

Sutton, Louis Valvelle ^[1]

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by Jack Riley, 1994

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Louis Valvelle Sutton, engineer and electric utility executive, was born in Richmond, Va., the son of Lee Edwards and Ella Wagner Sutton. His father, a tobacco manufacturer, invited him into the business, and when the son chose electrical engineering instead, his father built for him an electrical workshop behind their home. This encouragement led to a lifetime in electric utilities later to be recognized nationally by fellow power company presidents. Under Sutton's direction, the customers of the [Carolina Power and Light Company](#) ^[2] (CP&L) grew from 62,500 to 530,000, while its assets increased sevenfold and its generating capacity, by a factor of 1,000.

At age fourteen Sutton moved with the family to Petersburg, Va., where he was graduated from Petersburg (formerly McCabe) Academy. In 1910 he received a B.S. degree in electrical engineering from [Virginia Polytechnic Institute](#) ^[3], where he was a cadet captain, an adjutant, and a varsity football player. He became an apprentice engineer in General Electric's training program at Lynn, Mass., but kept an eye on job opportunities in North Carolina, where he had met Cantey McDowell Venable, the daughter of Dr. [Francis Preston Venable](#) ^[4], president of [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[5]. They were married on 30 Apr. 1912 and had two children: Louis, Jr., who married Jane Kennedy of [Charlotte](#) ^[6], and Sarah Manning, who married Lawrence Tomlinson, Jr., also of Charlotte.

In a personal appeal for a job, Sutton visited Paul A. Tillery, chief engineer of CP&L, and took work as a statistician at less than his General Electric wage. Promoted to commercial manager, he supervised local office managers and sales personnel, whom he urged to seek company growth through increased electrical service to domestic customers. Sutton had installed in the [Meredith College](#) ^[7] home economics department one of the first electric ranges ever built and put a similar stove in his home kitchen. While his wife tested recipes, he took notes and published the first "electric cook book." Such initiative won him promotion to the position of assistant to Tillery, who rose to company chief executive.

In August 1924 Sutton moved to Little Rock, Ark., as assistant general manager of the Arkansas Central Power Company, and three years later he became vice-president and general manager of the newly formed Mississippi Power and Light Company headquartered at Jackson, Miss. He was called back to CP&L as vice-president in 1932, when Tillery became critically ill. After Tillery's death on 14 Jan. 1933, Sutton was elected president and general manager on 23 March. He continued as chief executive officer for more than thirty-five years.

The economy of the thirties drove homeowners to cut their use of electricity at the same time that long-range construction commitments were bringing "on line" more and more generating capacity. Rather than increase rates to cover any deficit, Sutton surprised the industry by reducing rates. His so-called "inducement rate" permitted householders to use more electricity so long as their total bill did not drop below prior years. Exploiting this lower unit price, homeowners doubled their usage within two years despite the severely depressed economy. Sutton's inducement rate outlived the depression and built a broad base of residential usage that became the envy—and the model—of many utilities nationwide.

The early thirties also brought fear of nationalization of electric utilities. As he had in Mississippi, Sutton resisted government competition. His support of investor-owned utilities won him national recognition and election, in 1950, as president of the Edison Electric Institute. In 1944 he was awarded the honorary degree of doctor of engineering by [North Carolina State College](#) ^[8], and in 1953 he was cited by the North Carolina Society of Engineers for "outstanding engineering achievement." *The State* magazine cover featured him as North Carolinian of 1953, and *Dixie Business Magazine* chose him as Man of the South for 1966. Virginia Polytechnic Institute, his alma mater, awarded him its Distinguished Alumnus citation in 1961.

Political trends in 1933 also shifted the attention of many utility executives from engineering to legislation. Operations and engineering were left to others while chief executives sought ways of competing successfully with the elastic "yardstick" of the Tennessee Valley Authority and other burgeoning tax-financed power entities. Sutton's resistance to nationalized power and his defense of free enterprise won conservatives' acclaim, as typified in a 1953 comment by a panel of judges for *The State* magazine: "he demonstrated that not only could an investor-owned and privately managed utility adequately meet the power needs of a state, but also that a great corporation could be humanized, kept close to the people and be responsive to their aspirations."

Declining invitations to sit on boards of directors of other corporations, Sutton expressed reservations at possible conflicting business interests and steadfastly confined his work to CP&L and its immediately related operations. He was a director and president of Carolinas, Virginia Nuclear Power Association, director and president of Capitan Corporation, board member of the [North Carolina State College Engineering Foundation](#) ^[9], president and director of the Business Foundation of The University of North Carolina, president and director of the Southeastern Electric Exchange, and

director of the Research Triangle Foundation. Sutton served on the vestry of the Church of the Good Shepherd (Episcopal) in [Raleigh](#) ^[10], held numerous offices in national trade and fraternal organizations, and was a member of the [Society of the Cincinnati](#) ^[11]. Along with his art-oriented wife, he was active in several cultural and social groups. He was buried in Montlawn Memorial Park, Raleigh.

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