

Holyoke Gas and Electric Department Collection, 1853-2001

2 Document Cases, 3 Cartons, 4 Books (5.5 linear feet)

Collection Number: HPLA2005.95

Abstract:

The Holyoke Gas & Electric Department formed when the Holyoke Water Power Company sold its gas and electric works to the city in 1902. HG&E continues to provide energy to Holyoke after more than century. This collection includes dam licensure records, historical perspectives, environmental reports, and industry reference publications.

Historical Note:

In the final months of 1902, after a few years of litigation, 109 hearings, and a Supreme Court decision, the Holyoke Water Power Company (HWP) transferred the rights and ownership of its gas and electric works to the city of Holyoke. Within its first year as a separate municipal entity, under the management of William H. Snow and A.W. Darby, the Holyoke Gas & Electric Department (HG&E) constructed 24 transformers and increased its customer base by 30 percent. From 1904 to 1907, the growing industrial and residential customer base allowed HG&E to reduce its rates by 40 percent, and, by 1916, the number of operating street lights increased by 400 percent.

William Snow resigned in 1912 and John J. Kirkpatrick became Manager. He led the plan to start an underground wire and conduit system in the main part of the city, and also oversaw the expansion of the aboveground electric distribution as residential and commercial enterprise developed in the northern and western sections of Holyoke. Many HG&E employees served in WWI and although wages offered by other companies reached record highs due to the labor shortage, staff loyalties remained with the city's gas and electric department. While cost of oil, gas, and coal was on the rise during the war years, the stability of electricity costs permitted prosperity through end of the department's first twenty years.

In 1922, Holyoke's Board of Alderman approved the formation of a special Commission of mayor-appointed city residents to oversee HG&E which in essence acted as the company's Board of Directors. During the decade of the 1920s, HG&E and the Springfield Gas Light Company collaborated to build a six-inch main which crossed the Willimansett Bridge to provide emergency services for both cities. This connection proved crucial within just a few years, during a major 1925 power outage. Because of the newly available emergency service the city was able to restore electricity in less than eight minutes. In subsequent years emergency connections with Springfield prevented loss of power during the 1927 and 1936 floods, as well as the 1938 hurricane. The Great Depression hit hard the

gas and electric works, as it did the nation. In 1929, the Mayor of Holyoke attempted to reallocate \$100,000 of HG&E funds to reduce the city's taxes. While HG&E prevented this action, in 1932 it also submitted its final payment on the original 1902 bonds used to purchase the department from HWP.

In 1940 HG&E moved to a new headquarters at the corner of Maple and Suffolk Streets. Manager Kirkpatrick that same year announced a 50 percent reduction to all November electric bills, which comprised 17,500 domestic customers. By 1943, due to the escalation of war, the federal government instilled regulations on nearly every aspect of the industry. Amidst the drastic operational changes HG&E still purchased a quarter of million dollars in war bonds in support of the country's efforts overseas. In 1944, with the approval of the city Commissioners, HG&E reduced its employee's work week from 48 to 40 hours, without any change in compensation. The next year John J. Kirkpatrick passed away, being only the second Manager in the first 43 years of the department's history. He effectively maintained the company's competitiveness through social, political, and commercial uncertainty, and left large shoes to fill for his successor, Francis H. King.

As the 1940s came to close, both HG&E and the Holyoke Water Power Company applied for licensure to own, operate, and develop hydroelectric projects along the dam. Due to the laws governing interstate commerce, the Federal Power Commission (FPC) controlled the navigable waters of the Connecticut River and reviewed and granted all project license applications. A vigorous campaign by HG&E and HWP ensued through the media, industry, and city government, but in the end the FPC awarded HWP the license for fifty years. Although Francis King fought admirably and never planned to use the city's tax revenue to fund any dam project, the FPC cited the complications of a municipally owned department as the reason HG&E did not receive licensure.

In October of 1951, the gas system in Holyoke became the first in New England to distribute 100 percent natural gas. Following its fiftieth anniversary in 1952 and throughout the decade, HG&E improved its relations with HWP. Both entities began to rely on each other for emergency power, and purchased extra electricity from one another during peak load periods. However, during the 1960s this relationship experienced further tension. As Francis King and the HG&E Commissioners considered the acquisition of HWP's industrial electric distribution system, HWP countered with a proposal to lease its gas and electric plant from the city of Holyoke for 30 years at a rate of 1.25 million per year. Another media driven campaign from both sides focused on convincing customers and elected officials of the benefits of either private or public ownership of electrical distribution. In the end, at the time of a public hearing in front of the Massachusetts State legislature in 1965, HG&E management and their employees' guild prevailed. Despite the ongoing competition between HG&E and HWP, cooperative practices in the electricity supply for the city continued, and a catastrophic blackout which affected the entire northeastern United States in

November of 1965 critically tested their relationship. HG&E helped restart HWP's distribution system with a jet-powered power plant purchased just a few years before, and Holyoke experienced only minor effects compared to the rest of New England.

In 1969, HG&E signed an agreement with the Western Massachusetts Electric Company to join CONVEX, a group of privately-owned companies that pooled electric power. Later in 1973 this collaborative expanded throughout New England to become NEPOOL, which in general lowered the cost of power on the open market. However, the 1970s energy crisis caused dramatic increases in fuel prices. In 1975 alone HG&E began to pay more than double for all its fuel costs. A year later, as a result of the energy crisis and the success of NEPOOL, the Massachusetts Municipal Wholesale Electric Company (MMWEC) became a public corporation and integrated 28 other publically-owned electric systems as members, including HG&E. It lowered costs, raised capital, and allowed municipally owned departments to act separately as privately-owned power firms. By the time of his retirement in 1976, Francis King had become a dominant figure in the New England power industry and had grown HG&E into one of the most successful power distributors in the region. George Leary, King's assistant, became the new Manager of the city's gas and electric department.

Although the plan for increasing the electrical supply capacity began in the late 1970s, the construction of the new 115KV interconnection project with West Holyoke began in early 1980s. This multi-million dollar connection gave the department another link to electric sources outside the city, another contribution to the power pool, and it also encouraged growth and supplied electricity to a fast-developing residential area in West Holyoke. HG&E completed the final phase of this 115KV interconnector in 1984. At the same time, the department rebuilt its gas system and extended a main through West Holyoke and also down Southampton Road, to connect residents of that town HG&E's system. These projects, along with a stringent focus on customer service and employee training and education, made George Leary an unsung leader of HG&E until 1998, when he retired to become General Manager of the MMWEC. Despite HG&E's continued growth, success, and public support, in 1999 the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission awarded the new hydroelectric dam licensure to Northeast Utilities (NU), the company which purchased HWP in 1967.

Raymond Archambault served a short term as Manager after George Leary, until 1999 when the HG&E Commissioners appointed James M. Lavelle to head the department. Shortly after Lavelle's appointment, HG&E and NU reached a resolution to settle an expiring contract, set aside historical disputes, and cooperatively moved forward by drafting a Memorandum of Understanding. This agreement, signed in June of 2000, outlined the settlement that led to HG&E's purchase of the Holyoke dam, canal system, HWP's retail franchise and customer base, and several real estate holdings. With the support of the Commissioners, the

deal closed in December of 2001. The Holyoke Gas & Electric Department continues to this day providing power services to the city.

Scope and Contents:

The first series in this collection comprises annual and audit reports, fact files, and company histories. Series 2, publicity materials, includes advertisements and newspaper clippings. The third series, industry publications, contains mechanical, operational, and hydroelectric reference books. Dam licensure records, Series 4, include records and bound volumes pertaining to the application submitted to the federal government in 1949 and 1997-1998. The fifth and final series comprises environmental assessments of the affect of hydroelectric projects on the Connecticut River and surrounding ecosystem.

The HG&E collection consists of 5 series as follows:

- Corporate Reports
 - Publicity Materials
 - Industry Publications
 - Dam Licensure Records
 - Environmental Reports
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Information on Use

Terms of Access and Use

Restrictions on Access:

The collection is open for research

Preferred Citation

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Collection donated by Robert E. Barrett, Jr. and the Holyoke Gas & Electric Department

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Related Materials:

See the Holyoke Water Power Company Collection

Additional Information:

Repository Information

Holyoke Public Library
History Room & Archives
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Holyoke, MA 01040

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Series Descriptions:

Series 1: Corporate Reports

1853 - 2001

- Box 1: Annual Reports – 1952, 1963, 1970, 1977-79, 1994
 - Audit Reports and Letters
 - Report on the 115KV Transmission Line
 - HG&E Fact File
 - History of HG&E by Edith Sullivan
 - Municipal owned plants, 1950
- Box 2: Report on the History and Present Condition of the Hadley Falls Company, 1853
 - Special Report on the Manufacture vs. Purchase of Electrical Energy, by the Gas and Electric Department, May 1919
 - Hours of Generator Operation (Handwritten Ledger), 1952-1953
 - United States Federal Power Commission Federal Power Act, 1971
- Box 5: Holyoke Gas & Electric Department Facilities Assessment, 2001

Series 2: Publicity Materials

1912-1960

- Box 1: Advertisements and Newspaper Articles

Series 3: Industry Publications

1910 - 1972

- Box 2: *Electric Power Stations* by L.W.W. Morrow, 1927
- The Pelton Water Wheel* by W.F. Durand, June 1939
- Steam Power Stations* by Gustaf A. Gaffert, 1946
- S. Morgan Smith and the Hydroelectric Industry* by Beauchamp E. Smith, 1952

Books (4): New England Water Works Association Journal, 1910
The Economics of Water Power Development by Walter H. Voskuil, 1928
Mechanical Design of Hydroelectric Plants by the Tennessee Valley
Authority, 1960
Government Competition in the Electric Utility Industry, by Richard Hellman,
1972

Series 4: Dam Licensure Records

1949 - 1999

Box 3: Federal Power Commission Stenographer's Report (16 Volumes),
March-February 1949
Box 4: Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Application for New
Licensure, Holyoke Hydroelectric Project, August-February 1997
Box 5: Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Application for New
Licensure, Holyoke Hydroelectric Project, July 1998

Series 5: Environmental Reports

1974 - 1999

Box 3: Draft of Environmental Impact Statement, Holyoke Hydroelectric Project, 1999
Box 5: Connecticut River Environmental and Hydrological Studies, 1974-1995
