

Shining a Light on Lanterns

By Inga Milbauer

The earliest evidence of lanterns dates back to ancient Egypt, Greece and the Han Dynasty in China (206 BC-220 AD). These lanterns were made of a wooden or bamboo construction with paper, silk or animal hide. The first mention of lanterns in written documents is in the writings by Empedocles of Agrigentum and by Theopompus, a poet from ancient Greece. [1] The first known use of the English word lantern, “a usually portable protective case for a light with transparent openings,” dates from the 13th century; with the Middle English word lanterne derived from the Latin word lanterna. [2] The light source for these lanterns would be a wick in oil or a candle. Lanterns made from metal and glass have been popular since the 1700s, with different types of oil being used until coal oil and kerosene were invented in the mid1800s.

The Boylston Historical Society and Museum has several antique lanterns in its collection.



Candle Lantern
BHSM Collection



Defiance Lantern
BHSM Collection

The lantern shown in the photograph on the left was donated from the estate of Mrs. Lillian E. Vickery. Lillian was born February 5, 1877 and died November 23, 1977. This lantern dates back to 1900-1910, it is stamped: “NO. 0. PERFECT DEFIANCE LANTERN & STPG. CO. ROCHESTER. N.Y.U.S.A.” Its base would be filled with oil and the glass lifted to light the fluid. This lantern is an example of a hot-blast tubular lantern in which the burning mixture is composed of kerosene vapor mixed with air. A portion of the spent air recirculates through the side tubes. In a cold-blast lantern the spent air is diverted and expelled and only fresh, cold air enters the tubes. This results in a more efficient and brighter light compared to the hot-blast design. [3]

The lantern was manufactured by the Defiance Lantern & Stamping Company, located in Rochester, NY. The company was founded by William C. Embury, born on December 17, 1873 in Napanee, Ontario, Canada. He became interested in lanterns and in starting his own lantern business while working at the Kemp Mfg. Co. in Toronto, Canada which manufactured

tin-ware products and kerosene lanterns. His brother-in-law, James Harvey Hill was working on improving the lantern design, while William Embury contacted several investors in Toronto, Canada. Initially, two U.S. patents were granted to James H. Hill, Patent #628804 on July 11, 1899 and Patent #649452 on May 15, 1900. The Defiance Lantern & Stamping Company was

incorporated in 1900. “The name “Defiance” was in defiance of the various established lantern manufacturers already in existence in the Rochester area.” [4] In 1908, William Embury resigned from the Defiance Lantern & Stamping Company and established the Embury Manufacturing Company in Rochester, NY on 27 November 1908. Following an agreement with the Warsaw Improvement Company, the factory moved to Warsaw, NY circa 1911-1912. The Defiance Lantern & Stamping Company was unable to survive the Stock Market crash in 1929, and the company was purchased by William Embury in 1930. [5] Because of product improvements and new lantern designs, the Embury Manufacturing Company stayed in business until it was sold on January 6, 1953 to the R.E. Dietz Company in Syracuse, NY. [6]

The lantern in the photograph on the right is an example of a vintage lantern which was converted into an electric lantern. The initiative to introduce electrification into the town of Boylston, Massachusetts began at the Annual Town Meeting in March 1911. A committee was chosen to study the feasibility. The members were M.C. Flagg, B.J. Garfield, and A.L. Stevenson. [7]

At the Town Meeting on April 17, 1911 a ballot to

“Construct and maintain a plant for the manufacture or distribution of electricity for furnishing light, heat or power for the use of the inhabitants of the town of Boylston, or otherwise procure such light, heat or power for the use of the inhabitants of said town, as may be most advantageous to the town, at a cost not to exceed six thousand dollars”

was declared lost because of a failure to receive a necessary two-thirds vote. [8] The committee continued its work and reported at the Town Meeting on May 15, 1911 that:

“We have endeavored to avoid all misrepresentations and confine ourselves to the facts that we have learned from our investigations in the adjoining towns that are already using electricity for lighting and other purposes. In every town we have visited we have not seen a dissatisfied person.” [9]

The towns visited which had a limited amount of electric street lights and consumers were Berlin, West Boylston, and Shrewsbury. The ballot was again lost due to the failure to receive the necessary two-thirds vote (37 yes votes and 33 no votes).

Finally, at the Town Meeting on June 24, 1912, two-thirds of the legal voters present voted yes to

“Construct and maintain within its limits a suitable plant for the distribution of electricity for furnishing light, heat and power for the use of its inhabitants, and that power or current be purchased or procured by contract from any electric light transmission or other company who are able to furnish such power or current at reasonable and satisfactory terms.” [10]

The sum of eight thousand dollars was approved to pay for this project.



Electric Lantern
BHSM Collection

According to the article “Boylston’s Oldest Resident Still Serves Town” by Robert Backus, Lillian Vickery’s husband, George Albert Vickery (1881-1930) “*was also instrumental in establishing the Boylston Light Department. Most people give him credit for getting street lights and electrical power into Boylston.*” [11]

During the 1890’s the Town Center had utilized gas street lamps with Robert P. Andrews and William H. Gero serving as its lamp lighters. With the approval at the Town Meeting in 1912, Boylston moved to electric lights when “in 1913, the stone switching station in the center was built, and electric lamps began to flicker on in the community.” [12]



Stone Switching Station
Built 1913 - Boylston Center
BHSM Collection

Acknowledgements:

1. <http://www.historyoflamps.com/lantern-history/history-of-lanterns/>
 2. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lantern#h1>
 3. <https://lanternnet.com/lantern-care-terminology/>
 4. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/antique-lantern-collectors/the-embury-manufacturing-company/363949133654254/>
 5. <https://www.architecturals.net/embury-manufacturing/>
 6. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/antique-lantern-collectors/the-embury-manufacturing-company/363949133654254/>
 7. Boylston Historical Series, Bruce Filgate, 2012 Volume XIII History of Boylston 1886-1979 p.515
 8. Annual Report of the Town Officers of Boylston, MA for the year ending March 1, 1912 p.25
 9. Annual Report of the Town Officers of Boylston, MA for the year ending March 1, 1912 p.27
 10. Annual Report of the Town Officers of Boylston, MA for the year ending March 1, 1913 p.33
 11. Newspaper article by Robert Backus “Boylston’s Oldest Resident Still Serves Town” 11/6/1972
 12. Boylston Historical Series, Bruce Filgate, 2012 Volume XIII History of Boylston 1886-1979 p.515
- <https://www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/antique-defiance-lantern-stpg-co-1459909623>
Object Collection Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Boylston, Massachusetts
Edited by Nancy A. Filgate, Director Boylston Historical Society & Museum
Lantern Photography by Inga Milbauer
Switching Station Photography by Bruce D. Filgate