NYC Department of Records & Information Services

INVISIBLE BUT ESSENTIAL:

HISTORY OF ELECTRIFICATION IN NYC

CONTENTS

Contributor: Emily Mandelstam.

OVERVIEW

Setting the Scene: Life in New York City before Electricity

Imagine it's a Saturday night in present-day New York City. You're hungry. You walk into your dark kitchen and with a simple flick of a switch, the room floods with light from the ceiling fixture. You grab a frozen pizza from the refrigerator, pop it in the microwave, and in minutes, it's ready to eat. As you enjoy your meal, you relax in front of the TV, flipping through channels to catch up on your favorite sports team or to watch a live concert by your favorite pop star.

Now, let's take a step back in time…

It's a Saturday night in New York City in the year 1824—200 years earlier. You're hungry. To navigate your dark kitchen, you carefully carry a lamp lit by a small flame fueled by whale oil, or perhaps you use a wax candle with an even smaller, more fragile flame. You move cautiously, knowing that a simple misstep could knock over the lamp or candle and start a fire. In the dim, flickering light, you open the heavy lid of the iron cook-stove and add logs. After lighting the logs with a match, you wait patiently for the fire to build. You then place a heavy metal pot on the stove to heat your meal—perhaps a simple soup. As you eat at the table, illuminated by the unsteady light of your oil lamp or candle, you read a letter from your cousin in another country. The letter took a month to reach you, traveling first by land, carried by horse or donkey, and then by ship across the ocean. Although you're eager to hear from your cousin, the news is already outdated by the time you read it.

Questions for Students:

1. What do you think explains the differences in these two experiences 200 years apart, one present day and one in 1824?

2. Can you name three things you use daily that would not be possible without electricity?

3. How would your life change if you had to live without electricity and these three things?

4. In a time before these modern conveniences existed, what did people use or do instead?

5. How do you think your daily routines or family chores would be different if you had no access to electricity?

Greetings, Teachers! This curriculum aid is about the history of electrification in New York City. It was developed in the hope that 6th graders would find it interesting to think about NYC before and after electricity. Electricity— invisible but essential — makes possible so many important things in the everyday lives of adolescents, from smartphones to TVs to refrigerators. Yet people take these conveniences for granted. Take your students on a journey that explores what made this aspect of modern life in our city come to be!

Primary Sources

The beating heart of this curriculum aid is its primary sources. Primary sources are archival materials that offer contemporaneous — and often first-hand — accounts of historical eras and events. These are materials that were created at or near the time when the events being studied actually occurred, by people who had a direct connection to these events. Primary sources are key to understanding history. They provide context, look, feel, and language that transport the researcher back to the era being examined.

Primary sources come in many forms, including letters, diaries, autobiographies, photographs, newspaper articles, government records (like birth certificates or census reports), trial transcripts, and so on. Primary sources do not provide scholarly analysis or interpretation – that's the job of secondary sources.

You can ask your students why it's important to use primary sources to study history. Responses might include:

- provide an authentic link to the past;
- reveal the complexities and contributions of the past;
- help us to construct nuanced interpretations of history;

- help us understand the many experiences and viewpoints of people who were directly involved in a moment in history;
- let us hear their voices, unmediated; and
- help us understand the social, cultural, economic, and political context of a particular time and place.

When using each primary source included in this curriculum aid, you can ask your students some or all of the following questions:

- What type of primary source is this?
- What do you notice about this primary source?
- What do you know or can you guess about this primary source or where it comes from that helps you understand it?
- Whose perspective regarding the event or period being studied is reflected in this primary source?
- What else was happening at the time when this primary source was created? How does that help you understand why it was created?
- Do you think this primary source / archival item is important – why or why not?
- What does this primary source teach you that you didn't know before?

The goal is for these primary sources to inspire students to explore and learn independently, while also opening their eyes to fascinating historical issues.

STANDARDS

NY Grade 6 Science Standards

MS-PS2-3: Electricity and Magnetism: Ask questions about data to determine the factors of strength of electricity and magnification.

MS-PS3-6: Make observations to provide evidence that energy can be transferred by electric currents.

NY Grade 8 Social Studies Standards

8.2- A Changing Society: Industrialization and immigration contributing to the urbanization of America.

8.2 b- Population density, diversity, technologies, and industry in urban areas shaped the social, cultural, and economic lives of people.

8.4- WWI and The Roaring Twenties: Various diplomatic, economic, and ideological factors contributed to the United States' decision to enter WWI. Post war was characterized by economic prosperity, technological innovations and changes in the workplace.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

apparatus	furnaces	transmission
conduits	incandescent	trenches
electrification	power grid	utility pole
electrocution	power plant/power station	water main
extinguished	streetcar	

PRIMARY SOURCE 1

Undated photo of horse-drawn streetcar.

PRIMARY SOURCE 1 QUESTIONS

Before the advent of electricity, one major difference was in public transportation.

1. What dangers and challenges do you think existed when horses were used to pull streetcars, before subways became possible with the introduction of electricity?
2. Can you imagine what it would have been like to travel to school in the morning on a horse -drawn streetcar?
3. How long do you think it would have taken, and what do you imagine the ride would have felt like?
4. Would you prefer traveling by horse-drawn streetcar over the method you use to get to school today? Why or why not?

COAL POWER

Coal: The Power, Heat, and Light Source in New York City Before Electricity

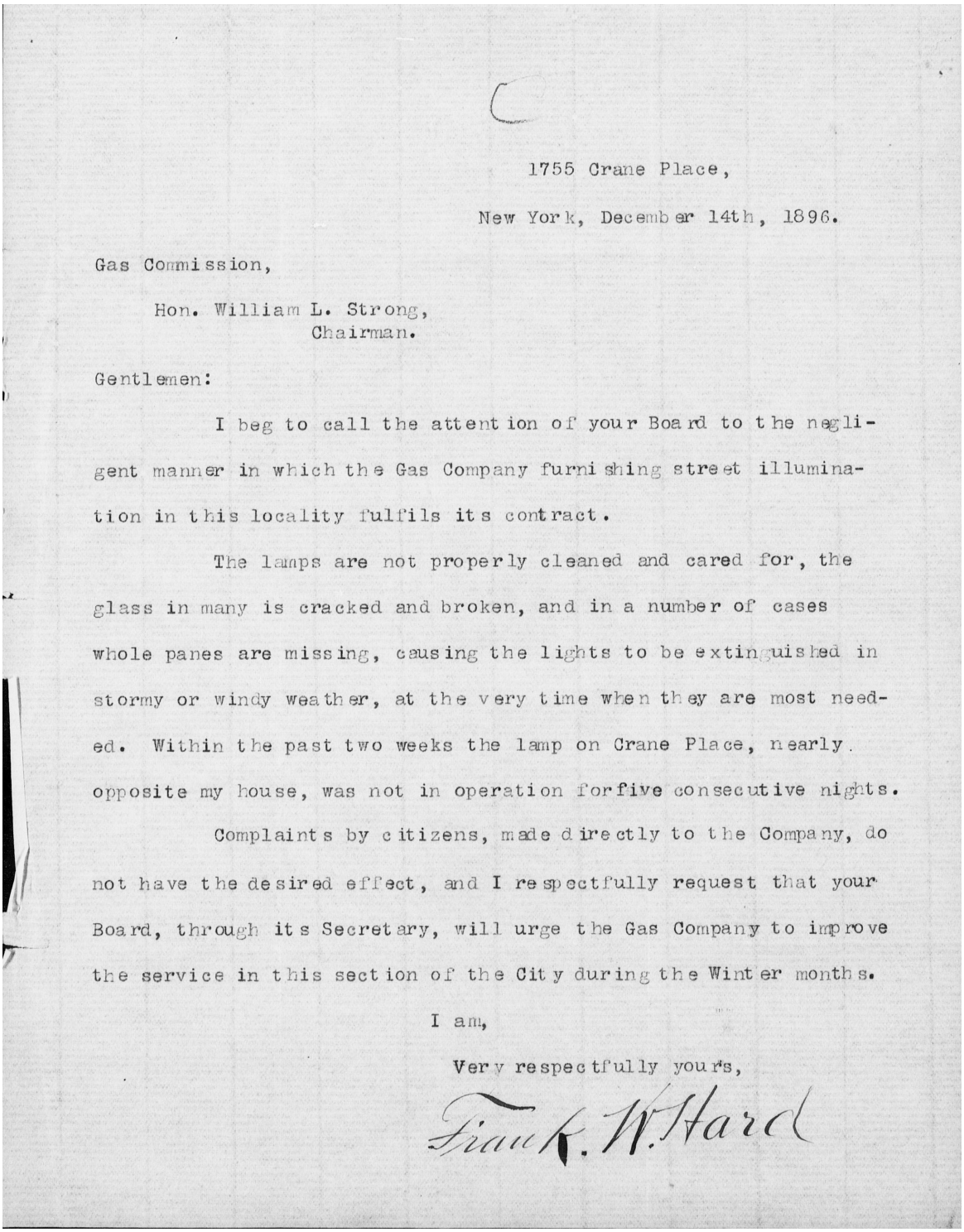
Before electricity became available in New York City in the 1880s, coal was the primary source of power, heat, and light. Furnaces, either in individual basements or nearby power plants, burned coal to produce coal gas. This gas was then transported through underground pipes to lamps in apartments, classrooms, or to street lamp-posts. Once the gas reached a lamp, it had to be manually lit with a match to produce light. When no longer needed, the flame had to be extinguished by hand. In 19th-century New York, hundreds of workers, known as "lamp-lighters," were employed to light the street lamps each evening at dusk and to extinguish them every morning at dawn.

Challenges and Inconveniences of Coal-Based Energy:

Using coal as an energy source came with numerous problems:

- **Dirt and Soot**: Coal lamps produced soot and grime, staining clothes and furniture indoors.
- **Health Hazards**: The burning of coal released harmful chemicals that caused headaches and coughs.
- **Unreliable Lighting**: The glass globes surrounding the gas flames often broke, allowing wind to blow out the flames.
- **Fire Risks**: The open flames from coal-gas lamps could easily start dangerous and uncontrollable fires.
- **Dim Lighting**: The light produced by coal-gas was weak and insufficient.
- **Labor-Intensive**: Coal had to be transported across the city and delivered to furnaces, which required constant attention from workers who faced the dangerous task of shoveling coal into blazing-hot stoves.

PRIMARY SOURCE 2



1755 Crane Place,

New York, December 14th, 1896.

Gas Commission,

Hon. William L. Strong,
Chairman.

Gentlemen:

I beg to call the attention of your Board to the negligent manner in which the Gas Company furnishing street illumination in this locality fulfils its contract.

The lamps are not properly cleaned and cared for, the glass in many is cracked and broken, and in a number of cases whole panes are missing, causing the lights to be extinguished in stormy or windy weather, at the very time when they are most needed. Within the past two weeks the lamp on Crane Place, nearly opposite my house, was not in operation forfive consecutive nights.

Complaints by citizens, made directly to the Company, do not have the desired effect, and I respectfully request that your Board, through its Secretary, will urge the Gas Company to improve the service in this section of the City during the Winter months.

I am,

Very respectfully yours,

Frank W. Hard

December 1896 letter from a New York City resident to a City agency complaining about a problem near his home.

PRIMARY SOURCE 2 QUESTIONS

1. Why is this resident concerned about the broken streetlights near their home?

2. Why is having streetlights at night important for New York City's streets?

3. How would your street feel at night if there were no streetlights?

4. This letter to the New York City Gas Commission starts with the salutation "Gentlemen," which was common at the time. What does this suggest about the staff members at city agencies back then? How does this make you feel?

PRIMARY SOURCE 3

1931 photo of overturned coal truck on 169th Street & Washington Avenue, with coal scattered on street.

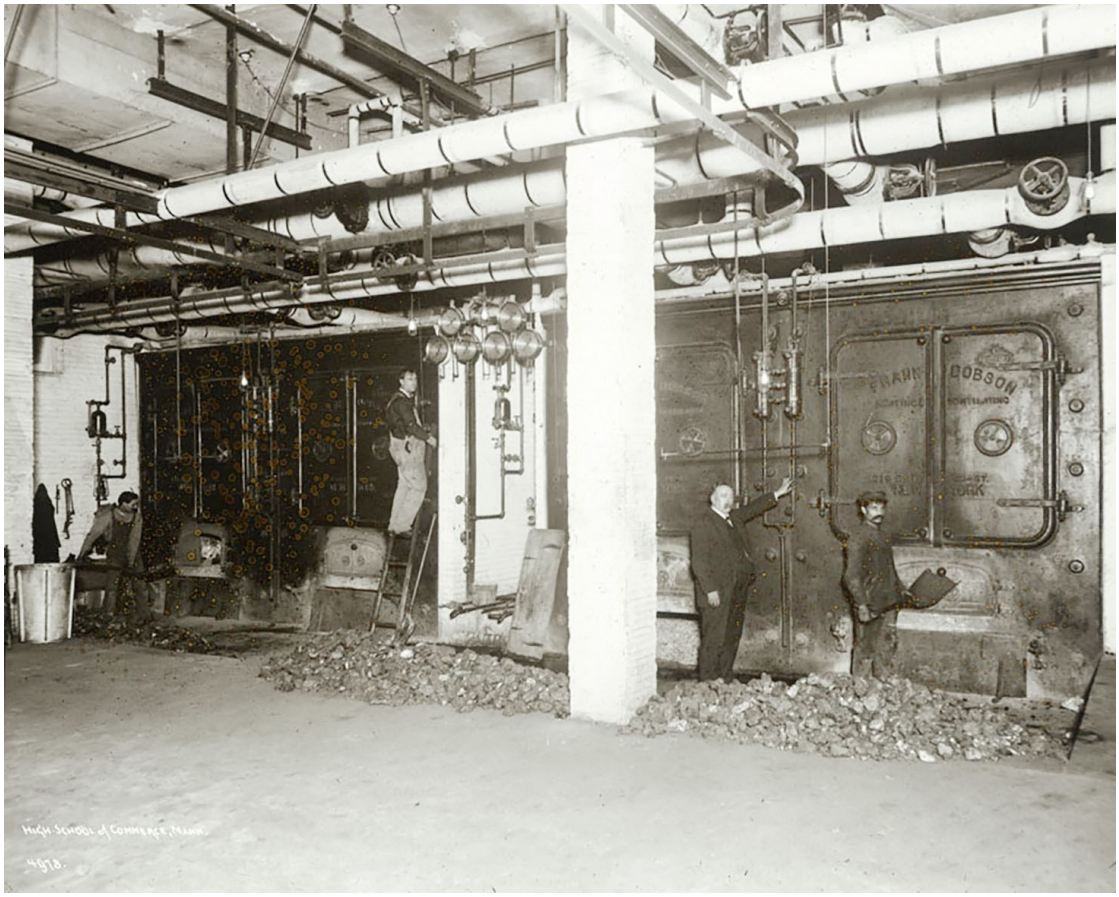
PRIMARY SOURCE 3 QUESTIONS

1. Why is this over-turned coal truck a problem?

2. Who was inconvenienced by this?

3. How difficult do you think it would be to clean up the coal on the street?

PRIMARY SOURCE 4



Undated photo of large coal heating apparatus in basement of High School of Commerce in Manhattan, with worker shoveling coal.

PRIMARY SOURCE 4 QUESTIONS

1. Why was this job difficult and dangerous?

2. Would you want to do this job -- why or why not?

3. What would it feel like to you if workers were in the basement of your school every single day, shoveling coal into blazing furnaces to keep the building warm and lighted for you?

The Need for Better and Safer Sources of Power, Heat, and Light

Due to all the problems with coal and coal-gas as a source of power, heat, and light, people in the 19th Century realized that a better and safer energy source was needed.

Two brilliant inventors answered the call in New York City: Thomas Edison, an American who was born in the Midwest, and Nikola Tesla, an immigrant to the United States who was born in Serbia. These men competed with each other to make electricity widely available. These creative scientists each figured out a way to bring electricity to streets, homes, offices, stores, schools, hospitals, libraries, theaters, and other outdoor and indoor places by inventing giant and powerful generators that could produce electricity -- rather than coal-gas -- from burning coal. That electricity would then be moved from the place where the coal was burned (a centrally-located power-station) through underground wires to nearby streets and buildings where electric light-bulbs (not gas flames) were installed to provide lighting.

This overall process was known as *electrification:* the transformation of non-electric power systems into electricity-based systems.

Edison made three key advances central to the electrification of NYC:

1. He built the first large-scale power-generating station in Manhattan to produce electricity from burning coal;

2. He created a safe power-grid by burying electric transmission wires underground so that electricity could be transported from the generating station to street-lamps, homes, workplaces, and other locations; and

3. He perfected the incandescent light-bulb, making it possible to light streets and buildings

without an open flame.

Until Edison came along with his innovative idea for an underground electricity power-grid, New York City endured a tangle of exposed, overhead power-lines (which one observer jokingly referred to as "spaghetti") attached to tall utility poles. These power-lines provided electricity for telephone and telegraph services, rather than for heating and lighting buildings and street-lights. Edison's opponents wanted to use these same above-ground wires and poles to transport Edison's electricity because the utility poles already existed. But Edison fiercely opposed this.

PRIMARY SOURCE 5

1880 - 1899 photo of New Yorkers perched up high on telephone poles to watch parade, with many crisscrossing wires visible.

PRIMARY SOURCE 5 QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about the men in derby hats who are sitting high up on poles among the electric wires?

2. Do you think this is a good place for watching a parade? Why or why not?

3. What are the dangers these men face by being so close to the wires?

ELECTROCUTION

Another significant issue with overhead electric wires was that they occasionally came loose from their poles, posing a serious risk of electrocuting pedestrians. In April 1888, a tragic incident brought this danger to the public's attention. A young immigrant boy named Moses (or possibly Meyer—historical records are unclear) Streiffer was skipping down East Broadway in Manhattan when he innocently grabbed a dangling electrical wire, unaware of the lethal risk. He was tragically electrocuted. The New-York Daily Tribune published an editorial on April 17, 1888, about Streiffer's death, stating: "It is almost a pity that it wasn't a millionaire or other leading citizen that was killed … If it had been, the community would have been startled and its indignation might have brought the wires underground. But it was only a poor boy peddler—a little fellow 15 years old, a Romanian, a stranger in this great city, selling collar buttons and pocket combs from a modest tray to help support his mother and eight brothers and sisters."

Questions:

1. What is an editorial?
2. What are your thoughts on this editorial's approach to the issue of dangerous dangling wires in New York City?
3. Why do you think the editorial writer chose to contrast a millionaire with a peddler in this context?
4. Do you think this approach is effective? Why or why not?
5. What do you believe the editorial's goal was? If you had been the editorial writer, how would you have approached this issue to achieve the same goal?

ELECTRIFICATION

Electrification in New York City was a slow and disruptive process that spanned several decades. In 1882, Thomas Edison opened the city's first electric power station on Pearl Street in Lower Manhattan. His company, the Edison Electric Illuminating Company, spent many years developing the power grid necessary to distribute electricity generated by the station. It wasn't until the late 1930s that this massive project was largely completed, allowing most New Yorkers to simply flip a switch and access electricity in their homes, delivered from a local power station all the way to their kitchens. Interestingly, one of the key innovations that made long-distance power transmission possible wasn't Edison's invention. It was the work of Nikola Tesla, who designed a significantly improved power-generating motor that used a new type of electrical current, making Edison's vision of widespread electrification a reality.

PRIMARY SOURCE 6

1930 - 1940 photo of the NY Edison Company power plant on the East River.

PRIMARY SOURCE 6 QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think it was challenging to build a power-generating station like this?
2. What materials and types of workers would have been required for its construction?
3. Once the power station was built, what would be necessary to keep it operational?
4. Have you ever noticed the name "Edison" on trucks, uniforms, or sidewalk signs around New York City's five boroughs?
5. Do you know anyone who works for the company called Con Edison?
6. What does the "Con" in Con Edison stand for?

PRIMARY SOURCE 7

Edison's efforts to bury his transmission lines in order to create a safe underground power grid met with many obstacles. The chief problem: the ground underneath New York City's streets was already crowded with pipes for water, coal-gas, and sewage.

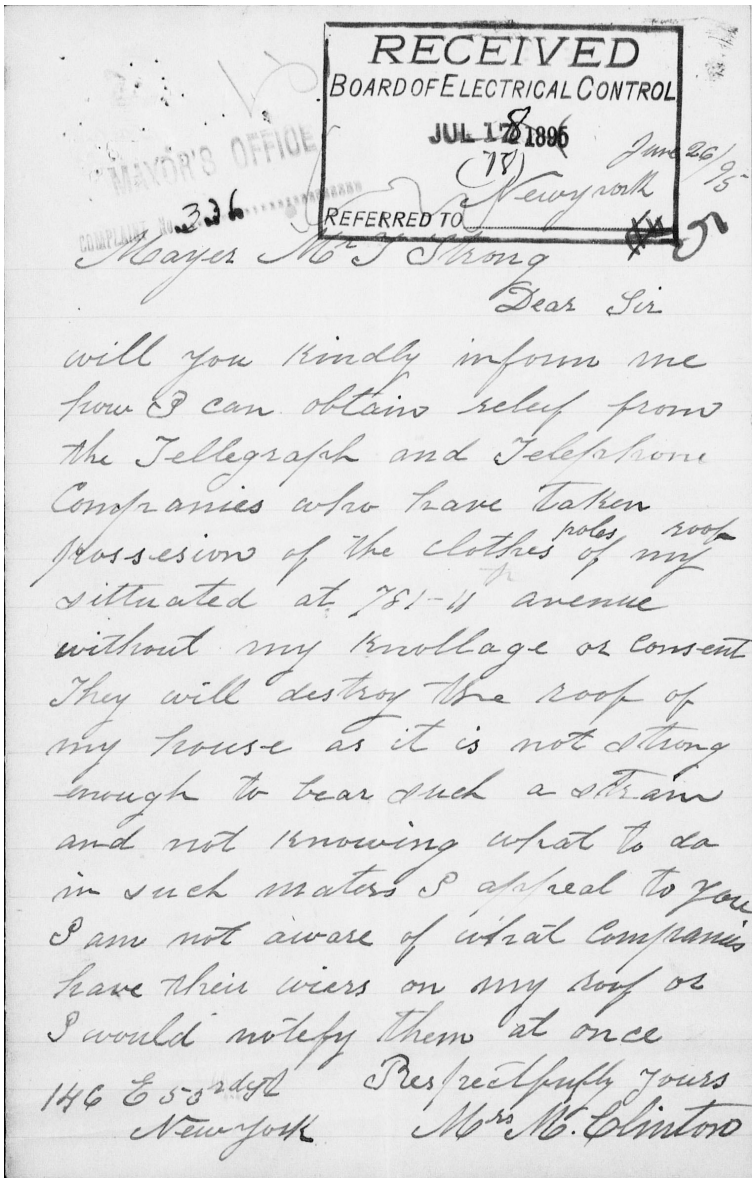
March 1914 photo of a water-main break at 23rd Street & Fifth Avenue.

PRIMARY SOURCE 7 QUESTIONS

1. What do you notice in this photograph?
2. Based on what you observe, why do you think it took so long to bury power lines beneath all of New York City's streets to deliver electricity from power stations to streets, homes, workplaces, and other locations?
3. What challenges would people face if they lived or worked near the open trenches created for installing underground electrical conduits?
4. How would this construction project specifically impact residents, store owners, and others in the neighborhood?
5. What actions could people in the neighborhood take to address these challenges?
6. How could New York City officials minimize the disruption caused by this construction?

PRIMARY SOURCE 8

Due to the difficulty and slow pace of burying electrical conduits, many power lines remained above ground—on sidewalk poles, rooftops, and other structures—for several decades after electrification began in the 1880s. These overhead wires carried electricity for various purposes, including powering telephone and telegraph services.


RECEIVED
BOARD OF ELECTRICAL CONTROL
JUL 17 1895

MAYOR'S OFFICE

336

June 26/95

REFERRED TO Newyork

Mayor Mr J Strong

Dear Sir

will you kindly inform me how I can obtain relief from the Tellegraph and Telephone Companies who have taken possesion of the clothes poles roof of my situated at 781-11 avenue without my knollage or consent They will destroy the roof of my house as it is not strong enough to bear such a strain and not knowing what to do in such mates I appeal to you I am not aware of what companies have their wiers on my roof or I would notefy them at once

146 E 53rd st Newyork

Respectfully Yours
Mrs M. Clinton

June 1895 letter from a homeowner seeking advice from the Mayor of New York City regarding clothing-poles on her roof, which were used by the telephone and telegraph company without her knowledge or permission.

PRIMARY SOURCE 8 QUESTIONS

1. What was a clothing-pole on a roof used for?

2. Why was such a pole important in the era before people had electricity inside their homes?

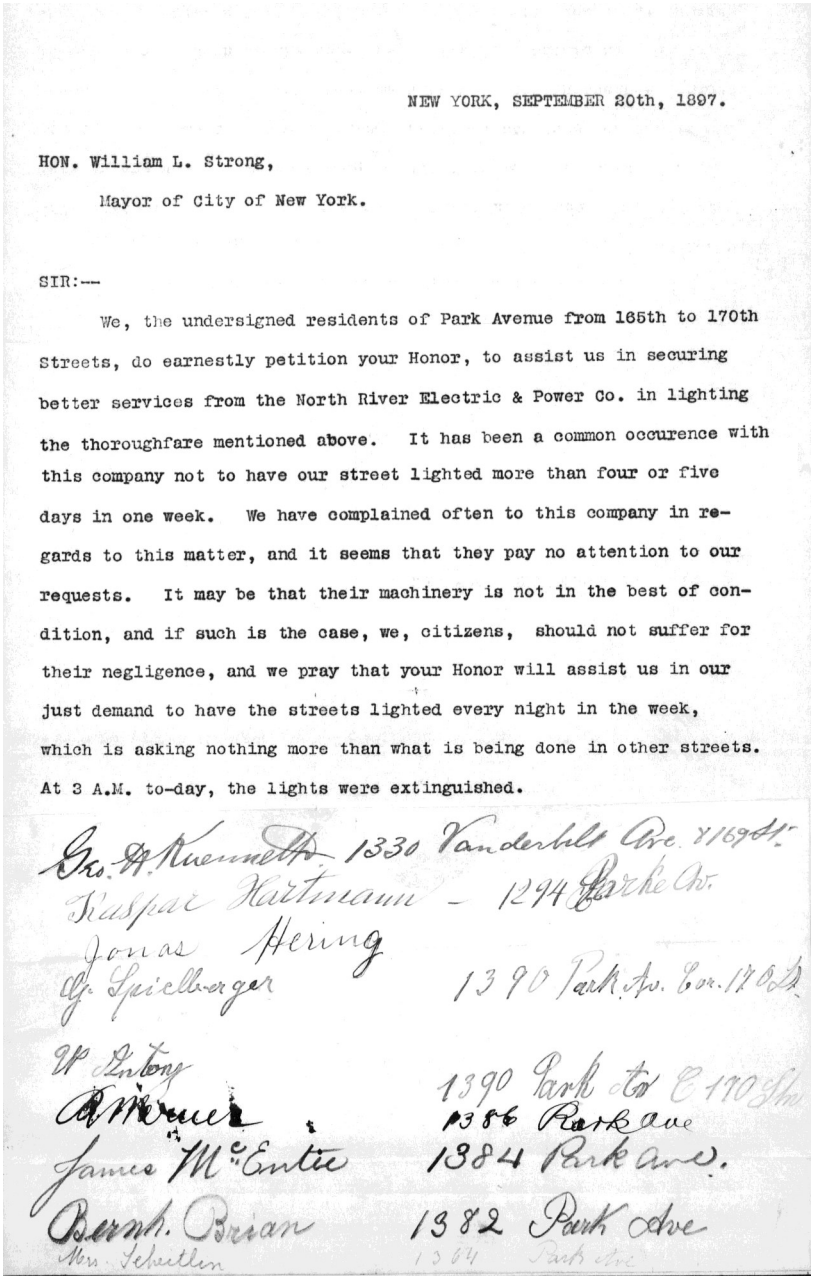
3. Why is this resident concerned about clothing-poles on her roof being used by the telephone and telegraph companies?

4. How should the Mayor have responded to this resident's letter?

5. What would you have done if you had been the Mayor?

PRIMARY SOURCE 9A

Many city residents (especially in the boroughs beyond Manhattan) complained that electric-lighting services weren't being provided evenly and fairly around New York City.



NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 20th, 1897.

HON. William L. Strong,
Mayor of City of New York.

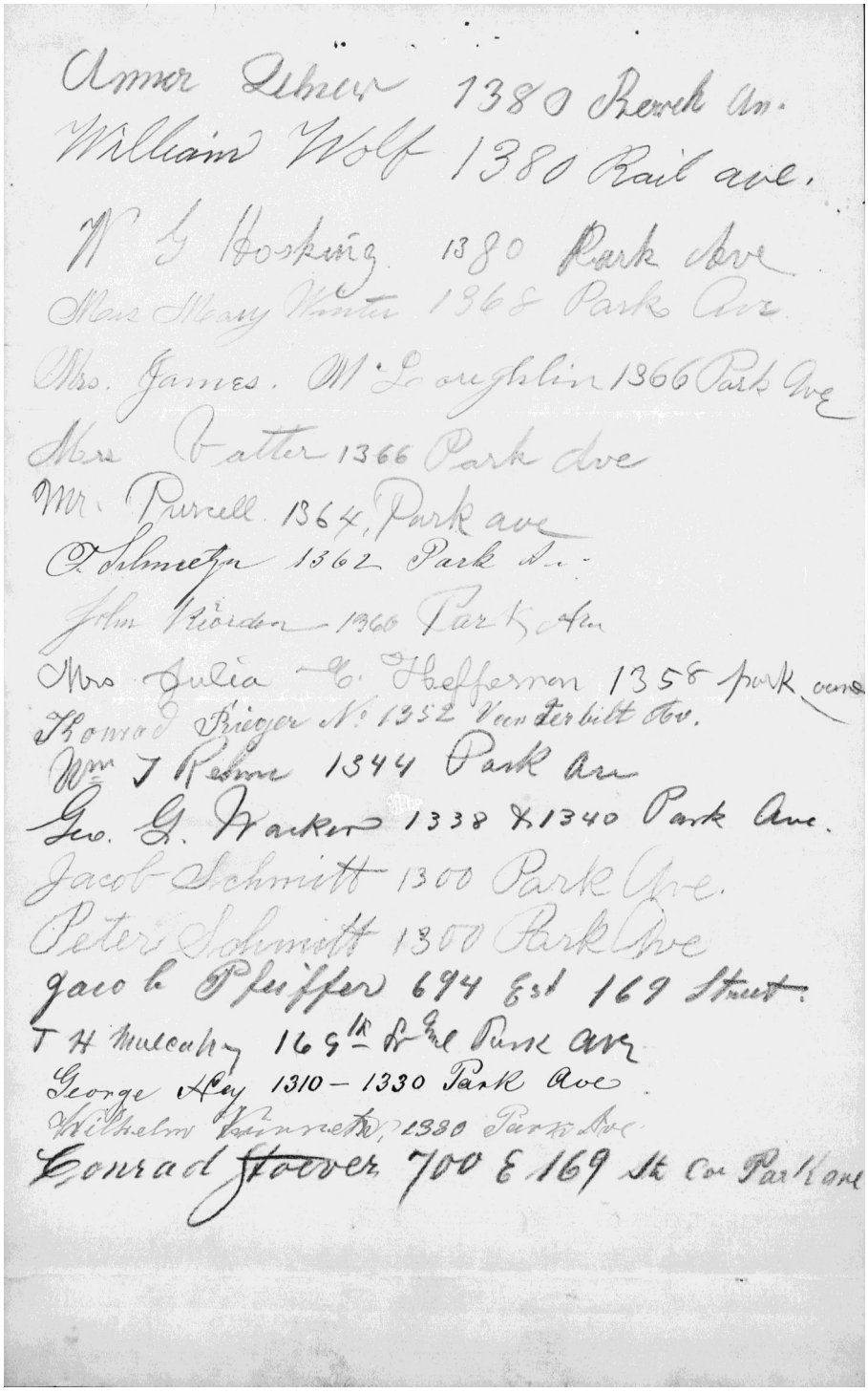
SIR:—

We, the undersigned residents of Park Avenue from 165th to 170th Streets, do earnestly petition your Honor, to assist us in securing better services from the North River Electric & Power Co. in lighting the thoroughfare mentioned above. It has been a common occurence with this company not to have our street lighted more than four or five days in one week. We have complained often to this company in regards to this matter, and it seems that they pay no attention to our requests. It may be that their machinery is not in the best of condition, and if such is the case, we, citizens, should not suffer for their negligence, and we pray that your Honor will assist us in our just demand to have the streets lighted every night in the week, which is asking nothing more than what is being done in other streets. At 3 A.M. to-day, the lights were extinguished.

Gus. H. Kuennelt 1330 Vanderbilt Ave. x 169th
Kaspar Kaltmann - 1294 Clarke Av.
Jonas Hering
G. Spielberger 1390 Park Av. Cor. 170th
W. Lutzig
A. Meuer 1390 Park Av Cor 170th
James McEntee 1386 Park ave
Bernh. Brian 1384 Park ave.
Mrs. Schutten 1382 Park Ave
1364 Park Ave

Page 1 of a September 1897 letter from residents of Park Avenue from 165th to 170th Streets in the Bronx to the Mayor, complaining of streetlight outages and seeking better service, "which is asking nothing more than what is being done in other streets."

PRIMARY SOURCE 9B



Amor Ulmer 1380 Reach Av.
William Wolf 1380 Rail ave.
W G Hosking 1380 Park Ave
Mrs Mary Winter 1368 Park Ave.
Mrs. James. McLaughlin 1366 Park Ave
Mrs Potter 1366 Park Ave
Mr. Purcell 1364 Park ave
Schmeja 1362 Park Av.
John Riordan 1360 Park Ave
Mrs Julia G. Heffernan 1358 Park ave
Konrad Krieger No 1352 Vanderbilt Ave.
Wm J Rehm 1344 Park Ave
Geo. G. Harker 1338 & 1340 Park Ave.
Jacob Schmitt 1300 Park Ave.
Peter Schmitt 1300 Park Ave
Jacob Pfeiffer 694 E 169 Street.
T H Mulcahy 169th & 2nd Park ave
George Kay 1310 – 1330 Park Ave
Wilhelm Kunnecke 1330 Park Ave
Conrad Stoever 700 E 169 St Cor Park Ave

Page 2 of September 1897 letter from residents of Park Avenue from 165th to 170th Streets in the Bronx to the Mayor, complaining of street-light outages and seeking better service, "which is asking nothing more than what is being done in other streets."

PRIMARY SOURCE 9A & 9B QUESTIONS

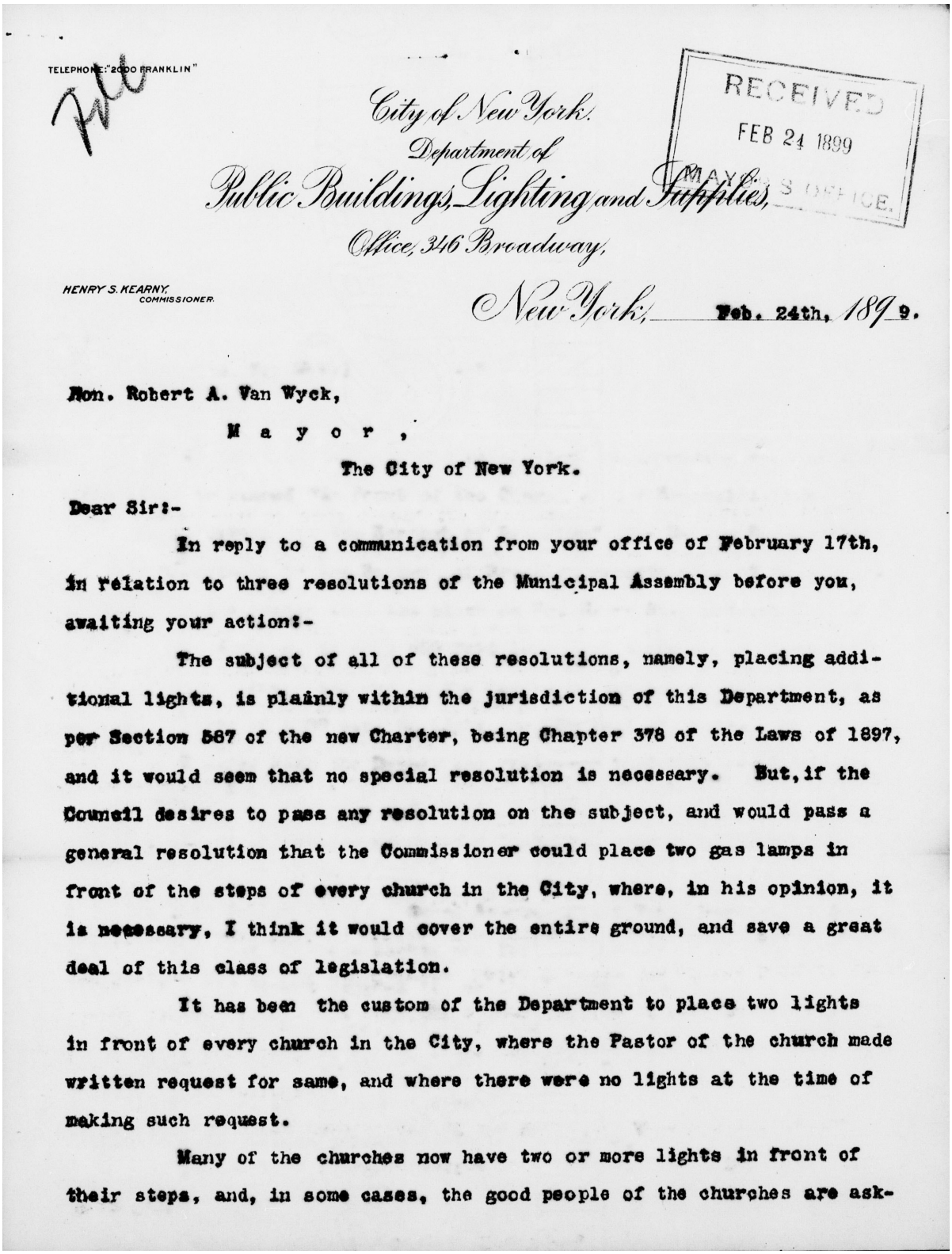
1. What do you think of the request by these residents for the same attention to their street-lights as the city government was giving to other areas?

2. How should the Mayor have responded?

3. If you felt that your own street or neighborhood was getting fewer city services than other areas, what would you do?

4. What is the best way to advocate for your rights?

PRIMARY SOURCE 10A



TELEPHONE "2000 FRANKLIN"

City of New York.
Department of
Public Buildings, Lighting and Supplies,
Office, 346 Broadway,

RECEIVED
FEB 24 1899
MAYOR'S OFFICE.

HENRY S. KEARNY,
COMMISSIONER.

New York, Feb. 24th, 1899.

Hon. Robert A. Van Wyck,
Mayor,
The City of New York.

Dear Sir:-

In reply to a communication from your office of February 17th, in relation to three resolutions of the Municipal Assembly before you, awaiting your action:-

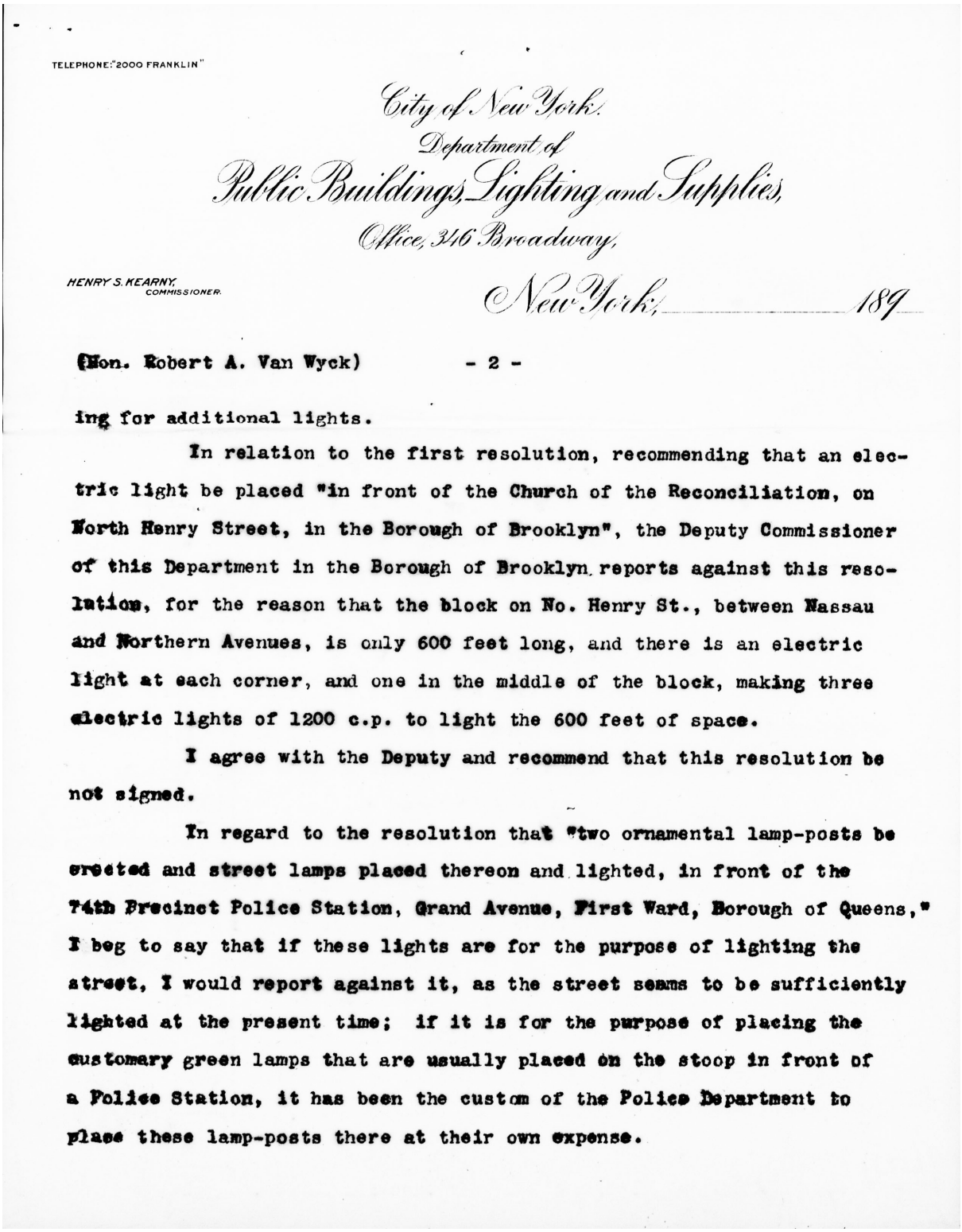
The subject of all of these resolutions, namely, placing additional lights, is plainly within the jurisdiction of this Department, as per Section 587 of the new Charter, being Chapter 378 of the Laws of 1897, and it would seem that no special resolution is necessary. But, if the Council desires to pass any resolution on the subject, and would pass a general resolution that the Commissioner could place two gas lamps in front of the steps of every church in the City, where, in his opinion, it is necessary, I think it would cover the entire ground, and save a great deal of this class of legislation.

It has been the custom of the Department to place two lights in front of every church in the City, where the Pastor of the church made written request for same, and where there were no lights at the time of making such request.

Many of the churches now have two or more lights in front of their steps, and, in some cases, the good people of the churches are ask-

Page 1 of a February 1899 letter from the NYC Department of Public Buildings, Lighting, and Supplies to the Mayor about the City's policy regarding streetlights in front of churches.

PRIMARY SOURCE 10B



TELEPHONE: "2000 FRANKLIN"

City of New York.
Department of
Public Buildings, Lighting and Supplies,
Office, 346 Broadway,

HENRY S. KEARNY,
COMMISSIONER.

New York, _____ 189_

(Hon. Robert A. Van Wyck) - 2 -

ing for additional lights.

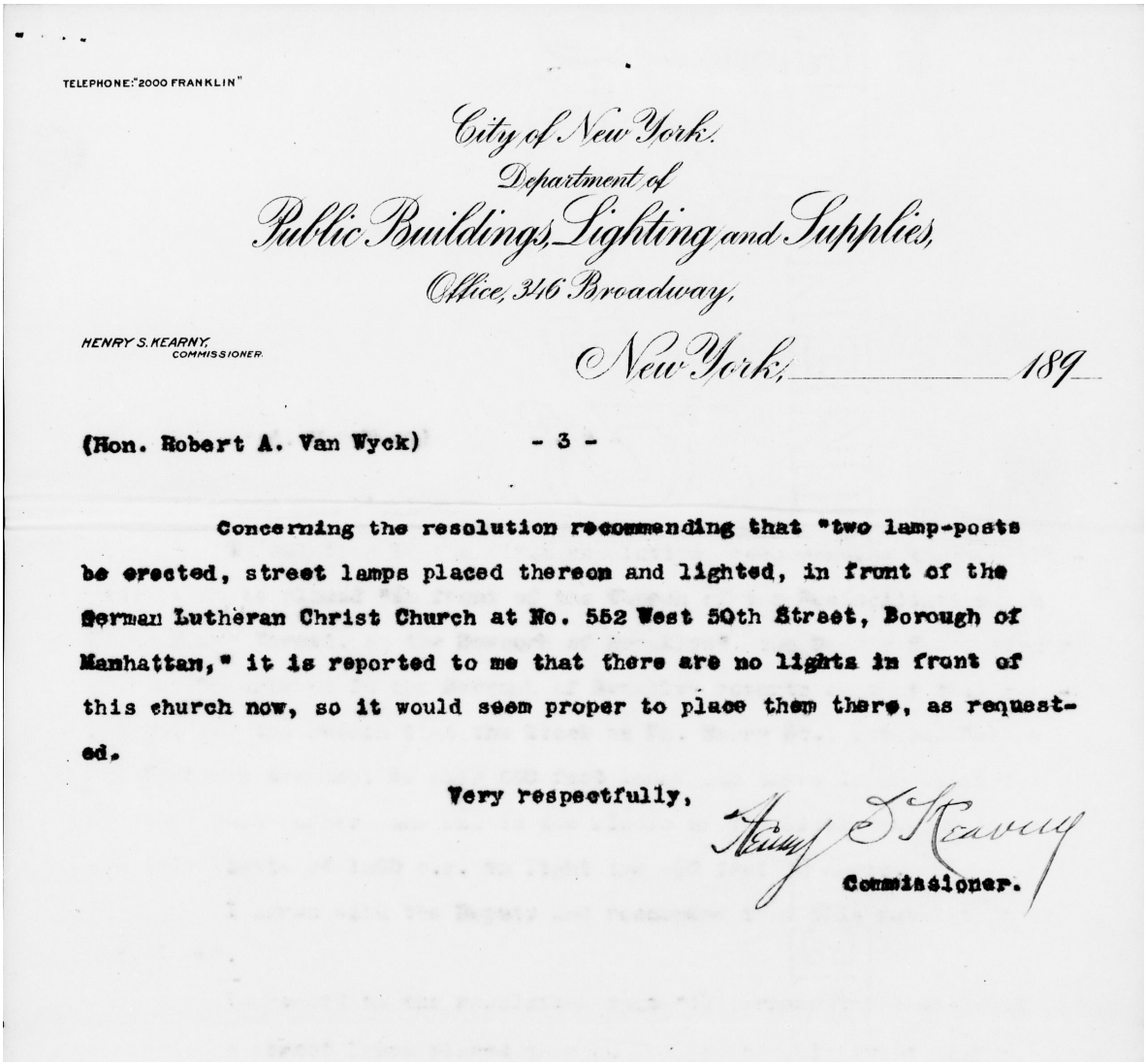
In relation to the first resolution, recommending that an electric light be placed "in front of the Church of the Reconciliation, on North Henry Street, in the Borough of Brooklyn", the Deputy Commissioner of this Department in the Borough of Brooklyn reports against this resolution, for the reason that the block on No. Henry St., between Nassau and Northern Avenues, is only 600 feet long, and there is an electric light at each corner, and one in the middle of the block, making three electric lights of 1200 c.p. to light the 600 feet of space.

I agree with the Deputy and recommend that this resolution be not signed.

In regard to the resolution that "two ornamental lamp-posts be erected and street lamps placed thereon and lighted, in front of the 74th Precinct Police Station, Grand Avenue, First Ward, Borough of Queens," I beg to say that if these lights are for the purpose of lighting the street, I would report against it, as the street seems to be sufficiently lighted at the present time; if it is for the purpose of placing the customary green lamps that are usually placed on the stoop in front of a Police Station, it has been the custom of the Police Department to place these lamp-posts there at their own expense.

Page 2 of a February 1899 letter from the NYC Department of Public Buildings, Lighting, and Supplies to the Mayor about the City's policy regarding streetlights in front of churches.

PRIMARY SOURCE 10C



TELEPHONE: "2000 FRANKLIN"

City of New York.
Department of
Public Buildings, Lighting and Supplies,
Office, 346 Broadway,

HENRY S. KEARNY,
COMMISSIONER.

New York, _____ 189_

(Hon. Robert A. Van Wyck) - 3 -

Concerning the resolution recommending that "two lamp-posts be erected, street lamps placed thereon and lighted, in front of the German Lutheran Christ Church at No. 552 West 50th Street, Borough of Manhattan," it is reported to me that there are no lights in front of this church now, so it would seem proper to place them there, as requested.

Very respectfully,

Henry S. Kearney
Commissioner.

Page 3 of a February 1899 letter from the NYC Department of Public Buildings, Lighting, and Supplies to the Mayor about the City's policy regarding streetlights in front of churches.

PRIMARY SOURCE 10A, 10B, & 10C QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think New York City promised to put lights in front of all churches?

2. What does this tell you about the role of religion in city life at the time?

PRIMARY SOURCE 11

A September 1924 photo of the Queensboro Bridge experimental electric traffic light.

PRIMARY SOURCE 11 QUESTION

1. As late as 1924, New York City was still experimenting with traffic lights on the Queensboro Bridge. What do you think would happen if New York City's bridges, tunnels, and streets had no traffic lights?

PRIMARY SOURCE 12

As late as the 1930s, major roads in Queens still had very few electric traffic-lights.

A June 1938 photo of a lone traffic light at intersection of 21st Street & Astoria Boulevard in Queens.

PRIMARY SOURCE 12 QUESTIONS

1. What do you think our city would be like if the traffic-light had never been invented or if electricity had never been available to power these traffic-lights?

2. How would drivers and pedestrians have managed to move around?

3. Would Astoria Boulevard or any other New York City street be safe?

PRIMARY SOURCE 13

As late as the 1930s, many neighborhoods far from midtown Manhattan still had very few electric street-lights.

An April 1934 photo of East 117th Street in Manhattan, looking west from 2nd Avenue.

PRIMARY SOURCE 13 QUESTIONS

1. How many street-lights do you see in this photograph?

2. What do you think these streets would have been like at night?

3. Do you think that electrification in New York City has provided your own neighborhood and other neighborhoods with adequate services such as street-lights and traffic-lights?

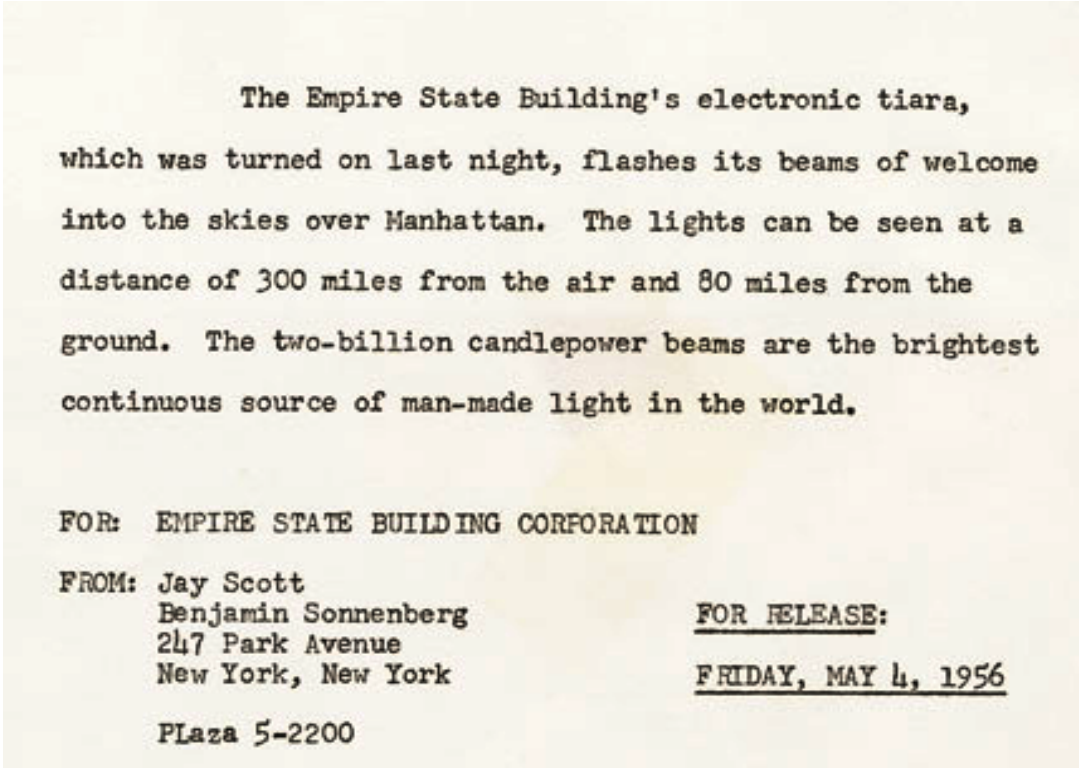
4. Why or why not? Give examples.

PRIMARY SOURCE 14A

The Triumph of Electricity: By the mid 20th Century, NYC's electrification was complete—electricity was available throughout the five boroughs.

A May 1956 photo of the new light on top of Empire State Building.

PRIMARY SOURCE 14B



The Empire State Building's electronic tiara, which was turned on last night, flashes its beams of welcome into the skies over Manhattan. The lights can be seen at a distance of 300 miles from the air and 80 miles from the ground. The two-billion candlepower beams are the brightest continuous source of man-made light in the world.

FOR: EMPIRE STATE BUILDING CORPORATION

FROM: Jay Scott
Benjamin Sonnenberg
247 Park Avenue
New York, New York

PLaza 5-2200

FOR RELEASE:
FRIDAY, MAY 4, 1956

Press Release Memo for Empire State Building Corporation:

"The Empire State Building's electronic tiara, which was turned on last night, flashes its beam of welcome into the skies over Manhattan. The lights can be seen at a distance of 300 miles from the air and 80 miles from the ground. The two-billion candlepower beams are the brightest continuous source of the man -made light in the world."

PRIMARY SOURCE 14A & 14B QUESTIONS

As you've learned, electrification involved disruption like digging up streets to bury transmission lines underground — so that street-lights could be added to sidewalks, traffic-lights could be added to roads, and electricity could be brought into homes, workplaces, and many other indoor spaces.

1. What problems did electrification create for New Yorkers?
2. What problems did it solve?
3. What groups of New Yorkers might have opposed electrification and why?
4. What groups might have supported it and why?
5. Has electrification been worth it for our city, for you, and for your family?
6. Do you agree with the triumphant tone of this 1956 press release?

CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

Marketing Electricity to Potential Customers in NYC

Pretend you work in the sales and marketing department of the Edison Electric Company in New York City in the first two decades of the 20th Century (the years 1900 – 1920). With electrification reaching more neighborhoods every day, Edison Electric wants more New Yorkers to become customers who buy their electricity.

Your challenge is to develop marketing materials that will convince people to become customers. These materials can be flyers, brochures, posters, or newspaper/magazine ads. You must tell potential customers why electricity will improve their lives. For example, what labor-saving household appliances might people want to use that require electricity? Or, why should people stop using coal-gas to heat and light their homes? You'll first need to research topics such as, what electrical appliances had been invented by 1920. (Hint: The first iPhone went on sale in 2007 so this doesn't count!) Or you could research what the health risks were of coal-gas indoors. Use your imagination and be creative—but also use facts.

You may want to address the fears that some people had about electricity – which is an invisible, mysterious current that sometimes causes fires and electric shocks. Remember what you learned about the immigrant boy who was accidentally electrocuted in 1888. Many New Yorkers in the early 20th Century knew tragic stories like this and as a result were reluctant to use electricity. You should research the risks of electricity and the safety features that can reduce these risks.

You may use any arguments you want in favor of electricity and against coal-gas, as long as you provide specific examples to support your position. This means you can't simply say, "Electricity will make your life easier." Instead, you must say something like, "Electricity will

make your life easier because with electricity in your home, you'll be able to use a washing-machine. Think of all the time and effort you'll save when you no longer need to scrub stubborn stains out of your family's clothing by hand!" You should research such ads from 1900 – 1920 to get an idea of what marketing materials were like back then. Note: When looking at old ads, try to analyze any stereotypes and biases you detect about race, class, gender, nationality, and more. Avoid those stereotypes in your own marketing materials.

Remember that marketing materials are designed to convince people to do something. So your materials must be attention-getting, creative, and persuasive. Think about the TV commercials and online ads that you find persuasive. What elements made you want to buy the product being advertised – was it the slogan, the visual images, the emotion, the factual information, something else? Include some of these elements in your own marketing materials for Edison Electric. You can be imaginative. But you can't lie.

Your potential customers can be residential (families) or commercial (businesses, schools, hospitals, etc.). Pick whatever group interests you the most. As you craft your marketing materials, keep in mind your target audience's cultural backgrounds, experiences, interests, needs, goals, income-levels, and more. For example, how do you reach immigrants who don't speak English or who prefer the traditional methods of their home countries, rather than modern American lifestyles? How can you make electricity affordable to working-class people? What issues were hospitals facing in 1900 – 1920 that might make electricity especially appealing? How would electricity have helped schools educate their students? Design your marketing materials based on your knowledge of your chosen group. Then convince them to buy your company's electricity!

ABOUT US

The mission of the NYC Department of Records and Information Services (DORIS) is to foster civic life by preserving and providing public access to historical and contemporary records and information about New York City government. The agency ensures that City records are properly maintained following professional archival and record management practices. Materials are available to diverse communities, both online and in person.

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On the cover: Photo from our archives of the crowd gathered for the debut of New York City's very first electric traffic light.