

History of Natural Gas

Centuries ago, man noticed that lightning ignited natural gas seeping from the ground and creating a "burning spring." The most famous legend about natural gas originated on Mount Parnassus in Greece approximately 1,000 B.C. A goat herdsman discovered a burning spring on the mountain. A temple was built on that spot and the priestess, Oracle of Delphi, spoke of prophecies inspired by the burning spring.

Burning springs of natural gas were prominent in religious practices of ancient Persia and India, where temples were constructed around these "eternal flames." The Greeks, Persians, and Indians did not recognize the energy value or potential usefulness of natural gas. Ancient Chinese realized that natural gas could work for them. About 500 B.C., they used natural gas to make portable water by piping it from shallow wells through bamboo poles to evaporate salt from sea water.

Britain commercialized the natural gas industry around 1785. This was gas manufactured from coal, not from naturally occurring natural gas. A Scotsman, William Murdock, improved upon a method of manufacturing natural gas and used it to light his home. Shortly afterwards, the first natural gas company illuminated London streets with gaslights.

Manufactured natural gas arrived in the United States in 1816, when the city of Baltimore, Maryland installed gaslights. Baltimore's gas was also manufactured from coal. This gas had a much lower energy content and more impurities than today's natural gas.

Other sources of natural gas were discovered, which were superior in performance and price. Early explorers noticed natural gas seeping up from the ground in the eastern United States and along the California coast. As early as 1626, French missionaries had recorded that Indians ignited gases in the shallows of Lake Erie and in streams flowing into the lake. The American natural gas industry began in this area, known as New York. The birthplace of underground natural gas in America is Fredonia, New York, a small village on the Candaway Creek near Lake Erie.

In 1821, Fredonia residents observed gas bubbles rising to the surface from a creek. William Hart dug the first natural gas well in America along a creek outside Fredonia. The well was approximately 27 feet deep. (By contrast, today's wells are over 30,000 feet deep). As the first person to put natural gas to work in America, he is considered America's "father of natural gas." Other individuals expanded upon his work and a group of entrepreneurs formed the Fredonia Gas Light Company, our nation's first natural gas company. Natural gas drilling continued throughout western New York, Pennsylvania, northern Ohio, and northern Indiana. By 1900, natural gas was discovered in 17 states.

Natural gas continued to aggressively compete with manufactured gas into the 1920's. Plants that manufactured gas from coal were usually located in prominent cities, where there was a large and steady demand. During this time manufactured gas had a competitive advantage over coal's established distribution system.

In the 1950's, interstate pipelines reached across the entire continent to provide competitive, naturally occurring natural gas, and manufactured gas' dominance declined. America's interstate pipeline system now contains over one million miles of pipe that deliver large quantities of clean, efficient and cost-effective natural gas to different regions.