

Michigan Every Day **By Patrick Sullivan and Carole Eberly**

Nov. 14, 1857
First gas light in Grand Rapids

When natural gas came to Grand Rapids, it came with a fury. The Grand Rapids Gas Light Company, a local concern, beat out-of-towners in a race to lay gas lines through the city to bring this novel energy into homes and businesses. Gas lines were first laid at Ottawa Avenue and Ferry Street that August. Soon four miles of gas mains had been laid. The novelty of artificial light illuminating the darkness caused a crowd to gather at Canal and Pearl Streets, where, on Nov. 14, 1857, Francis B. Gilbert, president of the power company, lit Grand Rapids' first gaslight. Soon, shops, inns and a number of private residences, invariably owned by the city's wealthiest citizens, signed up for the service. In its first year, the Grand Rapids Gas light Company sold a million cubic feet of gas to a hundred customers. Like other methods of illumination, candles and oil lamps, natural gas carried a risk of fire. However, it provided a reliable source of light. But by 1880, the gas company had reason to fear a new technology that had the potential to wipe out its business – electricity. At first, electricity seemed a threat but the gas company carried on, hedging its position by offering a new service – gas hookups for stoves. By 1882, there were about a dozen electric lights in the city, but gaslight still dominated. Across the city thoroughfares were lit up at night with gaslights. On the outskirts of the city, where neither gas lines nor electric wires yet reached, oil lamps remained the source of light. Natural gas became more affordable in the early 20th century as advances in its delivery system were developed. But by the 1920's, the industry faced a new problem. During Prohibition, moonshiners tapped into the lines with garden hoses to steal the gas for powering their stills. The moonshiners often were able to move on before the company caught on to a line breach.

Nonetheless, the Grand Rapids Gas Light Company survived electricity and moonshiners. It went on to merge with other companies and become part of Michigan Consolidated Gas Company.