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THE ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF PUBLIC ILLUMINATION IN VENICE



Definite information exists from the year 1000 concerning the first rudimentary provisions adopted by the city of Venice to illuminate its streets and its many canals.

Until then, moving around at night had been a somewhat risky business; we should bear in mind that the total lack of light in the streets themselves was compounded by the still greater darkness of the shops and houses. As these were constructed entirely of wood, lights and fires were forbidden on account of the ever-incumbent peril of fire.

It was from the year 1128, under the *Doge* Domenico Michiel, that a few small lamps began to appear, placed on the walls of the houses and intended to burn all night so as to “give courage” to such wayfarers as were able to catch sight of

them even from a distance. This regulation, while responding in small part to contemporary needs, was nevertheless wholly inadequate.

It appears, but this is not definitely proved, that in addition to the personal equipment recommended for moving around at night (this equipment included torches and, later, lanterns), it was possible, under exceptional circumstances of plague, disorders, or when protection was urgently needed against criminals, for illumination to be imposed on house-owners by ordering them to place at their first-floor windows a lantern with a lighted tallow candle. This device appears to have been particularly common at the beginning of the 16th century. These systems and provisions continued until 1730 when rational illumination of the entire city by oil lamps was ordered.



The first 843 were attached to the walls of the buildings. By 1761 they had increased to 1750, reaching 1778 by April 1773. In a document on the "oil required for the nightly illumination of the City including Piazza San Marco and the adjacent streets" we read that at the beginning of the 19th century "La Serenissima" – Venice – had 2030 lamps, distributed as follows: 12 at the Giudecca, 27 in the Ghetto, 76 in Piazza San

provided with a ladder and other necessary equipment for the job. During a session of July 1839 a contract was approved with the French company "De Frigère, Cottin, Montgolfier, Bodin", ordering the illumination of San Marco and its surroundings with the use of gas.

It was noted in the report that "Venice is in no



Marco and 1915 scattered around the city. They were lit by the *bollegghieri*, appointed lamplighters

way secondary to the other principal cities, especially as regards that which is beautiful and



conspicuous, and therefore cannot ignore the question of gas lighting which is currently being debated also in Milan". It was proposed to introduce the new system in the central streets – such as Piazza and Riva Schiavoni, Merceria, San Bartolomeo and Calle Larga – with 146 lamps to be made of iron plate, with glass panes on the four sides and below.

The French company, known as "*La Lionese*", created the first gasworks at San Francesco della Vigna; the lamps were experimentally lit in Piazza San Marco on 13th and 14th March 1843. In February 1841, however, a proposal had already been accepted to illuminate the covered area, "*placing there cast iron candelabra topped with double-burner lanterns and reflectors such as to enable a newspaper to be read in any part of the Piazza*".

Until 1864, however, most of the city quarters continued to be illuminated by oil. The contract for this illumination expired in that year, providing an opportunity to review that for gas. The company undertook to provide the new fuel throughout the city within six years and to add a further 1500 lamps to the 1368 already in existence. These were either lanterns fixed to the building façades by iron brackets or hanging from elaborate vertical cast iron posts, more correctly described as lamp-posts or candelabra.

Although gas was considerably cheaper than oil, its introduction aroused violent protests from the population, chiefly on account of the unpleasant

odour it gave off. Artists, in particular, complained of the excessive intensity and the colouring of the light. Attempts were made to remedy this over the years with the use of gas mantles: wire gauze soaked in salts of sodium, potassium, lithium and copper.

The flames were lit and extinguished by hand, using long rods which could open and close the gas tap. Only from the beginning of the 20th century were automatic clocks placed in each lamp, spring-wound to last a week. This device required, however, a small pilot-light to be kept alight throughout the day so that the clock would set off a lever at the programmed hour which lit or extinguished the mantle.

In 1886, after examining several projects for electrical illumination, the first experiment was made at the Giudecca. The following year the Municipality awarded a ten-year contract to the *Walter-Edison* company for the supply of electrical energy to private users. For the illumination of public streets, however, the gas company claimed exclusive rights.

In 1889 the *Società anonima per l'illuminazione elettrica di Venezia* was constituted; it created a small plant covering a limited central zone. Gas continued to play the leading role; in 1909, indeed, the Municipality renewed its contract with *La Lionese*, providing for the construction of a new gasworks in the zone of the ex Campo di Marte, now Santa Marta. The Municipality was free to introduce and apply any system of public



illumination it wished, but it had to guarantee (or pay for) a minimum quantity of gas. Later this clause was definitively abolished by law and in 1922 it was decided to substitute gas with electrical lighting throughout the city.

The French company became Italian in those years, coming under the ownership of *Italgas* which provided for capillary distribution of the fossil fuel from the new industrial pole of Porto Marghera.

Much later, in 1969 – but this is recent history – and following expiry of the 60-year concession, *Veneziana gas* was constituted. It has substituted city gas with methane throughout the territory.