

NOTES AND COMMENT  
NOTES ON EARLY BRITISH GAS COMPANIES  
IN LATIN AMERICA

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Havana was probably the first city in Latin America to utilize artificial gas. In 1844, about thirty years after this new source of light and heat began to be used in the British Isles and a decade or so after it was introduced into the United States,<sup>1</sup> James Robb of New Orleans and Miguel de Silva of Havana obtained a concession from the Spanish government to operate a coal-gas plant in the Cuban capital. Organizing the *Compañía Española de Alumbrado de Gas*, they began to light Havana's streets by means of the new illuminant before 1850, probably in 1848. A second gas concession was granted in 1877, to Juan Domingo Stable, who transferred it to the Havana Gas Light Company, a New York corporation, which inaugurated its plant in 1882. The Spanish American Light and Power Company, also a United States corporation, leased both of these properties in 1883 and soon absorbed the two companies.<sup>2</sup> By 1890, perhaps several years earlier, gasworks had been established in Cienfuegos and Santiago.<sup>3</sup>

Gas lights appeared for the first time on the streets of several of the Latin-American cities during the eighteen-fifties. They began to be used in the course of this decade in Rio de Janeiro,<sup>4</sup> Buenos Aires,<sup>5</sup> Santiago,<sup>6</sup> Valparaíso,<sup>7</sup> and Guayaquil,<sup>8</sup> and probably in Recife<sup>9</sup>, Lima,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, under "Gas."

<sup>2</sup> Cuba, Dirección general del Censo, *Informe general del censo de 1943* (Havana, 1945), p. 539.

<sup>3</sup> *Special Consular Reports* (Washington, 1891), Vol. VI, reports from Cienfuegos and Santiago.

<sup>4</sup> *The Journal of Gas Lighting*, II (London, 1851-1852), 177, 378. *Water Supply and Sanitary Improvement* were phrases soon added in the title of this journal, but it will be cited in this paper under the shorter name.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, V (1856), 259, 484-485, 661. The Buenos Aires plant was built by William Bragge, an English engineer.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs. C. B. Merwin, *Three Years in Chile* (Columbus, Ohio, 1861), p. 80; George A. Peabody, *South American Journals, 1858-1859* (Salem, Mass., 1937), p. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Merwin, *op. cit.*, p. 123. The city of Valparaíso was "lighted with gas for the first time" on September 18, 1856; gas lights appeared on the streets of Santiago sometime between September 1855 and May 1859.

<sup>8</sup> J. Fred Rippey, *Latin America and the Industrial Age* (New York, 1947), p. 72; *Commercial Relations of the United States* (Washington, 1859-1860), *passim* (Guayaquil).

<sup>9</sup> *The Journal of Gas Lighting*, VI (1857), 30.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, II (1851-1852), 405.

Mexico City, and Veracruz.<sup>11</sup> During the subsequent decade the first plants were erected in Bahía, Ceará, Niteroi, Pará (Belém), São Paulo, and São Luiz de Maranhão,<sup>12</sup> Caracas, and perhaps in some additional towns of Chile and Peru. Between 1870 and 1890 artificial gas began to be utilized in Montevideo, Pelotas, Porto Alegre, Rio Grande, and a few more urban centers; by 1890, in short, gasworks were in operation in numerous cities and towns of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Cuba, although artificial gas was still not widely used, and perhaps will never be widely used, in other Latin-American countries.<sup>13</sup>

Many of the early gasworks in Latin America were financed by the British, who built even more plants than they ever owned.<sup>14</sup> The extent of British ownership is set forth in Table I, which gives the names of the British companies, the date when each was founded, and the capitalization of each.<sup>15</sup>

TABLE I  
BRITISH GAS COMPANIES IN LATIN AMERICA, 1876-1890  
END OF 1876

1. Bahía Gas Co., Ltd. (1860) . . . . .	£150,000
2. Buenos Ayres (New) Gas Co., Ltd. (1875) . . . . .	£303,750 (?)
3. Ceará Gas Co., Ltd. (1866) . . . . .	£ 38,255 (?)
4. Montevideo Gas Co., Ltd. (1872) . . . . .	£550,000
5. Nictheroy (Brazil) Gas Co., Ltd. (1867) . . . . .	£ 85,220
6. Pará Gas Co., Ltd. (1862) . . . . .	£166,870

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, V (August 19, 1856, 484: "The last West Indian Mail brings advices of the lighting of the city of Mexico with gas. Veracruz has been [thus] lighted for some time past."

<sup>12</sup> Michael G. Mulhall, *The English in South America* (Buenos Aires. 1878), pp. 525, 531; *The Journal of Gas Lighting*, XIX-XVIII. See index under the towns mentioned. This magazine usually gives the date of inauguration of each plant as well as some account of its construction. See also Table I, below.

<sup>13</sup> *Special Consular Reports* (Washington, 1891), Vol. VI, reports of consuls from the various Latin-American countries on the utilization of artificial gas. The coverage is not complete, but more than twenty plants are mentioned. See also Table I.

<sup>14</sup> This statement is based upon a careful examination of *The Journal of Gas Lighting* for the years 1851 to 1890. The British investment was confined mainly to Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

<sup>15</sup> The table has been compiled from *The Stock Exchange Year-Book* (London) for the years 1876 and 1877 and 1890 and 1891. This manual may have failed to include some of the smaller companies as well as some of the firms financed in part by British residents in Latin America. The date of a company's organization does not correspond to the date of the first use of gas, which usually occurs several months (sometimes even a year or two) later; but artificial gas was certainly used in Rio de Janeiro before the company listed for that city was organized—ten years before—and it was probably utilized in Santos before 1880, the date of the founding of the British company in that city. Proper names in the following tables are spelled as they appeared in the English reports.

7. Rio de Janeiro Gas Co., Ltd. (1865)..... £720,000
8. San Paulo Gas Co., Ltd. (1869)..... £ 80,000
9. São Pedro (Brazil) Gas Co., Ltd. (1871)..... £110,000

## END OF 1890

1. Bahía Gas Co., Ltd. (1860)..... £150,000
2. Belgrano (Buenos Ayres) Gas Co., Ltd. (1878).... £300,000
3. Buenos Ayres (New) Gas Co., Ltd. (1875)..... £700,000
4. Ceará Gas Co., Ltd. (1866)..... £ 38,255
5. City of Santos Improvements Co., Ltd. (1880).... £135,000  
Owned waterworks, sewerage system, and gas plant.
6. Montevideo Gas Co., Ltd. (1872)..... £599,000
7. Pará Gas Co., Ltd. (1862)..... £186,265
8. San Paulo Gas Co., Ltd. (1869)..... £161,205
9. South Barracas (Buenos Ayres) Gas and Coke Co.,  
Ltd. (1888)..... £ 40,400 (?)

Although the number of British-owned companies remained the same for the years indicated, three of the old companies had passed from British control by 1890, three new firms had taken their place, and the nominal investment had increased. The properties at Rio and Niteroi had been acquired in the late 1880's by French or Belgian capitalists; those at Pelotas, Porto Alegre, and Rio Grande—all owned by the São Pedro company (see number 9)—apparently had been taken over by the Brazilians.<sup>16</sup>

During the twenty years following 1890, further changes occurred and British holdings increased, as Table II will disclose. Figures for capital invested are not given in this table, however. Many of the gas companies had become subsidiaries of large utility corporations and the capitalization of the subordinate companies could not be accurately discovered from *The Stock Exchange Year-Book* (London) for 1913 and 1914, from which the list was compiled.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *The Journal of Gas Lighting* traces briefly the history of these companies; see the index of each volume under "Rio de Janeiro," "Nichteroy," etc.

<sup>17</sup> The British owned an interest in the Bahía Tramway, Light and Power Co. (1905), a Maine corporation which had taken over the old Bahía gas property, and in the Lima Light, Power and Tramways Co. (Empresas Eléctricas Asociadas, 1910), a Peruvian corporation which probably controlled the gasworks in Lima. Veracruz Electric Light, Power and Traction Co., Ltd. (1906) probably took over the Veracruz gas plant, if it was still in operation. Table II therefore does not present a complete record of British investments in Latin-American gas enterprises; in fact, it merely lists the companies (perhaps not quite all of these) whose securities were traded on the London Stock Exchange during the years 1912 and 1913. The writer of these Notes has deliberately refrained from any discussion of the nature of the capitalization of these companies, their profits or losses, their rates, wage and labor policies, or their public relations. These are subjects of fundamental

## TABLE II

## BRITISH GAS COMPANIES IN LATIN AMERICA, 1913

1. Bahía Blanca Gas Co., Ltd. (1907)
2. Ceará Gas Co., Ltd. (1866)
3. City of Santos Improvements Co., Ltd. (1880) Owned gas plant (?)
4. Maranhão Obras Públicas Co., Ltd. (1909)
5. Mexican Gas and Electric Light Co., Ltd. (1881?); absorbed by Mexican Light and Power Co., Ltd. (1902), a Canadian firm
6. Montevideo Gas Co., Ltd. (1872)
7. Pará Gas Co., Ltd. (1898); reorganization of the old British company founded in 1862; controlled by Pará Electric Railways and Lighting Company, Ltd. (1905)
8. Primitiva Gas Company of Buenos Aires, Ltd. (1910); reorganization of Primitiva Gas and Electric Lighting Co., Ltd. (1901), which took over an Argentine company of similar name; the new British corporation controlled:
  - (1) Belgrano (Buenos Ayres) Gas Co., Ltd. (1878)
  - (2) Buenos Ayres (New) Gas Co., Ltd. (1875)
  - (3) La Compañía Gas Argentina (1869 ?)
  - (4) River Plate Gas Co., Ltd. (1897)
9. Rio de Janeiro Gas Co., Ltd. (1904 ?); reorganization of the old British firm founded in 1865; controlled by Rio de Janeiro Tramways, Light and Power Co., Ltd. (1904), a Canadian Corporation.
10. San Paulo Gas Co., Ltd. (1869); controlled by São Paulo Tramways, Light and Power Co., Ltd. (1899), a Canadian corporation.
11. South Barracas (Buenos Ayres) Gas and Coke Co., Ltd. (1888).

importance but they are reserved for later treatment. The present objective is merely to trace the chronology of the appearance of this new utility in the leading communities of Latin America and to present a general view of the part the British played in introducing it.