A "Weird and Ghostly Appearance"

Gigantic Towers Once Shined Electric Moonlight on Dark Cityscape

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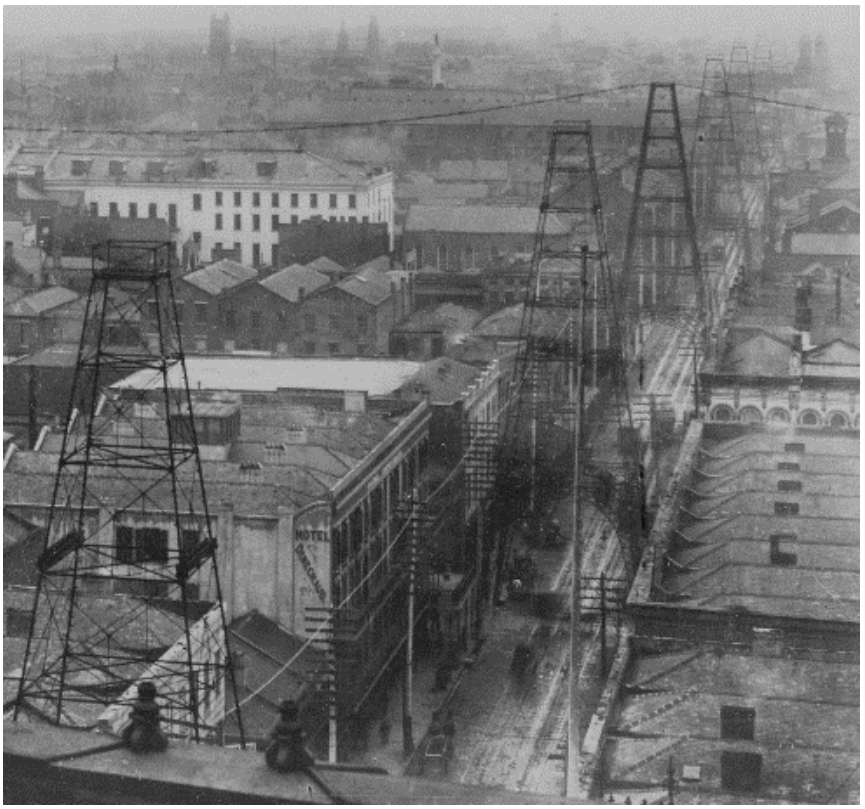

Looking up Carondelet Street around 1900, when light towers were used for transmission wiring. Photo detail courtesy Louisiana State Museum.

A nighttime stroll through circa-1890 New Orleans would have presented many memorable sights: retail emporia with lavish window displays, rambunctious concert saloons spilling music into the streets, ships readying for departure at dawn—and, overhead, lofty lamps casting ethereal glows on the cityscape below. The steel towers were part of a spectacular but short-lived experiment to determine the best way to illuminate the nocturnal city.

The problem was as old as the city, and various strategies were tried. The Spanish Cabildo in the 1790s called for owners of corner properties to mount lanterns with tin reflectors against their walls. When these proved inadequate, the Cabildo purchased 86 glass-encased oil lamps from Philadelphia and hung them from iron arms mounted on wooden posts. According to Cabildo records, expenses for "oil, cotton, sulphur, wicks, flints, and steel…to make sparks" were borne by property owners in proportion to their frontage. To minimize costs, administrators tried various fuels, including fish oil, bear oil and pelican grease, and directed that lamps be lit only 22 nights monthly—"based on the decrease or increase of the light of the moon."

By the 1820s, busy intersections were illuminated by oil-fueled lamps "hung from the centre of ropes passing across the streets, as in France," as an English visitor later described of the Faubourg Marigny. Along with "the shops, signs, gateways, pavements, and passengers moving in the streets," he wrote, the suspended lamps "all seemed so perfectly Parisian." A team of city-

employed lamplighters serviced the devices and doubled as security guards as they made their daily rounds.

In 1834, the New Orleans Gas Light and Banking Company opened a manufacturing plant in the vicinity of today's Superdome. There, gas was extracted from super-heated coal and piped to subscribers for domestic cooking and illumination, making New Orleans an earlier adopter of urban gasification lighting. By the 1840s, stately iron lampposts with glass-encased gas lamps were installed throughout the urban core, while suspended oil lamps remained in the faubourgs. For decades to come, the New Orleans night flickered with a yellow firefly-like glimmer.

Electrification arrived to New Orleans around 1880 and was embraced enthusiastically by the commercial sector. Theaters and hotels were among the first to electrify, and department stores saw a competitive advantage to radiant displays. "Even dingy back streets and narrow alleys are illuminated," reported *Harper's Weekly* in March 1883, "and it is not uncommon to find the brilliantly lit globe of glass swinging in front of some picturesque tumble-down shop."

Along the levee, the wharfmaster installed "high poles" keeping aloft rows of colored bulbs, while high-powered spotlights were mounted atop the Canal Street Ferry House. On clear nights, the lighting enabled loading and unloading, and when fog rolled in, "the effect is then wonderful," wrote *Harper's*, giving the scene "an uncertain, weird, and ghostly appearance."

1883 view of electric light illumination on the New Orleans levee, by J. O. Davidson, courtesy Library of Congress.

Wonderful as it was, the city realized this piecemeal approach eventually had to be replaced with permanent infrastructure. Engineers debated a fundamental question: should the city install a distributed system of thousands of lampposts and suspended lights citywide, using Thomas Edison's incandescent bulb? Or would it be more effective to install a few dozen soaring towers and illuminate entire neighborhoods with powerful arc lights favored by Edison's rival, Charles Brush?

Building a vast new network of wired lampposts would be slow and costly. Centralized towers, on the other hand, would get light on the streets faster and cheaper and make constituents happier sooner. Other cities had been experimenting with electric tower lights, including Aurora, Cleveland, Detroit and New York City, which erected 250-foot-towers over Madison Square and along the East River. Liverpool lit its port in a similar manner, as did France for parts of its coastline. New Orleans seemed to be primed for a similar project: stated the *Scientific American*, "It is doubtful whether there is in the whole of the country another space…so largely benefited by the new method of lighting as the busy crescent of the New Orleans levee." That 1882 article introduced an ambitious proposal for a 500-foot illumination tower at the foot of Canal Street.

The narrow cast-iron cylinder would be erected in sections from the bottom up, its zenith tethered by guy wires to the four street corners. Inside would be a rather claustrophobic elevator for a “light trimmer” to be lifted daily to the top, like a human bullet shot slowly up a vertical barrel. There, he would insert new carbon rods into the lamps—a wildly dangerous job called trimming—to cast the equivalent light of 40,000 candles over the next evening.

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PROPOSED ELECTRIC LIGHT TOWER AT NEW ORLEANS.

The convenience and economy of electric illumination for harbors and water fronts, particularly when it is desirable to handle freight by night as well as by day, have been amply demonstrated in this country and in Europe. The experience of Liverpool on this point has been especially valuable, both in showing the economy of the electric light for docks and shipping, and the very satisfactory working of lights raised high in the air.

The crescent shape of the river front at New Orleans, the massing of the shipping business along a comparatively short reach of shore, and the broad open space along the levee to be illuminated, conspire to make the elevated electric light especially serviceable and appropriate there; while the high cost of wharfage makes it extremely desirable that every possible facility should be afforded for the rapid transference of the vast cargoes of cotton, sugar, grain, and other bulky commodities handled at that port. It is doubtful whether there is in the whole country another space of equal magnitude calculated to be so largely benefited by the new method of lighting as the busy crescent of the New Orleans levee.

Two serious obstacles have been encountered in the practical development of plans of securing such artificial illumination on a grand scale by means of powerful electric lamps raised on lofty towers. The towers are costly and not easy to erect; and a good deal of awkward machinery is required to lower the lamps for trimming every day and return them to their position at the top of the mast. To do away with the latter difficulty entirely and to very materially lessen the former are the objects of the light tower invented by Mr. William Golding, of New Orleans, and illustrated by the engravings herewith.

From time immemorial a standard illustration of perversity and impracticableness has been the man who would begin to [Continued on page 165.]

ELECTRIC LIGHT TOWER FOR CANAL STREET AND LEVEE NEW ORLEANS.—DESIGNED BY WM. GOLDING, M.E.

The Canal needle was never built, but the idea of centralized towers advanced. In 1884, the Committee on Fire Department and Lighting recommended to allow the Brush Electric Light Company to erect a light tower uptown. It would save the city the expense of 50 existing gas lamps, the committee noted, and not cost a dime, because Brush offered to erect the first tower gratis—and then get paid to build many more. The city agreed to erect light towers all through the “suburbs,” meaning just about everywhere outside the French Quarter.

The first tower was erected in 1884-1885 by the Dryades Market on present-day O.C. Haley Boulevard at Martin Luther King. While the Detroit Iron Tower Company installed the triangular 175-foot-high structure, the Brush Company handled the 12,000-candlelight-power lamps.

That same year, the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exhibition at present-day Audubon Park was lit by ten 25,000-candlepower towers, and its exhibits proudly showcased electricity in all its uses. More towers followed: on Canal at Bourbon; along Poydras, Carondelet, Camp, Dryades, and Carrollton Avenue; on North Tonti and Lapeyrouse; on Galvez at Dumaine.

The concurrent spread of telephones and residential electrification meant that many towers did double duty as transmission supports, upholding utility cables. Plans called for over 250 towers throughout town—some for illumination, more for transmission, some for both. From a distance, the interconnected superstructures looked like giant skeleton monsters marching down the avenue.

1898 photo of Canal-Bourbon tower. Courtesy Louisiana State Museum.

Their bizarre appearance detracted from the novelty of the midnight suns, and by the early 1890s, the public began to see the technology's drawbacks. For one, the arc lamps were absolutely blinding to a direct gaze, while the illumination below formed hard shadows up close or faded to darkness farther away. Maintenance was big problem: whereas streetlights with incandescent bulbs could be fixed by anyone on a ladder, tower-mounted arc lamps required a specialist to climb to the top daily, or the lamps to be slowly lowered. Pedestrians and conveyances, meanwhile, had to navigate around the towers. Migrating birds crashed into them, kids scampered up them, and drunks fell off them. One "foolhardy climber…under the influence of liquor," reported the *Daily Picayune* in 1890, scaled the 150-foot-tower on Howard and Carondelet and ended up "dash(ing) out his brains (and landing) in an inert heap." Civic watchdogs, meanwhile, raised concerns about monopolies, as the lighting companies increased their leverage in the utility marketplace when more and more cables were strung upon their towers. Safety questions arose regarding live wires falling to the streets, and neighbors found the spindly apparatus to be "beauty spoilers… great, cumbersome, unsightly affairs," as the *Daily Item* stated in an 1894 editorial titled "Remove the Towers." By the early 1900s, it became clear that tower lighting was a mistake. Without much fanfare, the steel structures were gradually dismantled and replaced by modern lampposts, utility poles and, in parts of downtown, underground wiring. By the 1910s nearly all the towers were gone. Arc lamps, meanwhile, were gradually being replaced by incandescent bulbs, whose "effect," according to one 1919 source, "is much more beautiful, and the light more evenly distributed."

No traces of the towers remain today, but we may glean how they looked from the giant transmission towers currently lining the riverfront, at such spots as the foot of Oak Street. As to how the beams appeared at night, one must travel to Austin, Texas, where the world's last operating system of "moon towers" has been in service since 1895.

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