

A SOLID FOUNDATION

The citizens of Jamestown had their first experience with electricity in 1880 when a local cotton mill owner, Thomas Henry Smith, installed a steam engine and turbine in his Brooklyn Square factory. The electricity generated powered his milling operations and a number of street lights in the area operated under a village franchise. By 1886 when Jamestown reached city status, far-sighted industrialists of the city formed the private Jamestown Electric Power and Light Company. They produced electricity for their own factory operations, and took over Mr. Smith's city lighting franchise.

In 1889 when the owners of the private electric company sought to raise the rates for street lighting, the idea of creating a city-owned plant took shape. A year of debate and discussion followed. Both the Common Council and the general public were divided. The results of votes that were taken were ignored by whichever side had lost.

The solution to this year of disagreement among the citizens and their elected representatives came from an Albany - approved Amendment to the City Charter. It designated that all municipal improvements be placed under the jurisdiction of an appointed Board of Public Works. The Jamestown Municipal Power Plant came into existence in July 1891 under the direction of this basically independent body.

Two years later, in 1893, the municipal plant gained state authorization to sell its power to private citizens and industries. At this time, Samuel A. Carlson, first as a city Councilman, and then long-term Mayor, became the philosophical and political godfather of the Jamestown Municipal Power Plant. His entire career became inextricably connected to municipal developments in Jamestown.

A non-partisan Board of Electric Light Commissioners was created in 1906 to separate the operations of the power plant from other city services in order that it might move unilaterally on all aspects of electrical production. The independence of this body was further legalized in 1923 when the City Charter was rewritten. It created a Board of Public Utilities that was given complete control of all properties,

records, rights, and privileges of the Water and Lighting Systems. This remains the chartered authorization for the Jamestown Municipal Power Plant to this day.

This board expended funds for constant modernization over the years while a salaried staff of engineers and technicians operated the plant with an efficiency that forced the earlier private electric plant into a constant rivalry for industrial and residential customers.

This competition between the public and private electric plants was most intense during the late 1920s after the private company was sold to the regionally widespread Niagara, Lockport & Ontario Power Company in 1922. Eventually the municipal company lowered its rates to levels that the profit-making company could not match. This aggressive move held in spite of a court challenge by the large power corporation. On May 19, 1931, the Board of Utilities of the Jamestown Municipal Power Company announced the purchase of all the properties and distribution system of the Niagara, Lockport & Ontario Power Company within the city, for \$750,000, to be paid over four years. The plant's efficiency was such that this debt was paid off in three years.

In the decades since this transaction freeing the municipal power plant from competition, city residents have continued to benefit from many aspects of the solid foundation on which the plant was established.

Helen G. Ebersole

(This account is excerpted from Mrs. Ebersole's book, *Electricity and Politics, Jamestown, 1891-1931*)

This is one piece of a series of op-ed's that will appear in the Post Journal over the next several weeks prior to the Jamestown Strategic Planning & Partnerships Commission's and City Council's Public Dialogue and Fact Finding Forum on the proposed BPU Clean Coal project. The articles are intended to provide different aspects of the proposed project in order to have a better understanding of this critical issue facing the City of Jamestown. The Community Forum is scheduled for Wednesday, April 6th at 7:00 p.m. at the Robert H. Jackson Center, 304 East Fourth Street in Jamestown. All are encouraged to attend.