History of Time Zones

A few hundred years ago, each individual town kept track of their own time. When railroads began to carry people long distances across the country, however, train schedules became confusing because there was a different official time in every town where the trains stopped. The need to efficiently operate the railroads was the catalyst for the standardization of timekeeping.

The first country to set an entire region to a standard time was Britain. London time was adopted as the standard time, and the Great Western Railway was the first to adopt it, in November 1840. Within seven years, almost all railways in Britain used London time.

The U.S. experienced similar problems with their railway schedules. Although standardizing time in the U.S. had been proposed to Congress in 1809 and again in 1870, it wasn't embraced until 1878, when a Canadian named Sir Sandford Fleming first suggested dividing the globe into 24 times zones, each one 15 degrees longitude and one hour apart. U.S railroad companies adopted Fleming's time zone system in 1883. In the following year, at an International Prime Meridian Conference in Washington D.C. Greenwich, England was selected as the Prime Meridian (0 degrees longitude), and the 24 time zones were offset from the prime meridian in one hour increments. Most U.S. states had begun to use the Pacific, Mountain, Central, and Eastern time zones by 1895, though it wasn't legally required that they do so until the Standard Time Act of 1918.

Although most countries today still use some variation of Fleming's system, some don't. All of China uses a single time zone eight hours ahead of UTC, though they span five. Australia has three time zones, with its central zone only a half hour ahead of its UTC zone. Some countries in the Middle East and South Asia also use half-hour time zones. Today, there are a total of 37 time zones.