

Summary of Evidence in Support of the Nomination of the "Gas Plant" building at
535 S. Center St. to be Designated a City of Stockton Structure of Merit.

From

Wesley Swanson, PhD
Professor of History
Chair, Cultural Heritage Board, City of Stockton

The PG&E owned "Gas Plant" on Center Street meets many of the Federal, State, and City of Stockton criteria to be considered an important historical and cultural resource. This location has been an important part of the city's history since the waning days of the California Gold Rush and before American Civil War. This site was an energy production facility; both in the form of manufactured natural gas and electrical power production for nearly a century and has been owned by a succession of energy companies for approximately one hundred and sixty years. During that period the site has seen the introduction of many important technologies, the participation of many historically significant people, and helped form the layout and design of the City of Stockton.

Stockton Criteria Met

For this building to be designated a structure of merit it need only meet one of the following SMC mandated criteria, but the building meets several:

The building may contain "Archaeological Interest," due to its long use and many different technologies used at the site, but this could only be determined if the location were subjected to a proper investigation. The building should be saved so this may yet be done.

But this building is rich in "Heritage," Stockton was probably the third city in California to introduce gas lighting, behind San Francisco and Sacramento. When the State of California had only been admitted to the Union for nine years, Stockton was already a leading and innovative city. The introduction of manufactured gas lighting was one of the most modern technologies available and it lead the way for the very early introduction of electrical power, manufactured on the same site making Stockton not a backwater frontier outpost but one of the most advanced cities in the country.

This early introduction of energy utilities history in Stockton lent itself to many significant "Historical Events." Event does not necessarily mean a singular grand event, such as the site of a battle or great labor strike, but it can also be a "pattern of events" such as an area of business growth, a point of migration, a hub of transportation, or a location where a type of industry was significantly practiced over a significant period. In Stockton the first gas lights were installed in 1855 and the first gas providing company was chartered in 1859, the Stockton Gas Co., which

was the original enterprise that lead to this facility. The manufacture of natural gas started with this company and the technique lasted until 1930. This Stockton Gas Company was the pioneering firm that brought Stockton's first gas and then later electrical service and power for the city "Insane Asylum" street car system the ran down California St.

These combined technologies of gas lighting, the transmission of electricity, and public transportation helped define the Stockton "Way of Life" from the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

Many "Significant Persons" associated with the Stockton Gas Company and its various successor organizations drove the Stockton "Way of Life." The first superintendent of the Stockton Gas Co. was Stockton pioneer entrepreneur, P. E. O'Connor; his tenure lasted ten years until the enterprise was acquired by the San Francisco Gas Company, and placed under the control Joseph G. Eastland. Joseph G. Eastland, a participant in the Mexican War had come to California with his father with the Gold Rush of 1849, and became an associate of the Donahue Brothers. Peter and James Donahue also came to California for the Gold Rush but instead became involved with enterprises all over the state; the town of "Donahue" is named for Peter. They had enterprises ranged from boiler making, locomotive construction, and shipbuilding. Peter Donahue set up California's first iron foundry and machine shop, the first to light San Francisco, and the first street railroad on the West Coast. After the death of Eastland the company, then named Stockton Gas and Electric was taken over by Frederick A. Hihn. Hihn was a very important developer and California entrepreneur with interests and holding all over the state. This brief summary of some of the notable persons associated with the Stockton Gas Co. barely scratches the surface.

The last applicable category to demonstrate the historic and heritage nature of the building under discussion is its design and construction. In the Stockton SMC this would come under "Visual Feature of the City." This criteria does not require the structure to be a great temple, castle, or in unaltered condition. This criteria applies to this buildings because it demonstrated exceptional construction and design and represents the best extant demonstration of a certain type of industrial construction once found in the City of Stockton. Once known for its exceptional brick buildings, and also as the home of many brick making companies, this aspect of Stockton's history is now all but forgotten. The "Gas Plant" was built in the "Victorian Gothic" or castellated commercial style, which "embody distinctive characteristics of a type, period," and "method of construction." This building was intended to be attractive and impressive, well beyond the needs of an industrial plant.

Conclusion

In the end the "Gas Plant" meets the City of Stockton's requirements to be listed as a Structure of merit due to its possible archaeological interest, heritage, association with historical events, its related contribution to the city's way of life, its association to many historical persons, and its visual features.

The historical information in this report comes from the book *PG&E of California, The Centennial Story Pacific Gas and Electric, 1852 - 1952*, by Charles Colman, published by McGraw-Hill, New York, 1952. Also some of the above quotes refer to Federal and State historical criteria standards.