

## A Timeline of Utilities in Ottawa, Kansas

Extracted by FCHS Director Deborah Barker from **Ottawa Annals, 1864-2003**  
(Annals are available online at [www.ottawalibrary.pbworks.com/f/OttawaAnnals.txt](http://www.ottawalibrary.pbworks.com/f/OttawaAnnals.txt))

**1883--Merchants Telephone and Telegraph Co.**, first plant in Ottawa, had central office on second floor of 207 and 209 S. Main. Miss Minnie Welsh, a daughter of Attorney H.P. Welsh was the first operator. The first telephone installation was for H.J. Smith, banker, and the second for S.B. Bodley, hack operator. Mr. Bodley was call boy for several years, getting to the nearest phone, non-subscribers for night long distance calls. Rates were \$50 and \$36 per annum.

**1884**—Fifty-four subscribers to the telephone.

**1885**—Former Franklin Countian W.H. Schofield, the founder of Williamsburg, came to Ottawa with New York and Chicago financial backing to begin a utility company. The basic charge for water would be around 5 cents for 100-200 gallons/day. Candy manufactories would cost \$8-\$18/year, cows \$2/year, dwellings of five rooms or less \$6/year and water closets (flush toilets) cost \$5 per seat per year. Outside interests operated the electric plant at a heavy loss of money, and the company threatened to remove the machinery and leave. A group of local investors formed to keep electricity available—Horace J. Smith, J.P. Harris, A.T. Sharpe, Peter Shiras, Adam Dobson and others. They convinced the City of Ottawa to take five electric street lamps, at intersections and at the bridge. An ordinance is published granting **Ottawa Water Works, Gas Light & Fuel Company** the right to erect, construct and operate and maintain a water works and for the City of Ottawa the right to purchase it after 20 years. Sperry Electric Light Company authorized necessary outlay to set boilers and engine to light the Franklin County Fair on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September. (They didn't get it done in time.) The Southern Kansas Railroad requested that the City establish lines along Tecumseh Street so they can proceed with their new depot.

**1886**—The ground north of Pottorf's Oil Mill on west 2<sup>nd</sup> was purchased for the power company. Street lights were acquired and lit by electricity, as was the 1886 Chautauqua. The waterworks built a standpipe 127 feet high, holding 65,000 gallons, at the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Hickory. The Electric Company's big, 90 hp engine arrived on May 27, 1886 from Erie, PA. The waterworks pump was in place by August 19. By December 9, the Excelsior Mill (currently part of the Ottawa Co-Op) was lighted electrically—the first commercial building in Ottawa—with a 3 hp dynamo.

-- Waterworks tested at Second and Main, six streams 80' high, 4 streams 124' high, and one stream 175' high through a 1 3/8" smooth nozzle of the Fire Department's.

-- Plans for a sewer system awarded to Rosewater & Christie of Omaha, NE.

**1887**—Water Company extends mains on Sycamore Street from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup>, for 8 customers.

**1888**—Electric Light Company is supplying 37 arc lights and 175 incandescent lights. There are more calls for lights than can be supplied until additional equipment arrives.

-- City Council committee on sewers recommends the plans of engineers be accepted. No decision when to start the 3.4 miles of mains and 13 miles of laterals estimated to cost \$93,655.43. These bonds pass with a 344 vote majority in March.

-- A new electric plant appeared in August. By December, it was reported that the old light company is commencing service with new wires.

1889—Electric plant to have an 80-hp Westinghouse system, a 150 light generator, AC and DC.

1890—Captain C.T. Ewing buys out electric plant.

1892—There are only seventeen subscribers to the telephone company.

1893—The electric light at Second and Main was put out by sparrows falling into the globe.

1894—Superintendent Pollock had a special on electric lighting for the ice gatherers in operation on Feb. 5. As a result over 100 tons of ice was harvested between suns.

-- The Waterworks asks customers to conserve water during the drought. The water company submits plans for a settling basin but instead erects an improved filtering basin. Previously, raw river water was pumped into the mains.

1895—A statewide reduction of telephone rates occurred.

-- July 11, river higher than the record flood of 1892. Waterworks machinery under water. North Main under water and a sea of mud.

1897—November 11, ordinance passed by City Council and signed by H.F. Sheldon, mayor, giving the **Missouri and Kansas Telephone Co.** a 21-year franchise.

1898—"Day current" is now on. Prior to this, electricity was only generated and delivered during hours of darkness.

-- Contract let for the extension of the water mains to the University about 1450 feet of 6" pipe and several hundred more on college grounds.

-- Ordinance passed by City Council and signed by A. Dobson, mayor, granting to **Ottawa Telephone Co.**, an independent company, a 21-year license. Company financed by J.E. Byers, prominent Ottawa resident and Joseph Carey and Frank Brown, Garnett. U.S. Hannum was the first manager of this company. Construction of plant started at once and service opened June 13, 1898. A.S. Munsell was builder. Equipped for 150 lines, with an office at 134 S. Main. Four hundred stations were secured in four months with the rates \$24 and \$12.

--J.W. Pollock, Electric Company manager, asks all consumers using lights to turn them off when closing, except one maybe left burning, or they will be compelled to put in meters. All night service has been added.

1899—Gas Company offers 50 gas lights for streets at \$1.00/month. The City did not accept, but contracted for arc lights at five city corners at \$7.00/month, and other street lights (32 candlepower) at \$1.00/month.

1901—The Missouri and Kansas Plant was entirely rebuilt. Rates were \$18 to \$9 per year and there was little business.

1905—The **Ottawa Telephone Company** had 1100 subscribers and **Kansas and Missouri Company** had 300 subscribers. The **Independent** plant was offered to the **Missouri and Kansas Company** for \$55,000, the offer being refused. It was sold the same year to the **Kansas City Long Distance Company**, which took control. U.S. Hannum was manager until 1912.

-- City voters informally vote for municipal ownership of Water & Light Company by a large majority.

1906—A bond issue to purchase the utilities (power and light) is passed. Bids opened in June, deeds exchanged in July. Roy Stookey comes to town as the engineer to run the new city utility. He would marry George P. Washburn's daughter Hazel and enter the architectural office, eventually becoming State Architect.

--March 16, Miss Manta J. Elder begins her 30-year career as an Ottawa telephone operator.

1907—Large flood puts strain on telephone service as hundreds try to call in and out.

-- July 11, Professor Bauer of Baker University tells locals that natural gas-burning power plants are demonstrably cheaper to run than steam-powered ones like Ottawa has. Officials tour other Kansas towns with gas-burning plants to see for themselves.

-- City votes in City Commission form of government to better run the Water & Light plant. In November, the **Municipal Water & Light Plant** is formally accepted.

1910—A cracked cylinder on the gas engine at the water plant causes worry. In March, the Commercial Club, a precursor of the Chamber of Commerce, forms a committee to look into civic improvements such as the water plant. In May, city officials look into selling the 18 acres on which the old river pumping plant was situated, leaving only a small access road (northwest of Hope Cemetery).

1912—**Independent Telephone Company** purchases the east 25 feet of 114 W. Third.

-- The **Municipal Water & Light Company** spends \$150,000 of its earnings in expanding the plant for better service.

-- 24-inch snow falls in March, and the telephone company sends horses for the operators to ride to work.

1913—The **Municipal Water & Light Company** was busy cutting ditches through gravel bars on the upper reaches of the river to allow water to flow downstream for Ottawa's use during a drought.

1918—The City sells the old standpipe at 9<sup>th</sup> and Hickory for scrap. Built in 1886 for \$5,000, it was 127 feet high and held 75,000 gallons of water.

1919—The standpipe falls on March 31 due to high winds.

1923—Telephone rates increase.

1926—**Southwestern Bell Telephone Company** absorbed **Kansas Telephone Company**, including Ottawa plant with 3,063 subscribers.

1928—Flood covers Ottawa's **Municipal Water & Light** plant. Drinking water shipped in by tank car, along with a purification plant. Power hooked up to **Kansas City Power & Light Company**. In December, a steam turbine is installed at Ottawa Municipal Power Plant with a capacity of 2500 kw.

1935—The City advertises for bids on globes and other fittings for new lights on south Main Street.

1936—**Southwestern Bell Telephone Company**, remodeled its traffic room. Twenty-five operators required to handle the business during 24 hours.

-- Tractor-driven pump installed in the river to lift water over the riffles west of the railroad bridge.

1939—A second General Electric steam turbine installed in the power plant with a capacity of 4000 kw.