benefit to obtaining an Extra Class license prior to 1968, when incentive licensing was reinstated. More important to many Extra Class licensees than their increased frequency privileges, however, was the FCC rule change that allowed any Extra Class licensee who had been licensed 25 years or longer to request a one-by-two call sign, such as W4AA.²⁹

The prefix was limited to a W or a K. The applicant did not have any choice of what call he or she was to receive. This was the first time since the late 1920s that these two-letter call signs had been regularly issued, and there was a great deal of excitement as some old-timers changed calls they had held for 50 years or more.

In 1977, the FCC modified this rule so as to allow any Extra Class licensee to request a two-letter call sign of his or her choice, and they dropped the 25-year requirement.³⁰ At the same time, the FCC opened up new prefixes in the block for the Extra Class. For the first time, Extra Class amateurs could receive an N-prefixed one-by-two call sign, such as N3AL. They could also request a unique two-by-two call sign beginning with the prefix AA, such as AA4AT.³¹

This ambitious program was developed in four stages, giving the first choice of call

signs to amateurs who had been licensed as Extra Class prior to incentive licensing. The second and third stages of this program allowed amateurs with progressively shorter longevity as Extra Class to apply. The last stage opened up the program to all Extra Class licensees. This program remained in effect until 1978, when the present assignment system was adopted.³²

Incidentally, it is possible to have a one-by-two "Extra Class format," preferred call and not be Extra Class. There are still a handful of amateurs who received their one-by-two call signs in the 1910s and '20s—the real old-timers in our hobby—and who have kept them to the present day, whether they hold Extra Class licenses or not.

The Present System

The most comprehensive change in the Amateur Radio call sign structure since World War II went into effect in late March 1978. The reason for this change was federal funding. While the workload of the FCC's Gettysburg licensing facility had increased 1000%, budget problems made it impossible for the Commission to hire enough employ-

Summary of Government Regulation of Amateur Radio

Before 1912, there was no licensing, no regulations, and no governing body to oversee "wireless" activities. Mandatory licensing began when the US Department of Commerce and Labor, under the authority of the Radio Act of 1912, created the Amateur First Grade and the Amateur Second Grade licenses.

In 1923, the Department of Commerce created the Amateur Extra First Grade license—a license so special that it was printed on pink paper! Only Amateur Extra First Grade licensees thereafter qualified for "special" station licenses, which had distinctive call signs and conveyed CW privileges on wavelengths longer than 200 meters. (Remember that hams had been banished to wavelengths of 200 meters and shorter, so as not to cause interference to commercial and military radio stations. At the time, everyone thought that such short wavelengths would not be very useful for communication. *Hal!*)

The Radio Act of 1927 transferred the power to issue station licenses to the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), while preserving the authority of the Commerce Department's Radio Division to issue operator licenses. Later, in 1932, the Radio Division and the FRC were merged.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) succeeded the FRC when the Communications Act of 1934 became law. The FCC revised the regulations in 1951 to create the license classes and their names as we know them today.

ees for the increased workload.³³

The first phase started on March 30, 1978.³⁴ In effect, the previous system was almost entirely thrown out. The most obvious change was the creation of the call sign blocks corresponding to the class of license, which is the present situation. The current system allows an amateur upgrading his license to get a call sign corresponding to his license class, the only exception being that the Technician class and General class licensees share the same call sign group. But there are problems in that some call sign groups are being exhausted (eg, Group C call signs in most call areas).

All provisions for the issuance of specific calls were abolished. All call signs would be assigned in systematic order. Extra Class licensees are systematically assigned a call within their block, although a licensee could request a nonspecific call from another amateur class block. If you move from one call area to another, you are no longer required to get a new call sign. Also, the FCC no longer issues special event calls, or RACES, repeater, military-recreation, and club station licenses. The Commission is, however, continuing to renew and modify existing RACES, military-recreation, and club licenses. Figure 2 shows the current call sign scheme.

An often overlooked change that was made is that the FCC will no longer assign a call sign on the basis of the station location; the new rules assign the call sign based on the mailing address.

Also, the prefixes of US territories and possessions were, in most cases, changed. Caribbean possessions were all given KP prefixes, with different numbers now identifying the different countries. Puerto Rico kept its old KP4 prefix, but the US Virgin Islands switched from KV4 to KP2. Pacific possessions were all given KH prefixes, with Hawaii keeping its KH6 prefix. Guam amateurs, for example, went from a KG6 to a KH2 prefix. In all instances, licensees with the former prefixes were allowed to keep them if they wished; for example, the perennial KG6DX. Thus, today we find both the old and the new prefixes being used in most US possessions and territories.

Phase II of the call sign program became effective January 1, 1979,³⁵ reaffirming FCC policies that no specific call sign requests would be honored and also that the FCC would no longer issue secondary station calls. Extra Class licensees were now only allowed to be assigned Group A calls, and could not choose an alternative group. While we're on the subject of Group A calls, did you know that it's possible that an Extra Class licensee might someday be assigned a one-by-one call, such as W1A? One-by-one calls, beginning with K, N and W, are in the Extra Class block. However, since there's only 78 such calls per call area (26 x 3), the Commission has so far shied away from issuing them. Those would be the ultimate preferred call signs, and if the FCC did issue them, it would take the entire FCC staff to field irate phone calls from the hams

Group A Call Signs		Group B Call Signs	
	<i>Contiguous</i>		<i>Contiguous</i>
<i>Block no.</i>	USA	<i>Block no.</i>	USA
*1	K#\$\$\$	1 ¹	KA1\$\$\$
*2	N#\$\$\$	2-23	KB#\$\$-KZ#\$\$\$
*3	W#\$\$\$	24-46	NA#\$\$-NZ#\$\$\$
4-13	AA#\$\$-AK#\$\$	47-69	WA#\$\$-WZ#\$\$\$
14-36	KA#\$\$-KZ#\$\$\$	70	Group C
37-59	NA#\$\$-NZ#\$\$\$		
60-82	WA#\$\$-WZ#\$\$\$		
83-92	AA#\$\$-AK#\$\$\$		
93	Group B		
The following prefixes will not be assigned to stations in the contiguous 48 states: AH WH KH NH NL AL KL WL KP NP WP. Pacific-area stations will be assigned AH#\$\$ KH#\$\$ NH#\$\$ WH#\$\$, then Group B. Alaska-area stations will get WL7\$ AL7\$ KL7\$ NL7\$, then Group B. Atlantic-area stations will be assigned KP#\$\$ NP#\$\$ WP#\$\$, then Group B.		¹ KA prefixes will be assigned only to persons living in the first call district. Other KAs are assigned to US personnel living in Japan. The following prefixes will not be assigned to stations in the contiguous 48 states. KH KL KP NH NL NP WH WL WP. Pacific-area stations will be assigned calls in the format, AH#\$\$, Alaska-area stations, AL7\$, and Atlantic-area stations, KP#\$\$\$. Once these blocks are used up, assignments will be made from Group C call signs.	
Group C Call Signs		Group D Call Signs	
	<i>Contiguous</i>		<i>Contiguous</i>
<i>Block no.</i>	USA	<i>Block no.</i>	USA
*1	K#\$\$\$\$	1-23 ¹	KA#\$\$\$\$-KZ#\$\$\$\$
2	N#\$\$\$\$	24-41	WA#\$\$\$\$-WZ#\$\$\$\$
*3	W#\$\$\$\$		
4	Group D		
Pacific-area stations will be assigned KH#\$\$\$ NH#\$\$\$ WH#\$\$\$, in that order; Alaska-area stations KL7\$\$\$ NL7\$\$\$ WL7\$\$\$; Atlantic-area stations NP#\$\$\$ WP#\$\$\$. After these are depleted, Group D will be used.		¹ Except KC4AAA-AAF and KC4USA-USZ. The following call sign formats will not be assigned to stations in the contiguous 48 states: KH#\$\$\$\$ KL#\$\$\$\$ KP#\$\$\$ WC#\$\$\$ WH#\$\$\$\$ WK#\$\$\$ WL#\$\$\$ WM#\$\$\$ WP#\$\$\$ WR#\$\$\$ WT#\$\$\$\$. Pacific-area stations will be assigned to KH#\$\$\$\$ WH#\$\$\$\$; Alaska-area stations will be assigned KL7#\$\$\$ WL7#\$\$\$; Atlantic-area stations KP#\$\$\$ WP#\$\$\$\$.	
*Call signs using these prefixes are not currently being issued.			

Figure 2—Current US call sign blocks.

who *didn't* get a one-by-one call sign!

Other Call Sign Types

Special Event Call Signs

Special Event call signs were formerly available to individuals and organizations to help publicize a special event or happening. The rules explicitly allowed for such assignment [97.51(a)(4), FCC Rules, 1976]. N6V, WX3MAS and NQ4ITU are some examples of special event calls that were issued. Even calls such as KC3F, which later became routine Group A call signs, were used. These calls were valid only for the duration of the event—usually only a few days. Some of the most popular special event calls were those issued to honor International Telecommunication Union Week in mid-May. Between 1975 and 1977, more than 120 of those special calls—all having ITU suffixes—were issued to groups and individuals requesting them. The FCC announced a moratorium, effective March 3, 1977, on applications for special events stations, and few, if any, special events calls have been issued since.³⁶

During the nation's bicentennial year In 1976, the FCC authorized amateurs to use a special prefix, if they wished. During the bicentennial year, amateurs could, at will, use either their normal prefix or the following sets of special prefixes:

Prefix	Bicentennial prefix
W	AC
K	AD
WA	AA
WB	AB
WD	AE
WN	AK
KH6	AH6
KP4	AJ4
KL7	AL7

There were also various bicentennial prefixes for the other US possessions, and distinctive bicentennial prefixes for the Novice class in some.³⁷

Temporary Calls

Before there were interim permits, amateurs had to wait until they had their license "in hand" before they could use their new privileges. Occasionally, someone who had just passed an examination and did not have any call sign had a pressing need to use his license immediately. For example, some individuals were planning to depart right away on a cruise on a small boat, and needed Amateur Radio communication immediately. Between 1976 and 1978 about 100 of these calls were issued. Each began with the prefix WT, such as WT4AAA. These calls were not issued by the FCC in Gettysburg, but by the Amateur and Citizens Division in

Washington. These temporary calls expired when the regular license arrived.

Repeater Calls

When repeater stations first began to flourish in the late 1960s, the owner's call sign was used on the repeater. Beginning in 1973, repeater stations were assigned two-by-three call signs with the prefix WR, such as WR4AUJ.³⁸ In May 1978, the FCC stopped issuing and renewing WR call signs. Amateurs could continue to use their WR calls until they expired, and then the repeater would revert to the owner's call sign. By 1984, all WR repeater calls had expired.³⁹

Secondary Station Licenses

Up to March 1977, the FCC would issue a *secondary station* license to an amateur who requested it. An additional station license could be licensed anywhere other than the primary station location. This gave amateurs the opportunity to keep old call signs when they applied for new call signs. They simply licensed one of their call signs to a secondary station location. In 1977, the FCC felt there was no longer any need for secondary station licenses, and they stopped issuing new ones⁴⁰ and stopped renewing old ones. Since many amateurs had a preferred call sign licensed to a secondary station, the FCC did allow the licensee the choice of which call sign he would keep when his secondary station license expired.⁴¹

RACES Stations

For a brief period from 1976 to 1977, RACES (Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service) stations were assigned WC prefixes.⁴² This prefix was not available for general amateur use. In early 1977, the FCC erroneously assigned several hundred WC prefixes to amateurs in the tenth call area. The FCC soon corrected their mistake and reissued new WD call signs, but allowed amateurs to use the WC call signs until the replacement license was received.⁴³

Club Calls

Club stations have been licensed almost as long as individual stations have been licensed. When the FCC proposed to eliminate club station calls in 1977,⁴⁴ there was a storm of complaints. The FCC finally said it would renew and modify existing club station licenses, but would not issue new ones.⁴⁵

Many clubs were previously able to receive preferred one-by-three or even one-by-two calls through the "in memoriam" FCC rule. This rule allowed amateur organizations to request the call sign of a deceased member as a memorial (see, for example, Section 12.81(a)(3), *FCC Rules*, 1957)

Summary

Figure 3 shows a brief history of US call signs drawn on a vertical time line. Some of the most notable changes during the 70 years displayed on the time line are noted.

What's Happening Now

The FCC has recently released a proposal

History of Call Signs At A Glance

1980	
AA2Z-KJ4KB N1EER KA1SIP	Present call sign assignment system adopted; call signs reflect license class.
N1ER AA4AT	FCC opens new blocks for Extra Class; drops 25-year requirement. First N 1 × 2 and A 2 × 2 call signs.
WD4AAA WG1AAA	New hams receive WD prefixes in some areas. RACES calls issued with WC prefixes.
WR1AUJ	WR calls issued to repeaters.
1970	
W4AA	FCC allows Extras licensed more than 25 years to request one-by-two calls.
WB6AAA	First WB prefixes appear.
1960	
WA2AAE WV2AYO	WN calls run low in second and sixth call areas; FCC issues WV prefixes to Novices. First WA prefixes appear.
WN4TYU	Novice class license and special call signs adopted.
1950	
K9AAA	Atlantic City conference of 1947 assigns AA to AL block to US; but the block was not turned over for amateur use until later. K-prefix calls appear in continental US.
KV4AA	Call areas redrawn to current status. US territories, possessions receive special two-letter prefixes.
1940	
1930	
W1AW	Washington Conference of 1927 assigns international prefixes.
nu601	"International Intermediates" used to reduce confusion in international QSOs.
1920	
1ANA	First three-letter suffixes appear in 1914 <i>Call Book</i> .
1WH	With the passage of the Radio Act of 1912, hams received their first call signs: a number followed by two letters.
SNY	Prior to 1912, there was no licensing. Pioneers made up their own calls. Hiram Percy Maxim used SNY in 1911.
1910	

Figure 3—Call sign history at a glance.

to once again revamp the call sign assignment system. The proposal would allow all amateurs to choose their call signs, but for an annual fee. You can have the best call sign money can buy! See February 1994 *QST*, page 84, for details, and get ready for the biggest thing to happen in the call sign arena for years. Preferred call signs, *here we come!*

Notes:

- ¹A. Schumacher, *Hiram Percy Maxim*, (Greenville, NH: The Ham Radio Publishing Group, 1970), p 62.
- ²"The International Intermediate," *QST*, Dec 1923, p 19, and "New International Intermediates," *QST*, Dec 1927, p 54; see also "Amateur Calls Changing," *QST*, Aug 1928, p 35, and the sidebar "When Amateur Call Signs Went International," *QST*, Oct 1992, p 41.

³Article 14, Sec. 1, *Call Signs, Radiotelegraph Convention and General Regulations*, Washington Conference, 1927.

⁴"Amateur Calls Changing," *QST*, Aug 1928, p 35.

⁵Article 14, Sec. 1, *Call Signs, Radiotelegraph Convention and General Regulations*, Washington Conference, 1927.

⁶Article 19, Sec. II, para. 4, *Allocation of International Series, Final Acts, International Telecommunications and Radio Conferences*, Atlantic City Conference, 1947, International Telecommunications Union.

⁷"New Call Sign Blocks Made Available," *QST*, May 1975, p 89.

⁸*Amateur Radio Stations of the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913).

⁹*Amateur Radio Stations of the United States*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1928).

¹⁰Service, Charles A., "Postwar Station Calls," *QST*, Jul 1945, p 24.

¹¹"Station Calls," *QST*, Feb 1945, pp 7-8.

¹²Service, Charles A., "Postwar Station Calls," *QST*, Jul 1945, p 24; see also Service, Charles A., "More About Postwar Station Calls," *QST*, Sep 1945, p 20.

¹³"New Call Areas," *QST*, Dec 1945, pp 31-32.

¹⁴*ibid.*

¹⁵*ibid.*; see also "Noncontinental Prefixes," *QST*, Apr 1946, p 43.

¹⁶*Radio Amateur's License Manual*, ARRL, 27th ed., 1951, p 13.

¹⁷"Novice Call Signs," *QST*, Jul 1951, p 25; see also "FCC Announces New System for Future Call Signs," *QST*, May 1958, p 72.

¹⁸"FCC Announces New System for Future Call Signs," *QST*, May 1958, p 72.

¹⁹"Novice Call Signs," *QST*, Jul 1951, p 25.

²⁰"League Lines," *QST*, Oct 1976, p 10.

²¹"K Calls," *QST*, Feb 1947, p 36.

²²"New Call Areas," *QST*, Dec 1945, p 32; see also "Call Signs," *QST*, Oct 1956, p 49.

²³"Novice Call Signs," *QST*, Jul 1951, p 25; see also "FCC Announces New System for Future Call Signs," *QST*, May 1958, p 72.

²⁴"FCC Announces New System for Future Call Signs," *QST*, May 1958, p 72.

²⁵*ibid.*

²⁶"Two-Letter Calls," *QST*, Oct 1946, p 27.

²⁷"All Special Calls—Doomed?" *QST*, May 1977, p 60; see also *FCC News Release*, March 16, 1977.

²⁸"Call Me Anything, But Don't Call Me 'Good Buddy'," *QST*, May 1978, p 49.

²⁹"Incentive Licensing Adopted by FCC," *QST*, Oct 1967, p 78.

³⁰"Extra Class Call Signs," *QST*, Jun 1976, p 55.

³¹"New Call Sign Blocks Made Available," *QST*, May 1975, p 89.

³²"Extra Class Call Signs," *QST*, Jun 1976, p 55.

³³"All Special Calls—Doomed?" *QST*, May 1977, p 58-60.

³⁴"Call Me Anything, But Don't Call Me 'Good Buddy'," *QST*, May 1978, p 49.

³⁵"Phase II of the Call-Sign Assignment System," *QST*, Jan 1979, p 62.

³⁶"League Lines," *QST*, Apr 1977, p 11.

³⁷"Centennial Call Signs," *QST*, May 1975, p 89.

³⁸"New Repeater Rules!" *QST*, Oct 1972, p 102.

³⁹"WR Call Signs Will Go," *QST*, May 1978, p 47.

⁴⁰"League Lines," *QST*, Apr 1977, p 10.

⁴¹"Call Me Anything, But Don't Call Me 'Good Buddy'," *QST*, May 1978, p 49.

⁴²"RACES Rules Reregulated," *QST*, Apr 1976, p 49.

⁴³"WC Calls In Error," *QST*, May 1977, p 64.

⁴⁴"All Special Calls—Doomed?" *QST*, May 1977, p 58-60.

⁴⁵"Club Calls—Those That Have them Can Keep Them," *QST*, May 1980, p 54.

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