

THE BUILDING OF THE NEW ORLEANS WATER WORKS.

Interesting History of the First Attempt to Supply the City With Water From the Mississippi River.

Enterprise Undertaken by the Commercial Bank of New Orleans,
Chartered for That Purpose—How the Work Was Done.

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THE New Orleans public is awaiting with much interest the completion of several important local and outside enterprises and schemes in which they naturally feel an immediate interest. They believe that when these great projects shall have been brought to their respective conclusions and overcome the long series of delays and the obstacles that have hampered them a greater prosperity will be assured to their city.

Among these enterprises are the important ones of the pure water supply for New Orleans, the sewerage and drainage systems for the city and the renewal of traffic and the passenger-carrying business on the Mississippi River through the revival of the interior waterways trade and facilities.

There can be no doubt whatever that the successful accomplishment of the purposes of our citizens in the important, although arduous, local enterprises of water supply, drainage and sewerage that are now under way would improve the general conditions in New Orleans immensely. Therefore the promise of future prosperity seems bright.

Of the three great works now going on in New Orleans having for their purpose the improvement of the city as a place of habitation for a large population two may be classed as forming only one engineering and topographical problem, which in the end it may be found difficult to solve satisfactorily. This is the difficulty presented by the drainage and sewerage schemes, which would be closely and intimately connected in their operations, if these operations should prove successful.

As to the third proposition, that of a general, regular and adequate water supply of river water for all the people, I propose to relate the interesting story of the first attempt made to have it in this city.

While the success of an unimpeded and universal water supply throughout the entire corporate area of the city necessarily would depend upon the establishment and operation of an equally unimpeded and universal drainage and sewerage system like the comprehensive one planned and devised by the able engineers and Council that took cognizance of the matter, still the past operations of the city water works and their long successful workings in those sections of New Orleans in which they have been in operation for many years would seem to justify the expectation that a satisfactory and adequate solution—one sufficient for all practical purposes at least—of the water supply problem can be found in the future.

This important feature of the city's civic economy saw its beginning in the thirties, although much earlier in the nineteenth century a small and crude water works system—a local enterprise, which was intended mainly for the filthy and malodorous French Market probably—was established near the river and just below the market. This, however, was quite an inconsequential affair in the matter of water works and a water supply drawn from the river.

It was in the year 1838 that the first steps were taken that led, early after that year, to the building of the present useful water works which, for the past seventy years, have been the means by which the householders and business men of the city who were inclined to pay for the luxury have been enabled to supply their dwellings and places of business with an unlimited abundance of water from the Mississippi River at all seasons of the year—water which, when well filtered, affords water for drinking and washing purposes which cannot be surpassed for clearness and purity by any water in the world except river water perhaps, while it is still in a state of suspension in the air in the shape of rain-clouds.

In the year mentioned the Commercial Bank of New Orleans was chartered to have its habitat in this city, and the main object of which in its organization was the construction of water works for the purpose of supplying the city by the best methods then known with water from the river for the use of citizens in their homes, their stores and their factories.

Under this charter and with the specified end in view the Commercial Bank of New Orleans was organized with a capital of \$3,000,000, and it was resolved to begin operations as soon as possible after the preliminary steps towards the beginning of the enterprise should have been taken.

In 1838, at the time when the operations of the water works were well under way, the building of the Commercial Bank was at the corner of Magazine and Natchez Street, a site familiar to our people of the present day. On the Board of Directors were several of the most prominent citizens of the city, including among them Maunsel White, whose name is commemorated in the community in the peppery bottled sauce that bears his name; A. P. Gray, George M. Lee, Robert Layton, Abijah Fisk, whose name has been given to the Public Library; A. Ledoux and others. The City Council was repre-

sented on the Board by Isaac Bridge.

At the same period the office of the water works was at No. 60, in Banks' Arcade, on Magazine Street. The officers of the Water Works Company represented on its committee, were: W. G. Hewes, Chairman; Maunsel White, T. O. Maux, Albert Stein, Engineer; Joseph P. Coulon, Superintendent, and S. W. Elliot, Secretary. The rates charged were \$50 for a hotel or tavern, with an additional charge of 3 per cent on the rental thereof; for a bottling establishment, from \$60 to \$100; for a dyeing or scouring establishment the same rates; a printing office, \$30, and a public bathhouse, \$10 per tub.

Immediately after the granting of the charter to the Commercial Bank Company, in 1833, a board of directors for the water works was organized, and a watering committee was appointed to attend to the preliminaries of the construction of the work.

The project was, of course, a novelty at that period in New Orleans and elsewhere, and obstacles which assumed the shape of problems were to be surmounted.

However, the Watering Committee went to work with a will. Many plans were brought forward as to the best means of accomplishing the end in view, and finally the services of Mr. Albert Stein were engaged. Mr. Stein was a most capable engineer and one who already had proved his efficiency in planning and building water works by the success which he had achieved in the construction of the water works in Cincinnati and in Lynchburg and Richmond, Va., and Nashville, were secured for the undertaking of the work.

The plan adopted was to build a mound of sufficient size at a suitable place and in this mound to construct a large reservoir to be kept supplied with water from the river which was to be furnished in quantities to suit the necessities of the works. The distribution of the water throughout the city was to be by means of cast-iron pipes.

The site selected for the mound was in the square bounded by Religious, John the Baptist, Market and Richard Streets, the ground with which it was built having been taken from the batture, 70,000 cubic yards of grounds having been required for the purpose of construction.

It is surrounded with a brick wall 320 feet square and 6 feet thick at the base. The wall is plastered with hydraulic cement. Work on the mound was begun June 2, 1834, and the wall was completed March 26, 1835.

The reservoir, built of brick, is 250 feet square, and contains four compartments, the whole being plastered with hydraulic cement.

The water was pumped into the reservoir from the river by means of three plunge-pumps worked by a condensing engine. The houses sheltering the engine and the pumps were situated on the corner of Richard and Tchoupitoulas Streets. The water-raising capacity of the engine was about 3,000,000 gallons of water in twenty-four hours. At the time these works were constructed the section of the city in which they were situated was known as the Faubourg Annunciation.

It was not until April 28, 1836, two years after the building of the mound had been begun and after the laying of the cast-iron pipes in the streets through which the water was to be distributed that the water was first pumped into the reservoir and that New Orleans first received its regular water supply from the Mississippi.

However, the great work was accomplished successfully at last, and one of the most necessary and desirable adjuncts of existence in a large city which otherwise must depend for its water supply upon the uncertain collection of rain-water in cisterns, tanks and large jars, was secured to the people of the city for their household and business needs.