

## **Caring for your Historic House by Gordon H. Bock ([www.gordonbock.com](http://www.gordonbock.com))**

Hard to believe it's been over 22 years since Heritage Preservation asked me to write a chapter for the book *Caring for Your Historic House*. It's barely in my memory banks, but I think it was Charles E. "Chuck" Fisher at The National Park Service who sought me out at *Old-House Journal*, where I was editor, and asked if I wanted to contribute. What he described was a follow-up to *Caring for Your Collections*, though focused on historic houses instead of material culture, and emphasizing not restoration but preventive maintenance – the preferable way to care for a historic building. By that time the project was well along in planning with most of the 20 chapters (especially the sexier subjects) already assigned. However, one still waiting for an author was "Lighting and Electrical Systems", and since this happened to be a pet interest of mine (as well as my earlier training and work background) I signed on.

While lighting is a pretty accessible subject, electrical history, and its application to historic buildings, is not very graphic or aesthetic for the average reader and seldom researched or written about even today. Plus, old wiring does not lend itself as readily to a discussion of maintenance as, say, decorative woodwork or plaster, so I approached the assignment as Understanding What You Have.

Remember, this was the (gasp!) largely pre-internet 1990s, and there was precious little primary source material to draw upon. Fortunately, I owned a collection of early electrical engineering literature and had notes and photos from some great libraries to draw upon – including a landmark report by Maximillian Ferro -- so I felt this material was sufficient to float a useful, readable chapter. To include some human qualities and a little drama in an otherwise rather dry subject, I interweaved Thomas Edison's story of creating the first DC electrical systems with housing developments in each era – for example, competition with gaslighting companies – and from there on the chapter started to write itself. Hugh C. Miller, who with Chuck Fisher was a general editor, asked that I add a bit about independent power plants, such as Delco systems, which was happy to oblige because I always heard that my great-grandparents had such a set-up.

From the first I knew that chapters were also coming from several longtime colleagues and friends – John Leeke, James Boorstein, and David Flaharty among them – but I was to work alongside many more. As project director, Clare Bouton Hansen did a great job of keeping all the chapter "boxcars" on track and, to my amazement, even charmed the folks at Clark's Trading Post (a tourist venue in New Hampshire) into photographing their nifty early lighting display for my chapter. However, it was not until the book came off the presses that I realized what esteemed company I had the luck to join. Indeed, over the years I've met almost all of my co-authors, and as soon as I mention, "Yeah, we both worked on *Caring for Your Historic House*," no further introductions are necessary.