

HISTORY CENTER

SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

Illuminating History



San Luis Obispo's Fourth of July parade, 1923. At the bottom left, between two cars, you can see a gas lamp. As you continue to scan through the image, you'll notice more such lamps highlighted in blue at quite considerable distances from each other.

By Bill Cattaneo, October 21, 1999

If nighttime skies were clear and the moon was full, pedestrians could make their way around downtown San Luis Obispo with minimum difficulty in the final years of the last century.

Pitch-black nighttime skies were another matter. With gas street lights (described as feeble in 1888) and widely-spaced electric street lights providing inadequate illumination,



walking around town after dark was



This 1886 photo shows a single gas lamp on the corner of Mission San Luis Obispo.

oftentimes hazardous, and pedestrians ran the risk of stepping into sidewalk holes, tripping over obstacles, finding themselves ankle-deep in mud, or taking an unexpected tumble into San Luis Creek.

The problems with San Luis Obispo's electric street lights during the last century

were not limited to their spacing. Occasionally they were turned off if the city treasury was too low to pay the electric bill.

San Luis Obispo's street lighting woes began to turn the corner in the first years of the 1900s when increasing numbers of automobiles on city streets began to convince the city of San Luis Obispo trustee boards and city councils that downtown streets needed improved dusk-to-dawn illumination.

In December 1916 the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce invited an Oakland street lighting expert, George Babcock, to appear as principal speaker at the Chamber's last monthly luncheon meeting of the year.

The main object in modern street lighting, said Babcock, was to give an illumination sufficient for pedestrians and rapidly moving vehicles, and he advocated electric street lights placed low, declaring that his experience in Oakland demonstrated the old system of swinging high-power lights on tall poles, placed at comparatively long distances apart, proved a failure in the 1916 age of rapid vehicle transit.

Street lamps placed low at frequent intervals, according to Babcock, were far more efficient, eliminating dark zones and giving better and cheaper service.

In clear and unmistakable terms, Babcock recommended electrically powered incandescent street lighting over gas street lamps at a time when quaint but archaic gas street lamps were already in decline and modern electric lighting systems were on the rise.

Yet on 8 October 1917 the San Luis Obispo city council voted to implement gas street lighting in the downtown area - ignoring Babcock's experiences with both electricity and gas in the city of Oakland.

Questionable and still mired in mystery after their choice eighty-two years ago, gas street lamps were used for almost a quarter century, with the last gas street lamps finally retired in downtown San Luis Obispo in May 1941.

What made the October 1917 council vote for gas lighting even more incomprehensible were the large number of prominent and influential San Luis Obispo leaders present for Babcock's expert lighting presentation to the Camber of Commerce.

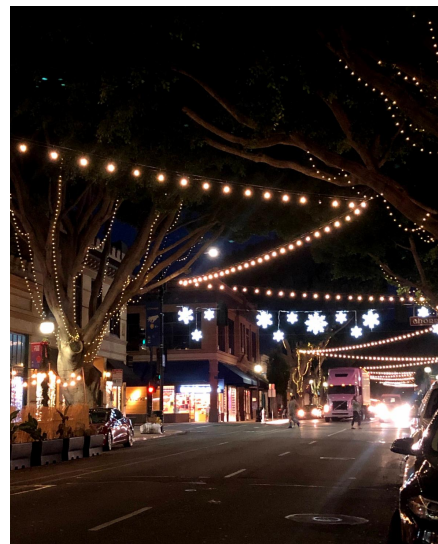


Photo courtesy of [Downtown SLO](#). The City of San Luis Obispo invested in additional lighting to celebrate the holidays in 2020.

The zig-zag lights installed for the holidays are still up and the City is evaluating ways to make the lights permanent.

There is little doubt that George Babcock's electric lighting recommendation would have easily provided more efficient and economical street lighting than the gas system chosen by the San Luis Obispo city council in October 1917, but gas street lamps had one undeniable advantage over electric incandescent lamps.

Talk to anyone who lived in San Luis Obispo during the days of gas street lamps and they will tell you that there was nothing more picturesque and charming than a gas street lamp flickering away on a foggy or rainy night.



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