

# Municipal electric service

Articles from the New Bern *Daily Journal*, October 1901—May 1902.

## As you read...

### LIGHTING THE STREETS

Before the invention of electric lights, large cities developed systems of gas lighting. Each street lamp had to be manually lit every evening and snuffed out in the morning, which made lighting expensive, and many cities and towns went without it.

Beginning in the 1880s, cities in Europe and the Americas began using electric lamps to light city streets. The better light from electric lamps made cities safer, and they were more efficient and cheaper to operate than gas lamps.

But providing lights for a city remained a massive undertaking. It required a city to purchase and install lamps and to purchase electricity from a local company. Most electrical companies preferred to supply electricity only to densely populated and industrial areas, and so many communities in North Carolina had no electric service. Companies also might charge more than towns were willing to pay. Towns therefore began building and operating their own electric generation plants — the beginnings of municipal electric service. In 1889, Statesville (see <http://www.ci.statesville.nc.us/index.php/content/?cgi-bin=0&id=74>) became the first city in North Carolina to run its own electric plant. Wilson (see <http://www.wilsonnc.org/departments/wilsonenergy/electrichistory/>), Fayetteville (see [http://www.faypwc.com/about\\_svcs\\_elec.htm](http://www.faypwc.com/about_svcs_elec.htm)), and Washington (see [http://www.ci.washington.nc.us/electric\\_history.aspx](http://www.ci.washington.nc.us/electric_history.aspx)) soon followed.

In New Bern, street lights became a political issue. After a dispute with elected city officials, the power company cut off the city's electrical supply, darkening street lamps. As the newspaper articles on this page show, citizens were outraged and demanded the city find a solution. Instead of negotiating with private companies, the city built its own power plant, which began operating in March 1902.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why were the lights turned out in New Bern?
2. What were some of the concerns about not having public lights?
3. For people who still had to go out at night, what did they use for light?
4. What steps did the city officials take to try and restore electric lighting to the streets of the city?
5. What did the *Charlotte Observer* say about the lack of lighting in New Bern?
6. Why do you think the people wanted to tour the new electrical facility?

## Electricity in other cities

Other North Carolina cities have information on the web about the history of their municipal electric service. Statesville (see <http://www.ci.statesville.nc.us/index.php/content/?cgi-bin=o&id=74>) was the first to provide municipal electric service, in 1889. You can also read about early electric service in Wilson (see <http://www.wilsonnc.org/departments/wilsonenergy/electrichistory/>), Washington (see [http://www.ci.washington.nc.us/electric\\_history.aspx](http://www.ci.washington.nc.us/electric_history.aspx)), and Fayetteville (see [http://www.faypwc.com/about\\_svcs\\_elec.htm](http://www.faypwc.com/about_svcs_elec.htm)).

## There Was Darkness.

### Street Lighting Abandoned and New Bern Goes Back to Ancient Ways.

New Bern *Daily Journal*, October 8, 1901, p. 4.

The predicted eclipse, according to predictions, occurred Sunday night at the mystic hour of twelve. A great darkness settled down upon the town, a darkness that could be felt. It was after the good people of the place had retired for the night but a few curious ones remained up to witness the phenomenon. New Bern was peculiarly favored, it was the only town in the country where the eclipse was visible a totality.

As the bell at Meadows' mill finished its midnight stroke, the Electric Light Company shut down the dynamo that runs the street arc lights<sup>1</sup>. Notice had been served by the city fathers that the contract for light was up and Mr. "Dick" Williams promised to shut down at the appointed time. He said that would he do and he did.

Last night the citizens began to realize that something had happened and that between the city council and the light company the city had been left to darkness. It was not so dark down town in the early evening as the stores were lighted, but on the up town streets it was fully as black as the council could have wished. A few pedestrians had provided themselves with "lanthorns" and as they wandered upon a dark street they gave the appearances of big fire flies bobbing along. It is likely that by tonight there will be many citizens who will go back to ancestral habits and carry their own lights. It will be like the ghost of old days come back to the ancient town.

It has been suggested that the police be furnished by the authorities with miners' hats, the kind of a hat that holds a candle on its brim, to enable them to get around. It would make them a shining mark.

No one knows, apparently, how long this sort of thing is to continue. Alderman Bill Johnsons feels that the question of "white supremacy"<sup>2</sup> has received a body blow in this vicinity as his was the deciding vote that made an Egypt<sup>3</sup> of the burg. The "Whites" were evenly divided on the question, three against three, when Bill got in his work.

It is suggested that a Board of Arbitration be appointed, to patch up a peace. Some people take a serious view of the matter, that the streets are unsafe to be upon in the dark. It is said that the city will be almost sure to be in for damage suits, people will be falling down and breaking arms and legs, or walking up against trees and "losing face," that in

case of fire the wagons cannot safely go to the place of danger, and that any “hold ups”<sup>4</sup> will surely be laid to lack of illuminations. It is apparent that something be quickly done.

## The Citizens Want Light

New Bern *Daily Journal*, October 9, 1901, p. 2.

The action by the City Aldermen, by a vote of four to three, out of a board of twelve members to stop all public lighting of New Bern, is not a move that meets the favor or choice of any tax payer.

While street lighting may not be so vital to every interest of public welfare, as water or sewerage, yet it is an important public interest and not one to be taken away suddenly and without consideration.

The electric lighting of New Bern enters into the matter of public welfare and safety to the social and commercial interest of this city.

The fact that one, two or all of the Aldermen may have disagreement with the company which can furnish light for the city, is no excuse for depriving the tax payers of all light.

The Aldermen are elected as guardians and conservators of this city, and it is their office to see that every public function is carried on which means the preservation of life, property and public safety.

And in this day of advancement a well-lighted city goes along with a well appointed police force and a capable fire department, all absolutely interdependent in order that the community may be protected.

It may be admitted that the light furnished the city has been in insufficient. There was a remedy for it, but it was not to deprive the tax payer of the safety which even the admitted poor light gave.

The failure to carry a bond election<sup>5</sup> for a light plant, is admitted by the aldermen to be their fault.

There was no public knowledge of the election given, nor an argument advanced or reason given for voting any bonds.

But that has nothing to do with the present situation of darkness throughout the public streets at night. It is the business and office of the aldermen that the city should not remain in darkness, and each night that this condition exists the safety of this community and people is threatened, and lives and property are at hazard.

## City Aldermen

### **Special Meeting to Determine Question: Electric Light.**

New Bern *Daily Journal*, October 11, 1901, p. 4.

A special meeting of the Aldermen was held last night on the matter of lights....

The following resolutions were presented, read and adopted:

Whereas the Board of Aldermen of the City of New Bern are informed that many citizens of New Bern were not advised of the time or purpose of the holdings of recent elections upon the question of issuing Bonds for the purchase or erection of an Electric Light System in the city, and that many citizens favorable to such purchase would have attended said elections and have voted therefore but for their lack of information as to the holding of said Election.

And whereas it is the sense of the Board that the will of the people shall be freely obtained and their wishes obeyed with reference to furnishing the city with a complete and perfect system of Electric Lights at the least possible expense and cost, in order that proper lights if so desired shall be furnished the city and this question fully settled and determined by the inhabitants of this city, and in order that no citizen shall remain in ignorance of the importance of this question, but that the same shall be by them finally decided at the polls.

Now therefore be it Resolved, That another election shall be called for the purpose of submitting this question to the qualified voters of the City for their settlement.

Be it further Resolved, That a committee of this Body to be appointed by the Mayor, shall cause proper and sufficient notice from time to time to be published pending said Election and shall otherwise present to the public in a proper and sufficient manner all data concerning all items of cost and expense to the City of operating and conducting an Electric Light System under municipal ownership, and otherwise intelligibly and frequently present the same to the public for its consideration.

Be it Further Resolved, That the City Attorney is instructed to prepare a proper ordinance for passage by this Board calling said election to be held in the shortest possible time allowed by law:—

And in order that the full expression of opinion for the voters of the City may be legally obtained, Be it Resolved that an entire new registration be ordered for said elections.

## Darkness in New Bern

### **From *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 11**

New Bern *Daily Journal*, 12 October 1901, p. 4.

By reason of a disagreement between the board of aldermen and the electric light company, the aldermen of New Bern have discontinued the street lights and there is confusion worse confounded. Aside from the inconvenience, discomfort and danger to which pedestrians are subjected, the town is easily startled, and if one may judge from The JOURNAL's account, was nearly panic-stricken Tuesday night when there were three fire alarms in rapid succession. They turned out to be legitimate, but "it was thought at first that evil minded persons were taking advantage of the unprotected state of the city, to turn in alarms and create disorder."

The JOURNAL calls loudly for lights as a measure of public safety. This is another case of the luxury of today being the necessity of tomorrow. The lighting of the streets of our towns by electricity is a relatively new thing in North Carolina, yet the cutting off of the light in a town which has grown accustomed to it is a matter of great gravity.

Even the going out of one light in a locality where it is accustomed to be seen is felt and remarked upon and so dependent do the people become upon this means of

illumination that in some communities – Charlotte, for instance – where this “moonlight schedule” was good enough when the electric light was a novelty, the moon is now disregarded, and the electric lights are run all night every night in the year. New Bern’s feeling in the present condition of darkness where there has been light can be more easily described than realized. Her people are to be commiserated.

## The Dawning of Light.

### **The Electric Lights Flashed Over the City Last Night. The Plant Working All Night. Gloom Dispelled.**

New Bern *Daily Journal*, 16 May 1902, p.3

A pall of darkness has been hanging over New Bern for many days. An appalling sense of loneliness would some times creep over the midnight toffer<sup>6</sup> as he anticipated the moment when he would be permitted to grope his way homeward. Deeds have been done that would scarcely bear a good inspection in the light. Fancy and fantastic marches have been made by people that pride themselves on the circumspections of their walk in the straight and narrow way. Visits remained unpaid. Many fabrications were manufactured to excuse non-attendance at night services at church and everything was more or less depressed by the gloom.

But the light has flashed upon us again, not a winking, blinking, expiring light, but a beautiful brilliant light whose steady flame, gives an assurance that it has come to stay, and causes the unsteady in their habits to watch their “steps.”

Sixteen arc lights were flashed on Pollock street last night, 1,000 candles power each, half of their full capacity and by Sunday night it is hoped the illuminations will be perfect.

The old hand lanterns, some of which was in service during the American Revolution can now “go way back and rest!” their usefulness all gone.

## To the Public

New Bern *Daily Journal*, 16 May 1902, p.3

Editor, *Journal*—

Noting the great interest manifested by the people of New Bern in the new electric lighting plant now under construction here and wishing to give an opportunity for them to make an inspection, I would like you to give prominence to the fact that Friday afternoon and evening May 16th the public is invited to visit the power house between the hours of 4 and 10 p.m. The machinery will be started about 5 o’clock. It can be readily understood that it would be unsafe to allow visitors at other times, but tomorrow the writer will be on hand to make any explanations and will take great pleasure in showing the plant.

It is requested that no children be brought and under no circumstances will children without guardians, be admitted.

Thank you in advance for extending this invitation to the public, I am

Yours very truly,

## On the web

### Duke Power

<http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/encyclopedia/279/entry>

Industrialists quickly found that electricity could run their factories more efficiently than steam, and other businessmen found ways to supply them. In 1904, James Buchanan Duke invested in a project to generate electricity by a dam on the Catawba River. The company, called the Southern Power Company, supplied electricity to textile mills. In 1913 it began selling electricity to homes, and in 1924 it was renamed Duke Power.

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## Notes

1. Arc lights were the first electric lights, invented in the 1870s. They were used for street lighting before the invention of incandescent light bulbs.
2. The writer is making a joke — by “white supremacy” he means the lighting of the city in the blackness of night. That he made such a joke probably tells you something about the state of race relations at the time.
3. This probably refers to the story of Judaeo-Christian scripture, in which the Pharaoh refused to free the Hebrew slaves. God sent plagues as a punishment, and one of the plagues was total darkness, in which no Egyptian could light a lamp or a fire. See Exodus, chapters 7–11 (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus%207-11&version=NASB>).
4. Robberies. “Hold-up” was a new term at the time.
5. In a bond election, voters approve or reject a measure to allow a government to sell bonds — essentially, to borrow money — for building projects. Schools are often built with bond money today.
6. “Toffer” (or “toff”) was nineteenth-century British slang for either a well-dressed and refined upper-class person (usually not a very smart or capable one) or a high-class prostitute. It isn’t clear which the writer means, and it’s possible that he is misusing the term.