

NOTES CONCERNING THE EARLY WATER WORKS SYSTEMS

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CITY OF MADISON, INDIANA

1814 --- 1868

By Katharine Belzer  
April 25, 1925

Although there is no way of verifying the dates and history of Madison's first water works, there is an article in the issue of the Madison Daily Courier for June 18th. 1850 which gives an interesting and fairly accurate account of it.

The reporter was inspecting the reservoir then in process of construction, and fell into conversation with one of the older inhabitants, who gave him the following history.

Spring water had been piped into the city or the spot where the city now stands, at a period between 1814 and 1817. He is confident that the inhabitants of the place had been supplied with spring water from the hill in 1817. After this time from the decay of the wooden pipes or from some other cause, the hydrants were not used. The water at this time was brought from springs now owned by Judge Stevens and A.F. Hitz, and the work was done mostly at the cost of John Paul and a few others.

There were three hydrants; one in front of the store room now occupied by C.W. Barnett, one on the lot where the Madison Insurance office now stands, which was kept by H. Restive, the terminus here being in the yard east of the house, and the third was on Main Street, west side, about where A. Zuck now keeps his store. Our informant says further that the water was pure and cool and could be kept sweet any reasonable time in a clean vessel, and the supply amply sufficient to answer to the wants of the "habitants" of that day. There are still a good many above ground whose names might be given, who used the water and who would endorse all we have said by his authority.

Just when after that, the town began to feel the need of a water supply is not ascertained but by May 4th. 1833 they had a committee to look into the expediency of supplying the town with water, and on May 11th. there was an ordinance to preserve the public springs from contamination. On May 21, 1834 (P. 91 Council Minutes) there was a petition from Caleb Lodge and others, asking that an arrangement be made to procure the surplus water from the Cotton Mills water works. It was believed that at least a fourth of the population could be supplied. This petition was granted and during May and June there were several small bills for repairs, etc. on the Cotton Mills water works.

On November 17th. 1834 the Council decided to grant a contract to an individual or company for watering the town, and on November 25th. 1834 (P. 121-125 Council Minutes) a contract was presented them by John Sheets and others. He was to have the works completed at the end of five years. Water was to be pumped from the Ohio River into a reservoir and there was to be sufficient water and force for public use and for extinguishing fires. At the end of sixty years, the town was to buy the water works.

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On December 19th. a petition for permission for Mr. Sheets to carry out his program was sent to the State Legislature. What intervened to cause Mr. Sheets to change his plans is not known but on February 10th. 1837 (Council Minutes) he proposed to abandon his contract for furnishing the town with water.

After this the Council makes a few feeble attempts to start at a water works but so far as is known, nothing further was done until November 12th. 1846, when the Council Minutes contain a communication from Thomas A. Godman.

He owned a tract of land adjacent to the city of Madison, on which there were several never failing springs. He proposed to erect a water works there, to be called the Madison Water Works; his plan being to collect the water from the springs into a safe and clean reservoir, and to conduct the water through iron pipes into such parts of the city as might be agreed upon, in a contract. The work was to begin the following August. Mr. Godman had already received the permission of the State Legislature. A committee from the Council was appointed to examine the source from which Mr. Godman proposed to collect the water; this committee reported favorably and on December 10th. 1846, (P. 302 Council Minutes for that year) a contract with Mr. Godman was presented to the Council and was approved.

The pipes of the new water works were laid in the city as far as Second Street in the fall of 1849, according to an article in the Courier of Feb. 6th. 1850, which also says that the arrangement for supplying the city with pure spring water from the numerous springs on the hill, have been completed. March 5th. 1850 a Courier article reports that 5,000 feet of pipe had been laid and the work was progressing rapidly.

Both the Minutes of the Council and the Courier for March 10th. contain a communication from T. S. Godman, telling of the contract of 1846 in which the city agreed to pay \$20.00 per annum for each fire plug, and saying that he had already spent some \$10,000 for erection of reservoirs and conveying pipes, and had arrangements pending for the completion of the same. For the purpose of facilitating the watering of the city with pure and wholesome water the Company makes the following proposition; that the city of Madison issue her bonds for \$25,000, taking a mortgage on the property, the bonds to pay six percent interest and be payable in ten years. It was suggested that if the Council did not feel authorized to make such a contract, that they put it up to public vote at the April election.

The Courier approved of the plan and March 19th. 1850 had an article in favor of the loan and prophesying freedom from disease as a result of an adequate pure water supply. For more than two weeks the Courier carried an announcement of the vote to be taken at the ensuing election, but on March 30th. a notice in the Courier said the Clifton Water Company having withdrawn their proposition, there would be no vote taken at the election.

On May 7th. however, the Council met the committee to whom the petition of the Water Company had been referred, who reported that they recommended the acceptance of the Company's proposition and on May 16th. 1850 (P. 50 Council Records for that year) the Council agreed to issue bonds, taking a mortgage on the whole of the Water Company's property.

The Courier for May 17th. 1850 contains an article saying that fears were entertained by some that the supply would not be sufficient and would not be as healthy as cistern or river water but that other towns having spring water were exceptionally healthy. There was no doubt as to the quality or quantity of the water.

During the remainder of May and June there were numerous items following the progress of the laying of the pipes through the town, and on June 29th. an article saying the first fire plug will be ready for use by July 4th. July 1st. the Company had completed the laying of the main stem of their pipes. The water was turned on in July because on July 22nd. and 29th. the Courier makes fun of the fact that the "jet d'eau" at the upper end of Main Cross Street had not been "jetting."

During August the Company ran an add in the Courier saying they were now prepared to supply with water the people along the water pipes, but they continued to further extend the pipes throughout the city. Twice during September they tried out the water pressure and found it satisfactory.

As early as March 11th. 1851 the Courier came out in favor of the city buying the water works, not because of any inefficiency of those in charge, but because it was a matter in which the whole public was vitally interested and should be under public control. It cited the example of the greater efficiency of the Cincinnati Water Works since it was taken over by the city. Following an account of a fire in which much damage had been averted because of an adequate water supply. the Courier again brought out the point that such a public utility should belong to the public. On April 14th. an article stated that with a full stream from three of the fire plugs for a whole afternoon, the water in the Clifton Reservoirs suffered no perceptible diminution. By April 22nd. two and half miles of pipe had been laid by the Clifton Water Company.

It would seem that the Company was having some financial trouble because May 26th. Mr. Godman presented a contract to the Council that the city pay \$25 per fire plug instead of \$20, as the original contract read. This was approved by the Council. Then On August 7th. 1851 (P. 178 Council Minutes) Mr. Godman asked for a loan of the credit of the city, to enable the construction of an additional and more spacious reservoir, and the laying of four miles more of pipe. This was referred to the financial committee. No further mention is made of it until Dec. 19th. 1851 although there were several articles in the Courier telling of additional pipes and fire plugs.

December 19th. the Mayor presented a resolution that it was important that the city have a pure and adequate water supply, and that a committee should look into the situation, confer with the Water Company and learn what assistance the company needed to fulfil the requirements.

March 4th. 1852 (Council Minutes) the Water Company's proposal to sell the water works to the city was presented. The Council passed a resolution to put the question to a public vote at the following election. The Madison Courier of March 8th. had an

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editorial on the proposed purchase. It cited examples of other cities which had made a paying proposition of their water works. In each issue after that until the election in April, a copy of the Water Company's proposition was published in the Courier, and along with the results of the election was published the favorable vote of the citizens.

On April 15th. 1852 the Council Minutes held the statement that the freeholders of Madison expressed their opinion on the purchase of the water works, and on May 6th. a committee was appointed to collect information on the cost, value, and cost of maintenance. Shortly after this the purchase was made. The city was steadily outgrowing its water supply. Two years after there appeared several pointed remarks in the Courier in regard to the situation. On April 12th. 1854 there was an article telling how the Watertown water works paid for themselves in checking the ravages of a single fire, and inquiring how often the limited supply from Clifton springs had done the same.

That the situation was critical was indicated by the fact that the Council held a called meeting on April 24th. 1854, to decide on some action. The committee reported in favor of building an additional reservoir of pretty large dimensions near the one already in use, and recommended its speedy erection. The Council agreed to this unanimously. The next day the Courier contained an account of the meeting. The article ended by saying "The supply is not now near equal to the demand, and this demand must increase as the City grows in population."

On May 4th. 1854 a contract with Herman Christian for the building of the reservoir was presented to the Council. This included specifications - the reservoir was to be 80 ft. in diameter, 20 ft. deep and the walls to be of graduated thickness. It was to be completed August 1854.

For the next few years the water works must have been an object to which the citizens pointed with pride and satisfaction. On May 1st. 1857 there was an article in the Courier about the Louisville pumps which were out of order and asking what they would't give for the Madison City Water Works.

By 1867, however, the supply had again become inadequate. In the Courier for May 15th. 1867 there is a letter to the editors from A. J. Godman saying that there was only enough water to supply one fire company in case of a fire - that another reservoir was needed and suggests putting one the size of the others on the hill east of the city. On August 15th. 1867 (P. 320 Council Minutes) the Mayor spoke in relation to the city's water privileges. He was in favor of throwing a dam across the ravine above the reservoir. The water committee was also instructed to examine into the feasibility of carrying water from the depot ponds to feed the reservoir.

On September 5th. 1867 the Council received a letter from Mr. McKim giving an estimate of the cost of building the dam, and suggesting that the wall be five feet thick at the bottom and two and a half feet thick at the top, built in a curve. This should withstand a 30 foot wall of water. Frequently through the month of August the Courier deplored the water situation. It was a very dry season and the situation became desperate. The work had already been begun on the new dam but the citizens of Madison were apparently not

satisfied with that as a solution and in the Courier for August 29th. 1867 there was an announcement of a public meeting to be held September 3rd. for the purpose of discussing the feasibility of the construction of a water works sufficient to supply the town. The next day the Courier contained an editorial saying that it was understood that the plan proposed was to fill the reservoirs from the river. It would seem better to go ahead with the plans already under construction.

On September 4th. the Courier reported that at the meeting of September 3rd. a committee of five was appointed to investigate three plans - that of pumping water into the present reservoirs from the river; of building a complete new plant or of adding three reservoirs to the present system.

September 5th. this committee asked for the Council Committee to meet with them. If one may read between the lines he may feel the antagonism here, because immediately following is a motion to instruct the committee to proceed to build the improvement with all possible speed and still to meet with the citizens committee. The citizens committee continued to do its duty regardless of this however, and on September 19th. (P. 333 Council Minutes) report that they who were appointed by the citizens to investigate the subject of procuring an adequate supply of water for the city, had found a supply of water sufficient for the city on the north-east hills on the farm known as the Cravens Farm, owned by S. Weyer. This water could be brought to the city at the expense of \$20,000. They recommended the abandonment of the work of damming on the north-west hills. The Minutes do not even honor this with a comment.

There are occasional reports to the Council as to the progress of the reservoir until November 7th. when the work was ordered stopped until spring.

On October 17th. John Kirk again suggested using the water on the Weyer farm. The work was resumed in the spring and occasional reports were made to the Council. On September 3rd. 1868 the committee was instructed to make the wall of the reservoir five feet higher and on October 1st. to add a twenty inch ledge to the top;

November 5th. 1868 Mr. Spangler, Chairman of the committee, reported that the dam was completed, and a complete survey of the city property made and the corner stones fixed. Even with this addition, in about three years the supply became inadequate and in the fall of 1870, work was begun on the reservoir near the river bank, to be supplied by steam pumps with water from the river. On Aug. 1871 this new water works was completed.

Mr. Mike Donlan was working for the Water Company in 1895 and he reports that at that time they were using what water could be obtained from the old water system in conjunction with the new, but due to the fact that the springs were drying up because of the clearing off of the land, and that the reservoirs were becoming leaky and the pipes clogged with mud, the supply dwindled and finally stopped entirely.