

Keeping the Lights On

The gaslight has long been the symbol of South Orange, and will continue with broad new initiatives.
by Karen Duncan

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South Orange is one of only a handful of towns in the United States that still illuminates streets using lights fueled by natural gas. Many of its major roads have modern electric streetlights, but most of the residential sections are still gas lit.

"The distinctive street gaslights add to the charm and appeal of our historic neighborhoods," notes South Orange Village President Doug Newman. "In a way, it's ironic, since Thomas Edison invented the long-lasting light bulb in his laboratory only two miles from here, in West Orange."

The first practical use of gas in modern times was for street lighting. When Edison's rival inventor, William Murdock, a British engineer, lighted his cottage with manufactured gas in 1792, he literally opened up a whole new industry and changed the living habits of the civilized world. By 1798, he had developed his invention to a point where he was using manufactured gas to light his entire cotton mill in Manchester, England.

Soon after, the first public street lighting with gas took place in London. Baltimore was the first American city to light its streets with gas in 1816. In 1820, Paris adopted the trend.

In 1820 when the first gas well was drilled, Fredonia, New York played host to an illustrious French nobleman, the Marquis de Lafayette, Revolutionary War hero and personal friend of George Washington. Lafayette marveled that all the streets of the town were completely lighted by gas. He was even more amazed to sit down to a gas-cooked dinner served in his honor. Fredonia's discovery of natural gas opened the rapid expansion of the industry in the decades that followed.

During the decade from 1865 to 1875, the use of gas for lighting and for cooking made significant progress. Soon much of America, as well as other countries was lighted by gas,

including South Orange.

"Just a little before my time," laughs Ray Kienzle, the current PSE&G employee who maintains the gaslights. "I know where they all are," he adds with pride, noting that he maintains each of the 2,400 lamps installed within PSE&G's gas service territory. "At least twice a year I look at them all," he says. "Sometimes more, if there are problems."

While South Orange, with approximately 1,400 units, has the largest number of gaslights, PSE&G has gas lamps in Bloomfield, East Orange, Essex Fells, Glen Ridge, Morris Township, Montclair, Palmyra, Riverton, Roseland, Trenton, and Verona. Kienzle works on the lamps in Llewellyn Park – the gated community within West Orange entirely covered by gas lamps – and the town of Glen Ridge, which is also completely gas lit.

But according to Howard Levison, South Orange Township trustee, operating the lamps 24 hours a day, seven days a week is environmentally incorrect and costly. Levison is chairing the township's endeavor to keep the gas lamps off from sunrise until sunset.

"Gas lamps are coordinated with backyard distribution of electric and communications for an undisturbed streetscape without the clutter of unsightly distribution poles," Levison explains. "We've identified a monitoring product that could significantly reduce our annual gas consumption."



The township, working with PSE&G and other gas lit communities, is actively seeking ways to reduce the use of natural gas by lessening the time the lamps are on.

PSE&G purchases the lamps, according to company spokesperson Bonnie Sheppard, from firms that specialize in their manufacture. "Municipalities pay a monthly price to PSE&G per fixture that includes the installation, maintenance, energy, and other charges approved by the NJ Board of Public Utilities," she explains.

A proposal to replace all the gaslights in South Orange with electric streetlights was explored as both a cost-saving and security measure back in the '70s. And although the changeover to electric was rejected at the time, the light output of the lamps was subsequently increased to address the concern that the streets of South Orange were too dimly lit. Today South Orange has more operating gaslights than any other community in the United States.

"And we want to keep them," adds Levison, "but in a prudent, efficient way."

"The first lamps were fueled by sperm whale oil," says South Orange historian Naoma Welk. "During World War II residents who had gas lamps in front of their homes were responsible

for making sure they were turned off at night to avoid attracting the attention of foreign aircraft that might be flying overhead."

Academy Street resident Libby Munro Christensen owns the house which was once the home of one of the town's earliest gas lighters. This lamplighter was a familiar figure around town. Initially paid \$50 a month, good wages at the turn of the last century, he'd crisscross the hills of South Orange on a bicycle with a ladder attached. He'd fill his pockets with matches and many times have to come back home for more when he ran out. Often, he'd light a lamp with care, but before he could get the hinged door shut the wind would sneak in and put out the flame. He then devised a way to shield the door and save another match.

Not only town officials are thinking up better strategies. So is the lamplighter.

"I had the globes changed to high-quality plexiglass," Kienzle explains. "The glass globes were too fragile. One pebble from a lawn mower and they were cracked."

There is no manual on how to deal with a temperamental lamp, or how to improvise during rain. It is trial and error until it's done. Training for this was on the job, explains Kienzle, now in his 20th year with PSE&G. "And I'll train the next one," he says with a sly smile. "Not that I expect to retire too soon."



Into the early 1950s it was still a town employee, on a little scooter with a small stepladder strapped to the rear, who rode from lamp to lamp in South Orange and turned the lights on every night and off every morning. Eventually it became more cost-effective to leave the gas lamps on all the time. Then the entire process was turned over to PSE&G.

Today a gas street light quietly hisses on a street in former East Berlin. Cincinnati still uses gas lighting in many of its residential neighborhoods. Quite a few streets in central London, the Royal Parks and the exterior of Buckingham Palace remain gas lit. Neighborhoods in cities that are trying to recall a nostalgic effect, such as the French Quarter in New Orleans and Boston's Beacon Hill are still illuminated by gas mantle lights. Gas lighting has even seen resurgence in the luxury home market.

For South Orange the gaslights are part of its history, its charm, and because of master lamplighters like Ray Kienzle, and the broad, imaginative, cost effective initiatives of the township, they are very much a part of its future.

Karen Duncan enjoys enormously the warm glow of a South Orange gaslight from her front window.

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