

# BRATTLEBORO'S WATER SYSTEM HISTORY

## DEVELOPMENT OF BRATTLEBORO'S WATER SYSTEM

By Wayne Carhart

Brattleboro's plentiful and high quality water supply was not the foresight of early tax paid city planners, but the vision of a local businessman and the backbreaking work of many laborers.

### **WATER FOR DRINKING**

In the late 19th century, as towns grew because of the industrial revolution, the demand for potable (suitable for drinking) water grew as well. Sewage "treatment" was addressed by the use of outhouses or, in the case of dwellings, with indoor plumbing, discharged into the nearest stream or river. Such practices greatly restricted the supply of potable water for a community. Drinking water had to come from springs or waterways that were not serving as sewers. Spring fed cisterns, connected to each other by wooden and lead pipes, which then fed homes and businesses, were developed and operated by individuals who charged a fee for the water they provided.

### **WATER FOR FIRE FIGHTING**

A large water supply, with adequate pressure, was needed in fire fighting which was a major incentive to develop these cistern systems. Fire fighters could connect a pumping machine to the cisterns, which stored a large quantity of water, and through the use of fire hoses fight a fire. Downtown Brattleboro suffered a devastating fire in 1869 and another in 1877 that no doubt heightened the business owners' and citizens' concern for adequate fire protection. The Estey Organ Company, after suffering major fires, developed such a system and maintained their own fire fighting equipment.

### **A CIVIC MINDED BUSINESSMAN**

In 1866, George Crowell, age 32, moved to Brattleboro from Massachusetts to work on the editorial staff of the Vermont Record and Farmer published by Daniel L. Milliken. A year later Crowell started and served as publisher of the highly successful women's weekly paper The Household, headquartered in the Crosby Block on Main Street. The paper, a forerunner of other women's magazines of the period, had 80,000 subscribers in 1890. In addition to his publishing activities, Crowell became active in other businesses, including real estate. But it was his interest in the growing needs of the community and another enterprise that got his name in the paper--the town of Brattleboro's water supply and distribution system.

Crowell had acquired considerable real estate holdings and, like his fellow businessmen, was concerned with fire protection and a supply of potable domestic water.

About 1880, he started to develop a spring fed distribution system to serve his apartments in the Forest Park area of town. In 1882, he purchased a partially completed reservoir, started by Isaac Hines, four springs, and land from Isaac's son, Alonzo. Isaac Hines died before the project was operational. In addition to developing the reservoir and aqueduct, Crowell developed a park around the area and renamed it Chestnut Hill because of the large number of chestnut trees in the area. The 30-acre park and reservoir was on a plateau at a higher elevation than the town. This provided an increase in water pressure for the water system, and gave park visitors a commanding view of the town and surrounding area. Roads were built that enabled the public to visit croquet grounds, a newly built log cabin, a bandstand, and a three-story cottage of Swiss

architecture that had a 50-foot observatory tower. Open to the public his privately developed park was beautifully landscaped and attracted much attention. It was promoted by a pamphlet in the Victorian style.

"A walk up High Street to the wood-crowned heights conspicuously seen from every part of the village brings one in a short time to Highland Park, an enclosure of 30 acres in the heart of town, and a place of charming views and rural sights. These are private grounds owned by Mr. George E. Crowell, the editor and proprietor of the Household, which he fitted up and thrown open to the public. The enterprise is purely one of public spirit, and the park is open to all those who do not abuse its privileges. The only stated restriction is the shooting of birds and squirrels. The hill is a most charming place and offers great opportunities for development to a man like Mr. Crowell, who only seems anxious to devote the wealth which he has won after a hard struggle to the upbuilding and beautifying of his town."

On November 7, 1888, two fire hydrants were installed, at the expense of a local businessman, George J. Brooks. These hydrants were connected to the newly built Chestnut Hill Reservoir and improved fire-fighting capacity by providing a large quantity of water, under pressure, to the downtown area.

### **FIRST SIGNS OF A PUBLICLY SUPPORTED WATER SYSTEM**

Clearly, the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, with its 5,000,000-gallon capacity, improved the water system of Brattleboro considerably. Interestingly, until the early 1890s the municipal water supply was undertaken entirely by private enterprise. In 1892, the town of Brattleboro sought a charter from the state of Vermont to authorize it to develop a municipal water system; however, even having obtained such authority, Brattleboro continued to rely on George Crowell's system.

The Chestnut Hill Reservoir, supplied by springs in the immediate area, was eventually unable to keep pace with the increasing demand for water. An additional source of water was needed. To this aim, Crowell devised a plan to pump water from the nearby West River into the reservoir. By installing a steam-powered pump near the West River, water was pumped through a six-inch main into the reservoir. Crowell's plan awakened the debate: Should the town of Brattleboro build its own municipal water system? On December 20, 1892, a special committee of five was appointed to study the issue of the town's water supply. The committee's recommendation was to accept Crowell's plan and continue to use the privately operated Crowell system. Work began on the West River Pumping Station and six-inch pipeline. The system became operational August 4, 1893.

### **WATER USE INCREASES, CROWELL'S SYSTEM EXPANDS**

Crowell knew it was only a matter of time before the Chestnut Hill Reservoir, even with its West River Pumping Station, would not be able to keep up with Brattleboro's growing demand for water. He continued to buy land and water rights. His plan was to use Sunset Lake, combine it with Stickney Brook, and collect the water in a large reservoir to be constructed at Pleasant Valley. These bodies of water were at a higher elevation than the Chestnut Hill Reservoir and were located north west of the town of Brattleboro. The water would be distributed to Brattleboro through a system of water mains. Again, the issue of the town of Brattleboro developing its own municipal system was revisited. On August 1, 1905, Crowell was prepared to sell the Chestnut Hill Reservoir system and the water rights of Sunset Lake and Stickney Brook to the town for about \$200,000. Again, Brattleboro chose not to build its own system or to buy Crowell's. It chose to continue using Crowell's privately managed system.

Crowell began work on the Sunset Lake and Pleasant Valley system in November 1905. The headline in the local paper read, "Brattleboro's New Water Supply - Abundance of Water Adequate for All Domestic, Fire, Elevator, and Light Manufacturing Purposes." (Elevators at the time used water as a counterbalance to raise the elevator car. To lower the car, water was drained from the counterbalance container.) Another headline proclaimed, "Village Water Supply to Be Greatly Increased by New System. Sunset Lake Water Company Will Develop the Stickney Brook Water Rights and Connect with Chestnut Hill Company's Main."

In 1906, the town again considered buying and running its own municipal water system, which brought citizens out in large numbers to discuss the merits of such a move. The main issue was the cost to the taxpayers. The Town offered Crowell \$250,000 for the Chestnut Hill System and the Sunset Lake System, but by this time Crowell wanted \$345,000 and rejected the town's offer. For years, Crowell's water system had met most of the town's needs. Fortunately, he had the foresight to expand the system and could do so as a private company a lot easier than a town could. At the time, the country was much more accustomed to letting private enterprise solve municipal problems. Remember, this was long before the Great Depression, when the country started to question its reliance on private enterprise to solve its problems and started to use publicly supported projects for its municipal needs.

### **CROWELL DIES AND SO DOES THE DRIVING FORCE**

On October 20, 1916, George Crowell died at age 82. Earlier in the century, George Crowell had offered the park at Chestnut Hill to the town of Brattleboro. The offer was rejected because the town feared that the cost of upkeep would be too big a tax burden. And after Crowell's death the park fell into disrepair and all the many "special" features of its heyday rotted away. Eventually, Crowell's son, Christie, formed a real estate company with other businessmen and sold off the park as building lots.

It was not until 1925 that the town bought the Brattleboro Water Works company and reservoir for \$550,000. Since that time, there have been many improvements, the most recent of which is a water-filtration system, but Brattleboro's relationship with its water system is still much related to the cost of the system's operation. Plans for expansion are now the responsibility of publicly paid civil servants who, fortunately, take their responsibility seriously. Private enterprise's involvement is limited to consulting and construction contracts. Now the system is totally owned and operated by the town of Brattleboro, but George Crowell is remembered as a man of vision who gave Brattleboro water.