

Springfield Gas Machine

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How would one provide lighting to a large building in Garrett County, Maryland, in the year 1873? Today, such a question would only be posed by a history teacher or individual casually pondering the past in an idle moment. The availability of electrical service in today's world makes the issue a moot point. But in the nineteenth century the question of how to provide illumination was not so easily answered.

For centuries, the standard lighting system for buildings involved the use of candles, fireplaces, oil lamps, and lanterns. The limitations of those items were obvious, but they were relatively inexpensive to purchase and maintain at home. This combination of illumination sources was used into the early nineteenth century when technological innovations began to offer more choices to consumers.

Municipal street lighting systems, powered by gas from a central location, were installed during the early 1800s. The gas lights eventually made their way into homes and

businesses. Urban gas lighting systems were relatively inexpensive and offered many benefits, but they still left rural areas stranded because the infrastructure required close proximity between businesses and dwellings.

Rural businesses were offered a solution by entrepreneurs Charles Gilbert and John Barker who designed a self-contained gas generating unit that became known as the Springfield Gas Machine. The machine has been forgotten but at the time it created quite an interest while also providing an answer to the problem of safely lighting buildings in rural areas.

Gilbert and Barker's system depended on gasoline, a flammable and explosive liquid that was a byproduct of refining crude oil into kerosene; at the time it was deemed to be of little value. The gasoline was converted from liquid to vapor by pouring it onto a series of baffles and wick material. The resulting gas/air fumes were pumped into the building by a large generator where they could be burned in standard gas fixtures. The gasoline-to-air mixture



Hand-colored post card of the Deer Park Hotel, Deer Park, Maryland.

was adjusted by a regulator to ensure that it remained about 15% to 85%.

The machine was welcomed by insurance companies because it was buried underground approximately 100 feet from the building and a great improvement over the traditional flammable sources that were used indoors. It was also readily accepted by business owners who could provide improved illumination for large numbers of workers regardless of their location. One Springfield Machine Company customer was the Deer Park Hotel in Deer Park, Maryland.

When the Deer Park Hotel was completed by the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in 1873 it was considered an upscale destination for wealthy visitors seeking to escape the humid summertime conditions of eastern metropolitan centers. The railroad provided regular service and occasional excursions to the retreat that became popular in the early 1880s; annexes were erected to accommodate the ever growing numbers of guests. The list of industrialists, elected officials, and bankers who vacationed at Deer Park was impressive. Deer Park even promoted itself as “The Summer Capital.”

In addition to the main hotel, a semi circle of private cottages was built on the grounds to accommodate requests from wealthy individuals; the President Grover Cleveland, Garrett family, and Josias Pennington cottages are extant and serve as reminders of the Gilded Age. One of the cottages is currently in the process of total restoration.

Amenities at Deer Park were impressive and included two swimming pools, a golf course, billiard room, bowling alley, and first-class sleeping accommodations. Part of the hotel’s exclusiveness must have been its first-class lighting system.

Deer Park’s business began to fade with the increasing popularity of automobiles and the invention of air conditioning. The railroad decided to sell the business to a Pittsburgh firm in the early 1900s and it was subsequently closed after the stock market crash in 1929. When the hotel was razed in 1942 the removal process did not include the stone building encasing the gas machine and the site became overgrown with vegetation.

Through the generosity of property owners Jerry and Janet Browning the cut stone building, designed by Jack Frost



of Baltimore, became available to The Garrett County Historical Society and it was opened for public viewing. In 2000, the building was moved to a new location on the museum grounds at 107 South Second Street in Oakland, Maryland. The setting is most appropriate because the museum's facade replicates the Deer Park Hotel's architectural features.

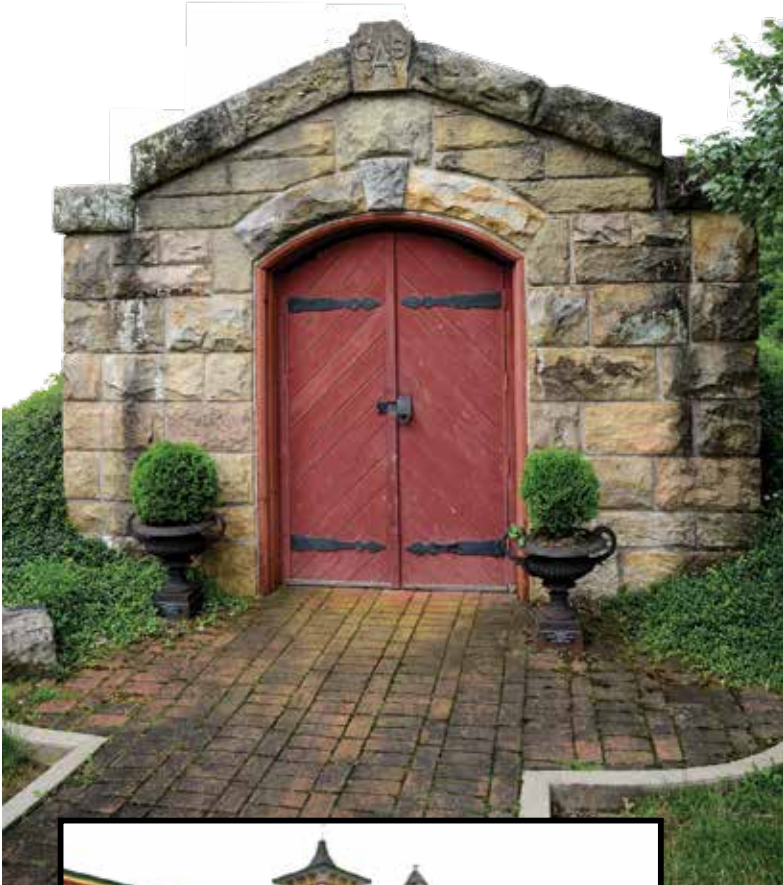
Moving the stones was not an easy task. Heavy equipment provided for removal of the earthen embankment around the stones while craftsman carefully identified each one by number before moving them for re-assembly in Oakland. The gas machine was removed long ago. Considering the date of the hotel's demolition it may have been contributed to a scrap drive during the Second World War or discarded when Thomas Edison's light bulbs replaced the gas system.

To the casual observer the stone structure in Oakland resembles a mausoleum but its true purpose was very different. The chamber is a reminder of an innovative illumination machine that provided a vital link in the glory days of Deer Park Hotel.

Left: Notice the depth of burial of the original Gas House at the Deer Park Hotel.

Below: Interior of original Gas House before excavation.





Top left: The reassembled Deer Park Gas House is now located beside the **Garrett County Historical Museum (inset)** on **South Second Street in Oakland, MD.**

Top right: The completed stonework showing the word "GAS" in place as it appears today.

Middle right: Missing top keystone at the beginning of excavation. It is said the missing engraved keystone turned up in a local garden and was added back during reconstruction.

Right: Deer Park Gas house during excavation; the entrance was almost totally buried in growth and vegetation.

