

Electrical Provincetown

by Thomas J. Blalock

The introduction of electric light to Provincetown during the early twentieth century was, in fact, intertwined with the power needs of the several fish-processing cold storage plants that once operated in the town.

At one time, there were seven of these plants in operation and they have been described as being “huge and completely out of scale” with the appearance of the town. Regardless, they were necessary to the town’s economy. They “flash” froze both fish for transportation and bait for use during the winter and spring fishing seasons.

The Cape Cod Cold Storage Company, for example, dated from about 1850 and it was located at 125-129 Commercial Street in the West End, adjacent to what was known as Freeman’s Wharf. Eventually, this facility was operated by Atlantic Coast Fisheries and, today, the site is occupied by the Coast Guard Station.

This plant included what has been described as a “Greek Revival” style power house that fronted on Commercial Street.

Near the center of town, the Colonial Cold Storage plant was located at 229 Commercial Street, adjacent to what formerly had been known as Lancy’s Wharf. The power house for this plant also fronted on Commercial Street and that building still exists today. The original ornate columned portico now serves as the entrance to a clothing boutique known as the *Indigo Lounge*, just across from Masonic Place.

These were not originally electrical power houses, however. They served to provide steam, which was the source of power, to operate either steam engines or steam turbines which, in turn, powered ammonia compressors that were the heart of the refrigeration systems. The steam was produced in coal-burning boilers and it has been said that these processing plants “each had a tall brick chimney that vomited smoke”.

An early attempt to introduce electric lighting to Provincetown occurred in 1909 with the organization of the Cape Light, Heat and Power Company which operated a generating station on Race Point Road. This enterprise failed financially, however, and in 1913 its assets were acquired by a group known as the Provincetown Light and Power Associates. That, in turn, became the Provincetown Light and Power Company in 1914.

By this time, the cold storage plants had begun to replace their steam-driven refrigeration equipment with electrically-driven equipment. Thus, the steam engines or turbines in their power houses now drove electric generators instead.

Consequently, the new Provincetown Light and Power Company simply purchased their electric power from the Cape Cod Cold Storage Company in the West End. By 1916, they were supplying about 700 summer customers and about 500 winter customers. In addition, they supplied electric power for about 130 street lamps throughout the town.

The production of this electric power was, apparently, a cooperative venture between the Cape Cod Cold Storage Company and the Provincetown Light and Power Company.

In 1921, at the Cape Cod Cold Storage plant, the Provincetown Light and Power Company paid for the drilling of eight new water wells in order to supply additional water for the condensation of the steam used by the steam turbines which drove the electrical generators. In the following year, they also paid for the installation of a 50-kilowatt gasoline engine driven generator to assist the main generators during times of peak electrical load.

In 1925, a new General Electric 125-kilowatt steam turbine generator was installed, presumably by the Cape Cod Cold Storage Company itself.

Then, in 1926, the installation of diesel engine driven generators by the Provincetown Light and Power Company began with a 90-kilowatt unit that, apparently, had been part of the assets acquired from the failed Cape Light, Heat and Power Company in 1913.

The demand for electrical power continued to increase rapidly and, in 1930, two large new Fairbanks-Morse 300-kilowatt diesel engine driven generators were added and housed "in a new brick and steel building".

As a result, a surplus of generating capacity allowed for the construction of an overhead power line from Provincetown to North Truro in order to supply fifty customers there. By this time, the number of customers in Provincetown had increased to eleven hundred.

Coincidentally, the Highland Light was electrified in 1932. However, it appears that a generator was installed at that location for the purpose, rather than tapping power from this new line to North Truro.

By 1936, the Provincetown Light and Power Company had a total of four diesel engine driven generators in operation which totaled about 1300 kilowatts in capacity and were supplying a peak electrical load of 640 kilowatts.

In 1937, the company was acquired by the New England Gas and Electric Association and, in 1938, they installed an additional 150-kilowatt diesel engine driven generator that had been purchased second-hand from the Worcester Gas Light Company (the municipal gas lighting companies entered the business of providing electric lighting as a matter of survival during the early twentieth century !).

In spite of this almost continuous addition of new generating equipment, by 1939 the peak load being supplied equaled the total capacity of the generators, not a good situation in the event of a generator breakdown or even just due to the need for routine maintenance of the generating equipment.

A 1931 report on electric power in Massachusetts had stated that “Provincetown is on the extreme tip of Cape Cod and most disadvantageously located for the purchase of current from any of the large generating plants” !

Regardless, electric power was first imported to Provincetown, in 1939, as a result of the construction of a new overhead line from Wellfleet to South Truro so as to connect with the existing line from Provincetown to North Truro. These lines enabled electric power to be purchased from the Cape and Vineyard Electric Company which had been supplying power to the Upper Cape and The Islands. This meant that the power flow along the existing line between Provincetown and North Truro was now reversed !

Then, in 1948, a new 22,000 volt overhead power line was constructed from the substation in Truro to a new electrical substation in Provincetown in order to increase the amount of imported power available in Provincetown.

In 1950, the Provincetown Light and Power Company stockholders voted to merge with the Cape and Vineyard Electric Company which, in turn, became a part of the Commonwealth Electric Company in 1981. Since 1999, Commonwealth Electric has been called “NSTAR”.

Unfortunately, it is not known just how long, following the importation of electric power into Provincetown, the generators at the Cape Cod Cold Storage plant were kept in operation. Perhaps there are readers who could shed some “light” on this subject !

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SOURCES

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APPENDIX

Cold Storage Plants

Western Cold Storage (across from) 50 Commercial Street
[now the site of the West End parking lot]

Cape Cod Cold Storage 125-129 Commercial Street
[now the site of the Coast Guard Station]

Puritan Cold Storage 131 Commercial Street
[connected with Cape Cod Cold Storage]

Fisherman's Cold Storage 185 Commercial Street
[now the site of *Bubala's* restaurant]

Colonial Cold Storage 229 Commercial Street
[power house building still standing]

Provincetown Cold Storage (?) Commercial Street
[now the site of the Johnson St. parking lot]

Consolidated Cold Storage 497-503 Commercial Street
[now the *Ice House Condominiums*]

(additional source) Bonnie Steele McGhee,
"Old Wharves of Provincetown", 1996 (unpublished)
Provincetown Public Library Archives