

Then & Now: From Gas Light to Gulu

Built for the gas light era, this building has a varied history.

By Jerome Curley | September 20, 2011



Detail of the old sign that remains today *Credit: Jerome Curley*

Gas light conjures up images of soft, golden pools of light along foggy cobblestone streets; Victorian drawing rooms crowded with overstuffed furniture and landscape paintings with elegantly dressed people discussing the events in their lives and the world of the late 1800s.

In Salem, the use of gas light started in 1850 when the Salem Gas Light Company was organized. The gas works were located at the foot of Northey Street with a large holder on Bridge Street. On Dec. 17, 1850, the first stores were lighted with gas lamps. On Dec. 25, that same year, streetlamps were lit across the city. By 1886, there were some 400 gas lights illuminating Salem. That year, the city contracted with the new Salem Electric Lighting Company to provide 129 electric lights instead of the gas lanterns.

While this was a rapid changeover to electricity by the city, many Salem households remained lit by gas. There were constant arguments in the press and advertising over which lighting was best. While electric light was brighter, was it better for your eyes? At this time, there were few places wired for electricity and people were more inclined to stay with gas for their lighting and cooking. Even though an electric stove was exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, electric stoves wouldn't compete seriously with gas until the 1920s to 1930s.

Electrical lighting was not to be denied though and made rapid progress in Salem. Homes were wired for electricity at a rapid rate, bringing the gas light era to an end in the early 20th century. With the reliance on gas for cooking and water heating as well as industrial applications, the Salem Gas Light Company remained strong. In the early 20th century, the gas works on Northey and Bridge Streets were rebuilt and modernized. At the same time, a headquarters building was built at 247 Essex St.

Rather than renovate the existing building that housed a number of stores, The Salem Gas Light Company opted to build a new "showcase" building that the newspaper of the day referred to as another "ornament" for Salem.

Built in the Georgian Revival style by Henry Bailey Alden, architect with J.J. Flynn & Son Contractors, its three floors boasted the latest in gas light fixtures with large ceiling fixtures controlled by magnetic valves. Over the large windows on both floors were 14 inverted mantle lamps to illuminate the space.

The main floor was divided into three sections with chair rails, wainscoting and ceilings, all of polished mahogany in the public space. Across this spacious room of 35 feet there was a mahogany counter with grill work that enclosed three cashier sections. Beyond the cashiers, there were offices for the company. In the basement were demonstration and exhibition rooms to showcase the latest in gas appliances and lighting fixtures, including a full sized gas range for cooking demonstrations. The upper floors were designed as office space.

In the rear of the building was a large brick workshop building that fronted on Barton Square. Both buildings were connected by both telephone and a pneumatic system that was used to send orders and communications to various offices.

Many readers may recall the similar pneumatic system in the old [Daniel Low's Dept. Store](#). I recall being fascinated by the salesperson putting money and the invoice in the brass cylinder then into the tube, which would shoot it on a cushion of air to the cashier who would return the bill and change. I loved the whoosh of the cylinder racing along the ceiling and the clunk of its return.

Not long after opening, the city directory lists attorneys having office space on the upper floor of this building. This arrangement continued for many years. With the waning of the gas business as well as mergers and acquisitions by power companies by 1929, the Salem Gas Light Company was no longer headquartered here.

In the ensuing years this building housed a number of businesses. Throughout the 30s, and 40s, there were a number of lawyers' offices upstairs along with hairdressers, accountants, dentists and a jeweler.

Downstairs on the street floor it appears that the space was divided into two stores with various tenants such as the NY Dress Shop and the A.E. A. MacDonald Tea Room that later was known as MacDonald's Restaurant for a number of years. In 1945, Sears Roebuck took over the store and ran Sears Roebuck & Co. Dept. Store here taking over this and other stores so that Sears ran from Essex Street down Washington to Barton Square. It was in the mid 60s when they made the move out of Salem to the shopping center in Peabody.

The store remained vacant for some time until the state used this building as a claims center for the State Division of Employment Security, which I'm sure many of us recall.

The Division of Employment Security maintained offices here until the late 1980s. After being vacant for an extended time the space was used as part of the [Phoenix School](#) classroom space. The Phoenix School later moved to Margin Street.

As the current photo shows, the building has once again been transformed, this time as the [Gulu-Gulu Cafe](#) based on a Prague Cafe the owners wanted to emulate. This café opened here in 2007.