

# The First 100 Years



## The Creation of the Commission

The Public Utilities Commission of the District of Columbia came into existence on March 4, 1913, inauguration day. Just before leaving office, President William Howard Taft signed legislation creating the new agency. Regulation of DC's utilities switched from Congress to the PUC (now the Public Service Commission or PSC).

The law designated the commissioners of the new PUC to be the same presidentially appointed members of the DC Board of Commissioners who ran the city at that time.

Determining exactly which companies were subject to the law took some time. Eventually the list comprised streetcar, bus, taxi, lighting and heating gas, electric, telephone and telegraph, and pipeline companies.

The PUC had an enormous job ahead of it. First it needed to value the capital assets of every utility it regulated. The resulting dollar amounts would guide the agency in setting rates that would be fair both to consumers and to the companies. The task proved enormously challenging when some of the companies refused to cooperate. PUC staff had to literally count bricks and windows to come up with the needed figures.

Other tasks included investigating thousands of complaints from utility customers and brokering solutions, writing operating and accounting standards, investigating accidents, conducting hearings on proposed rate increases, and much more.

In the Commission's first annual report, General Counsel Conrad H. Syme wrote:

*"The principle that the rights of the people ... constituted a most important element in the determination as to how much a corporation should charge in the exercise of a public grant came almost as a shock to corporate comprehension."*



1 President William Howard Taft signed the Public Utilities bill into law minutes before his term ended on March 4, 1913.



2 The Commission's first offices were on the third floor of the District Building (completed 1908).

3 Col. Chester Harding was the PUC's first chairman. As the District's Engineer Commissioner, he was an Army Corps of Engineers officer.

ENACTED, OR FRANCHISE GRANTED.

Par. 2. That every public utility doing business within the District of Columbia is required to furnish service and facilities reasonably safe and adequate and in all respects just and reasonable. The charge made by any such public utility for any facility or services furnished, rendered, or to be furnished or rendered, shall be reasonable, just, and nondiscriminatory. Every unjust or unreasonable or discriminatory charge for such facility or service is prohibited and is hereby declared unlawful. Every public utility is hereby required to obey the lawful orders of the commission created by this section.

Par. 3. That every public utility doing business in the District of Columbia having

4 Section 8 of the 1913 DC Appropriations Act created the Public Utilities Commission.

Paragraph 2 set forth expectations for utility companies, to be enforced by the Commission.

### SOME OF THE COMPANIES UNDER THE PUC'S JURISDICTION:



5 Chesapeake & Potomac Telephone Co.



6 Washington Railway & Electric Co., one of several street railways operating in DC in 1913. This photograph was taken at 11th and F streets, NW.



7 Federal Taxicab Co. The courts determined that taxi service originating from public stands, like this one at Union Station, was subject to PUC regulation. Private service was not.

8 Potomac Electric Power Co. The company's headquarters and power plant were at 14th and Constitution, NW.



9 Washington Gas Light Co. This was the company's facility at 26th and G streets, NW.