

HISTORY MAKER

HENRY ELIAS FRIES

Born: Sept. 22, 1857, Salem

Died: March 3, 1949, Winston-Salem

Known for: Decades of public service, business and civic leadership and as a pioneer of industrial and civic use of electricity in the state

At noon on April 21, 1898, 6-year-old Marguerite Fries pushed a button that started the massive generator at the Fries Manufacturing and Power Company on the Yadkin River. Her father, Henry Elias Fries, formed the company to power the growing manufacturing industry in Winston and Salem as well as street cars, street lights and telephones.

Called “the achievement of the century” by Winston’s Union Reporter, many newspapers agreed the plant would attract more industry.

“While this is not the first electric plant of the kind,” wrote the editor of the Western Sentinel in January that year, “a special interest attaches to it, because the distance over which the power is to be carried, 13 ½ miles, is longer than usual and ... is the first development of the kind in the state.”

During a trip to New York in 1896, Fries sought out engineers with electrical experience. A well-known and respected citizen of Salem with more than two decades heading textile and grist mills as well as civic and public posts, he had the resources and contacts to persuade other business leaders to support the venture, even in the midst of an economic depression.

“The availability of electric power generated (by the plant) enabled the early development of the Winston-Salem area as a significant industrial and manufacturing center,” said a 1984 report from The American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Sixth of seven children born to Francis Levin Fries and wife, Lisetta Maria Vogler, Henry attended Salem Boys School and then Davidson College, though failing eyesight kept him from graduating.

In 1874, he became manager of Wachovia Mills, part of the family’s extensive business interests under his father and uncle’s F&H Fries Manufacturing Company.

He served in the state General Assembly, three terms as mayor of Salem and 19 terms as commissioner. A passionate supporter of conservative “sound money” economic policies, he was a longtime member of the Democratic National Committee.

He was a vocal proponent of publicly funded paved streets, health care and education and adamantly promoted plans to



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unite Winston and Salem.

A trustee of both Slater Industrial and Normal School (today’s Winston-Salem State University) and the N.C. College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (now N.C. State), he wrote in Winston’s People’s Press that it was important “to train ... the bright youth of North Carolina to fill most of the positions” needed to develop the state’s “agricultural, dairy, horticultural, mechanical, mining and manufacturing interests” rather than continue to seek skilled labor from other regions.

“The growth of Salem adds to the prosperity of Winston, which is and has been recognized as a commercial center of our section,” he wrote in 1897. “The most important thing for the citizens of both towns and this section of the country to do, is to take a bold stand for the upbuilding of our towns and the enlargement of our industries.”