



Transformation Through Collaboration

Why AEIC? Why Now?

By AEIC's ELIZABETH COOK

In 1885, a small group of Edison Illuminating Companies gathered in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, not to celebrate themselves, but to solve problems. They came together, the record shows, for “mutual protection” and for the “collection and dissemination of information.” They believed the knowledge of one company should become the knowledge of all. That was the point. That was the value. That was the beginning.

More than 140 years later, the industry is still working together to solve problems and share knowledge. It still needs a place where operators, engineers, planners, leaders, and stewards of the grid can come together to compare experiences, debate hard truths, and make the knowledge of one utility useful to many.

That is why AEIC matters. And that is why AEIC matters now. The earliest minutes make clear that AEIC was never intended to be a ceremonial society. It was a working body.

The conversations were grounded in station management, lamp performance, wiring, fusing, engine design,

cost, and the practical realities of running electric systems safely and economically. Even in those earliest years, the members understood something that still defines our work today: progress in infrastructure does not come from invention alone. It comes from disciplined operations, shared learning, and the willingness to standardize where standardization serves the greater good.

By the late 1880s and into the 1890s, that instinct had become more formal. AEIC's bylaws continued to center on “mutual protection” and the dissemination of information, but the association's work was clearly widening. The members were not simply sharing anecdotes.

They were building an operating

culture. They were comparing failures, debating technical practice, examining legal exposure, and confronting safety hazards that could not be solved by any one company in isolation.

That is one of the most striking themes across the early decades. The industry did not gather because everything was certain. It gathered because so much was uncertain. There were real questions about fire risk, high-tension crossings, grounding methods, meter accuracy, municipal pressure, and the cost of doing business in a rapidly changing environment.

There were disagreements. There were competing interests. There were technological unknowns. And still, they met.

The Evolution Continued: Industry Grows

In 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, the discussions reflected an industry already grappling with regulation, public accountability,

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and the need to educate beyond its own walls. AEIC heard from Massachusetts regulator F. E. Barker on state control of electric lighting interests.

A key organizer of the Exposition, Captain Brophy, continued pressing the importance of inspection and safety. The group was already wrestling with the question of how an emerging utility industry should be governed, trusted, and understood by the public.

By 1897, Samuel Insull's presidential address made the case in unmistakable terms: Edison companies met because they had mutual interests, shared obligations, and much to gain by exchanging ideas on how to conduct the business well. He pointed to the importance of economic production, transmission, storage, pricing, and comparable accounting.

In other words, even then, the work was already bigger than equipment. It was about operating models, business discipline, and the structure needed to support growth responsibly.

By 1900, AEIC had matured further. President John W. Lieb Jr. described the association not as a purely technical body, but as one with interests to safeguard through committee work and deliberate cooperation. That same year, the record shows committees focused on meters, grounding, automobiles, municipal relations, and the standardization of switches and similar apparatus. The association had evolved from a place to compare notes into an institution capable of shaping the methods, language, and priorities of a growing industry.

That arc from 1885 through 1900 matters because it reveals AEIC's original logic. The association existed

to help utilities do hard things better. It created room for candor. It allowed peers to learn from one another without pretense. It built trust across companies so that safety lessons, operational methods, economic frameworks, and engineering standards did not remain isolated within one service territory. It treated the exchange of practical intelligence as essential infrastructure.

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And then came the next evolution. From 1900 to 1910, the industry moved from novelty to responsibility. The conversations increasingly reflected professionalization: testing methods, data reporting, customer trust, inspection quality, system planning, and the idea that utilities were becoming civic institutions, not merely engineering ventures.

Figures like W. J. Jenks, Arthur Williams, Captain Brophy, Louis Bell, C.O. Mailloux, Alex Dow, and Everett W. Burdett helped shape a decade defined less by dramatic invention than by the quiet discipline of making electrification dependable, explainable, and scalable.

The Stakes Widened

From 1911 to 1920, the stakes widened again. Urban growth, industrial expansion, regulatory oversight, World War I, and the influenza pandemic pushed the electric industry to think in more systemic terms. Reliability

was no longer just good engineering. It was public duty.

Utilities had to think about fuel, labor, continuity, safety, planning, capital, and resilience under strain. The work became more strategic because society was becoming more dependent on the service. And that is precisely why these years matter to us now.

Today, our vocabulary is different. We talk about grid modernization, DER integration, data governance, cybersecurity, advanced analytics, electrification, resilience, workforce transitions, AI, and the need for mod-

ernized operating models. But beneath the changing language, the underlying challenge is surprisingly familiar.

We are once again living through a period in which the grid is evolving faster than old ways of working. We are once again confronting fragmented systems, uneven readiness, rising public expectations, regulatory pressure, and the need to align many entities around a shared operational future.

We are also, once again, at risk of mistaking technology for transformation. The early AEIC minutes remind us that transformation has never been achieved by tools alone. It has always depended on people willing to gather, compare, challenge, standardize, document, and improve.

It has depended on operators telling the truth about what failed. It has depended on leaders creating structures for collaboration. It has depended on the humility to admit that no single utility, vendor, regulator, or expert can solve systemic change alone. **PUF**