

The First Electrically Lighted Church in the World

When the seven founders of the Wabash (Indiana, USA) Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) met for an organising meeting in a log cabin school-house in 1842, they were unknowingly setting the stage for the first electrically lighted church in the world. Charles F. Brush, the key player in the illuminating event, was born seven years later in the neighbouring state of Ohio.

As was the case with many wilderness churches, the Wabash congregation met for several years in private residences where worship services were led by travelling preachers or their own elders. Services were also held in the Wabash County Court House and a rented Baptist church building.

Membership fluctuated as settlers sought more elbow room farther west. The California Gold Rush of 1849 also took its toll. However, because Wabash was a strategic trading site adjacent to the Wabash and Erie Canal, the town continued to grow.

Facing a more stable future after the Civil War, the Wabash congregation began building its church edifice less than a block from the Court House in July 1865. Although services were first held in the "audience room" in January 1867, the first full-time minister, Leewell Lee "L.L." Carpenter, was not called until December 1868.

Meanwhile in Ohio, inventor Charles F. Brush may have already been designing electrical equipment in Cleveland. By 1876 he had built a dynamo big enough to power carbon arc-lights, known as "Brush lights."

Having conducted small-scale tests in Cleveland, Mr Brush hoped to stage a larger public test to prove the usefulness

of Brush lights for general street illumination. The Wabash City Common Council happened to be in the market for just such an improvement, so it entered into an agreement with Mr Brush to test his lights in Wabash.

Four 3,000 candle-power lamps were suspended from the flagstaff of the Court House, about 200 feet above ground.

On the evening of Wednesday, March 31, 1880, horse-and-buggy traffic was prohibited from entering the Court House Square. Special railroad excursions brought hundreds of sightseers to witness the widely publicised experiment. Anxious city officials, citizens, tourists, and newspaper reporters from all over the Midwest were ready to see history made. According to one report, nearly 10,000 persons were present.

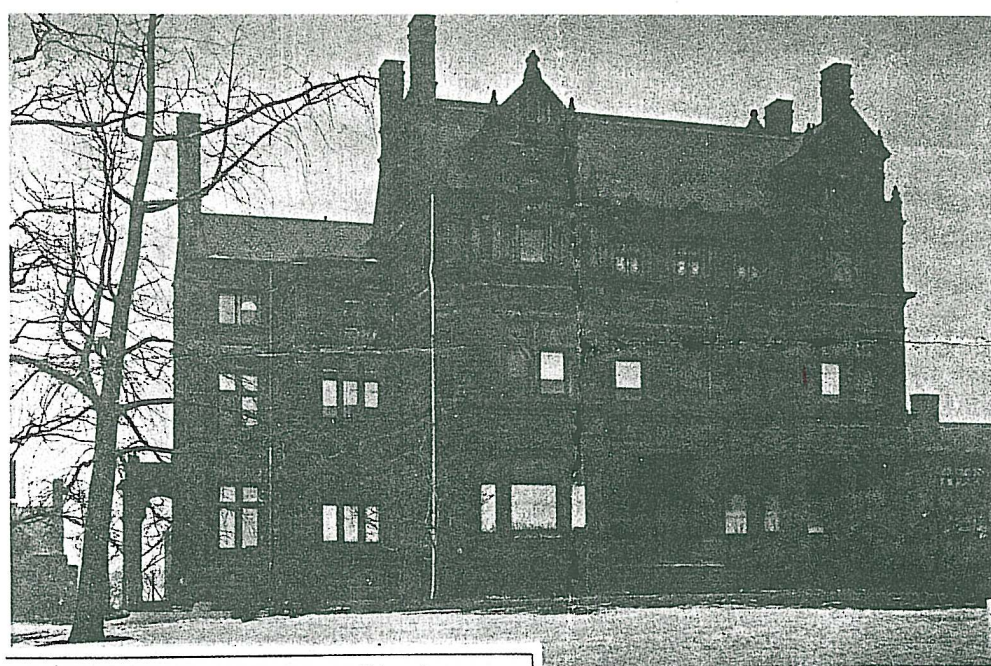
For added drama, the gas lantern street lights were extinguished – this was a *dark* town.

As the Court House bell bonged its 8.00 pm signal, night became almost as day. The flood of light was so bright and unusual that the stunned crowd stood in rigid silence for a few seconds.

Then came the oooo's, ah's, hand claps and cheers. The experiment was a total success – the entire city below the blinding lights was exceedingly well illuminated.

Of course there were the simple tests. Men snapped open their pocket watches and clearly read the time. The mayor's wife read the newspaper on her porch four blocks away. A farmer five miles away said his barnyard was sufficiently lighted to see his way around without a lantern.

The Wabash River, eight blocks south, was said to glow "like a band of molten silver."



BIRTHPLACE of the arc light which soon will be only a memory. The home of Charles F. Brush, 3725 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, is to be torn down in accordance with the late aged inventor's will.

*From Cleveland Plain Dealer
January 1930.*

Being the first in the world to adopt the electric light for general street illumination, Wabash would forever be known as the "First Electrically Lighted City in the World."

The beautiful church building in which the Wabash Disciples worship even today was also well lit that famous night in 1880. The five tall, slender windows on its east side were in a clear line of sight with the Court House lights less than a block away.

When worshippers arrived for evening services on the following Sunday night, I wonder if they extinguished the church's gas light chandeliers. Surely the Court House lights were bright enough to cause a peaceful glow in the sanctuary.

What a great place to sit quietly and contemplate the blessing of electric light.

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