

# Historically Speaking - Street Lights

*By Damon McQuaid*

In January 1884, Lunenburg had its first street lamps erected and lit courtesy of the Village Improvement Society. The society, which operated from 1881 to 1947 was founded to improve public grounds and streets by planting trees, protecting walls and tending to plots of grass. By 1884 they had appropriated enough funding by throwing parties, suppers and hosting May Pole dances to purchase seven street lamps. Four of these lamps were placed near homes in the town center, and three were placed around the lower common.

In 1885, Lunenburg first included money in the town budget to pay for lighting and the care of street lamps. As these were gas or oil lamps and required attention on a daily basis, the position of lamp lighter was created with a salary of \$83.33

In 1909 the town was asked to improve a sum of money to purchase 24 oil lamps and posts to be placed near Whalom Park where they were most needed. It was understood, according to the article in the warrant for the town meeting, that the residents living closest to the lamp would supply their own oil as well as clean and light the lamps. In the same year an appropriation of \$600.00 was made to cover the cost of new electric street lights, purchasing the electricity from the Leominster Electric Light and Power Company.

In 1912, a lighting committee was appointed by the town to study the feasibility of obtaining electricity for both public and private use at a rate less than currently being charged. It seems even one hundred years ago people

were still complaining about high electricity rates. The result of this was the establishment of a Municipal Light Department that was put in operation in 1914, when an electrical distribution system was purchased from the Leominster Electric Light and Power Company on a bond issue for \$15,000.00.

At the time of the take over there were 81 meters in town, which then increased to 102 by the end of the year. To oversee the operation, a Municipal Light Board was established that was overseen by Ernest G. Carswell, who also served as plant manager, Emerson W. Baker and George P. Grant, Jr. This operation remained in effect until 1920 when it was sold to the Fitchburg Gas and Electric Company.

By 1976 there were 645 street lights in operation in Lunenburg at a cost of \$45,789 a year. However, by 1978, the town put a moratorium on adding new street lights because of the energy shortage.

In 1992 Fitchburg Gas and Electric (founded in 1852) merged with Unitil who currently owns and operates 322 street lights in town at a cost of around \$50,000 a year.