

Bethinking of Old Orleans

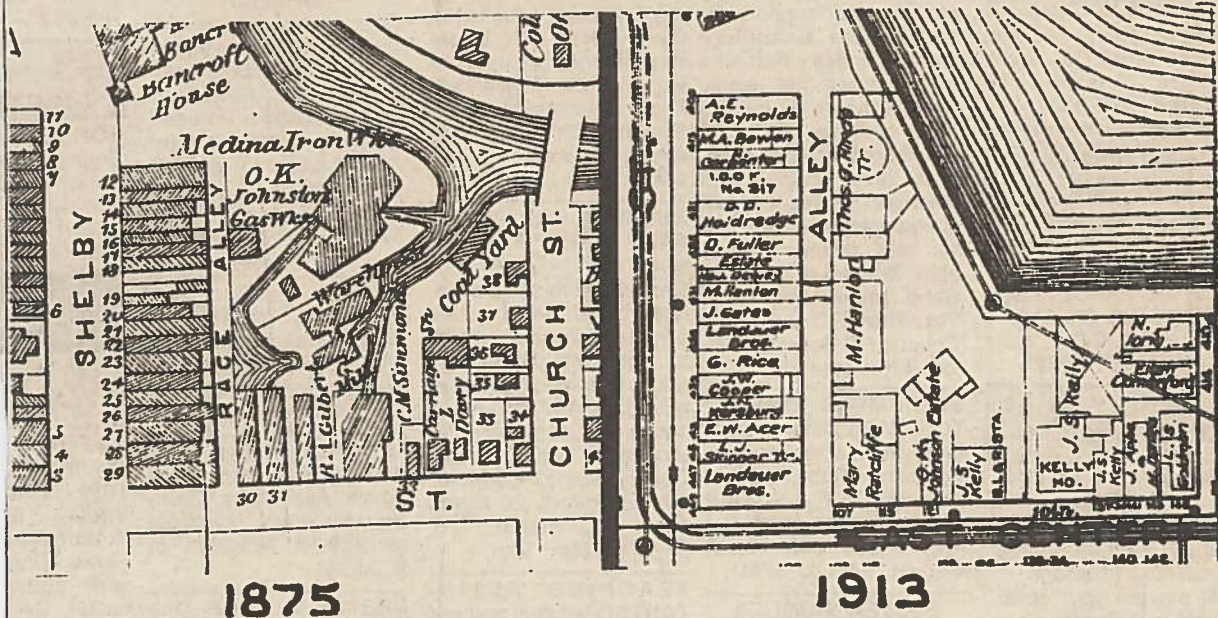
C.W.Lattin County Historian

Vol. XX

4-27-98

No. 16

MANUFACTURED GAS - MEDINA



The people of Medina considered themselves quite progressive and very fortunate when the first gas installations were completed in 1857. The work was done under the direction of a gas works headed by William Bent. He was a cousin of Don C. Bent who operated Bent's Opera House in Medina. The site of the gas works or gas plant was at the end of Pearl Street adjacent to the canal off Race Alley!

The 1875 Orleans County Atlas clearly shows the location as "Gas Wks". It was only logical that it should be located here because of cheap coal rates by canal transport and unloading facilities. Notice too, the coal yard also located on a slip of the Erie Canal off the Medina basin.

We must remember that gas for illumination was being manufactured from coal. This was not natural gas that was being distributed.

Let me give you just a brief 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 gas-lights 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 gas works opened in Buffalo. By 1859 New York State had 70 gas companies - more than any other state.

In essence, a gas works had a large furnace with a huge oven or retort used for heating coal. Under heat, the retort drives the gas off the coal. It was then purified by exposing it through lime sludge and stored in a holder or tank under pressure for underground distribution. Naturally, there was a by-product which was called coke. This was the coal after extreme heating which left it soft and porous. It could be used for burning in stoves or sometimes just as back fill in grading or surface cover on driveways.

The first gas mains in Medina were made of logs

as were most gas lines of the 1850's. The first streets to have gas installed were Shelby Street, now Main Street and Center Street. By the 1860's a stock company was formed, the gas works expanded and more sections of Medina got mains. Gas lights along the streets were considered a modern convenience even though a lamp lighter was required to turn the individual lights on each night and light them. Precautions were not always taken and explosions sometimes occurred. The worst occurred in August 1888 when a gas works employee was fatally injured by being blown to the top of a coal pile.

In 1891 the Medina Gas Co. was consolidated with electric interests under the Medina Gas & Electric Co. W. R. Curry is listed in the 1894 Directory as electric and gas manager. About the same time the assets of the company were sold to a group of New York interests with A. L. Fennessy as president but with Mr. Curry as plant manager. There were over 150 customers located along four miles of mains in the Village of Medina. A holder tank had the capacity of 40,000 cubic feet of manufactured gas. By 1902 however, the gas works was suffering from a bad financial situation and was sold at a foreclosure sale. Around ten years later there was a movement to get the village to take it over but this was stalled through litigation. Foreclosure proceedings resulted with Thomas Hinds purchasing the plant for \$15,000. Some \$37,000 was spent on an addition and other improvements to the system.

The 1913 map clearly shows the gas works with "Thos. G. Hinds" on it. Note here the circle which represents the gas holding or retaining tank. This operation continued until 1917 when the plant was abandoned as electricity had taken over all the lighting needs. In progressive stages the old plant was dismantled and the building eventually razed. The gas holder was removed in 1921. At that time Charles N. Hood and Milton J. Whedon, who had acquired the property at a county tax sale, gave the village the site for a parking area.