



CHAPTER 1

# Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company Limited



1891 – 1901

It is a fact – or have I dreamt it – that, by means of electricity, the world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time.

–Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1851

*F*lick a light switch, turn on a television, use a microwave – we take many electrical conveniences for granted. But before the turn of the twentieth century, electricity was just a flickering novelty for most people. Since then, it has become central to our daily lives, a driving force of modern industry, and a multi-billion dollar enterprise. And for people in Edmonton, a home-grown utility has made electricity a reality for more than a century.

## EDMONTON’S EARLY GROWTH

Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company Limited has its roots in the early history of the City of Edmonton. Like other cities in western Canada, Edmonton began as a fur trading post. After relocating several times, Fort Edmonton was situated in the Edmonton area in 1802, when it was erected on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River. In 1829, the fort was moved to higher ground near the present location of Alberta’s legislature building.

Fort Edmonton experienced two separate waves of newcomers. The first and smaller group were fur traders. These rugged individuals traded with Native peoples at the fort and transported furs along the North Saskatchewan in Edmonton-built York boats.

This way of life was not to continue for long. Demand for furs in North America and Europe diminished. In the 1870s, the rich agricultural land of the West attracted those who saw opportunities for farming and commerce. A new wave of newcomers began to arrive in what is now central Alberta, eager to homestead on the land that had been opened up by the traders.

## MILESTONES

1891

Alex Taylor starts the first electric plant in Edmonton.

The C&E Railway between Calgary and South Edmonton is completed.

1892

Edmonton is incorporated as a town.

1895

John Walter’s sawmill business is operational in Edmonton.

1896

Marconi applies for a patent on wireless telegraphy.

The Klondike Gold Rush begins.

The first long-distance, high-voltage transmission line (11 kV) carries power from St. Narcisse to Trois-Rivières, Québec, a distance of 29 km.

1898

The Edmonton Golf and Country Club is established.

1899

South Edmonton is incorporated as a town and renamed Strathcona.

The North Saskatchewan River floods Edmonton’s river valley.





## OUT OF THE PAST, INTO THE FUTURE

It was in 1267 AD that Roger Bacon first published his theories on the polar attraction of magnetite. Almost 600 years would pass before Michael Faraday demonstrated in 1891 that electricity could be generated by passing a wire through a magnetic field ... he went on to build the world's first dynamo in 1831. Once the power of electricity was harnessed, it swept the world like wildfire.

Within a few short years we had the telegraph (1846), the telephone (1876), incandescent lights (1879), streetcars (1883), the electric oven (1892), electric cars (1893), movies (1896), radio (1900), and a myriad of other inventions.

*From The Electric Century:  
The Canadian Electricity Association  
1891-1991, 1990*

As businesses were established to provide goods and services for the homesteaders, a town grew up around Fort Edmonton. By 1890, the commercial core of this riverside community was well established along a thoroughfare known as Jasper Avenue (*see map, page 5*). This main street was lined with two-storey wood-frame stores selling jewelry, shoes, and hardware. There were hotels, a Masonic Hall, and the Hudson's Bay Company store. One general store would later serve as the print shop for Frank Oliver's *Edmonton Bulletin*, one of the city's early newspapers.

The trickle of second-wave settlers became a torrent when the C&E Railway reached the south side of the North Saskatchewan in 1891. Edmonton had been clamoring for a rail line since 1882, when the Canadian Pacific Railway first reached Calgary. Although a railway bridge across the North Saskatchewan to Edmonton would not be built until after the new century began, the future

capital benefitted from the increasing numbers of settlers arriving at the station on the south side.

Edmonton's population grew steadily. During the summer of 1891, over 300 homesteading entries were filed. In 1892, Edmonton was incorporated as a town. Edmontonians were optimistic that the growth of their community would be sustained. This growing market several hundred kilometers from other major centres, combined with the development of electrical technologies, made a homegrown electrical utility a plausible investment.

## THE LIGHTS COME ON IN EDMONTON!

Edmonton had much to offer an electrical utility besides an isolated concentration of consumers. Many of the ingredients necessary for electrical generation were in the community's backyard. The North Saskatchewan was available to supply water to boilers, and the Edmonton area was rich in coal deposits. In fact, many small coal mines operated in the river valley not far from Jasper Avenue.

In 1891, a small group of frontier entrepreneurs recognized how far a local electrical utility could go in Edmonton. In that year, they became the original shareholders of Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company Limited. Those who were willing to take that first risk in bringing electricity to Edmonton came from many walks of life. Many names that remain familiar to Edmontonians today appeared in an *Edmonton Bulletin* article about the utility on October 8, 1891. Donald Ross

**LEFT:** *The board of Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company Limited.*



EDMONTON ELECTRIC LIGHTING AND POWER COMPANY 1902



## JOHN ALEXANDER MCDUGALL

John A. McDougall's is one of the signatures most often found on early Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company records. Elected as the first president of the company, he remained in that position until the utility was sold to the Town of Edmonton in May 1902. John A. McDougall played a leading role in the development of the civic enterprises and businesses of Edmonton.

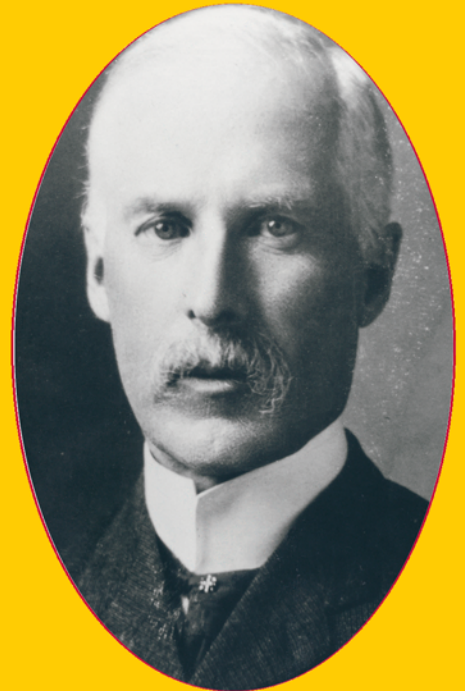
Originally from Oakwood, Ontario, McDougall first made his way west at 19 years of age by working as a trader and freighter. He first reached Edmonton in 1877, but remained only briefly. He returned from Ontario in 1879 with a new bride, Lovisa. He entered into a business partnership with local businessman Richard Secord; together, they established several of Edmonton's founding businesses.

Their first firm was known as McDougall and Secord; they described themselves as

*general merchants, wholesale and retail; buyers and exporters of raw furs; dealers in land scrip and north-west lands; outfitters for survey parties, traders, trappers, miners and others for the north; and suppliers for country stores.*

Later, in 1907, this enterprise was sold and the two men set up a financial business that would grow into the \$2,500,000 Empire Building.

John A. McDougall's contributions to the Edmonton scene were impressive. He was a charter member of the Edmonton Board of Trade, and chairman of the Edmonton Public School Board. He was also a patron of the arts and benefactor of many welfare and youth organizations. McDougall was a member of the first senate of the University of Alberta. Politically, he was elected mayor of the Town, then City, of Edmonton starting in 1897, and was elected to the legislature in 1909.



McDougall spent the later years of his life traveling throughout the world. He died in Edmonton at the age of 74.

*Sources:*

The Edmonton Bulletin, 1918,  
The Edmonton Journal, 1963, 1959,  
and City of Edmonton Archives material

owned the Edmonton Hotel. Frank Oliver, a politician and forceful advocate for settler's land rights, operated *The Edmonton Bulletin*. Daniel R. Fraser was the proprietor of a flourmill as well as a sawmill that milled 50,000 feet of lumber daily and employed as many as 70 people. John Walter, operator of a ferry, sawmill, and coal mine, may have supplied his own coal to the power plant. John A. McDougall was elected president of Edmonton Electric Light-

**RIGHT:** Looking east down Jasper Avenue in 1896. Signs of innovation, including streetlights and telephone lines, are visible.



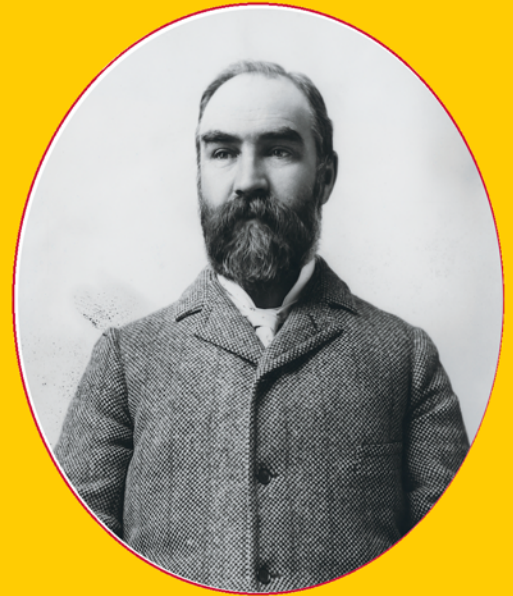
## ALEX TAYLOR

When the Dominion Telegraph Service line was extended from Hay Lakes to Edmonton in 1879, Alex Taylor came with it as its first operator. He set up an office in John Walter's old log house across the river from Fort Edmonton. That winter, he arranged for weekly news bulletins to be wired to him from Winnipeg. He wrote out these bulletins and left them in Frank Oliver's store, where customers eagerly read them. This, Edmonton's first newspaper, evolved into Frank Oliver's *Edmonton Bulletin*.

Alex Taylor's telegraph operation also led to the telephone business. In 1884, only eight years after Alexander Graham Bell's historic call from Brantford to Paris, Ontario, Alex Taylor

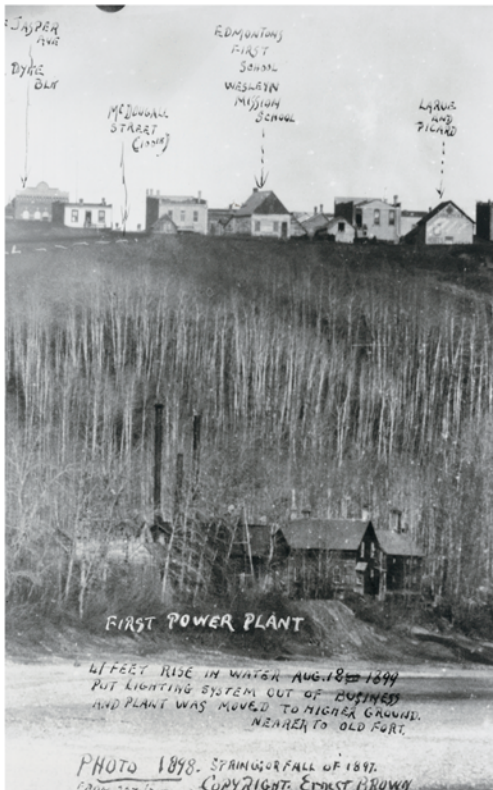
encouraged the Dominion Telegraph Service to build a telephone link between his telegraph office and St. Albert, a community a short distance north of Edmonton. This, Alberta's first telephone line, began operation in January 1885. Soon after, Alex established telephone connections between his office and Fort Edmonton, then to various businesses around the community. Edmonton's first telephone system was launched. Alex sold his operation to the City in 1904, and it became the municipally-owned Edmonton Telephones.

Alex Taylor was also the Dominion weatherman, postmaster, clerk of the court, and chairman of the public school. In later life, he lost the use of both arms, yet remained active in



serving the community. He set a fine example of dignity and courage.

*Adapted from Edmonton: Portrait of a City, 1981*



ing and Power Company Limited, and remained in that position until 1902. Alex Taylor, a well-known business owner, was the company's managing director.

On October 23, 1891, Queen Victoria's representative to the North West Territories, Joseph Royal, granted the Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company a "letters patent." This gave the fledgling company the right to the "construction, maintenance and operation of works for the production, sale and distribution of electricity for purposes of light, heat and power." As a private company, the capital stock was fixed at \$10,000, which was made up of 1,000 shares at \$10 each.

**LEFT:** *Edmonton's power plant as it appeared in the 1890s.*

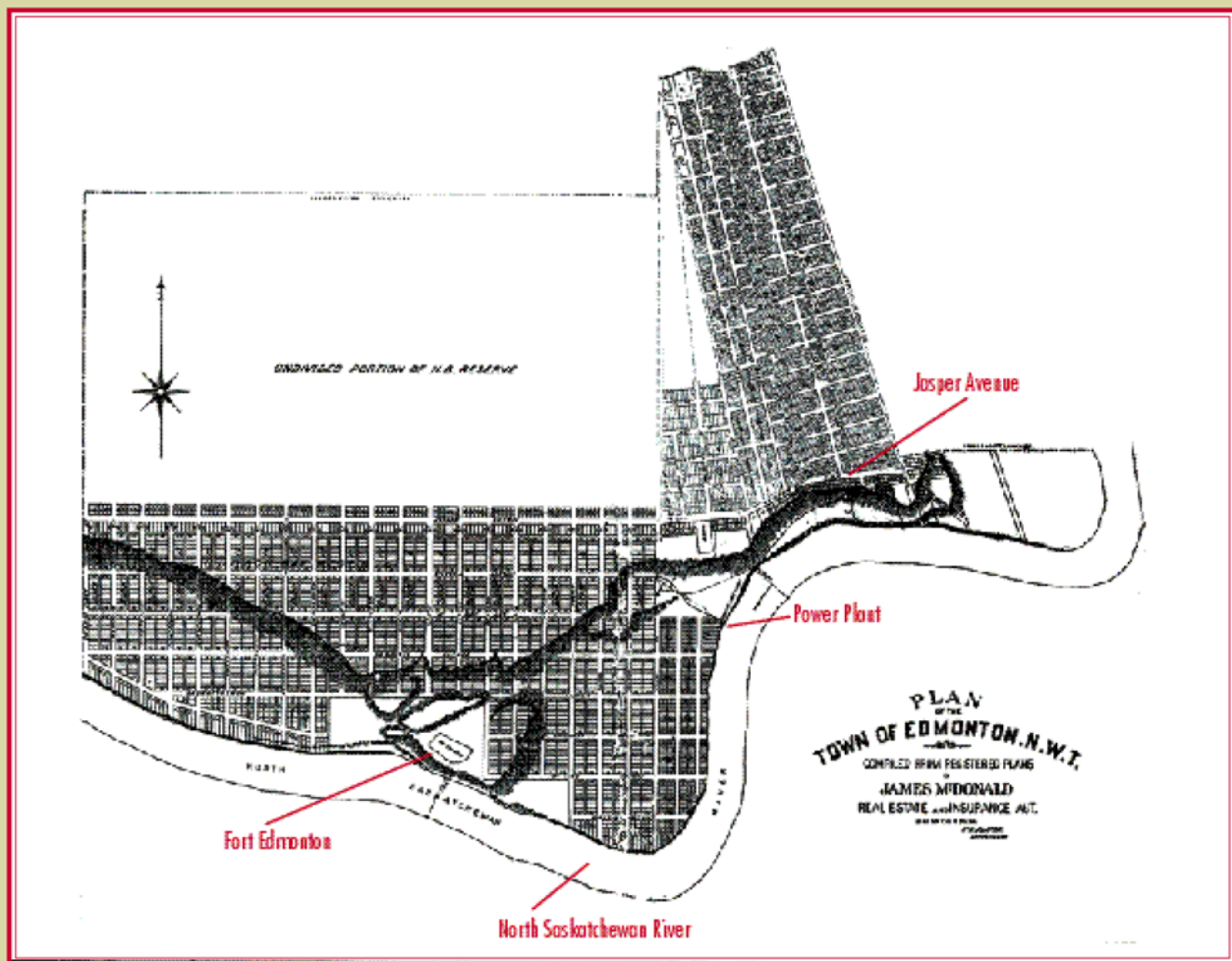
Under the management of Alex Taylor, Edmonton's power plant was built on the north bank of the North Saskatchewan River, upstream of the Low Level Bridge's present location. This plant had a coal-fired steam boiler and piston-engine-driven generators. Coal, which was stoked by hand, was taken from nearby river valley mines; the river provided easy transportation from mines upstream.

Power poles were installed along Jasper Avenue from 96 Street to 103 Street to power principal buildings and lampposts. Beginning December 22, 1891, electric lights came on in Edmonton. From sunset to 1:00 AM, and in the winter months from 5:30 AM to sunrise, Jasper Avenue was illuminated.

Inroads into Edmonton's market of about 700 citizens (in 1892) came slowly

## EDMONTON IN 1892

*The basic plan of downtown Edmonton was already formed in 1892. This map shows the location of Edmonton's first power plant (right and below center) as well as another notable landmark of the day: Fort Edmonton, situated on what is now the grounds of the provincial legislature.*



## JOHN AND ELIZABETH WALTER

John and Elizabeth Walter formed one of Edmonton's most memorable founding families. John built many of the businesses and institutions that were critical to the city's early development, including a sawmill, a coal mine, and a ferry.

John Walter was born at Sennes, on the Orkney Islands, on August 12, 1849. The Hudson's Bay Company lured him to North America; he arrived at York Factory on Hudson Bay in 1870. He then made a long journey to Edmonton, first to Norway House on Lake Winnipeg, then on to Edmonton via the Saskatchewan River. While he could, he traveled by York boat. As winter set in, however, his party continued on by dog train. He finally reached Edmonton on December 24.

Elizabeth Newby was also born in Great Britain, in Yorkshire, in 1860. She came to Canada in 1880, and lived in Toronto for two years. She then traveled by rail to Brandon, and from there made her way to Pheasant Plains by oxcart.

Elizabeth left Pheasant Plains for Winnipeg after only one year; there were too few people of her age living there. After leaving Winnipeg she worked in an orphanage for Native children in Morely. She finally arrived in Edmonton in 1886. There, she met John, whom she married on October 21 of that same year.

By this time, John had become a pillar in the emerging community. He had left the Hudson's Bay Company to pursue his own interests. These interests included Walter's Ferry, the

first ferry service to cross the North Saskatchewan, and a boat-building operation that provided small scows to both the Hudson's Bay Company and the government.

When the railway began bringing settlers into the Edmonton area in 1891, John's business diversified. He opened a sawmill, started a coal mine, became the owner of a considerable quantity of land, invested in an electrical generating station, and built a steamer that sailed the North Saskatchewan. He and Elizabeth had two sons: John William and Stanley, who both grew up to operate farms in the Sandy Lake district of Alberta.

A series of floods damaged John's operations around the turn of the century. At this time, many businesses were located on the banks of the river. John urged the government to do something to decrease the severity of the flooding. But a flood in 1915 destroyed not only John's sawmill, but many homes as well. John abandoned his mill, but retained sufficient equity in other interests to go into semi-retirement, though he intended to re-enter the business world.

Unfortunately, however, John died on Christmas morning, 1920, after an operation at Edmonton's Royal Alexandra Hospital. Elizabeth survived her husband, and continued to live in her large green house on the river's edge. Today, Edmonton remembers the Walters through the John Walter Museum.

*Source: text prepared by the Northern Alberta Pioneers and Old Timers Association*

for Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power. The utility had yet to prove itself: people were not convinced that this new method of lighting was better than the old coal-oil lantern. After all, lanterns required the user to trim wicks and clean chimneys, but once a lantern was lit, it stayed on! This could not always be said for electric lights. Electric generation and distribution were new technologies at the turn of the century, and lacked modern failsafes. Floods and falling trees could cut the electric supply.

According to an original Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power price list of 1891, the cost of lighting a home or business depended on how many lights were wanted.

*The rates are as follows: dwelling houses, hotel bedrooms, etc., the first lamp costs \$1 a month; two lamps, 85 cents each; more than four lamps, 50 cents each.*

## THE FLOOD OF 1899

The early utility faced a serious challenge in 1899, when the North Saskatchewan rose 41 feet up over the river banks and rolled into the power station. According to Arthur W. Ormsby (later a superintendent of the plant), three to four feet of water had spilled in the building, disabling the operation of the control apparatus and other equipment.

"After we went down McDougall Hill, it was necessary to take a boat to the power plant," said Ormsby in a later interview. The flood caused countless other difficulties that were compounded by a lack of facilities for drying or fixing the wet equipment. As a result, power was off for at least three weeks. It was this disaster, and a smaller flood in 1900,



## ARTHUR ORMSBY

Born near Orilla, in Simcoe County, Ontario, Arthur Ormsby gained some experience in telephone operations as a youth. He came to Edmonton on April 16, 1892.

Arthur Ormsby made his first 50 cents in Edmonton repairing a phone in the office of *The Edmonton Bulletin*. Alex Taylor immediately hired him to work as telephone repairman for Taylor's telephone company. At that time, there were between 25 and 30 telephones in Edmonton. Taylor subsequently had Ormsby work at the Electric Lighting and Power Company.

Mr. Ormsby continued to work for the utilities after the Town of Edmonton purchased the electric light and telephone systems. Later, he was employed solely in the electric light department, and eventually became superintendent. In 1919, he

was appointed City commissioner, and held the post until 1921, when he entered private business.

Arthur Ormsby was an avid curler. He was one of the 16 people who founded the Edmonton Curling Club in 1892. At that time, the club's "rocks" were kettles filled with sand. "We decided to do it right," Ormsby recalled in an interview he gave in 1961, when he was 92 years old.

*So we went to ... the blacksmiths. We described curling rocks to them and they made them from iron blocks. They rounded off the blocks and welded iron handles on them. We ordered just enough rocks for one game at a time.*

*We sent away to Winnipeg for the dimensions of a curling rink, and marked one out on the river where the*

*Macdonald Hotel is now. We marked the sheet with paint and it lasted all winter.*

They used moccasins or skates for shoes, and ordinary household brooms.

*We tried curling at night with the light from coal oil lanterns, but it wasn't too successful. Still, we managed to play two or three times a week.*

Then, in 1894, the club built a lean-to alongside the lumberyard owned by D.R. Fraser. These facilities attracted the attention of other Alberta teams, and played host to many friendly tournaments.

*Sources: The Edmonton Journal, 1954, 1961, and Ormsby's obituary*



that would eventually lead to the decision to move the plant to higher ground.

Once the power plant was back in operation, it remained in good running order under private ownership for several more years. In 1901, however, the company's franchise came to an end. In May 1902, after 10 successful and profitable years under private ownership, Edmonton Electric Lighting and Power Company entered the next phase of its existence, as the first municipally-owned electric utility in a Canada, with an installed capacity of 75 kW.

**LEFT:** *Edmonton's power plant during the disastrous flood of 1899.*

