

ELECTRICITY IN THE LOWER KEYS

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Although usually associated with modernity, electric power has a long history here.

It all began during the 1880s with a venture in gaslights. The first gaslight company in Key West was organized in 1883, with the gasworks on Emma Street.

But the backers of this earlier technology soon saw the future in electricity. The gas company expanded into this new energy source in 1887, and two years later they dropped the production of gas entirely, replacing the now-obsolete gasworks with an electric plant on the same site. One writer characterized this as "the first plant to generate electric power in the South." The offices of the company were located at the corner of Duval and Greene streets, in a wood-frame building that still stands.

In those early days, the Key West Electric Company was a completely private firm, led by John Jay Philbrick. And because this was pure capitalism, by 1895, a competing electric company formed, composed of Charles Curry, Martin L. Hellings, Milton W. Curry, George H. Curry and Joseph Y. Porter — all sons or sons-in-law of millionaire William Curry. By 1897, William Curry's Sons Company went online with their own electric plant, soon becoming a serious rival of Philbrick's. So for a while, there were two competing electric companies in Key West, each with their own sets of poles, wires and other infrastructure.

By the late 1890s, some new markets were opening up for electricity. In 1896, Philbrick bought a mule-drawn street-car line, with the intention of converting it to electricity, a changeover that was complete three years later. Meanwhile, in 1898, the Key West Electric Co. began furnishing power to the Navy, which in time became a huge and important customer.

Then Philbrick died, and his nephews inherited their uncle's company, buying the Curry plant in 1904, and consolidating the two firms. In the same year, the Key West Electric Co. began operating a diesel plant in a brick building at the foot of Angela Street, the remains of which are still visible. Two years later, the Stone & Webster Corporation bought the plant and the street car company.

During the next several decades, the use of electric power grew enormously. Consumers in Key West were no doubt glad to have a cooler — and safer — source of light than open flames. And, as often happens with new technology, the more people converted to it, the cheaper, more available and more useful it became.

The world had changed significantly by 1931, when Thomas Edison — the inventor of the light bulb and pioneer in all things electric — died. In his honor, the power was turned off across the country for one minute, giving all an opportunity to appreciate how prevalent his new technology had become. Here, in Key West, Bascom L. Grooms, president of the Key West Electric Co., threw the switch for this memorial gesture.

The production and distribution of electricity took a new turn in 1943, when a municipal utility — City Electric — was formed, and Stone & Webster sold to the new public agency. Eight years later, the offices of the company moved into the new Scottish Rite Temple Association building

at the corner of Eaton and Simonton streets. This concrete structure is still notable for its streamlined rounded corner, ribbon windows and glass block in the Art Moderne style.

At the same time, plans were afoot to build a new steam plant on Trumbo Road. Built by the J. F. Pritchard Company, it opened in 1952. It, too, is concrete, featuring an Art Moderne façade facing the street, with a stepped parapet.

The next year, electrical service was introduced in the Lower Keys up to Big Pine Key. While there were only 53 customers on Big Pine at the time, this new amenity caused a significant increase in property values in the Lower Keys.

Back in Key West, in 1957, the now-familiar headquarters of the company, the William Arnold Service building, opened at James and Grinnell streets. At the same time, the steam plant expanded.

More recent decades have brought significant changes. In 1981, the offices moved out of the Scottish Rite Temple Association building to the William Arnold Service building. And in 1987, City Electric connected to the mainland power grid, eventually leading to the closing of the steam plant in 1991.

And so the history of electrical power in the Lower Keys — which began in 1889 — has been long and distinguished — including some significant historic buildings, the tangible remains of technology, progress and modernity.

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