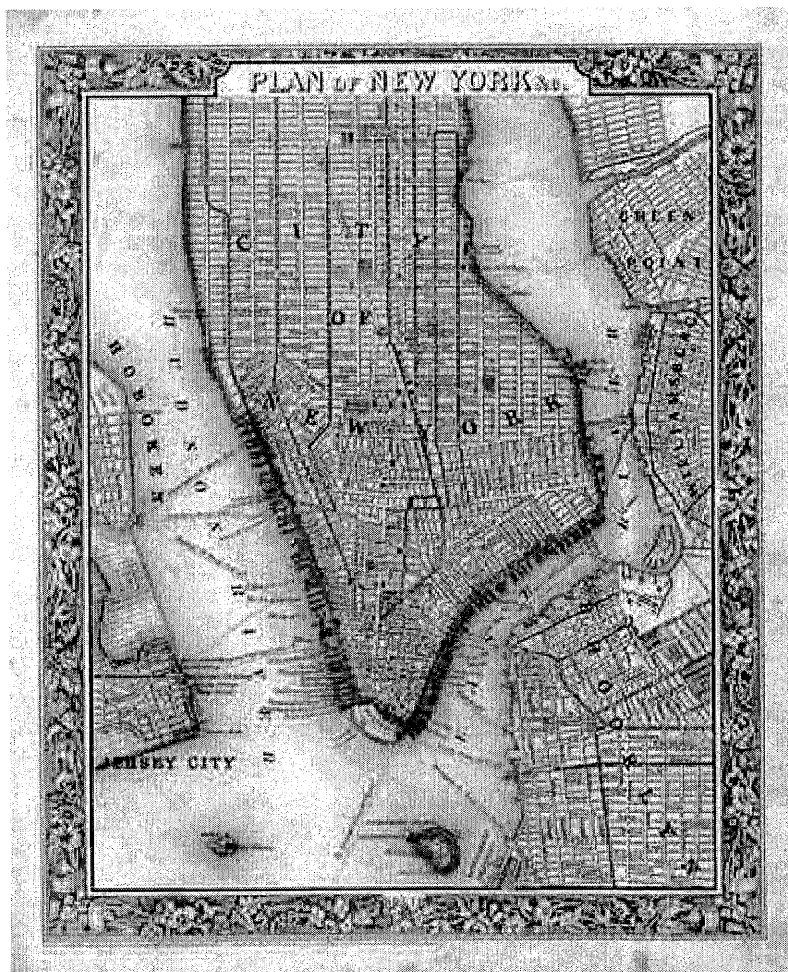


# This Day in Water History

A little bit of water history—one day at a time

## October 9, 1860: Antebellum Cheap Water



**October 9, 1860:** New York Times headline—Cheap Water. "It would not be easy to exaggerate the importance of a bountiful supply of pure water to the general health and comfort of cities and large towns. But no sooner does this first principle of civilization assume the practical shape of costly water works, suited to the prospective wants of our growing towns, than lo! the reservoirs are but half full, and the engineers are threatening us with new reservoirs, aqueducts, engines — and taxation. It is only a few years ago that New-York celebrated the introduction of the copious and inexhaustible Croton; what is the hydraulic condition of its streets and houses to-day? Fountains as

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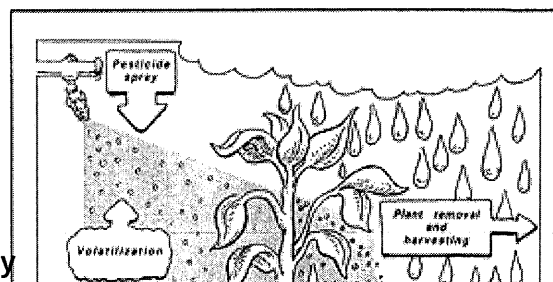
dry as the desert — hydrants that were to throw their full streams to warehouse tops, scarcely able to expand a hose; penurious drippings in the second stories of dwellings, and the dry whistle of air entering a vacuum, in the upper rooms; manufacturers taxed for water to an amount almost equal to the rent of their buildings; news columns filled with appeals to good citizens to refrain from the excessive use of water; official reports acknowledging the utter inability of the Department to check the enormous drain on the reservoirs. More than ten years ago we were told that the maximum capacity of the works was exhausted — works designed for a much larger population — and that suffering would inevitably follow an interruption of the water supply. And at this time we are paying for a reservoir of enormous cost and magnitude, to be drained like the rest, by the remorseless demand for water — a demand which increases with the supply — a thirst which the Father of Waters could scarcely quench."

**Commentary:** The article goes on for another 1000 words or so. The unnamed author finally made his point near the end of the piece by saying that water was too cheap and that people were wasting it. He argued that no new expensive facilities needed to be built. All that was needed was to meter the water that goes into each dwelling and charge according. It would be many decades before metering in New York City would take hold. Once NYC decided to meter, they went forward with gusto. As of February 2011, NYC was more than halfway done connecting its customers to meters with digital transmitters that send real-time water use data to the City using radio transmissions. Other cities have followed a similar path and more will join the digitization of water use.

This entry was posted in Year 4 TDIWH and tagged cheap water, Croton water supply, drinking water, meters, New York City, water on October 9, 2015

[<https://thisdayinwaterhistory.wordpress.com/2015/10/09/october-9-1860-antebellum-cheap-water-2/>].

## October 8, 1823: Inauguration of the Erie Canal; 1986: Dinoseb Pesticide Banned



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# Cheap Water.

Published: October 9, 1860

It would not be easy to exaggerate the importance of a bountiful supply of pure water to the general health and comfort of cities and large towns. But no sooner does this first principle of civilization assume the practical shape of costly water works, suited to the prospective wants of our growing towns, than lo! the reservoirs are but half full, and the engineers are threatening us with new reservoirs, aqueducts, engines -- and taxation. It is only a few years ago that New-York celebrated the introduction of the copious and inexhaustible Croton; what is the hydraulic condition of its streets and houses to-day? Fountains as dry as the desert -- hydrants that were to throw their full streams to warehouse tops, scarcely able to expand a hose; penurious drippings in the second stories of dwellings, and the dry whistle of air entering a vacuum, in the upper rooms; manufacturers taxed for water to an amount almost equal to the rent of their buildings; news columns filled with appeals to good citizens to refrain from the excessive use of water; official reports acknowledging the utter inability of the Department to check the enormous drain on the reservoirs. More than ten years ago we were told that the maximum capacity of the works was exhausted -- works designed for a much larger population -- and that suffering would inevitably follow an interruption of the water supply. And at this time we are paying for a reservoir of enormous cost and magnitude, to be drained like the rest, by the remorseless demand for water -- a demand which increases with the supply -- a thirst which the Father of Waters could scarcely quench.

Determining to profit by the experience of New-York, Boston attempted to insure the most lavish provision of water for the wants of her citizens; and what do we find there? Deficiency and complaint on all sides; the immense brick conduit designed to carry an ample supply when half full, compelled to work under a two-feet head to make up in velocity what it could not furnish in volume, until it was burst from overpressure; and at last, to assist it, a new system of supply mains of extraordinary size. Philadelphia, Jersey City, and Brooklyn -- so soon -- illustrate the same excessive demand. And it not only would appear that luxuries generally will soon be "as cheap as water," but that it will ultimately be impossible to furnish a plenty of water at any cost.

What becomes of all this water? Were not the calculations based on a most liberal allowance to each of a larger number of inhabitants, or is every creature in the Metropolis washed and rinsed three times a day? We shall look in vain for satisfactory answers in all directions but one, and we have been persistently looking in every other direction since water was first brought into our houses. The following extract from the last report of the Purveyor of the Brooklyn Water Department, is one of a thousand texts, written and unwritten, whereon alone, reform can be preached and practiced:

"In a few instances meters have been set at private houses, as a means of ascertaining the quantity of water used. The result has shown that the quantity of water used by different individual's varies in a very extraordinary degree, ranging from 130 gallons to 1,075 gallons per day."

Again he says:

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"In most instances, where a difference of opinion has existed as to the quantity of water used by manufactories, the use of a metre has shown in almost every instance a consumption of from 30 to 50 per cent. more than represented by the consumer."

And there are plainer evidences of waste than these. How many thousand people in this City draw a barrel of water to get a cool tumbler full to drink? How many thousand faucets are left open all night to prevent them freezing? How many thousand small but industrious leaks, thoughtlessly if not purposely opened in our distributing system, and making up in number what they lose in volume, are running away to the sewers with the noble stream that pours over High Bridge? And since there be no effective restraint, short of absolute measurement, while wanton waste costs the miscellaneous body of servants no more than care and prudence, however much it may cost the taxpayers, how do we expect to make up the deficiency? An increased supply will encourage rather than prevent waste; there can be no limits to waste. The Spring floods of the Mississippi -- all the aqueduct could carry, under boiler pressure, could be poured into our sewers through the sieve of faucets which might easily enough be left open in the houses of this city.

Our present system of water-rates offers no possible check to any amount of waste. Charging people for water by the size of their dwellings -- furnishing them facilities to draw thousands of gallons a day, and then charging them for as many hundreds, because their houses occupy a certain number of cubic feet of space, is as absurd as it would be to charge them for gas in proportion to their age or complexion.

The only reasonable method of preventing waste, is to charge each house with the water which goes into that house, and the only possible method of ascertaining this quantity is to measure it, or rather, let it measure itself, like gas, by passing through a meter. Then the amount of water that people are willing to pay for will be a very delicate test of what they want to use; and the reservoir will fill up and water will run in fourth stories, and the enormous works even now contemplated by the engineers -- works whose size, under the present system, can only be estimated by the amount of water that people can waste -- will not be required these many years. The authority referred to above states also, that the price of the difference of water estimated and that really consumed, would in many cases pay the cost of a meter in three months. In London, the water departments have generally expressed the belief that poor meters are better than none, while in Brooklyn, a considerable number of the best meters are in use; and the opinion of hydraulic engineers generally is, that measuring the delivery is not only the most economical, but the only practicable method of introducing cheap water into towns and cities. Then no person can feel aggrieved by paying more than his share, nor will any be deprived of the most luxurious rivers of water, if they want them, for the engineers can bring Lake Erie down here if it were only ordered by responsible parties.

We are building and planning works to empty the Croton River into New-York Bay, a scheme which, however magnificent, is quite unimportant compared with finishing the Central Park and completing the paving of Broadway. We believe that one branch of the Croton River is required for domestic and manufacturing purposes, and we would earnestly request those who control its disposal, to measure it out to those who are willing to pay for it, and to abandon the scheme of letting it run uninterruptedly through our City on its way to the ocean.

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