Electric Lights Come to Georgia

Atlanta was one of the first cities in Georgia to demand electric lighting. In 1883, its citizens organized and promoted the formation of an electric company. It seems they were motivated by a spirit of pride, in that they did not want Atlanta to lag behind other towns in acquiring this great invention. The citizens raised $3,500 in a stock offering and formed the Georgia Electric Light Company of Atlanta. The company received a franchise to "serve patrons from a central station, or from isolated plants, electric lights for stores, dwellings, machine shops, depots, inside and out, or to introduce said lights wherever desired." Later that year, the new company entered into a contract to purchase an electric light plant of 45 lights for the sum of $8,500 from the Southern Light Company of New York. In 1884, the company built a 940 kilowatt generating plant on Marietta and Spring Streets and installed 22 electric street lights.

By 1889, half the generation from the plant was powering 800 streetlights; the rest was being used to operate another new invention, electric streetcars. In 1891, an Atlanta banker named Henry Atkinson began pulling together the foundation of what was to become Georgia Power Company. He became a shareholder in Georgia Electric Light Company of Atlanta, and a year later, he quietly accumulated enough stock to take control of the operation.

Atkinson was the perfect person to take hold of a fledgling electric company, which he now simply called Georgia Electric Light Company. He was considered a visionary and maverick by all who knew him. One of Atkinson's first tasks was to raise funds to completely rebuild the electric system of his new company. He was successful and soon installed 800 arc lights and 2,000 incandescent lights and constructed a steam generating plant on Davis Street to provide more power. The new plant generated 11,000 kilowatts and was built for the huge sum of $600,000. Half the plant's output ran streetlights, the rest powered electric streetcars.

As a result of Atkinson's improvements, the Atlanta Constitution, on June 6, 1894, wrote, "There is not a better lighted city in America than Atlanta, and there is not a citizen in Atlanta who will not gladly testify to the excellence of the City's street lighting service. The Georgia Electric Light Company is fully deserving of commendation for its efforts to give the City a thoroughly efficient service.... Night after night, the street lights scattered over 10 square miles burn with perfect regularity. The City is to be congratulated that the lighting service is in the hands of a Company that performs its duties so faithfully."

By 1897, Georgia Electric Light Company was serving 400 customers. The company's annual payroll for its 35 employees was $25,283.

Georgia Railway and Electric Company

As the industry and demand for electricity grew, it wasn't long before Atkinson recognized the need for further consolidation. In 1902, he hired a young Atlanta lawyer, Preston S. Arkwright, to charter a company called Georgia Railway and Electric Company and consolidate many of the street car lines and their generating plants into the new firm.

Georgia Railway and Electric Company acquired Atlanta Gas Light Company in 1903.

By 1904, Georgia Railway and Electric Company was straining to keep up with demand. President Arkwright entered into an agreement with developer S. Morgan Smith, who founded the Atlanta Water and Electric Power Company, to purchase all the output from Smith's hyrdoelectric plant on the Chattahoochee River. The site, just north of Atlanta was called Morgan Falls.

Morgan Falls was one of the largest hydro plants of its time, with a capacity to generate 17,000 kilowatts. It was enough capacity to meet all the needs of Georgia Railway and Electric Company; but as a matter of precaution, the coal plants were maintained as standby generators. Unfortunately, early operations of the hydro plant were sporadic, leading to many power interruptions. To reduce this problem, the company purchased and installed a 6,000 horsepower gas engine at the Davis St. plant , and connected it to a 2,000-kilowatt generator. The unit could come on and take full load within two minutes, and with the aid of storage batteries, could keep both the street railway and electric light and power service going with minimal delay.

Through another consolidation, the hydro plant was acquired by Atkinson's company in 1912. Today Morgan Falls still produces power for Georgia Power customers.

Baseball used to boost ridership

In 1906, Arkwright purchased a baseball team, the Atlanta Crackers, and located it near his street-car line to boost ridership. The ploy worked. That same year, the second steel-tower transmission line in America was built by Georgia Railway and Electric Company. It carried 66,000 volts from Gainesville to Atlanta. Another hydro plant, named Lloyd Shoals, was completed in 1907 and added to Georgia Railway andElectric Company's system in 1927.

Another major restructuring took place in 1911, when Atkinson acquired several more utilities, including Atlanta Water and Electric Power Company. He leased the Georgia Railway and Electric Company to the new company Georgia Railway and Power Company.

In 1912, a 100-mile, high-voltage (110,000-volts) transmission line was built from Georgia Railway and Power's new hydro plant being built at Tallulah Falls to one of this country's first outdoor high-voltage substation at Boulevard in Atlanta. The next year, the first of six hydro units at Tallulah Falls opened, followed by four other units in 1914. A sixth unit, generating 12,000 kilowatts, was completed in 1919.

Ironically, the first power generated by Tallulah Falls was sold, not to Georgia Railway and Electric, but to Southern Power Company, later to become Duke Power Company. When completed, Tallulah Falls was capable of generating 72,000-kilowatts of electricity.

By 1914, the Georgia Railway and Power Company had three hydro and two steam electric generating plants with a combined capacity of 94,200 kilowatts.

Utilities join transmission networks

In 1920, the state made its first interconnection with the Alabama Power Company through a transmission line that extended from Rome, Ga., to the Gadsden, Ala., steam generating plant. This interconnection began a transmission network that embraced seven major electric systems in five southeastern states. It also marked the beginning of an extremely beneficial inter-utility cooperation.

A severe drought during the summer of 1925 reduced the electrical production from the hydro plants by nearly 60 percent. Power had to be purchased from neighboring states to make up the deficit. The event embarrassed Atkinson, and hydro power would never again reign as the primary generation mix for Georgia Railway and Power Company.

In 1926, several southern utilities, including Georgia Railway and Power Company, become part of a holding company called Southeastern Power & Light Company. During the consolidation, the name of Georgia Railway and Power changed to Georgia Power Company. Atkinson became chairman of the board and retained that title until his death in 1939. With the consolidations, the new Georgia Power Company now served about half the state.

In 1927, several more utilities including Athens Railway and Electric Company and Rome Railway and Light Company merged with Georgia Power. The new company now served 76 cities, more than 600 miles of transmission and distribution lines and a territory of about 30,000 square miles. The company had 4,000 employees, 17 hydroelectric plants, four steam generating stations, about 5,000 miles of transmission and distribution lines, 300 miles of street railways in several cities, gas generating and distribution systems and the steam heat system in Atlanta.

The mergers brought 130 communities together into one system. Georgia Power's customer base was now 62,734. Electricity was selling for 7.6 cents per kilowatt-hour and the average annual consumption was 481 kilowatt-hours — about half the average monthly usage today.

By the end of 1927, Southeastern Power & Light Co., which was then comprised of Alabama Power, Gulf Power, Georgia Power, Mississippi Power and South Carolina Power, merged with the Commonwealth Power Company, (Central Illinois Light Company, Consumers Power Company, Pennsylvania Power Company, Ohio Edison, and Southern Indiana Gas and Electric). The consolidation was undertaken to provide more reliable service, pool capital funds for construction purposes and take advantage of the executive and technical expertise of the system's employees. The new venture was called Commonwealth & Southern Corporation.

In 1928, power companies in the cities of Macon and Augusta merged with Georgia Power Company.

Georgia Power got out of the gas business in 1929 when it sold Atlanta Gas Light Company and the other gas subsidiaries it owned.

All that changed in 1930, when Georgia Power built the first unit at Plant Atkinson. The coal-fired unit was built under the supervision of a bright engineer named Bill Mitchell. The plant was designed to burn coal, but it also was equipped to burn gas. It would be 10 years before another plant was constructed.

Besides Plant Atkinson, Mitchell later supervised the construction of the other three units at Atkinson, the four steam units at Plant Arkwright near Macon, and two units at Plant Mitchell near Albany.

Electricity now 5.7 cents per kilowatt-hour

By the close of 1930, through new innovations and better utilization of equipment and systems, electricity prices had dropped to 5.7 cents per kilowatt-hour, down from 7.6 cents in 1927.

Under terms of a Securities and Exchange Commission ruling, the Commonwealth and Southern Corporation had to divest itself of its southern properties. This breakup resulted in the birth of the Southern Company in 1947. The former Tennessee Electric Power Company and northern portions of Alabama Power, Georgia Power and Mississippi Power had been sold by Commonwealth and Southern in 1938 and 1940 to TVA. Now Southern Company was required to sell the South Carolina Power Company as well.

In 1935, Georgia Power, for the first time in its history, sold a billion kilowatt-hours of electricity. A strong marketing campaign was begun with mobile electric kitchens, staffed by husband-and-wife teams, touring the state. The company also had a number of mobile farm and merchandising displays touring the state. The programs demonstrated how electric living was better.

By the end of 1940, Georgia Power was supplying service to 562 communities, located in 138 of Georgia's 159 counties. Hydro power was meeting 75 percent of the load and the remaining 25 percent was coming from steam-fired generation.

At the end of World War II, Mitchell became Georgia Power's second president. A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mitchell began his power career working in Brazil as a construction engineer on massive hydroelectric projects. He returned to the United States in 1912 and became associated with Alabama Power Company, where, in 1924, he became vice president and operating manager.

In 1947, Preston Arkwright Jr., the son of Georgia Power's first president, assumed the presidency. He died nine months later, when, on a trip to Washington, D.C. to visit his daughter, he developed pneumonia.

McManus becomes fourth president

Following Arkwright's death, Clifford McManus was named Georgia Power's fourth president. A native of Smithville, Ga., McManus came to Georgia Power Company from Alabama Power Company, where he began his career in 1927 as superintendent of district operations. He was a major architect of the divisional organization, which greatly increased the company's efficiency and its acceptance and approval by the public.

By 1947, the cost for electricity at Georgia Power for residential customers had fallen to just over 2 cents per kilowatt-hour. As a result, and Georgia Power's 354,000 customers were using 48 percent more electricity than the national average. By year's end, Georgia Power sold 3 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity. Three years later it sold 4 billion.

After World War II, Georgia Power started another huge construction program, with one new steam plant following another, as fast as construction crews could get them built.

During the next seven years, the company invested $238 million in new plant construction, including those at McManus, Mitchell, Hammond and Yates. Units also were added to Atkinson and Arkwright. Bartletts Ferry Dam was enlarged, and a 45,000-kilowatt Sinclair Dam became the newest hydro plant. About 539,000 kilowatts of generation were added during this period, and, by 1956, the system's capacity had climbed to 17,000,000-kilowatts.

Peak-load changes from winter to summer

It was during 1948 that air conditioning shifted Georgia Power's peak-load time from winter to summer. That same year, air-conditioned trackless trolleys and motor buses made their appearance on the streets of Atlanta.

In 1949, the last electric streetcar was retired, replaced by a trackless trolley.

In 1950, the Federal Securities and Exchange Commission ordered Georgia Power to sell its transit operations.

In 1951, Harllee Branch Jr. became Georgia Power's fifth president.

In 1956, Georgia Power sold 8 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity, doubling what it sold six years earlier. The system's generating capacity was now at 1.7 million kilowatts. Three-fourth of this power came from coal, the rest from hydro. Before World War II, those numbers were reversed.

Jack McDonough became Georgia Power's sixth president in 1957. During his term, Georgia Power got out of the transportation business and focused exclusively on supplying energy.

In 1957, Georgia Power acquired the Georgia Power & Light Company. With its headquarters in Valdosta, Georgia Power & Light was a subsidiary of Florida Power Corporation.

Company builds first steel line

Also in 1957, Georgia Power built the nation's first tubular-steel transmission line. It stretched 36 miles from Plant Yates to the town of Morrow. Virtually all poles erected before this time were wood.

In 1960, Georgia Power began moving from the Electric Building to its new headquarters at 270 Peachtree St.

In 1963, Ed Hatch became the seventh president of Georgia Power. That same year, Plant McDonough came into service, followed in 1965 by the largest of them all, Plant Branch, which, when all four of its units were installed, became Georgia's first million-kilowatt power plant.

In December 1967, Georgia Power entered the nuclear age by announcing plans to build a nuclear plant in south Georgia near Vidalia that would add more than 1.4 million kilowatts of generating capacity.

The 1970s marked a turning point in the electric generating business. For only the second time in the company's history, rates began to climb as the expense to build new generating units exceeded any technological advances.

Plant Bowen becomes top coal plant

In 1971, the first of Plant Bowen's four coal units came on line. Bowen eventually became the greatest producer of electric power of any coal-fired plant in the United States.

The industrialized world was shaken in 1973 by the Arab oil embargo. The 1970s also were a time of double-digit inflation. As a result, electric rates jumped. The cost of power poles shot up 80 percent, transformers 24 percent.

In 1974, Georgia Power added four major generating units to keep up with the state's growth, including the state's first nuclear facility, Plant Hatch Unit 1.

Bob Scherer became the eighth president of Georgia Power in 1975, during a time of severe financial crisis for the company. Earnings were declining and the company was undergoing a tremendous construction boom to keep up with the pace of growth in the state. The company cut $83.3 million from its construction budget, but that wasn't enough. To relieve the situation, the company asked the Public Service Commission for a 12 percent rate increase, or $47.9 million. It got $17.8 million. As a result, more than 2,500 Georgia Power construction jobs were eliminated.

The only two solutions to the financial crisis were to file bankruptcy or sell assets. The rural electric cooperatives had formed an umbrella organization, Oglethorpe Power Corporation, as had the municipals with the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia. These two organizations were able to infuse a huge sum of money into Georgia Power in return for portions of the company's generating and transmission assets.

Electric train makes comeback

In 1979, after a 30-year absence, electric trains made a comeback in Atlanta with the establishment of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA).

By 1980, Georgia Power had outgrown the 270 Peachtree St. building. The company moved into its current headquarters at 241 Ralph McGill Blvd. in 1981.

In 1981, James Miller Jr. became the ninth president of Georgia Power. Born in New Orleans, he was a graduate of Tulane University with a degree in electrical engineering. He started his career in 1943 as a junior engineer with Alabama Power Company in Mobile.

Savannah Electric joins system

In 1987, Savannah Electric and Power Company was purchased by The Southern Company. Power rates in Savannah were reduced three times in one year as a result of the merger.

In 1988, Bill Dahlberg became Georgia Power's 10th president. He had begun his career at Georgia Power washing meter covers.

The company's last nuclear unit, Vogtle Unit 2, went into service in 1989. The two-unit project cost in excess of $9 billion, but often has been cited as being the best nuclear plant in the world.

By 1989, Georgia Power was serving 1.5 million customers. Electric rates were about where they started 62 years earlier: 7.5 cents per kilowatt-hour.

In 1992, two electric-powered shuttle buses were delivered to Georgia Power and used to transport employees between the corporate headquarters and a nearby MARTA station in downtown Atlanta.

The following year, Georgia Power received 10 Dodge Caravan Electrics. It was heralded as the first commercially available U.S. electric vehicle in 65 years.

In 1994, Allen Franklin became the 11th president of Georgia Power. Georgia Power also became the "Official Power Source for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games."

By the end of 1997, Georgia Power had 8,300 employees serving more than 1.8 million customers. The company now is selling more than 74 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually.

In 1997, Georgia Power transferred it nuclear plant operations to Southern Nuclear, a subsidiary of Southern Company.

In 1998, the Public Service Commission cut Georgia Power's rates by $262 million. It was the company's first rate reduction since 1965.

In 1999, David Ratcliffe became Georgia Power's 12th president. That same year, Georgia Power consolidated several call centers into one location in Henry County, which houses over four hundred employees.

In 2000, Georgia Power announced the construction of Plant Dalhberg, a combined-cycle gas plant that will eventually produce 1200 megawatts of electricity.

An electronic bill program called e-bill, which allows customers to receive and pay their electric bill online, was introduced in 2001.

In 2002, the company retired 11 generating units at three sites including all of the units at Plant Atkinson and Plant Arkwright and two units at Plant Mitchell. Even with the retirement of these units, Georgia Power has more than 18,000 megawatts of generating capacity available on its system.

Southern Company entered the gas distribution business once again in Georgia with the formation of Southern Company Gas in 2002.

By the end of 2002, Georgia Power had 2.0 million customers, 8,837 employees, a total gross investment in facilities of $18.2 billion, 12,345 miles of transmission lines and 43,830 miles of distribution lines. The cost per kilowatt hour was 7.23, and the average annual customer usage was 12,867 kilowatt-hours.

Plants Arkwright and Atkinson were both demolished in late 2003, mostly by explosive demolition. That series of dramatic events began July 26 when Arkwright's 585-foot-tall exhaust stack was felled like a huge tree by about 100 pounds of explosives. Boilerhouses at Atkinson collapsed after a series of well-timed blasts on Nov. 8, and a similar Dec. 5 "implosion" of the boilerhouses at Arkwright was the final spectacle. Turbine buildings at both plants had been demolished by conventional means prior to each explosive event.