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Champaign's Early Street Lights

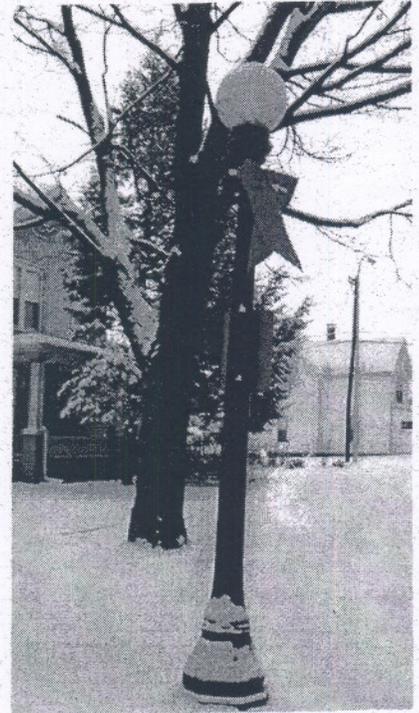
The Champaign and Urbana Gas and Light Company was the first utility company in the county; it was organized by Clark R. Griggs in 1867. The 1880 City Code ordained that the City Council was in charge of and in control of laying the gas-pipes, erecting lamp posts, and lighting the streets within the city. In 1885, gas lamps along Champaign streets were replaced by electric lights. It was in this year that William B. McKinley started the Western Electric Light Company and by 1891 he had electrified the old horse-drawn street railway. Although he sold the street railway to Benjamin F. Harris, Jr. in 1892, McKinley repurchased the business in 1898 and by 1899 he had organized the United Manufacturing Company that consolidated the water, electric, gas, and street-car railway service in Champaign. With the purchase of the Danville Street Railway in 1900 McKinley was now on his way to developing his Illinois Traction Company; a company that extended electric railway service from Danville to St. Louis via Decatur and Springfield.

Before 1911, Champaign had a street lighting system that consisted of one arc lamp at every other street intersection. But in that year a bond issue was passed that provided \$35,000 for improved lighting. An agreement was made with the electric lighting company, which was then supplying the entire street lighting system, to supply power to the city wholesale for a new lighting system if the city would put in and maintain a complete ornamental system of street lighting. The city would furnish all the regulating apparatus, transformers, wires, poles, and lamps while the electrical company would simply manufacture the energy for the system. The city hired J.R. Cravath, an electrical and illuminating engineer in Chicago, to plan the new system within the \$35,000 limit. This was somewhat of a challenge since ornamental lighting of residential streets in a city the size of

Champaign (13,000 population) had not been done before and the city wanted something nicer than wood poles with open lamps and reflectors.

A system was designed that used tungsten lamps with simple one-light poles carrying 200-candle-power lanterns within the central part of the city, except on the principal business streets where five-light ornamental poles had already been installed by the local businessmen. The wires would be underground in the central area, but residential areas would have overhead wires with light tubular steel poles and lamps. There were to be 64 one-light poles and 583 lanterns; it was designed so that the overhead lines could be changed to underground construction later without changing the poles and additional lanterns could be added. Spacing in residential areas was to be one 100-candle-power lantern at each street intersection with an additional intermediate lantern with a 60-candle-power if the distance to the next intersection was over 400 feet, provided that the street was paved or there were at least eight houses fronting on the block.

The Caldwell Electric Company of Champaign was awarded the contract for \$32,908. However, a number of property owners on the "best residence streets" asked that the street lighting wires be placed underground and that there be more lanterns along their streets. This change was granted with the proviso that the property owners pay the difference in cost between the two proposals and that Cravath supervise the work so that it was uniform and economical to maintain and operate. This "boulevard lighting" had the same lantern and bracket that was on other residential streets, but the pole was modified slightly for underground wiring and, since the poles were placed closer together (every 75 feet, alternating sides of the street), the candle-power was reduced. On the other residential streets the overhead wires were carried on tubular steel poles. A special lantern was designed by Cravath that had the look of



This 1928 street light on Washington Street is part of Champaign's new West Central Street Light Historic District.

an antique lantern but was more efficient due to the 18-inch flat reflector. As finally installed, the 1911 system consisted of 109 100-candle-power lanterns, 218 60-candle-power lanterns, 156 lanterns, and 64 one-light ball globe poles with 200-candle-power lamps. The city also took over the 36 existing five-light cluster poles installed by the downtown businessmen.

The 1920s was a decade of great civic improvement within the City of Champaign. The new Illinois Central train station was built in 1924 and with it the viaduct system that separated north/south train traffic from street traffic. Additionally, the city embarked on a major street, alley, sewer, and sidewalk improvement program. Local Improvement Bonds were issued to be paid for through assessments on individual property owners who benefitted from the specific improvement. In 1929, over 70 different

bonds on specific local improvement projects were listed in the *News-Gazette* as being due and payable.

During this period, the Champaign street lighting system was again under refinement, but this time the city was divided into a series of districts with property owners within each district assessed the cost of installing a new underground street lighting system. The University District was one of the first districts to be passed by ordinance in 1920. The Business District Lighting System was apparently very controversial having been first passed by Council in 1921, repealed and repassed as the Central District Lighting System in 1922. The Northeast Lighting System District was ratified in 1928; and the East Central Lighting District was approved in 1929.

The West Central Lighting District

The West Central Street Light Historic District basically encompasses the 1928 West Central Lighting District Local Improvement area. This district was established by the City Council on May 9, 1928 for the purpose of installing 1025 street lights in the area roughly bounded by Arthur Road (Mattis Avenue), Washington Street, Randolph Street, and Springfield Avenue. Over three-quarters of a million dollars worth of work was anticipated to be done in Champaign during 1928, but the largest single unit of work was the West Central lighting system which was estimated to cost \$134,848. Nine companies bid on the installation contract with the Standard Electric Co. of Champaign and the George Schugmann Electric Company of Abingdon the low bidders with a difference of only \$170 between their bids; Schugmann submitted the lowest bid. Since the difference was so slight, many local citizens thought that the contract should be given to the local firm to "keep the money at home and to be sure that local workmen would be employed."

When finally awarded on July 30, the contract was given to George S. Schugmann based on his low bid of \$89,594.30. The Council, meeting as the Board for Local Improvements, felt that they had to accept the lowest responsible bid with the added concern that if they restricted bidding to local concerns the board would be criticized for restraint of trade. Moreover, the Schugmann Company was one of the largest out-door lighting companies in the state.

Work installing the new system was underway by the middle of August when 25 men started at Lynn and Church streets. The ordinance specifically names the

streets to be included in the work and included most all of the streets between State Street and Arthur Road (Mattis Avenue, no lights on this road) and between Springfield Avenue (north side only) and Washington Street plus the blocks between State and Randolph streets on White, Clark, and Washington street. Not included in the work was Springfield Avenue east of Prospect, Van Doren Street, two blocks of Clark Street (one east of Draper and one west of Victor), White Street west of Fair Street, and a large tract of land mostly owned by the D. Morrissey Estate bounded by Springfield, McKinley, University, and Sabin Street extended. This district corresponds very closely to Area 4A in the City's Street Light Master Plan; however, the present arterial streets including Prospect, University, State, Church, and Springfield and portions of collector streets such as McKinley (south of University Avenue) and White (between State and Randolph streets) have had their 1928 street lights replaced with leased mercury vapor lights on tall poles.

According to the ordinance, 1025 cast iron electric lighting poles on concrete bases were to be installed along with a film socket, pothead, and lamp and globe wired complete for current; additionally, a regulating and distributing system composed of control panels, regulators, transformers, manholes, conduit, and lead covered double braid and steel taped wire for carrying the current were specified so as to make a complete lighting system. The poles were to be 10-feet, 6-inches tall with 16-inch glass globes. Once the new system was in place, the old overhead light system was dismantled. The cost of the West Central Lighting District Local Improvement was born by a special assessment on the improved properties that was divided into five installments with six percent interest. Bonds were issued by the City for immediate payment of the work with the bonds redeemed by the special assessment payments. Paul LaVernway was appointed the Commissioner of Special Assessments for the West Central Lighting District and \$6,165.00 was set aside for collecting the special assessment, including court costs. The original estimate for the work, including engineering services and interest payments, was \$134,397.00; however, when the work was completed, it only cost \$105,422.16. Therefore, the court ordered that \$29,567.34 be refunded to the property owners or 22% of their original assessment.

The lighting system was completed on December 23, 1928, although the poles had only a protective coat of red paint.

Much discussion had occurred during the fall on the color for the new poles. A dark shade of green, verging on blue, was on the older light poles, but that shade was felt to be too dark. A lighter, sandstone shade of grey was being contemplated as it was thought that the lighter shade would be more visible at night and thus better for safety. A tannish-gray color was finally chosen.

During 1928, the City of Champaign was also negotiating with the Illinois Power and Light Company for a new contract regarding electrical rates for city use. The new contract, signed in December, charged the city 2 cents per kilowatt hour for the first 40,000 and 1.5 cents after that; however, power to the city building and police department would continue to be free as per the original c. 1885 franchise contract with the city. Street lights, traffic lights, subway lights, the city garage, and the fire department were covered by the new contract that was in effect for five years. Power for the new lighting system was to come from the Illinois Power and Light Company's new Powerton plant south of Pekin. It was transferred to a company station on North Hickory, then to the city's substation on North Market and then to different transformers at street intersections where it is stepped down to the proper voltage. About 65 lights were on each power series.

Development History of the West Central Area

A map from 1893 shows how the West Central area grew from Farnum, Clark, and White's First Addition to the City (1855). By then the land had been almost totally subdivided into city lots from Randolph Street west to Lynn Street between Springfield Avenue and Washington Street. West of Lynn it was about half subdivided, but large tracts of land were still owned by individuals; west of Prospect Avenue was farm land although University, Church, and a portion of McKinley streets existed and the street railroad ran west along Church Street.

By 1913 the area east of Prospect Avenue was almost totally subdivided, although Clark and Washington streets were not through streets, stopping at New and Harris streets respectively. West of Prospect Avenue, development followed the street railroad line with Church Street being almost totally platted out to Arthur Road (Mattis Avenue) and north to Washington Street, although Washington Street was only completed in sections. University Avenue ended at the corporation line (Russell Street), and D. Morrissey retained a farm between

University, Springfield, McKinley, and the city limits. Beyond, to the southwest were large tracts of undivided land and West End Park, the Urbana and Champaign Gas & Electric Company's amusement park (now Eisner Park), was just to the west of the corporation line. It was during this time frame (1911) that the overhead street lighting system was installed throughout the city.

By 1928 and the installation of the current street lighting system, the area had basically achieved its present developmental form. Two sections, however, were still undeveloped and were not assessed as part of the West Central Lighting District Local Improvement: the D. Morrissey tract and the Miller and Tollis tract (Springfield to White Street west of Fair and east of Mattis). Even today, these areas do not have the historic lighting poles.

The current lighting system in the West Central Street Light Historic District consists of 722 poles dating to 1928. These poles are cast iron, 10-feet, 6-inches tall and topped by modern white polyethylene plastic globes with incandescent light fixtures; the original glass globes were replaced in the 1960s. The lights are still connected via series wiring. The poles are stamped "King" and may have been manufactured by the Union Metal Manufacturing Co. of Canton, Ohio. Along the major arterial streets (Prospect, Springfield, State, University, Church) and some portions of collector streets (McKinley and White), the historic lights have been replaced with modern mercury vapor fixtures on tall poles.

Summary

The historic street light poles extant within the West Central Street Light Historic District are the oldest street light poles remaining within the City of Champaign. As such, the 1928 street light poles have value as part of the historic and cultural heritage of the city as a whole and for this area in particular. They are a very visible reminder of a significant public works program undertaken in the 1920s to modernize and make safe the streets and neighborhoods of the city by upgrading roads, alleys, sidewalks, and lighting.

In addition, the historic 1928 light poles are the original cast-iron poles marked "King." These poles are both an architectural object and an engineering device representative of a particular time and place - the manufacturing of cast-iron street lights in the 1920's. While it was understood at that time that the primary function of street lights was to give better illumination at night to streets, their ornamental function was not overlooked by manufacturing companies. The lights and poles were designed to look good both at night and during the day. Because the lighting requirements of different streets would vary, depending on the use of the street (residential versus business or parkway), a range of pole heights and designs were necessary. The Union Metal Manufacturing Company, which made the King poles, created a "family" of poles to meet these different requirements. Poles in different heights with related, but slightly different ornamental designs as befitting their elevated status, were devised, and included poles for in-

tensively lighted central business districts, business streets, secondary business or residential streets, and secondary residential or park-boulevards. The poles were also designed so as to resist damage by collision from automobile bumpers and a concealed door in the side of the pole allowed easy access to the interior wiring. Although some of the light poles in the West Central Street Light Historic District have deteriorated over time, they still retain an integrity of time and place and are good representations of their period of time, craftsmanship, and construction technique.

The historic street light poles also contribute to the visual character of the community and specifically to the West Central area. These street light poles are unique within the city in terms of their height and spacing and their physical attributes. The street light poles in the West Central Street Light Historic District contribute to the historic character of the area which also has brick streets, concrete sidewalks (some dating to the 1920s also), mature street trees, and mature residential landscaping. The architecture of the district also reinforces the ambiance of the area as it is a mixture of historic architectural styles and building types ranging from simple gable front and L-plan cottages to Queen Anne and Georgian Revival residences, from vernacular cottages to Bungalows and period revival houses. The West Central Street Light Historic District imparts a visual quality that is not found in any other part of the city.

This article was taken from the Champaign Historic District nomination approved by the City in October.

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PACA Board Member, Kathy Reeves, serves birthday cake to members at the one-year warehouse anniversary party.

Warehouse Party

The warehouse was hopping with people and music on Sunday, October 17 at the One-Year Warehouse Anniversary Party and Second Annual PACA Member Get-together. Nearly 100 members, friends, and guests attended the open-house admirably arranged by Board Member, Kathy Reeves, and Warehouse Co-Chair, Rich Cahill. Music was provided by Drew Phillips and Becky Grosser with Radio Maria and the Corkscrew donating liquid refreshments. Dedicated volunteers spent the weeks before the party cleaning and rearranging the warehouse and the building looked great. PACA wishes to thank all of our wonderful and hardworking salvage volunteers for the work they do all through the year. They help make our organization successful.

The Heritage Award Committee is seeking nominations for the 2000 Awards. Please send in your nominations soon. Self-nominations are encouraged.

PACA Newsletter

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