

Remarks by Edel Wasserman, President, American Chemical Society

Designation of the Discovery of the Commercial Processes
for Making Calcium Carbide and Acetylene as an
International Historic Chemical Landmark



Ottawa, Canada

Thank you very much for your kind introduction. It's a joy to be with you here in Ottawa this afternoon. I'd like to express my deep appreciation to our good friends and colleagues from the Canadian Society for Chemistry for joining with us to celebrate this international landmark as part of Canada's National Chemistry Week. And thanks to all of you here for sharing this important day.

As you may know, the American Chemical Society has for some years honored important landmarks in chemistry like the one that brings us together this afternoon. Until recently, however, we had primarily honored breakthroughs within our borders. We have in the last year launched a new initiative to commemorate important milestones in chemistry and chemical technology around the world, as part of this year's International Chemistry Celebration.

One of the goals of the International Chemistry Celebration is to remind the chemistry community worldwide of its rich heritage and to increase the global public's appreciation of the role chemistry has played in world history. It's appropriate that we honor international landmarks because scientific research and discovery know no national boundaries. The discovery of the commercial processes for making calcium carbide and acetylene is a perfect example. The landmark we honor today is a happy accident of monumental proportions and global impact. Thomas L. Willson's accidental discovery in 1892 of the electric-arc process for making calcium carbide and acetylene triggered a chain of events that transformed the metals shipbuilding industries; led to a new and important method of lighting for domestic, nautical, and industrial applications; and launched the synthetic organic chemical industry.

While discovering the process by chance, Willson labored mightily and successfully for years after to put his discovery to work. His tale, which others have told already, is one of hard-earned success. Don't be fooled by the role of luck in the story: like so many who earn their good luck, Willson had to have the knowledge to recognize the breakthrough and the persistence and ingenuity to make it matter. Fortunately, he had both qualities in ample supply.

As you know, his breakthrough connected Ottawa with a small town in North Carolina. Although the particular routing is unique, we find that such connections abound in chemistry. As part of our International Chemical Landmarks effort, I and other ACS leaders have been to India, Germany, and France, and will be going to Mexico, and Great Britain. During this year we will honor chemistry practiced in many settings, in many

parts of the world, but with this similar outcome – the advances in chemistry in one country have inevitably triggered developments in another, and finally the benefits are felt the world over.

There is a special personal satisfaction that I have derived from being a part of this year's celebration of the history of chemistry. As a Boy Scout I had my carbide lantern with its sooty bright flame; in my formal education I learned a very simple version of the carbide process. But it was only through participating in this landmark designation that I learned of the rich history of its discovery and development. The landmarks program has given me, along with other chemists and the public the chance to become much better informed about something we now take for granted and learn the interesting tale behind the development.

And today we honor one of the great moments in that history. We are proud to join the Canadian Society for Chemistry in designating the discovery of the commercial processes for making calcium carbide and acetylene as an International Historic Chemistry Landmark.

Thank you very much.