

## The New Bedford Water Works When Running Water Came to New Bedford

Perhaps no other modern convenience impacts our daily lives in such a beneficial way as the public water supply. Taken for granted now, running water was a major technological achievement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as with most things New Bedford, its establishment here was not without controversy. However, the city successfully completed this Herculean construction project, which directly influenced the course of the city's history.

The first chapter in this saga, which would last nearly ten years, began on March 8, 1860. Frederick S. Allen introduced an order to the City Council to establish a committee to explore the feasibility of providing a public water supply. While the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of enormous prosperity for the city, the decade of the 1860s was one of financial stress. The discovery of oil in Pennsylvania, the ravages of the Civil War on the whaling fleet and the lingering effects of the financial panic of 1857 put the city and its residents in an unusually tight financial situation. The one bright economic light in the city was the phenomenal success of the Wamsutta Textile Mill. With this background, a committee was formed on July 26, 1860. On December 21, 1861, Capt. Charles H. Bigelow, an army engineer who was overseeing the construction of Fort Rodman, made an initial report endorsing the project. The primary benefits of the project were pure drinking water, adequate water for fire hydrants and increased sanitation (sewage disposal). The city agreed to go ahead with further planning which included having the Massachusetts General Court enact legislation to permit the acquisition of land and the issuing of bonds.

Incredibly, the project had serious opposition. The arguments against the project and its perceived result, industrialization, were clear and pointed. One writer to the Evening Standard opposed because manufacturing would cause "poverty and degradation among the poorer classes of operatives." Another writer said the city "would be full of mechanics and operatives, which no humane mind would desire to introduce among us." Proponents argued that, without the water works, prosperity for the city would wane. "New Bedford has been asleep for the past five years while every manufacturing town has been thriving." On April 14, 1864, in a city-wide referendum, the act was approved 782 votes to 594. The first Board of Commissioners was named on December 13, 1865 and work on the project began shortly thereafter with an initial appropriation of \$100,000.

The construction phase of the project was not without catastrophes. Some of the early contractors failed in their work, the storage reservoir gave way at one point, and the unusually wet year of 1868 delayed progress. However, by December of 1869, all was in place to pump the first gallons of water through the miles of pipeline that had been laid throughout the city. A state-of-the-art steam powered-water pump by the McAlpine Company was successfully tested early in the month. Immediately thereafter the fire hydrants were tested. The results of the tests were deemed "eminently successful". First use of the hydrants was on December 20 for a house fire at 21 School St.

It was a publicly financed project. The water works bonds amounted to \$400,000 with a short term debt of \$200,000. In addition to the borrowed money, Sylvia Ann Howland left the city \$100,000 expressly for this project. The massive endeavor ended only \$75,000 over budget.

The original reservoir was created by a dam across the Acushnet River, seven miles north of downtown, in the town of Acushnet. The pumping station was on Coggeshall St. A large storage reservoir was constructed to hold the water to be pumped throughout the city. A tall fence was built around it to keep out people, animals, and anything else that could contaminate the supply. This reservoir was on the east side of the train tracks between Coggeshall (north), Bowditch (east) and Cedar Grove (south). A "Distribution Reservoir" was situated about ¼ mile west of the pumping station between Highland and Mt. Pleasant Sts. This reservoir was located at one of the highest elevations in the city and helped to provide water pressure. This arrangement was in place until 1899 when Quiticas Pond was acquired by the Water Works. The Coggeshall Street station, currently the site of the Hayden-McFadden School, was demolished in 1974.

The water works did indeed spur industrial development in New Bedford. Just a short time after its completion, the Potomska Mill opened, the second successful mill established in New Bedford. The growth and resulting prosperity of the textile industry would dominate the affairs of New Bedford until its decline and fall after World War I.

Postscript.

The water works project consumed the public interest for many years. However, it appears from contemporary newspaper accounts that its completion was anticlimactic. The front-page news of the day was the election of a pro-temperance Mayor, George B. Richmond, and a huge controversy over the New Bedford-Fairhaven Bridge (sounds familiar). A powerful hurricane had destroyed the privately-owned toll bridge on September 8, 1869 and the state was threatening legal action against the city to do something about it. No one had made any effort to repair the bridge or even cart away the debris. City finances were strapped because, among other factors, the water works debt. After considerable debate and political wrangling the city purchased the rights to the bridge for \$20,000 and rebuilt it for \$45,000.

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