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Bright idea honors history of powering Athens and anniversary with TVA

The bright idea to place a light bulb sculpture in an Athens park got its spark from the statewide bicentennial occurring during the 85th anniversary of our city's partnership with the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Athens turned 200 last year, and Alabama turns 200 this year. Athens joined Alabama in its three-year bicentennial celebration, which concludes this year. TVA is an integral part of the history of Athens and this region, and the local bicentennial committee talked about a way to honor the anniversary of flipping the switch to TVA power.

Athens Electric Department Manager Blair Davis and TVA's Customer Service Manager Robby Jones agreed to support a bicentennial-themed project for Athens. City of Athens Grant Coordinator/Communications Specialist Holly Hollman, who serves on the county's bicentennial committee, asked local artist Micah Gregg if he could design a sculpture to commemorate the history of providing power in Athens and make it interactive where selfie-taking citizens and tourists could photograph themselves getting a bright idea with a light bulb above their heads. Gregg is the owner of the metal fabrication and design studio, Drop Metal LLC.

"People love to document their travels and places they explore, especially when there is a unique feature they can capture," Hollman said.

More importantly, Hollman said, the light bulb sculpture pays tribute to the ingenuity behind providing electrical power, preserves our local history, and honors those who have lost their lives and those who risk their lives to ensure the lights stay on.

TVA provided a \$5,000 community grant for the project, and Athens Utilities provided \$5,000 from its marketing budget.

The plaque on the sculpture states it commemorates "The first office for Athens Light and Water Company opened at the corner of Beaty and Market streets in 1906. The first street lights came in 1908. Athens Light provided electric power until midnight May 31, 1934. On June 1, 1934, Athens began to receive power from the Tennessee Valley Authority. TVA continues to provide power to Athens through Athens Utilities."

Gregg, a graduate of Athens High School who studied welding at the Limestone County Career Technical Center, said he has a "deep connection with North Alabama and surrounding areas" and feels honored project organizers asked him to create something special for Athens.

"In creating this art piece, we want to provide a lasting work of art for the park, commemorate TVA's 85th anniversary in Athens and inspire future park patrons and generations of children passing through the park with the 'flash of an idea,'" said Gregg, who has a degree in industrial product design.

The Mayor's Office is tasking the Athens Mayor's Youth Commission with creating social media filters utilizing the light bulb sculpture.

On Friday, May 31, Gregg joined Athens Utilities, the City of Athens, TVA, Greater Limestone County Chamber of Commerce and community to dedicate his creation at the corner of Beaty and Market streets. The light bulb sculpture is just north of the Athens-Limestone Tourism building at Big Spring Memorial Park. The Tourism building was the city's 1906 Athens Light and Water Company office.

Athens is...Classic. Southern. Character.

The Alabama Bicentennial Commission endorsed the dedication as a state bicentennial event. Mayor Ronnie Marks said the sculpture symbolizes the remarkable journey of our city from a few streetlights with electricity to serving 47,856 electric customers in Limestone County.

Marks said one reason Athens continues to grow is the availability of power through TVA, and the support of TVA for economic development. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the city's population has grown from 21,890 in 2010 to 26,247 in 2018, a growth rate of 19.9 percent.

In 1949, the City of Athens celebrated its 15th anniversary with TVA, and then Mayor Elmer Vinson said the partnership put our city in a "strategic position in the heart of the great Tennessee Valley." The 15th anniversary commemorative booklet pointed to increased farm and industrial production, increased incomes and a better living for those in Limestone County.

Marks said that holds true today. He thanked Athens Utilities, TVA and the bicentennial committee for honoring those who built our system and keep it operating.

"Our Electric Department employees are first responders as well as police and fire," Marks said. "They risk their lives during storms and emergencies to make areas safe for search and rescue and to rebuild damaged systems. This sculpture inspires a new generation to look for that spark of an idea within themselves, but it also ensures we remember those who put their lives on the line for our community."

Four employees have lost their lives since Athens opened its first utility plant in 1906. Those employees are:

- Albert Royal Cook – 1955
- Bobby Craddock Williams – 1961
- Charles Wayne Vinson – 1988
- Randy Lynn Priest - 1989