

Telephone, Telegraph, and Power in Chilton County
By Derric Scott
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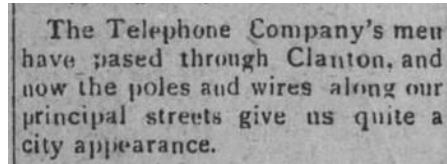
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Telephone and Telegraph

In 1897 a telegraph office was setup in Maplesville in T. U. Crumpton's store.

In September 1898 American Telephone Company representatives started meeting with local officials regarding their application to carry telephone wires over the poor house farm near Jemison. Also that month they announced that they expected to have Clanton connected very soon. In early October the crews were encamped outside (west) of town and by the end of October the poles and wires passed all the way through Clanton.



October 20th, 1898 Union Banner

For Christmas, 1898, Sartor & Kicker proudly advertised that they had a "long distance telephone" installed! They bragged that you could *"talk over the phone cheaper than you can telegraph, and more to your satisfaction, as you are your own operator. Bring your families to our store that they may see it."*

Telephones weren't only installed in the towns and cities; they went to rural sites too. In 1899 the sawmill company at Minooka was installing a telephone line from their mill down their railroad to the timber cutting site for communications.

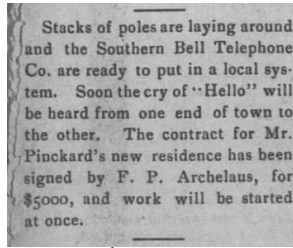
In early 1905 Mr. F. A. Gulledge of Verbena wrote an open letter to the Union Banner discussing, among other things, the telephone situation. He asked why it took outside companies to install telephone connections in the county and asked why couldn't local citizens form a company and do it locally. He suggested that he was ready to join such an endeavor. Later that year, in August, he wrote again and stated he was ready to start a local company. He points out that the Hull Brothers of Schley had run a wire to Knight's Ferry and he said he would build it on to Verbena. W. E. Thomas of Jemison counters that he should check out Jemison – they had equipment and supplies to build out telephone and gave prices (ex. four miles from Jemison to his house cost \$75.40). He was working to connect to Bibb county telephone at Randolph soon.



F. A. Gulledge Store in Verbena, ca 1890

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In February of 1906 the Southern Bell Telephone Company was in town and began to setup a local telephone system. The connection to Mr. E. M. Pinckard's new house would be started first.



February 15th, 1906 Union Banner

Apparently by April 1906 Mr. F. A. Gulledge was in the telephone business in Verbena. Someone had a good idea to call up all the Verbena people at one time and have Henry Johnson and Cliff Burkhalter play violin and guitar over the lines to everyone! Then he chided Clanton and said "Clanton don't know what she is missing by having no 'phones."

Even in May of 1907 Mr. F. A. Gulledge was still pushing Clanton to get on the telephone bandwagon. He lamented that so many prominent people didn't have phones and wouldn't contribute to the telephone installations. Meanwhile, at this same time, Jemison was running lines out to Mineral Springs, to J. M. Robinson's Mill and then later into Clanton. Thorsby had phones too, and "the central" was located in the home of Mrs. Swan. By October of 1907 Enterprise had their phones and were connected to Cooper and Billingsley.

In January of 1908 the people in Jemison had run a phone line to W. H. Shaw's. Maplesville also had some telephone lines by the end of the year. In Clanton, businesses were beginning to advertise their ability to take orders and do other business over their telephone line – Florence Drug Store was one that noted that they have both rural and town phones in their store. This brings up the point that there were multiple competing telephone companies and systems crisscrossing the county at this time. Some mentioned were **American Telephone Company, Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Company, Peoples Telephone Company**, and other independent systems, like Mr. F. A. Gulledge's in Verbena.

In Clanton, in February 1909, the telephone **Central Exchange** was in Mr. G. O. Foshee's house on Fifth Street. Lightning struck at Dr. J. P. Crompton's house which started a fire at Mr. Foshee's house! Also this year advertisements by **Western Electric Company** appeared encouraging people to purchase their telephone systems and setup their own telephone networks. **Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Co.** is sending out printed directories.

Verbena's **Oliver and Gulledge Brothers** (successors to F. A. Gulledge) arranged in 1910 to connect their telephone exchange with the long distance line of the **Southern Bell Telephone & Telegraph Company**. That allowed Verbena to reach Dollar, Coopers, Rushton, Sly, Billingsley, Lightwood, and Energy. Verbena's network has 116 telephones connected in September of 1910.

In 1913 the **Peoples Telephone Company** begins to show up, printing annual reports and asking for customers to make payments when their Secretary-Treasurer, G. O. Foshee, is available at Dr. T. J. Marcus' office or L. D. Popwell's store, etc. Officers at the end of 1913 are L. D. Popwell, President; Wiley Littlejohn, Vice President; G. O. Foshee, Secretary and Treasurer; Dr. T. J. Marcus, Director; J. N. Dennis, Director.

The **1917 and 1928 Sanborn Fire maps** show a telephone exchange in the 2nd floor of **Albert Headley & Son's** store, on the south west corner by the railroad.

Peoples Telephone is still doing business in the 1926 timeframe – building out with insulated wire, overhauling the switchboard, etc.

Power

A post from Thomas Alan Blalock, **Facebook: U know u lived in CLANTON as a kid** and with excerpts from the article “*Electricity in Clanton*” - **Union Banner** – July 28th, 1921.

On April 12, 1914 the dam at **Lock 12** (later named **Lay Dam**) went into service. And even though it was only a few miles away, it would take 6 more years for its electricity to reach Clanton in 1920.

The history of electricity in Clanton began in 1906 when Joseph P. VanDerveer placed his electric dynamo at the planing mill of B. H. Duke who provided steam power.

The Clanton Electric Light and Power Company was formed under Mr. VanDerveer and the town of Clanton contracted for 50 street lights in April 1906.

During the months of April and May 1906, poles were planted and wires were strung along the street.

A huge crowd gathered at the Courthouse (the one that burned in 1918) on the evening of July 31, 1906 to see the lights come on in the first building in Clanton.

About this same time, the first house (owned by E. M. Pinckard) was wired for electricity and a big party was held to celebrate. But the night watchman went to sleep at the mill and the steam got so low, that the lights went out. Mr. VanDerveer rushed to the mill, raised a new head of steam, the lights came back on and the party resumed till the middle of the night.

The Methodist Church installed electric lights, but **the Baptist Church** didn't because they feared it would cause a fire. (Note that at this time both churches were wood-framed construction.)

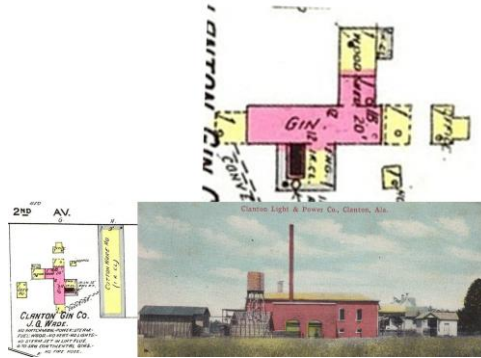
Mr. VanDerveer kept the first money he was paid for electricity in Clanton (3 dollars in silver) in an envelope. In June 1906, a street show was in Clanton and lights were provided for \$3.75. Mr. VanDerveer gave \$0.75 to Mr. Duke for supplying the steam.

Eventually, Mr. VanDerveer moved his operation into his own plant at the rear of the **Masonic Hall** where he made his own steam power. He employed Alva Wade to keep the plant running.

Over time the excitement and support from the town dwindled and after one night when the governors on the engine flew off and tore a hole in the roof as they passed out into space, Mr. VanDerveer sold his business to J. Q. and Alva Wade. It became the **Wade Electrical Light and Power Company** and operated successfully for several years, eventually selling out to the **Alabama Power Company** in 1920. It was then that Clanton finally received electricity from the dam just a few miles away.

But back to when the Wades bought it, after Mr. VanDerveer sold to Mr. Wade (behind the **Masonic Lodge**) Mr. Wade moved the power plant to his gin out near West End on 2nd Avenue North before March 1913. That's the postcard date and location and the 1917 Sanborn Fire Map location, see the composite image:

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Composite image of 1917 Sanborn Fire Insurance map excerpts and Clanton Light and Power Co. postcard.

At the end of 1914 and beginning of 1915 J. Q. and A. C. Wade moved their power plant to the lot just north of 2nd Avenue North beside the railroad. When they moved it, they added the Ice Plant equipment that many folks presently remember from their childhood. After selling the power company to Alabama Power in 1920, the Wades continued the Ice Plant for many years.

References

Union Banner:

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps: