One night, several weeks ago, as I was traveling from New York to Chicago on a New York Central train, shortly after leaving Albany and getting into my berth, I raised the shade and watched the countryside flash by through the night. Suddenly, the darkness was broken and there shot into view a dazzling white structure, beautiful in proportion and outlined against the darkness like a white-hot ingot. Below, the reflection of the flood-lighted building lay inverted in the still waters of the Mohawk. The effect was marvelous. That fairy-like white structure glowing against the dark sky must have impressed itself unforgettably on the minds of everyone that saw it.

"Why Not Good Looking Power Plants?", Literary Digest, August 1926

These lines, penned by an anonymous traveler heading west through the Mohawk Valley in the summer of 1926, read like a celebration of some imposing architectural monument to the authority of church or state. But the mill towns that had slowly crept their way over the low hills bordering the Mohawk River in the years following the Civil War could boast of no such edifices. In the early twentieth century, the buildings vital to community life were factories, drab brick and fieldstone structures often smoke-shrouded during the day and darkly silhouetted against the starlit night sky.

With one exception. For nearly a century, the Amsterdam Steam Generating Station of the Adirondack Power and Light Corporation (ADPL) has stood on the south bank of the Mohawk River opposite the hamlet of Cranesville. By the mid-twentieth century, the company that erected the building had passed into history, its demise the result of corporate mergers and a technology that made possible the growth of much cheaper hydroelectric power generation.
However, the steam station that was the showpiece of Adirondack Power and Light in the early 1920s, remains to impress the viewer in terms of its color and design.

**Specialized Brilliance**

The brilliance of the Amsterdam Steam Generating Station’s north and east walls that captured the imagination in the 1920s and does so even today is due to a specialized mixture of Medusa white cement, marble chips, and white sand. Medusa white cement was an innovation of the Sandusky Portland Cement Company of Ohio patented in 1903 for its pure white color and resistance to staining. It was widely used for heavy construction, architectural ornamentation, and the casting of statuary throughout the Art Deco period. That combination still gives the plant its glow evoking a “fairy-like” image demonstrating the builder’s intent to make the utilitarian beautiful. The choice of a specialized mixture of concrete noted for its “dazzling whiteness” signaled the ADPL’s desire to make the building a monument on the landscape that would symbolize the optimism of the region and the time. The building would also serve as a marker for the rapid growth of the company as a major provider of electricity to the eastern Mohawk Valley as well as points north and east. In fewer than fifty years, the ADPL had grown from a small generating plant serving only Amsterdam to an electric utility serving an area whose boundaries stretched from Lake
George to Lake Champlain on the North; Watervliet, Troy, and Albany on the east; and Oneida on the west. It had become the principal supplier of electricity to rural areas as well as cities in the region.

Architects of the plant were the well-known New York firm of McKee, Kim, and White, designers of the original Madison Square Garden and the old Pennsylvania Station. That Adirondack Power and Light had the resources to hire such a prestigious firm was a testament to the company's financial success. It had begun in the 1880s as Edison Electric Power and Light in 1920. At the time of the river station's construction, the Corporation retained its headquarters in Amsterdam.

Urgent Need
Construction of the station began in late August of 1920, with engineers surveying the flat farmland on the south shore of the Mohawk across from the hamlet of Cranesville. By early October, the dredge General Herkimer was at work excavating the foundation for a concrete mat varying from two to over six feet in thickness on which the building sits. Evidence of the urgency the project held for Adirondack Power was that outside contractors were not used in its construction. No time was to be lost to the uncertainties of travel to and from the surrounding communities, or possible delays due to a contractor's other projects. The company employed its own men and erected a boarding house at the construction site to accommodate the workers. The facility held seventy men, as well as a commissary capable of providing over four hundred meals a day.

First to be erected was the "crib house," which sits right at the river's edge and holds the intake gates for the boilers. Construction of that small building took place over the winter of 1920-21, when the water level was low. Concrete was poured, then allowed to cure, and underwater soil was scooped out, allowing the finished walls to sink below the level of the river. Despite the problems that the weather posed for such an endeavor at that time of year, only one complication occurred. On February 28, 1921, the level of the river rose at the rate of twelve feet in twelve minutes owing to an ice jam. However, the coffer dam protecting the work held against the rising water, and construction continued unabated. Fifteen months later, the first version of the station, housing one turbine with two imposing black stacks rising above the glistening white building, stood at the edge of the Mohawk, producing electric power for the eastern part of the valley.

In mid-1923, owing to problems in the anticipated

The station's north and east walls are made with a specialized mixture of Medusa white cement, marble chips, and white sand.
Most of the papers of the Adirondack Power and Light Corporation are held in the archives of The Museum of Science and Innovation in Schenectady. This collection has bound copies of the Synchronizer, a company newsletter. It is the primary source for information on the design and construction of the power station, as well as the effect the company had on the growth of industry in the area. The archives also hold the photographic record of the plant’s construction. Additionally, issues of the Amsterdam Recorder for the years 1920 to 1926 recount the power station’s economic impact.

More information on the history of electric and gas production in the eastern Mohawk Valley at the end of the nineteenth century can be found in Earl O. Stowitts’s booklet, “Little Journeys into Industrial Establishments of Amsterdam,” held in the collection of the Walter Elwood Museum in Amsterdam.