Freeport had only about 2,200 population when its municipal electric plan first went to work on April 12, 1898. A tiny brick building on Center Street (now Sunrise Highway) contained one 150-horsepower Corliss steam engine, which had been used for pumping water, and two small generators. At first it supplied only 24 carbon lamps, for street lighting from dusk until midnight.

A building for the power plant was added to the Village’s water pumping station. Steam to run generators came from two boilers used since 1894 by the Water Department. William R. Smith, Chief Engineer, directed production for both utilities until 1927.

City people moving into the Village had filed petitions for street lights. In the early ’90s a private company installed poles and started to put up a brick building near the site of the present municipal plant, but quit after pouring a concrete foundation.

At about this time Harry A. Walling had an oil route in the vicinity. He was instructed by the Village to install a number of lamp posts in the business area. Mr. Wallings supplied oil for the lamps and lit them each night. When electricity replaced oil, he was appointed head of electricity distribution. In 1928, he was succeeded by a son Clinton H. Walling, who later became Superintendent of Electric Utilities.

A public referendum in September, 1897 favored establishment of a power plan by 99 to 74. Village President William G. Miller and the Trustees acted promptly, appointing consulting engineers Charles Z. Southard who was asked to make recommendations. His proposals were adopted Oct. 27, 1897, together with a bond issue totaling $20,000.

Electricity proved such a popular improvement that a second bond issue—for $10,000—was authorized in 1899. Private consumers increased steadily. The little powerhouse’s boiler room was enlarged and a new brick smokestack was erected, 90 feet height. One 100-horsepower boiler was added along with another 150-horsepower engine and a 37 1/2-kilowatt generator. In 1905 a generator of 100 kilowatts was added, followed by a 275-horsepower engine and a generator

Westward Ho!

The next expansion, in 1908, put a 17-foot addition on the buildings west side. Two years later a modern smokestack of radial brick, 125 feet high, was constructed, the boiler room enlarged again, and two 200 horsepower horizontal tubular boilers were installed.
Daytime production of power began in 1910, but public opinion seems to have jelled more slowly for all-night streets lights.

So uncertain was sentiment that in 1912 the Village Board tried to please both the “pros” and the “cons.” It told Chief Engineer William R. Smith that on moonlight nights, when nature herself provided a certain amount of illumination, he should use his own judgment about turning on the man-made lights. But they were always to be lit in case of fire or when requested by police.

Controversy must have raged in March, 1912, when taxpayers voted “No” on an $11,000 outlay to introduce all-night street lighting. As a result some lights were turned off at 1:30 a.m., while others were discontinued altogether.

Progress of the Electric Department depended in those days largely upon how the public voted on matters proposed in the annual March elections. It appeared that 1912 was a favorable year, even though “early-to-bed-and-early-to-rise” Freeporters prevailed in the balloting on street illumination.

The power plan was modernized, internally at least. Mechanics removed much of the old equipment. A new 450 horsepower steam engine was directly connected to a new 300 Kilowatt Ac generator; one 150 horsepower Corliss engine from 1898 was remodeled and belt-connected to the 100 kilowatt generator which dated from 1905, and the switchboard was rebuilt and rewired. All this boosted the plant’s capacity to an amazing 600 kilowatts.

Fuel for the steam boilers was changed from coal to oil in 1914 and two oil tanks were built. But a tryout showed that at that time coal cost only about half as much to use, so the plant was reconverted back to coal. After coal arrived on a railroad siding northeast of the plant it had to be wheelbarrowed into the boiler room—some 13 to 14 tons for a night’s supply.

World War I brought problems of fuel conservation. Street lights were turned off at 2 a.m. All-night street lighting did not return automatically after the war it seems, for in 1927 the people voted 1212 to 485 in favor of all-night lightning.

Two big decisions were made in 1920—raising of the roof and installation of the first Diesel engine. This 365 horsepower engine, directly connected to a 250 kilowatt generator, started service May 8, 1921.

The Diesel performed so well that one year later an east wing was built for two engines, installed in 1922-23 and 1923-24 respectively. A 12-foot extension in front of the central section was built in 1925, followed in 1926 by a 47 1/2 -foot addition to the plant’s west side.

In 1928 the Village Board adopted a policy of paying for street lighting out of earnings, rather than by taxes authorized at an annual referendum. The same board successfully
sponsored a law that protects Freeport’s municipal plant, and others in the State, against sale to private interests without a vote of the people.

**Highway Dust a Problem**

The period from December, 1927 to June, 1929 was a difficult one. Construction of Sunrise Highway in 1927 filled the air with dust; then heavy high-speed traffic kept the dust stirred up. William H. Schneider, newly appointed Superintendent of Public Works, met the crisis by having air intake filters installed.

With the addition of Engines 4 and 5 in 1927, and Engine 1929, our Village had the largest municipal Diesel Station in the United States. Engine 6 was installed by Thomas F. Dunn, a Busch-Sulzer representative whom the Village afterward, as Superintendent-Engineer, he installed Engines 7, 8, and 9 – also Busch-Sulzers.

Voltage in primary distribution lines was increased in 1929 from 1,150 to 2,400 volts, reducing "line loss".

During the late ‘20s steam equipment was kept ready for peak loads, but then Freeport swung over completely to Diesel operation. The Water Department moved its wells in 1928-29 to the Northwest Watershed, southeast of Babylon Turnpike and Lakeview Avenue.

John T. Cotter headed the power plant from 1927 until the mid-‘30s. For five years, starting in 1928, the Electric and several other departments were under Superintendent of Public Works Schneider. Mr. Dunn headed the plant for a dozen or more years until 1947, succeeded by Thomas Moore in 1947, William Tompkins in 1951, Ross Gardner in 1954 and Charles Boden in 1959. Ludovic Long was appointed superintendent of Electric Utilities in the mid-‘60s succeeding Clinton H. Walling, with the authority over both production and distribution.

In 1935 Peru bought Diesels 2 and 3. Taken apart, the engines and generators were carried on the backs of South American mules up the steep Andes Mountains. They performed well there, the new owners said in a letter.

The power plant expanded westward in 1941 to accommodate Engine 9 and prepare for Engine 10, a Nordberg, which was added six years later. The next expansion move came for installation of a Hamilton engine with 3,100 kilowatts capacity, in 1953. A headquarters-storehouse was built.

Engine 12, a 5150-kilowatt Nordberg, increased the power plant’s capacity in October, 1964, to a total of more than 12,500 kilowatts.