
SERVICES FOR BETTER LIVING

Gas

Before the 1840s, downtown Washington was a dangerous place at night. Because of poor lighting from dim oil lamps, citizens were subjected to robberies which sometimes led to physical injury. Unpaved streets through swampy areas made walking hazardous.

In 1847 a dramatic demonstration of lighting took place. A gas lantern six feet in diameter was mounted on the dome of the Capitol building. At night it illuminated the grounds and surrounding areas and could be seen for miles. A gas chandelier suspended from the ceiling of the Senate Chamber provided a superior interior light. Gas lights were installed on downtown streets shortly thereafter, according to the Washington Gas Light Company's *Growing with Washington*, published in 1948.

The following year, Congress granted a charter to the Washington Gas Light Company, and a gas plant was built at 10th Street and Louisiana Avenue, N.W. Mains were laid to the White House, government buildings, and private businesses, and later to residential areas for street lights and interior lighting.

The Georgetown Gas Light Company was chartered in 1854, bringing service to communities in Northwest Washington and Montgomery County. During the early 1920s, when there was much building in the areas of Rosemary and Thornapple Streets and Meadow Lane, gas mains were extended into Section Four. Electric lights were already in use, but gas was used for stoves, hot water heaters, and furnaces.

The Georgetown and Washington Gas Light Companies were merged in 1936. Twenty years later, a pipeline system was installed from Texas to deliver natural gas to the metropolitan Washington area.

Electricity

Early experimentation with electric lighting in downtown Washington began in 1879, the year Thomas Edison perfected the first incandescent lamp. During the 1880s, the first practical electric street lights were installed along F Street, N.W., at the request of merchants who believed they would encourage business. Electric lights were installed in the White House in 1891. These efforts were the work of a number of small competing companies.

The Potomac Electric Power Company was incorporated in 1896. It was a subsidiary of the Washington

Railway and Electric Company, a major operator of trolley cars in the Washington area. PEPCO's *50 Years in Washington*, published in 1940, states that electric lights began to replace gas lights in the District of Columbia in the early 1900s.

During the early years of its residential development, the Chevy Chase Land Company supplied electricity to homes in nearby Maryland. It was generated at the Chevy Chase Lake power house, but was available only between the hours of sunset and sunrise. *PEPCO News* of November 1908 announced that all equipment and rights to supply service were transferred to the Potomac Electric Power Company, which was able to supply electricity on a 24-hour basis. During this period, small electric heating devices such as cooking aids, irons, and radiators were developed for home use. Small motors were perfected to operate sewing machines, pumps, and fans.

In the early 1920s, Chevy Chase Section Four had a separate billing from PEPCO for street lights. Town volunteers maintained payment lists and collected 50 cents per month from property owners. An interesting side light of this procedure was that prominent residents were sometimes delinquent and gave dubious reasons for non-payment.

Water Supply

The circle on Rosemary Street across from the Chevy Chase Elementary School was once the site of a water tower. Constructed in 1893, this 130-foot steel structure was of handsome design. It stood on high ground, dominated the nearby neighborhood, and was a landmark visible for miles. From a series of wells, a pumping station 300 feet to the north conveyed water to the tower. Residents of the Chevy Chase area were supplied through a system of water mains at a cost below city prices. This source of water was replaced during the 1920s, and the water tower was removed in 1934.

Many families had wells on their property. A hand pump was mounted on the platform which covered the well. Some of these pumps were protected by architecturally attractive pump houses. The installation of automatic electric pumps in basements began about 1912. They supplied running water to kitchens, bathrooms, radiators, and hot water heaters.

In the early 1920s, state and county health officials began to receive complaints. Local wells and springs were drying up during the summer months. There were

also indications that raw sewage was being discharged into the natural flows of water according to *A History of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission*, published in March 1979. Clearly, corrective measures were imperative. Town records indicate that eight-inch water mains were installed on Leland and Woodbine Streets in 1926 by the Suburban Sanitary Commission, and it can be assumed that the entire town changed over around that time.

Telephone

For our readers born after 1940, the instrument below is a telephone. It had no rotary dial or touch-tone. When the receiver was lifted, an operator at the telephone company responded in a charming feminine voice with "number please." She was also referred to as "Central," and she completed all calls by plugging in lines in her switchboard. When asked for Kensington 91 she connected you with McKeever's Ice Cream store. Bethesda 31-K was the number for Alfred Wilson, Coal, Wood, and Feed. She could reach numbers in the District which were prefixed with exchange names such as North, Main, and Lincoln.

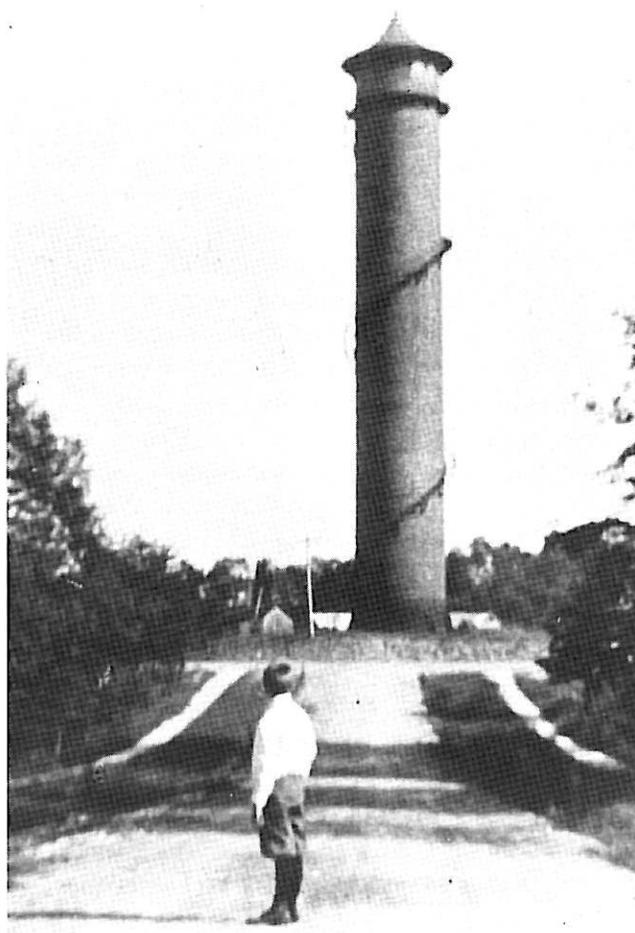
The first telephone in Chevy Chase was a line extended in 1893 from D.C. to the trolley car house at Chevy Chase Lake..

By 1902 there were 13 telephone lines in operation in the Chevy Chase area. Service was transferred to the Cleveland (Maryland) exchange in 1908 when the number of lines had increased to 311. In 1927 the exchange name for Chevy Chase became Wisconsin and 1,224 lines were in operation.

The central office at Wisconsin Avenue and Stanford Street was opened in 1928 to handle the Wisconsin and Bradley (Bethesda) exchanges. Service was converted to dial operation in 1940. Oliver became the exchange name for Chevy Chase in 1941. In 1953 the seven-digit numbering plan replaced the six-digit numbers, with designations known as Oliver 2 or Oliver 4, today dialed as 652 or 654.

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Information for this article was furnished by the Chesapeake and Potomac Telephone Company.



An eastward look at the water tower from Elm, now Stanford Street.

1913 PHOTO BY LAWRENCE WINNEMORE