

ASHBURNHAM MUNICIPAL LIGHT DEPARTMENT HISTORY

ASHBURNHAM MUNICIPAL LIGHT DEPARTMENT FIRST CONCEIVED
AND FOSTERED BY FITCHBURG AND ASHBY INTERESTS

IN THE YEAR 1900, *WILLIAM LOVELAND* OF ASHBY, *HENRY ALLISON* OF PROSPECT STREET, FITCHBURG AND *ANDREW WHITNEY* ALSO OF FITCHBURG HAD AN ORGANIZATION MEETING AND AGREED THAT IT WOULD BE A REASONABLE BUSINESS VENTURE TO ORGANIZE AND INSTALL AN ELECTRICAL SYSTEM IN THE TOWN OF ASHBURNHAM. UNTIL THIS TIME, ASHBURNHAM HAD NO CENTRAL ELECTRICAL DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM.

MR. LOVELAND WAS NOT UNFAMILIAR TO THE ELECTRICAL GENERATION BUSINESS HAVING OPERATED IN THE TOWN OF ASHBY A SAWMILL AND AN ELECTRICAL GENERATION PLANT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH *MR. CARR* AND *MR. WILDER*. LOCATED IN SOUTH ASHBY, THIS PLANT HAD A 1,100 ALTERNATING CURRENT OUTPUT AND USED WATER FROM THE ASHBY RESERVOIR (WHICH IS NOW PART OF THE CITY OF FITCHBURG'S WATER SUPPLY). DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS THE WATER SUPPLY FOR GENERATION WAS ADEQUATE BUT DURING THE WINTER, WHEN THE POND BECAME FROZEN, SLAB WOOD FROM THE SAWMILL HAD TO BE BURNED TO SUPPLEMENT THE SUPPLY BY STEAM EVAPORATION.

AFTER SEVERAL MEETINGS, *MESERS, LOVELAND, ALLISON* AND *WHITNEY* AGREED THAT A PRACTICAL LOCATION FOR THE NEW BUSINESS WOULD BE AT *FACTORY VILLAGE POND*, WHICH IS ON THE WESTERLY SIDE OF FITCHBURG ROAD (RTE. 12). THIS LOCATION WAS CONSIDERED IDEAL BECAUSE THE POND HAS A 62 FOOT HEAD OF WATER DROP AND COULD BE READILY HARNESSSED FOR ELECTRICAL POWER GENERATION. THE AREA OF THE POND COVERED NINE ACRES WHICH IS NOT LARGE BUT AT THE TIME WAS CONSIDERED ADEQUATE, BUT THIS LATER PROVED TO BE ONE OF THE PITFALLS DUE TO THE LIMITED SUPPLY OF WATER.

MR. CHARLES H. GREENE OF FITCHBURG, WHO THEN BECAME THE FOURTH PARTNER IN THIS BUSINESS VENTURE, CONDUCTED A LOCAL ICE BUSINESS IN FITCHBURG AND ASHBY. HE OWNED THE WATER RIGHTS AND LAND AROUND *FACTORY VILLAGE POND*, USING IT TO HARVEST ICE DURING THE WINTER MONTHS. HE BECAME A STOCKHOLDER BY VIRTUE OF SUPPLYING THE LAND ON WHICH THE POWER GENERATION PLANT WAS ERECTED, AND THE WATER SUPPLY WITH WHICH TO MANUFACTURE ELECTRICITY. THE OTHERS WERE TO SUPPLY THE NECESSARY FINANCIAL BACKING.

IN 1900, *THE GREENE ELECTRIC COMPANY OF ASHBURNHAM* WAS FOUNDED. UNLIKE THE LITTLE ACORN FROM WHICH THE LARGE OAK TREE GREW, UNFORESEEN PROBLEMS AROSE. A LARGE SUM OF MONEY

HAD TO BE APPROPRIATED TO ERECT THE BUILDING WHICH WAS CONSTRUCTED BY *WILEY AND FOSS COMPANY* OF FITCHBURG. THIS BUILDING WAS COMPLETED IN 1901. THE GENERATING EQUIPMENT WAS INSTALLED BY *JENNISON COMPANY* ALSO OF FITCHBURG. IN 1902 THE PLANT WAS COMMISSIONED AND PUT INTO OPERATION. *MR. ELMER WING* WAS HIRED AS THE FIRST CHIEF OPERATING ENGINEER OF THE PLANT.

MR. WING WAS BORN IN MANCHESTER, N.H., IN 1861 AND EARLY IN HIS YOUTH HE MOVED TO SPENCER, MASSACHUSETTS AND ATTENDED M.I.T. IN 1889, FEELING THAT A LARGER CITY WOULD HAVE MORE OPPORTUNITIES AND MORE DEMANDS FOR HIS PARTICULAR TALENTS HE MOVED TO LYNN, MASS., WHERE HE WORKED FOR THE *THOMPSON & HOUSTON COMPANY*, THE FORE-RUNNER OF *THE GENERAL ELECTRIC COMPANY*. HE WAS ALSO ASSOCIATED WITH THE *ROLLING & GLACIER COMPANY* AND *BOSTON POWER AND STREET RAILWAY COMPANY* IN THE ELECTRICAL GENERATION PLANT. WHILE EMPLOYED IN LYNN, HE HAD A DISABLING ACCIDENT AND WHILE RECOVERING FROM HIS MISFORTUNE DECIDED TO COME TO ASHBURNHAM ON THE INSISTANCE OF *MR. LOVELAND* TO RUN THE NEWLY BUILT ELECTRICAL GENERATION PLANT.

THE GREENE ELECTRIC COMPANY HAD ABOUT 60 CUSTOMERS AND AN AVERAGE SIX ROOM HOUSE COULD BE LIGHTED FOR ABOUT \$1.50 TO

\$2.00 PER MONTH (METERS WERE NOT AVAILABLE AT THAT TIME).

THE BUSINESS NOW IN ITS EARLY INFANCY BEGAN TO REVEAL SOME OF THE SHORT COMINGS WHICH OFTEN ARE PREVALENT IN A NEW AND UNTESTED PROMOTION. THE 42" PENSTOCK WITH ITS 62' OF WATER HEAD DID NOT HAVE AN ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF WATER FOR YEAR ROUND ELECTRICAL GENERATION. THIS NECESSITATED SUPPLEMENTING WITH THE USE OF WOOD AND EVENTUALLY BUYING COAL FOR STEAM GENERATION WHEN WATER WAS NOT AVAILABLE. THIS AUXILIARY SYSTEM PROVED EXPENSIVE AND THE LIMITED SUBSCRIPTION FOR SERVICE WOULD NOT SUPPORT THE OPERATION. ALTHOUGH, ANY GREATER NUMBER OF CUSTOMERS WOULD HAVE PUT A STRAIN ON THE 236 HORSE POWER OUTPUT OF THE STATION. ANOTHER DISTURBING FACTOR IN THE OPERATION WAS THE FACT THAT THERE WAS NO PRACTICAL KNOWN METHOD TO STORE ELECTRICITY. THE PLANT RAN FROM 5 P.M. TO 12 MIDNIGHT, THE TOWN BEING WITHOUT ELECTRICITY UNTIL OPERATIONS BEGAN EARLY THE NEXT EVENING. THERE WERE FEW, IF ANY, ELECTRICAL APPLIANCES AVAILABLE AND THE NEED FOR POWER DURING THE DAYLIGHT HOURS WAS PRACTICALLY NIL.

THE FINAL DECISION TO CLOSE THE PLANT CAME IN 1903 WHEN THREE WINDINGS IN THE GENERATOR BURNED OUT. THE COST OF THE NEW WINDINGS WAS ABOUT \$500.00. THE STOCKHOLDERS REFUSED TO SEND MORE GOOD MONEY AFTER BAD AND THE PLANT, AS A RESULT, CEASED

TO OPERATE. AFTER CLOSING THE BUILDING, ALL THE EQUIPMENT REMAINED INTACT FOR 16 YEARS AND IT WAS FINALLY PURCHASED BY *OSCAR WILBUR* AND SALVAGED AS JUNK. THIS, THE BUSINESS VENTURE WHICH HAD A SOMEWHAT GLORIOUS BEGINNING, EVENTUALLY LOST \$5,000 BUT MANY FEEL THAT IF IT COULD HAVE WEATHERED THE MANY ADVERSITIES FOR A FEW MORE YEARS, THE INCREASED POPULATION AND THE INCREASED BUSINESS AND DEMAND COULD HAVE MADE A THRIVING INDUSTRY.

THREE YEARS OF DARKNESS WAS ALL THE INHABITANTS OF ASHBURNHAM COULD TOLERATE AFTER HAVING TASTED THE LUXURIES OF HAVING LIGHTING. AT A SPECIAL TOWN MEETING HELD IN THE *MEMORIAL BUILDING* ON THE EVENING OF OCTOBER 29TH, 1907, THE PEOPLE VOTED TO PURCHASE THE REMAINING INTERESTS OF *THE GREENE ELECTRIC COMPANY* FOR \$5,000.00 AND THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN WERE TO CONSTITUTE THE NEWLY FORMED ELECTRIC LIGHT BOARD. WITH THE PURCHASE, THE *ASHBURNHAM MUNICIPAL LIGHT DEPARTMENT* RECEIVED ALL POLES, WIRES, LIGHTING FIXTURES, CROSSARMS AND TRANSFORMERS, IN ACCORDANCE WITH AN OPTION SIGNED BY *MR. WHITNEY AND MR. ALLISON* IN SEPTEMBER 1907. OTHER MONIES NECESSARY TO CONTINUE THE OPERATIONS AS A MUNICIPAL LIGHT PLANT (ABOUT \$10,000) WERE BORROWED FROM *CUSHING*

ACADEMY AND OTHER PUBLIC SPIRITED INDIVIDUALS. THE ACADEMY AT THE TIME HAD THEIR OWN PRIVATE GENERATION PLANT.

AT A TOWN MEETING HELD MARCH 2, 1908, THE FOLLOWING WERE ELECTED TO THE MUNICIPAL LIGHT BOARD. *WILLIAM PIERCE* FOR 1 YEARS, *WILLIAM MILLER* FOR 2 YEARS, AND *MASON B. GATES* FOR 3 YEARS, LATER *MR. GATES* WAS APPOINTED FIRST MANAGER OF THE LIGHT DEPARTMENT.

IT IS INDEED INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT THIS THE BICENTENNIAL YEAR (COMPRISING OF 200 YEARS) THAT THE *MUNICIPAL LIGHT PLANT* WITH ITS 58 YEARS IS BUT IN ITS INFANCY. HOWEVER, THIS GROWTH AND PROGRESS DID NOT COME ABOUT WITHOUT A GREAT EFFORT ON THE PART OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE TOWN AND ITS LEADERS.

AFTER TASTING THE FRUITS OF LUXURY LIVING FROM 1900 WITH THE INSTALLATION OF LIGHTS IN ASHBURNHAM, THE PEOPLE WERE NOT QUICK TO FORGET THE BENEFITS THEY ENJOYED WHILE ELECTRICITY WAS AVAILABLE. THUS ON AUGUST 17, 1907, A SPECIAL MEETING WAS CALLED IN *FAIRBANKS MEMORIAL HALL* TO DETERMINE WHAT THE FEELINGS WERE TOWARD THE TOWN TAKING OVER THE ELECTRICAL SYSTEM. FOLLOWING A LENGTHY DISCUSSION RELATIVE TO THE INSTALLATION OF AN ELECTRIC LIGHTING SYSTEM AN INFORMAL VOTE WAS TAKEN AND THE RESULTS WERE 38 VOTES FOR THE PROPOSITION AND 3 AGAINST. WITH THIS RESOUNDING VICTORY WHICH

GAVE FURTHER IMPETUS A SPECIAL MEETING WAS CALLED ON AUGUST 27, 1907. THE ARTICLE PRINTED ON THE BALLOT WAS AS FOLLOWS, "THAT THE TOWN CONSTRUCT, PURCHASE OR LEASE AND MAINTAIN WITHIN ITS LIMITS A PLANT FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF ELECTRICITY FOR FURNISHING LIGHTS FOR MUNICIPAL USE, OR LIGHT, HEAT OR POWER FOR THE USE OF ITS INHABITANTS." THE RESULTS, 52 IN THE AFFIRMATIVE AND 4 IN THE NEGATIVE. THIS WAS IN REALITY THE TRUE BEGINNING OF THE *ASHBURNHAM MUNICIPAL LIGHT PLANT*. ON OCTOBER 29, 1907, AT A SPECIAL TOWN MEETING, SELECTMEN *ALBERT NEEDHAM, FRANK L. HARDY AND HERBERT O. ELLIOT* WERE AUTHORIZED TO PURCHASE FOR THE TOWN FROM *ANDREW WHITNEY AND HENRY ALLISON* ALL EQUIPMENT CONNECTED WITH THE ELECTRIC DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM AND OWNED BY *THE GREENE ELECTRIC LIGHT AND POWER COMPANY* FOR THE SUM OF \$5,000 IN ACCORDANCE WITH AND OPTION IN WRITING SIGNED BY SAID *ANDREW WHITNEY AND HENRY ALLISON* WHICH WAS DATED SEPTEMBER 20, 1907 AS THE EXPIRATION DATE. THE VOTE TAKEN ON OCTOBER 29, 1907 TO ESTABLISH AN ELECTRIC LIGHT BOARD WAS RECINDED AND THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN WERE PUT IN FULL CHARGE. *HERBERT L. ELLIOT* WAS THE FIRST MANAGER. ON THE SAME DATE, THE SELECTMEN WERE AUTHORIZED TO RECONSTRUCT THE LIGHTING SYSTEM AND PURCHASE ALL MATERIALS NECESSARY AND ALSO

PURCHASE OR LEASE A BUILDING FOR INSTALLING A SWITCH-BOARD AND STORAGE OF SUPPLIES AND TO OPERATE SAID SYSTEM WHEN ESTABLISHED. ON A MOTION MADE BY *E. D. BRIGHAM* IT WAS UNANIMOUSLY VOTED TO ENTER INTO A CONTRACT WITH THE *GARDNER ELECTRIC LIGHT COMPANY* TO FURNISH ELECTRIC POWER TO THE TOWN OF ASHBURNHAM. ON MOTION OF *E. D. BRIGHAM*, THE TOWN TREASURER WAS AUTHORIZED, WITH THE APPROVAL OF THE SELECTMEN, TO BORROW \$10,000 TO ISSUE NOTES THEREFORE IN DENOMINATIONS AND IN SUCH TIME AS IN THE JUDGEMENT OF THE SELECTMEN SHALL BE FOR THE BEST INTEREST OF THE TOWN, SAID SUM TO BE USED FOR THE PURCHASE, RECONSTRUCTION, EXTENSION OR ENLARGEMENT OF A PLANT FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF ELECTRICITY WITHIN THE TOWN. THE MATTER OF RATES WERE TO BE LEFT TO THE FULL DISCRETION OF THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN.

THE FIRST SWITCHING STATION FOR THE *ASHBURNHAM MUNICIPAL LIGHT DEPARTMENT* WAS WHAT WAS FORMERLY *ROYAL WILLARDS BUTCHER SHOP* ON MAIN STREET, SOUTH ASHBURNHAM. THIS LOCATION WAS CONVENIENT IN THAT THE LIGHT LINE COMING FROM GARDNER WAS BUILT THROUGH SOUTH ASHBURNHAM. IT WAS RUMORED THAT THE *GARDNER ELECTRIC LIGHT AND POWER COMPANY* WOULD NOT HAVE CONSIDERED BUILDING THE LINE TO ASHBURNHAM AT ALL EXCEPT THAT THE *MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH*

AGREED TO SUBSCRIBE ALONG THE WAY WHICH HELPED TO DEFRAY THE COST OF THE LINE. THE FIRST TRANSMISSION FROM GARDNER TO *WILLARDS BUTCHER SHOP* HAD A TRANSFORMER SITTING ON THE BUTCHER BLOCK. A PROBLEM AROSE WITH THE SINGLE PHASE TRANSFORMER, THE BRINE THAT HAD BEEN USED IN THE CURING OF THE MEATS AND WASHING DOWN THE BLOCK HAD SO PERMEATED THE BLOCK THAT IT WAS CONSTANTLY MOIST AND WHEN STATIC ELECTRICITY BUILT UP AROUND THE BLOCK IT WENT OFF LIKE A FOURTH OF JULY CANNON GOING TO GROUND. THIS CONDITION WAS ELIMINATED WHEN A SHORT ROOF WAS ADDED TO THE FRONT OF THE BUILDING, TWO POLES ERECTED AND THE TRANSFORMERS WERE PLACED ON THE POLES. (NOTE: THE FIRST SWITCHING STATION BUILDING WAS PURCHASED FROM *ROYAL WILLARD* FOR \$250.00)

THE FIRST ANNUAL REPORT OF THE LIGHT DEPARTMENT WAS ISSUED BY THE FIRST REGULAR LIGHT BOARD CONSISTING OF *W. B. PIERCE, W. D. MILLER* AND *MASON E. GATES* AND *HERBERT O. ELLIOT* AS MANAGER FOR THE SELECTMEN.

MASON E. GATES BECAME MANAGER IN 1909. IN 1911 A NEW CONTRACT WAS SIGNED WITH THE *GARDNER ELECTRIC LIGHT COMPANY* TO CONTINUE IN FORCE UNTIL JANUARY 1, 1918. IN 1915 *AMEDEE F. ROY* BECAME MANAGER AND REMAINED UNTIL HIS RETIREMENT IN 1955 A PERIOD OF 38 YEARS OF FAITHFUL SERVICE. TIMES WERE GOOD AND BAD

AND GROWTH WAS SLOW. DOLLARS HAD TO BE WATCHED CAREFULLY BUT IT WAS THROUGH THE EFFORTS OF THESE MENTIONED THAT A SOLID BASE OF ELECTRICAL OPERATION WAS DEVELOPED AND WHICH SHOULD CONTINUE FOR MANY YEARS.

IN 1916 LIGHT BOARD MEMBERS WERE PUT ON BALLOT TO BE ELECTED FROM NOMINATIONS.

ON MARCH 9, 1929 AT THE ANNUAL TOWN MEETING, A MOVEMENT WAS STARTED TO SELL THE LIGHT PLANT. APPOINTED TO A FACT FINDING COMMITTEE TO LOOK INTO THE MATTER WERE THE FOLLOWING PROMINENT CITIZENS OF THE TOWN: *W. D. MILLER, ALFRED H. WHITNEY, WOLFRED A. CURTIS, ALFRED GARLICK* AND *ROBERT W. BICKFORD*. ON MARCH 8, 1930 THE FIRST COMMITTEE REPORT WAS MADE AND A VOTE WAS TAKEN TO CONTINUE THE SURVEY. AT A SPECIAL TOWN MEETING ON JULY 28, 1930, THE COMMITTEE REPORTED NOT IN FAVOR OF SELLING THE LIGHT PLANT – NO ACTION WAS TAKEN.

AT A SPECIAL TOWN MEETING ON FEBRUARY 6, 1931, *W. D. MILLER* REPORTED THE ADVISABILITY OF SALE OF THE *MUNICIPAL LIGHT PLANT* – PRICE \$70,000 NO LESS. THE REPORT OF *W. D. MILLER* IN REGARD TO THE SALE OF THE LIGHT PLANT HAD TWO PROVISORS. (1) PRICE NOT LESS THAN \$70,000 AND (2) THAT THE MONEY BE PLACED IN A FUND RESERVED FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING IF THAT BECAME

NECESSARY; THE INCOME IN THE INTERIM WAS TO BE USED FOR GENERAL TOWN PURPOSES. THE VOTE WAS UNANIMOUS, THE COMMITTEE WAS THANKED AND DISMISSED. *WALTER A. HOURAN* THEN MADE A MOTION THAT THE SELECTMEN CALL A SPECIAL TOWN MEETING AS SOON AS POSSIBLE FOR THE PURPOSE OF SELLING THE LIGHT PLANT. THESE LOOKED LIKE DARK DAYS FOR THE LIGHT COMPANY. *WILLIAM D. MILLER*, CHAIRMAN OF THE SELLING COMPANY, ASKED TO BE NOTIFIED AND CONSULTED BEFORE ANY MEETING WAS CALLED SO THAT HE COULD ATTEND.

THE SPECIAL MEETING FOR THE SALE WAS NEVER CALLED AND THE MATTER DIED A NATURAL DEATH. IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF CONJECTURE BUT IT IS FELT THAT PERHAPS ALL THE TALK AND COMMITTEE REPORTS WERE MERELY USED AS A METHOD OF ASSESSMENT OF PLANT WORTH AND SOME FREE ADVICE ON HOW TO MAKE FURTHER IMPROVEMENTS WITHOUT GOING TO THE EXPENSE OF CONSULTANTS FEES.

THE *LIGHT DEPARTMENT PLANT* PURCHASED IN 1907 FOR \$5,000 WITH LESS THAN 50 CONSUMERS HAS GROWN TO A SIZEABLE 1500 SUBSCRIBERS COVERING EVERY PHASE OF ELECTRICAL SERVICE. A REPORT IN 1963 ESTIMATED THE TOTAL UTILITY PLANT VALUE AT \$258,724 WITH ADEQUATE RESERVE FUNDS OF \$46,508 FOR UNPREDICTABLE CONDITIONS - IS A FAR CRY FROM THE PURCHASE PRICE OF \$5,000 AND A MANS DREAM IN 1907 TO A POSSIBLE SELLING VALUE OF \$70,000 IN 1931 AND

AN ESTIMATED VALUE OF \$346,000.00 IN 1965.

EACH OF THE MANAGERS HAVE WITNESSED A CONSTANT PLANT
GROWTH IN EACH OF THEIR TERMS.

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