

Did you know.....?

The first “stand pipe” or water tower for Hammonton was erected in 1902 after much controversy and delay.

The original proposal for a water works was talked about as early as 1895. On March 30, 1896, the Town Council instructed the Water Committee to secure specifications and bids for a water supply. On May 2, 1896, the Committee reported a bid of \$25,000.00 for the erection of a standpipe, piping, fire hydrants and necessary labor and other essentials. They were given another month to procure additional bids. As well as can be determined, nothing came of this effort. Up to this time, people relied on wells on their own property or on town pumps.

There were at least two failed efforts made by water companies franchised by Town Council to finance and complete a water system.

One of the franchise conditions was that the Town would pay for a certain number of fire plugs, and agree to pay for additional ones as the water lines were extended. Perhaps the main reason for the failures was that the Town Council did not feel that it had the power to obligate its citizens with the unknown future expenses that would come from a privately operated company.

Finally, after legal opinions and a special election held on Jan. 29, 1902, a Board of Water Commissioners was elected. The first Commissioners were William Bernshouse, J.L. O'Donnell and J.E. Watkis. Their first duty was to prepare a Bond Ordinance and Bond offering for \$30,000.00 to cover the costs of the water works. This may not seem like a lot of money today, but at that time, a skilled workman earned about \$15.00 per week.

The Underwriter deemed the original bond offering defective after most of the work had been contracted and some of it completed. The reason for this was that the Town Council did not have the authority to issue the bonds in the manner they were issued.

There is speculation the underwriters were unable to re-sell the bonds

or to finance the bonds themselves due to financial conditions. At this time, there was a severe recession, indeed almost a depression, in the Country. Again, after legal wrangling, consultations and disputes, another Bond offering was made and was successfully sold.

Initial bid advertisements were made in June and July of 1902 calling for a standpipe, piping, fire plugs, and other necessary parts to complete the project. The plans called for mains to extend to Bellevue Avenue and Liberty Street and to Central Avenue and Maple Street and the several streets so enclosed. There were to be a total of 48 fire plugs located along the streets. The stand pipe was to be located on high ground between Grand Street and First Rd. and to stand 115 feet tall. The pump house was to be located on 12th Street at the railroad, where it stands today at the corner of West End Avenue and 12th Street.

At the Sept 27, 1902 Town Council meeting, President of the Water Commissioners, William. Bernshouse reported that the wells had been completed but that there was insufficient money to complete the project. It was determined that it would be necessary to provide force pumping for the wells instead of relying on suction pumps as originally planned. Additionally, the available funds would not cover the costs of the pump house, pumps and other necessary materials.

A special meeting was called for Sept. 30, 1902 to consider what must be done. Again, there was lengthy discussion after which it was decided to seek legal advice as to the method of financing the water system. Another meeting was called for Thursday evening, Oct. 2. At this meeting it was decided to recommend that the Town Council call a Special Election to authorize the issue of bonds in the amount of \$45,000.00.

On 10/30/02 a Special Election was held to authorize the additional bond funding. This issue was to have the effect of canceling all preceding issues and to fund the additional work. The result of the election was 147 for, 72 against.

At the Town Council meeting April 3, 1903 the Town Clerk reported that the water system was complete at a total cost of \$41,974.00, leaving a surplus of \$3026.00.

A grand celebration was held on May 23, 1903 to mark the official opening of the Water Works. This consisted of a fine parade of bands, firemen, floats, fraternal organizations, officials and dignitaries. Undoubtedly, there were speeches. Afterwards, Hammonton firemen gave a demonstration of the capability of the system. Two hoses were connected to a fire hydrant and streams of water were thrown onto Judge Byrnes front yard (directly across 12th St) and higher than any building in town.

Over the years, various improvements have been made. In 1928, the steam equipment gave way to diesel engines. Later, in 1951, they were replaced by electric motors. New and additional wells were drilled, modifications and extensions to distribution lines and other improvements have been made, but, essentially, we have the same Water Works as in 1903.

In July, 1953, the stand pipe was demolished and sold for scrap, replaced by the tower we see today. Some of the original piping may still be in operation but most of the fire plugs (hydrants) have been replaced.

Can you imagine yourself living in a time and place that had no running water, inside plumbing or sewer system? We've come a long way!

From the files of The Historical Society of Hammonton.

Harry Stafford
561-7475