

HISTORY FROM THE OHA

# What a Gas:

## The story of the Syracuse Gas Lighting Company

■ By Karen Y. Cooney

**Long before the advent of electricity, gas street lamps dotted the thoroughfares of Syracuse. Around 1850, Syracuse became the 21st city in the United States to install gas lines for both domestic and industrial (manufacturing) purposes. This occurred only two years after the city was officially incorporated and came about primarily due to Syracuse's desire to stay ahead of its rival, Rochester. It was to become the Salt City's first utility plant.**

The original Syracuse Gas Lighting Company, whose first president was Moses D. Burnet, formed as a result of a ruling in 1849 by the Common Council to grant permission to that company to "build and maintain a gas plant and lay the necessary pipe lines that are after the plan and in all respects equal to and of the capacity of the gas works then erected in the City of Rochester, or an improvement on the same." The company agreed to initially lay a minimum of four miles of gas line to enable the downtown area to be lit at night. This area covered parts of Salina Street to State Street — east to west — and a portion of Jefferson Street almost up to James Street — south to north. The first plant was built on what was called Mechanic Street, very near the area now occupied by National Grid, while its offices were located off Jefferson Street. Initially, producing gas for street lighting was Gas Lighting Company's primary business. Slowly, it expanded to include both home and commercial enterprises. The streetlights were operated on what was termed a "Moonlight Schedule". On nights that the calendar indicated that the moon would be up, the gas lamps would not be lit. This schedule was strictly adhered to even if the weather was stormy or the moon hidden by clouds. During those times, citizens were forced to carry lanterns

to light their way.

In the mid to late-1800s, the only gas available was generated by the burning of soft coal. Seven railroad cars of coal were burned each day for city use and the gas was stored in huge circular structures specially designed for this purpose. At this time, the gas used for lighting the streetlamps was generated by heating large cast-iron vessels (later fire clay vessels were used) filled with coke. Once heated to the proper temperature the resulting gas was piped out to light the lamps. Every two hours the vessels, called retorts, had additional coke added to keep the gas continuously flowing. Between retort charges, the men responsible would adjourn to the nearest drinking establishment to fortify themselves with alcohol. At the time, it was felt that this type of liquid nourishment was necessary for the men to properly complete their duties. To allow the workers time off, the plant was closed on Sundays from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. During these hours, the city used the gas that was stored in the large tanks.

As time progressed, electricity became more available and Gas Lighting Company was forced into exploring new lines of business. Prior to 1896, gas stove owners were few and far between. Gas ranges at that time were still a novelty and primarily a luxury only owned by the city's wealthiest citizens. In order to boost sales and to show the practicality of cooking on gas stoves, the company connected ranges on street corners and invited the housewives in the neighborhoods to try them out. This method encouraged doubters to experiment, succeeded in boosting stove sales, and allowed the company to continue to grow — albeit in new areas.

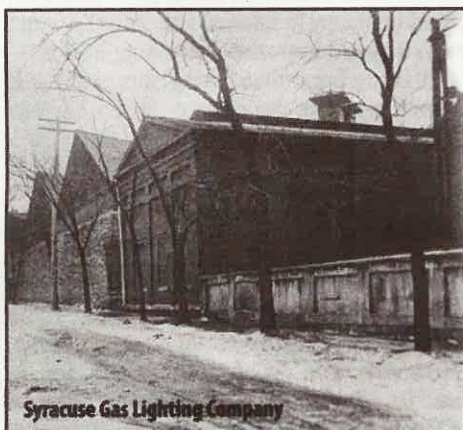
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Gas storage house



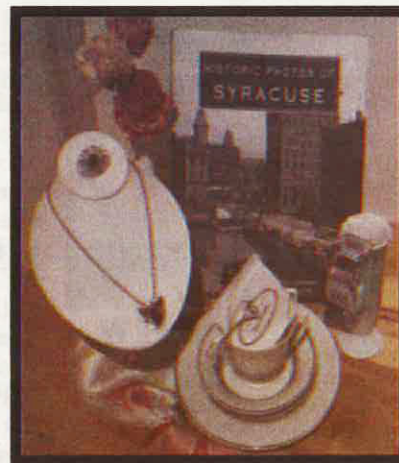
Street light repair shop at Syracuse Gas Lighting Co.



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