

3 New Beginnings

Events moved rapidly following the February 1901 fire that destroyed the electric light plant of the Citizens Electric Light Company. Mayor Samuel Woodson and the Independence City Council quickly began researching what it would take for the city to enter the electric power business.

There was ample precedent in the local area for municipal ownership of utilities. Nearby Kansas City had undergone a bruising fight just seven years before when the city government had bought the water company from private interests.¹ A number of Missouri communities, including Butler, Carthage, Farmington, Fulton, Hannibal, Kirkwood, Malden and Winona, had organized municipal utilities between 1880 and 1900.²

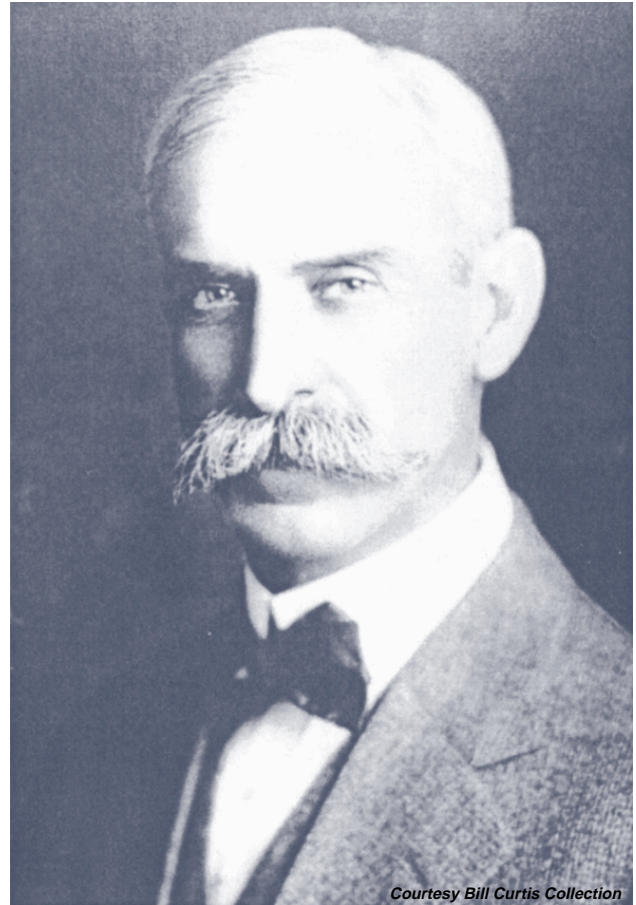
Mayor Woodson was a native of Independence and a prominent attorney and banker. He ran for mayor in 1898 and served two terms straddling the turn of the century.³ For most of his four years in office, Woodson dealt with the thorny question of providing reliable electric service for the growing city. He also presided over the switch from an aldermanic to city council form of government.

Within a week after the fire, Woodson called a special meeting of the city council to discuss the feasibility of issuing \$25,000 or more in city-backed bonds to build a new electric light plant.⁴ A majority of the council was already in agreement that municipal ownership was the direction Independence should take. A proposal by a Joplin businessman to reorganize the privately owned gas and electric companies had already been rejected by the council in January several weeks prior to the fire.⁵

Woodson and the council spent most of February and March negotiating how the bond issue would be presented to the public. In mid-March, the council voted to ask voters to issue bonds in the amount of \$25,000 to build a new electric light plant. The council set April 30, 1901 for the bond election, and noted that the referendum would require a two-thirds majority for passage.⁶ At its meeting in early April, the council upped the total for the bond issue to \$30,000.

In the weeks before the election, citizens debated the pros and cons of municipal ownership. The editors of the Independence Sentinel pointed out that the \$30,000 bond issue would have to be piggy-backed on the \$65,000 in bonds the city issued in 1897 for sewer improvements. “This lacks several thousands of dollars of reaching the constitutional bonded limit of the town,” the newspaper reported.⁷

Citizens weighed in with their opinions. “I had rather be controlled by politicians and pay my tribute to them than to be



Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

Mayor Samuel H. Woodson prevailed upon the council and voters in 1901 to permit the city's control of its electric power destiny.

controlled by trusts and compelled to contribute to them,” attorney J.A. Prewitt summed up the prevailing sentiment for municipal ownership. Realtor G.W. Clinton professed himself “in favor of encouraging outside capital to come to Independence and think a private corporation can furnish light just as cheap as the city.”⁸

Tuesday, April 30, 1901 dawned cloudy and cold. Woodson and the municipal ownership proponents admitted that they had no idea if the bond issue would pass. It did, but just barely. A total of 844 votes were cast, with 565 residents favoring city ownership of the light plant, or 67 percent of the votes cast. The measure had only two votes more than it needed to meet the two-thirds majority required.⁹

As it was, Independence was more successful in its quest for public power than Kansas City. In May 1902, a proposal to sell \$400,000 in bonds to purchase the electric system in Kansas City failed to reach the required two-thirds majority, losing by 400 votes out of 10,000 cast.¹⁰

Woodson and the council rapidly moved ahead with plans to build a new electric light plant. By the end of May, the city had entered into a contract with Owen Ford, a well-known St. Louis consulting engineer, for the construction of a coal-fired power plant on Dodgion Street, between East Lexington Street and Maple Avenue, near the public spring.¹¹

The Dodgion Street Plant

The Dodgion Street Plant almost didn't get built.

Owen Ford, the St. Louis consulting engineer hired by the Electric Light Board at its first meeting in July 1901, quickly drew up specifications for the new plant. Bids were let in early August, and Chris Yetter, the local contractor selected to build the plant, began grading and preparing the site. With orders in hand for half of the 2,000 incandescent lights the city would need to serve to break even, Electric Light Board members expressed optimism that the \$29,500 project would be completed by the end of the year.¹

But things started going wrong almost immediately. Yetter reported to the board at its August meeting that the materials to build the powerhouse had already arrived at the site, but that removing rock from the property was going slower than expected. “The contractors who secured the building of the plant are under bond to push the work through as rapidly as possible and have made all the arrangements to install the plant before the weather can interfere with the work,” Board President A.A. White reassured the public.²

Then the city got some really bad news. The wood poles brought in by the contractor for construction pilings and distribution poles were adjudged warped and crooked by Superintendent L.P. Caldwell and the city engineer. The Electric Light Board immediately sent for Owen Ford and vowed not to pay for the bad poles. “The work will not be done until it is done right,” White told reporters, “and the city is determined not to have a lot of bad poles put into the new plant.”³

The work stoppage continued through September. Ford rushed to Independence and agreed with the Electric Light Board that the majority of the crooked poles needed to be replaced. Meanwhile, the clock was ticking on the plant's finances. The city had committed to begin paying off the bonds in early August at \$100 a month for the first five years of the life of the bond issue.⁴

White and Mayor Samuel Woodson expressed hope that the new plant would be completed and in operation by December 1, but delays in the delivery of generating equipment made that date wishful thinking.⁵ By the time snow began falling in late November, it was apparent that the Dodgion Street Plant wouldn't be in operation until the spring of 1902.

In early 1902, the city assigned city employees to assist the contractors in erecting distribution poles and “buying wires and supplies.”⁶ Work on the plant sped ahead, and by May, the Dodgion Street Plant was generating electric power.

William Southern, Jr., the eccentric editor of the Jackson Examiner who rode his bicycle about town, noted in June that the city had paid about \$6,000 more to build the plant than had originally been budgeted. But Southern urged residents to give the new city utility a chance. “When this plant was built,” Southern editorialized, “there was no electric light plant in the city. Strangers coming into town to live hesitated when they found it was impossible to get electric lights, and that the streets were lighted only with gas lamps. The city by building a plant of its own has given a fine improvement, has furnished street lights of high grade, and the streets are better lighted today than ever before.”⁷ Southern's confidence was well placed. The original Dodgion Street Plant would serve the residents of the city with the bulk of their electric power needs over the next 28 years.

1 “Our Light Plant,” Jackson Examiner, June 27, 1902

2 “Work is Waiting,” Jackson Examiner, August 2, 1901

3 “The Work Is Stopped,” Jackson Examiner, September 20, 1901

4 “About December 1,” Jackson Examiner, September 27, 1901

5 *Ibid.*

6 “Light Bonds Exhausted,” Jackson Examiner, May 24, 1902

7 “Our Light Plant,” Jackson Examiner, June 27, 1902



Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

The Dodgion Street Plant in 1925.

On July 9, 1901, Woodson signed Ordinance No. 1445 into law, creating the Electric Light Board for the city of Independence. The ordinance empowered the board to hire a superintendent, sell electric power, maintain a system of accounts and recommend improvements to the electric system.¹² The council appointed one of its own, A.A. White, to head the board. Rounding out the appointments to the first board were local businessmen William Hill and Charles Stewart.¹³ The creation of the Electric Light Board marked the official starting date for public power in Independence.

As construction rushed ahead on the new electric light plant in the summer of 1901, the three-member board almost immediately agreed to hire a superintendent. They interviewed several applicants and selected L.P. Caldwell, a local electrician who had operated electric light plants at several Kansas City hotels.¹⁴

Early Struggles

The early years of municipal electric power were frequently a struggle. The Electric Superintendent and the Electric Light Board spent much of the first decade of the utility's existence making good on Woodson's 1901 promise to better light the city. City and utility crews erected 72 arc street lights of 2000 candlepower each, some on 80-foot towers that had been built by the predecessor company before the turn of the century.¹⁵

Mayor Lewellyn Jones presided over the final upgrade of lighting of Independence Square in 1910, including the installation of four incandescent lamps to illuminate the face of the clock on the courthouse. "Time is worth just as much at night as in the daytime," he argued, "and yet we cannot see the face of the town clock at night."¹⁶

Wiring homes for electric power took most of a decade and was an expensive and time-consuming process, with the city bearing much of the cost of new wiring. The costs associated with wiring homes and businesses kept the municipal utility in the red for much of its first 15 years in business. In January 1903, the Electric Light Board reported that income from the utility totaled \$341.44. Expenses for the month ran \$419.79.¹⁷

Providing electricity for the community also brought about unforeseen technical difficulties. Shortly after the Dodgion Street Plant began commercial service in 1902, engineers discovered that induction from the distribution lines was knocking out telephone service.¹⁸ In 1906, utility engineers determined that limestone deposits in the public springs were clogging up the boilers at the Dodgion Street Plant.¹⁹

Electric power was sold at a flat rate of 11 cents a kilowatt-hour, and it wasn't until the second decade of the century that meters were installed to provide a record of consumption for billing purposes. The light globes on street lamps downtown proved an irresistible target for small boys with slingshots.²⁰ Resident James Compton complained in 1912 that the 5 a.m. whistle at the Dodgion Street Plant was robbing him of a much-needed extra hour's sleep in the morning.²¹

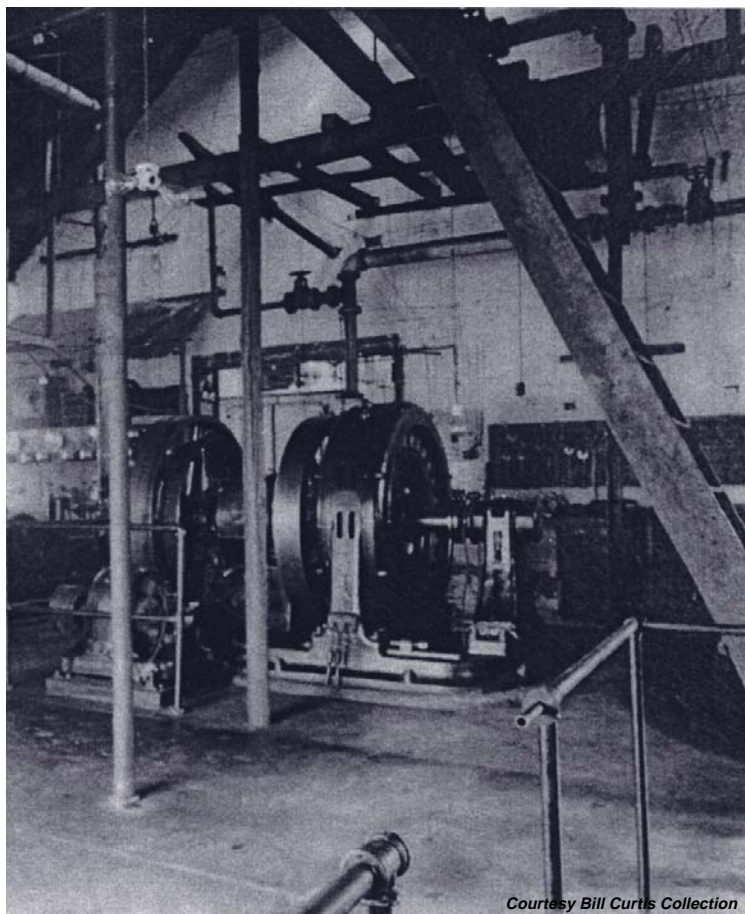
Personnel turnover was high during the first 20 years of the city's ownership of the utility. Benjamin F. Wallace, a cousin of Bess Wallace, one of the city's historically more important residents, succeeded Caldwell as superintendent in 1906 at a salary of \$100 a month.²² A.L. Nichols, a Kansas City electrician, replaced Wallace in late 1908.²³ Other superintendents during the



In 1931, the Dodgion Street Plant was replaced. The attractive new electric light plant promised to carry the electric power load for years to come.

early years included Henry Zum Berge, Lew Warren and B. Wesley Paxton.²⁴

Even with the financial and personnel problems attendant to the new utility, the city never gave up on its 1901 \$30,000 investment. By 1907, the plant was making only a small amount of money, but enough profit for the city council to reject a proposal of a Kansas City firm to run the utility for a percentage of the net earnings.²⁵



It was with the administration of Mayor Christian Ott that the city began to finally realize the integral benefits of public power. Ott, an Independence native and longtime banker, ran on a platform of upgrading the utility and its electric light plant.²⁶ The Dodgion Street Plant, Ott told campaign supporters, “looks like a widow’s barn.” Elected in 1913, Ott spent the first half of his 10 years as mayor effectively managing the day-to-day operations of the electric utility.²⁷ Ott presided over equipment and landscape upgrades at the Dodgion Street Plant. In 1914, he reduced rates and introduced an off-peak day rate to encourage the use of household appliances. The next year, Mr. and Mrs. G.C. Stewart took delivery of the first electric stove in Independence, taking advantage of the city’s new 3-1/2 cents per kilowatt-hour rate for cooking. Ott also encouraged the expansion of the city’s electric distribution lines to Maywood and Englewood, two new residential developments that came into existence after 1915.²⁸ Mayors Woodson, Jones and Ott had birthed and nurtured the municipal utility through its growing-up years. Now it was up to others to guide the utility’s fortunes during the tumultuous years of the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression and World War II.

In 1912, power generation was still in its infancy.

- 1 Sherry Lamb Schirmer and Richard D. McKenzie, *At the River's Bend: An Illustrated History of Kansas City, Independence and Jackson County Kansas City, Missouri: Smith Publishing Co., 1992, p.92*
- 2 American Public Power Association, “1998 Annual Directory and Statistical Report,” pp.107-112
- 3 W.Z. Hickman, *History of Jackson County, Missouri Topeka and Cleveland: Historical Publishing Company, 1920, pp.314-315*
- 4 “Municipal Light,” *Jackson Examiner*, February 8, 1901, p.1
- 5 *Ibid.*; See Also, “A New Light Company,” *Jackson Examiner*, February 1, 1901, p.1
- 6 “Voters Will Decide,” *Independence Sentinel*, March 22, 1901, p.1
- 7 “City Ownership,” *Independence Sentinel*, April 26, 1901, p.1
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.1
- 9 “Proposition Carried,” *Independence Sentinel*, May 10, 1901
- 10 “An Ordinance submitting to the qualified voters of Kansas City a proposal to issue and sell bonds of the City to the amount of four hundred thousand dollars and to expend the proceeds of the same in the acquisition or construction of an electric lighting works, and providing for a special election to vote upon said propositions, and providing a method of conducting said election and making proper record of the results,” May 20, 1902
- 11 “A Municipal Electric Light Plant Will Soon Be A Reality,” *Independence Sentinel*, May 24, 1901
- 12 City of Independence, Ordinance No. 1445, July 9, 1901, pp.1-2
- 13 “Electric Light Board Meets,” *Independence Sentinel*, August 30, 1901, p.1
- 14 Minutes, Meeting of Electric Light Board, August 22, 1901
- 15 “Location of Street Lamps,” *Independence Sentinel*, n.d. (1902)
- 16 E.K. Karnes, “Public Square Was Lighted During Mayor Jones’ Term,” *Jackson Examiner*, April 1, 1933, p.3
- 17 News Item, *Jackson Examiner*, February 3, 1903
- 18 News Item, *The Letter*, March 22, 1902, p.1
- 19 News Item, *Jackson Examiner*, June 1, 1906
- 20 News Item, *The Letter*, March 22, 1902, p.1
- 21 News Item, *Jackson Examiner*, September 25, 1912
- 22 News Item, *Jackson Examiner*, May 4, 1906
- 23 News Item, *Jackson Examiner*, December 16, 1908
- 24 “New Light Plant Head,” *The Independence Sentinel*, September 3, 1918
- 25 “Light Plant Pays,” *Jackson Examiner*, December 14, 1907
- 26 Hickman, *History of Jackson County*, pp.831-832
- 27 “Drops Light Plant,” *Independence Examiner*, October 9, 1918
- 28 “Story of the City’s Light Plant Dates Back to Start of Century,” *Independence Examiner*, January 6, 1953