

Consumers Company

by Ed Mullen, Volunteer Researcher

It's understandable that we think of Francis Stuyvesant Peabody as a coal-mine operator and a giant in the coal industry. The company he established in 1883 not only remains in business today but also still operates under the Peabody name. But like many business leaders of the Gilded Age, Peabody was involved in more than one industry.



Consumers Company

Guaranteed Products—A Pledge

Chapter 1—The Story of City Fuel

Historically, City Fuel goes back to the pioneer days of Chicago. Some of the companies which entered the organization when it was made years ago, had been supplying Chicago people with coal at a time that is already beginning to seem dim and shadowy to us of today.

Thus associated with Chicago's history, City Fuel is, in another way, representative of the growth of the community which it serves.

Before the development of the City Fuel idea, the coal business was in an unsatisfactory, not to say chaotic condition. No uniform quality; no positive assurance of correct weights; uncertain deliveries. The coal buyer took long chances!

The facilities of the City Fuel Company formed a protection against the crippled service that formerly used to follow a railroad tie-up or a miners' strike.

In those days, six or eight yards were considered a pretty big equipment for any one dealer—City Fuel has today 141.

The slow, unsatisfactory coal delivery became modern and snappy—City Fuel is now delivered with an outfit of 349 modern motor trucks and large capacity coal wagons—part of a total of 1100 vehicles.

A telephone order from any part of Chicago or outlying districts will instantly start a load of coal on its way to the desired point.

City Fuel service, in the larger organization of which the Company forms a part, will be continued—absolutely correct weights, uniformly good quality, conscientious service, rapid deliveries and the fairest price consistent with all these qualities.

City Fuel will maintain the high standard of the Consumers Company, all of whose products are "Guaranteed Products".

Chicago is assured, through the existence of the Consumers Company, of a coal service worthy of the progress of this community—a coal service that may be justly called ideal and Consumers Company fuel will always be known as City Fuel.

Consumers Company
City Fuel—Knickerbocker Ice—Building Material
Hydrox Products

General Offices, Consumers Company Bldg., State and Quincy Sts.
48 Limited Truck Lines at Main Office—Wabash 3455
141 Branch Telephones at Company Yards and Depots in Chicago and Vicinity—Use the One Nearest You for Prompt Service
More Than 2500 Dealers Now Sell GUARANTEED PRODUCTS

In 1913 Peabody and Fred Upham, a Republican leader and close business associate, were major players in the formation of Consumers Company, which sold coal, ice, soda pop and building materials in and around Chicago. The company was the product of a merge between Knickerbocker Ice Company and City Fuel Company, each the largest of its kind in Chicago. Knickerbocker sold sand, gravel and other building materials but also owned Consumers Pure Ice Company, which sold artificially made ice and Hydrox (no connection to the cookie) beverages and ice cream. City Fuel, which sold coal, had been founded by Peabody, Upham and three other businessmen, who wanted the retail share of their operations managed under one roof. By joining Knickerbocker and City Fuel, the new Consumers Company could take advantage of delivery equipment that idled either in coal yards in summer or ice plants in winter.

The new company sold its Hydrox operations in 1914, and although the balance of Consumers remained an independent enterprise until 1951, its affiliation with the Peabody name lasted only until the mid-1930s. Upham served as company president until his death in 1925, at which time Peabody's son, Stuyvesant "Jack," took over the position. By the end of 1931, Jack was no longer president but was still on Consumers' board of directors. He left the board before June 1934, though, when the company filed for bankruptcy. By the time the courts approved a reorganization of Consumers Company in October 1936, any Peabody involvement with the company had ended.

As ice and coal sales dwindled, Consumers shifted its focus to building materials, selling off its ice business in 1948 and its coal operations in 1951. Murchison interests from Dallas, Texas — the same family as Clinton Murchison Jr. who would bring the NFL and the Cowboys to Dallas in 1960 — purchased Consumers in 1951 but sold it three years later to Vulcan Materials Company. Now over 60 years later, the name Consumers Company is long gone, although at least one of its quarries, a local one at 55th Street and Joliet Road in McCook, Illinois, is still in operation.



F. S. Peabody's involvement with Consumers Company is another example of his connection to successful businesses with long histories. Like his companies, Peabody adapted to changing conditions. He wasn't just a coal man but a true Chicago business leader of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era who was always on the lookout for business opportunities with long-term growth potential.