

Bethinking of Old Orleans

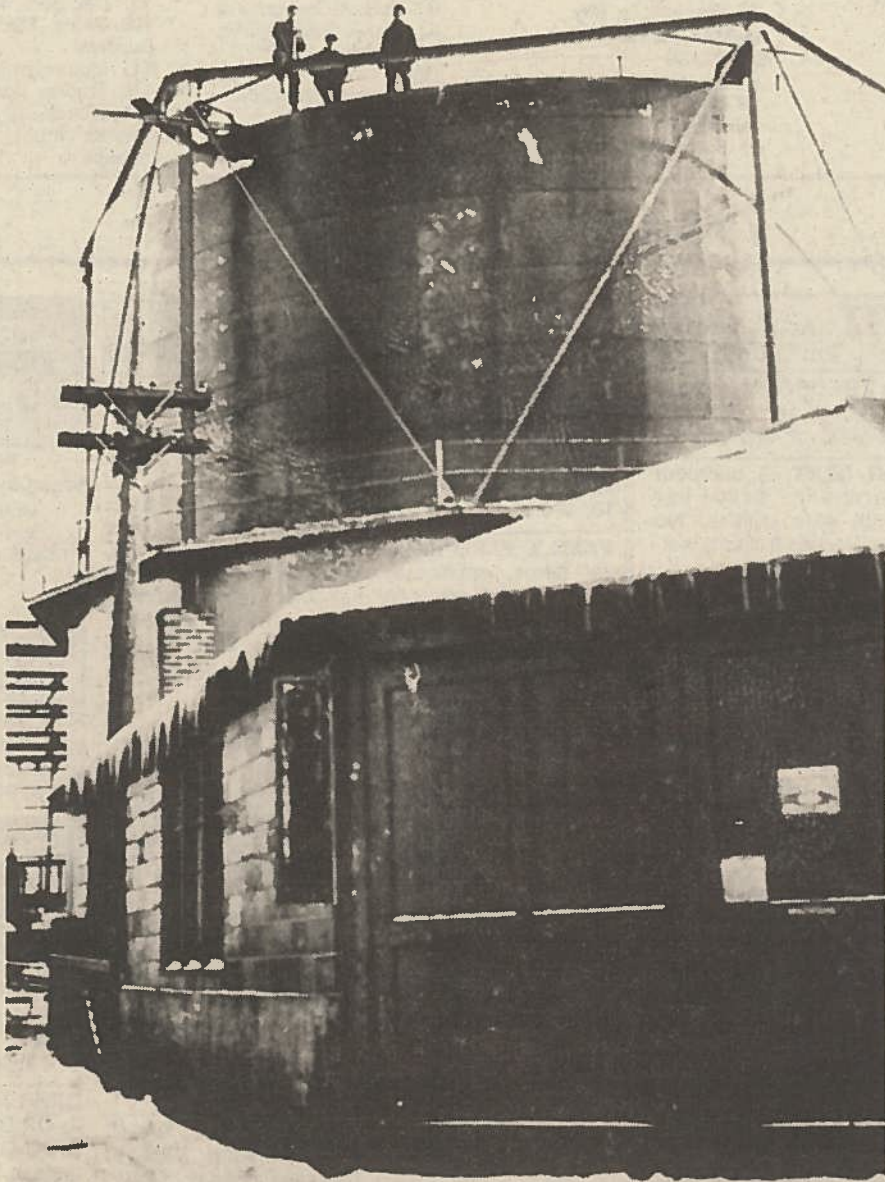
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MANUFACTURED GAS



Before electricity made it possible to turn lights on with the flip of a switch, homes, businesses and streets were illuminated by gaslight. The Gaslight Era is generally considered to be the period between 1830 and 1915. And incidentally, we are not speaking of natural gas but rather the type of gas that was produced as a result of cooking or heating coal.

The facilities that were built to produce this were called manufactured Gas Plants or simply "Gasworks". In general, the Erie Canal made it possible for coal to be shipped into this region for gas production. Likewise, many communities across New York State had gasworks located near the canal. Albion, N.Y. was no exception.

In brief, let me give a background to this once important industry for lighting. In 1680 Rev. D. Clayton first distilled gas from coal in England. In 1792 an engineer first illuminated his home in Cornwell, England with coal gas and by 1807 it was being used for public gaslights in London. By 1817 the first U.S. gas plant opened in Baltimore, MD and was soon followed by one in Boston in 1822. New York City was the third in 1825. Naturally, we were later in development in the western part of New York so it wasn't until 1848 that a gasworks opened in Buffalo. By 1859 New York State had 70 gas companies-more than any other state.

From the 1905 Souvenir Book of the Village of Albion under Gas Works, we find this brief information:

"In 1856 the Albion Gas Light Company was incorporated. A plant was established in an old tannery building, near the foot of Ingersoll Street, and mains were laid so that gas was first distributed Nov. 25, 1858."

"The original building occupied by the plant was replaced by the present brick structure in 1870."

"In 1901 the Albion Power Company bought the property and it has since then been operated by it."

As a side note, the Orleans County Court House was one of the very first buildings to be illuminated with gas light when it was completed in 1858. The gas was piped into the building through wooden pipes.

We know that after 1870 there was a coal ware-

house along side the Erie Canal and that a gangway was built between the coal warehouse and the gas house. However, by around 1900 the warehouse and gangway were removed. It was perhaps sometime in the teens that a large 55-foot diameter gas holding tank was erected on the Albion Gas Works site between the canal and East Bank Street near Ingersoll Street. It is that holder we see in this photo which may have been taken in the early 1920's Note also the gas house in the foreground.

To give you an idea of what actually took place here in the manufacturing of gas, is the following account. From a composition notebook dated Sept. 6, 1904, kept by Lucy Fancher when she was a grade school student, we find:

"Gas is made from soft coal. In the gas house there is a large furnace and in this furnace are retorts or ovens. The retorts are filled with coal and the heat from the furnace drives the gas out of it. The gas is impure so it is put through water, lime, etc., to be purified. It is then stored in tanks ready for use. It is sent through pipes underground to houses, stores, etc. to be used for heating and lighting. Gas is measured by the cu. ft. What is left of the coal after the gas is driven out is called coke."

On November 1, 1928 gas production at the Albion Gas Works was shut down when a pipeline was connected to out-of-town gas plants. By the mid-1950's natural gas began to dominate the industry and in 1960 all New York State gas plants were retired due to pipeline expansion. In Albion only the site bordering the Erie Canal is left of what once was an area of bustling activity during the Industrial Revolution.

"From their humble beginnings along the Erie Canal, to becoming the largest energy producers of their day, Manufactured Gas Plants have played a vital role in the growth and history of The Empire State."

My thanks to William D. Lilley of the Site Investigation and Remediative Environment Affairs Dept. of Niagara Mohawk for his input to this article and for the booklet entitled "Manufactured Gas Plants - A New York Heritage."