

History of Energy

The Sun

The sun was the first energy source on Earth. It provided light and heat to the first humans. During the day, the people searched for food. They had no home. When it began to get dark, they looked for shelter.

Once the sun went down, the world was dark and cold. The moon and stars gave the only light. People huddled together for warmth.



Fire

Once in a while, lightning started fires. Early humans saw the fire and were afraid. They saw the animals run in fear. But one day they didn't run away. Maybe they felt the heat on a cold day. Maybe they noticed they could see at night with the fire.

No one knows how it happened. Perhaps one brave person carried a burning branch to a cave. People put wood on the fire to keep it going. The fire kept them warm. It gave them light. It kept dangerous animals away.

For the first time, people had a home. They no longer slept wherever they were at the end of the day. The hunters came home at night to their fire and safety. The children and the elders made sure the fire did not go out.

These early cave dwellers didn't know how to start a fire. If the fire went out, they had to wait until lightning struck again. Keeping the fire going was a very important job. They had the first energy source they could control.

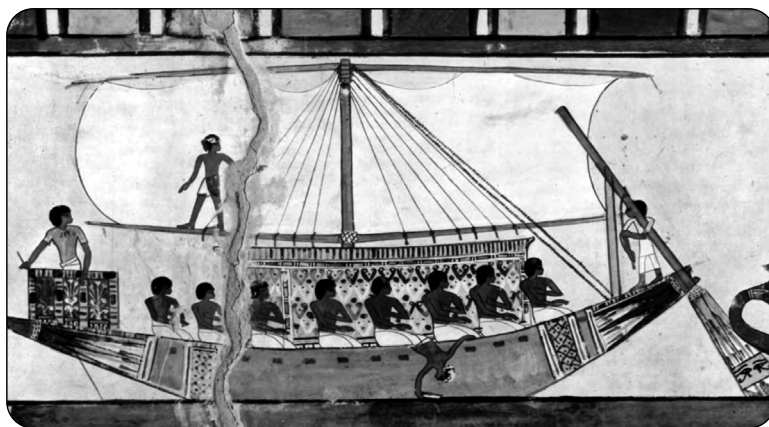


Later, they learned how to start fires. They rubbed pieces of flint together to make sparks. One day, someone dropped a piece of meat into the fire. They learned that fire could cook food. Cooked meat tasted better and was easier to chew.

They used fire to make stronger tools. They used fire to help them capture animals for food. They had an energy source that could do many things for them. It made life easier.

Communities Began to Use Energy

The sun and wood gave people energy for a long time. It was only about 5,000 years ago that people started using other energy sources. People began using the wind to move from one place to another. They built boats with sails that captured the wind. They could travel to new places. Wind was the first energy source used for transportation.



Egyptians were some of the first people to use sails to capture the wind's energy. This painting depicts a riverboat that was used over 3,000 years ago.

About 2,500 years ago, people began using **windmills** and **water wheels** to grind grain. Later, these simple machines were used to pump water and run sawmills.

Early Egyptians collected **oil** that floated to the top of ponds. They burned the oil for light. Native Americans burned **coal** to bake clay pots. Ancient Chinese people used **natural gas** to heat sea water for salt. They piped the gas from shallow **wells**. At about the same time, people began using heat energy from inside the Earth (**geothermal energy**). They piped hot water from hot springs into their houses for heat.

People were learning how to use many different energy sources. But until 150 years ago, the sun and wood provided most of the energy. In many parts of the world, they still do today.

Energy Is Needed for a Growing Country

Early American settlers used wood and water wheels for energy. They burned whale oil for light. Animals were used in farming and for transportation. In the 1800s, the country began to grow. Villages grew into towns and cities. People needed more energy. The first natural gas well was dug in 1821. People used the gas to light their homes and streets.

Coal mines were dug. Train tracks were built. We began burning coal for heat to power trains and boats and to make things. By the start of the Civil War in 1861, coal was the major energy source for the country.

Around the same time, oil was discovered. The first oil well was dug in 1859. The oil was used to make **kerosene** for lights. They had no use for gasoline; they threw it away. The first gasoline car wasn't built until 1885—over 125 years ago.

In New York, Thomas Edison built the first power plant. In 1882, his Pearl Street Power Station made electricity for 85 buildings. At first, people were afraid of electricity. They wouldn't let their children near the lights. Today, electricity is a part of almost everything we do. We use more every year. Scientists are still experimenting with new ways to make and store electricity.