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OF THE

*Broton Aqueduct*

IN THE

CITY OF NEW YORK.

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CHAS. W. BAKER, PRINTER, 29 BEEKMAN-STREET.

1857.

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THESE REMINISCENCES  
OF THE  
COMMON COUNCIL OF 1832,  
AND  
OF THE ORIGIN OF THE CROTON AQUEDUCT,

Are Dedicated

TO THE SURVIVING MEMBERS OF THAT BODY, AND TO THE  
MEMORY OF THE DEPARTED, BY THEIR  
FRIEND AND COLLEAGUE,

JAMES B. MURRAY.

*New York, May, 1857.*

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## Reminiscences.

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As the inestimable benefits, arising from the introduction of the Croton water and the system of sewerage, in their influence on the health and comfort of the inhabitants of the city of New York are now universally admitted, some reminiscences of the origin and progress of these measures may not be uninteresting, while a recurrence to past events frequently illustrates the importance of a calculative foresight in the administration of municipal affairs.

It is well-known that, as far back as in the latter part of the last century, the minds of the civil authorities of New York were turned upon providing a reliable source from which to derive an abundant supply of pure and wholesome water, not only adequate to the then existing necessities, but with reference to the future growth of the city, and to furnish a substitute for that brackish liquid derived from the street wells, which was becoming more noxious as the density of population increased.

Reports on the subject, accompanied by various propositions, were made by JOSEPH BROWN, in 1798; by WILLIAM WESTON, in 1799, as well as by others, but without any practical result.

Partial supplies were obtained by the more wealthy

from the Tea water pump in Chatham square, and from the spring at Fort Gansevoort, carted in hogsheads about the city and delivered in pails, at a high price, at their doors: two or three buckets per diem being considered a sufficient supply for a family, but to the poor this scanty luxury was inaccessible.

The inadequacy of these sources formed the basis of the argument by which certain shrewd speculators obtained the charter of the Manhattan Company, whose avowed object was to furnish an "abundant supply of pure and wholesome water," a privilege which they claimed to monopolize, but which soon resolved itself into a mere banking operation, having little regard to any other element—and from this institution and its retainers emanated a steady and powerful hostility to every legitimate plan for accomplishing the object in view—a hostility which, carried to the extent of the law, yielded only to the fearless action of the Common Council, sustained by the decision of the Judiciary.

In the mean time epidemics and fires were doing their work of havoc in our midst. Thousands of the inhabitants and millions of property were annually the victims of these destroyers, and in view of a rapidly increasing population, the city fathers were at their wits' end to devise a remedy.

Fire engines could only be used to draw scanty supplies through suction pipes in the immediate vicinity of the rivers, or to receive contributions drawn from the street

wells in leathern buckets, passed from hand to hand through lines of citizens, forced, reluctantly, into the ranks by civil authority, while the firemen, limited in number, were unable to give the aid they have always been anxious to afford.

Merchants and others formed themselves into associations, furnished with bags to save books and papers from the flames as well as to aid in the removal of families and their effects, but always falling short of the exigency of the case.

At a later period a public reservoir was constructed on Thirteenth street, near the Bowery, then on the outskirts of the city, which was replenished by steam power, and came somewhat in aid of the gallant body of firemen, but still the cry was for a more abundant and certain supply.

The dread of a return of the yellow fever, which had paid its last visit in 1822, still weighed upon the minds of the community, and almost every family kept in view the necessity of being ready for flight at a moment's warning. The commercial interests were always in jeopardy, while the absence of all subterraneous discharge kept the streets in a condition reeking with noisome odors, occasioned by the garbage always accumulating on the surface.

It was under this state of things that the city charter of 1830 took effect. This charter divided the Common Council into two boards. The late SAMUEL STEVENS, a devoted advocate of a bountiful supply of water, was chosen President of the Board of Aldermen, and JAMES B. MURRAY, President of the Board of Assistant Aldermen.

Thus, in May, 1831, the labor of organizing the various departments under the new charter, was perfected, and it was soon apparent that great talents and large experience were indispensable to the successful working of the system.

In casting about for a suitable person to place at the head of the Street Commissioner's Department, their attention was directed to that distinguished engineer, the late BENJAMIN WRIGHT, whose connection with the Erie Canal and other great public works throughout this continent, had given him a world-wide celebrity.

A strong appeal to his patriotism, in behalf of a city, of which he had become a resident, induced him to forego a much more lucrative employment, and to take charge of the Street Commissioner's Department, aided by his very talented assistant, GEORGE B. SMITH.

This city is more indebted to Judge WRIGHT than to any one individual, for great and permanent public improvements; such as the enlargement of Union square; the establishment of Tompkins and Stuyvesant squares; the plan of gradation and profiling of the whole island, and especially of the east side of the city; regulating the Stuyvesant meadows; a proper system of public sewers, with improved air-traps; Macadamizing and lighting the Third avenue to Harlem; an improved state of paving, curbing and guttering the city, &c.

With Judge WRIGHT was associated another eminent civil engineer, CANVASS WHITE; and in November, 1831,

they made a joint report on supplying the city of New York with pure and wholesome water, which was referred, in the Board of Aldermen, to the Committee on Fire and Water, consisting of JAMES PALMER, SAMUEL STEVENS and WILLIAM SCOTT.

This Committee, on the 21st December, 1831, reported the draft of a law to authorize the Common Council to raise two millions of dollars for the object in view, but *rejecting the idea of going to the Croton river*, on account of the distance, difficulty of the route, and expense of construction, and recommending the use of the Bronx river, with Rye pond as a reservoir, and the Wampus and Byram ponds as auxiliaries.

The Common Council, finding this and other matters of application to the legislature, very much neglected in that body, notwithstanding the efforts of ROBT. EMMET, Esq., Counsel of the Board, appointed, by a joint resolution, approved 15th March, 1832, a Committee, consisting of Alderman JAMES PALMER and Assistant Alderman JAMES B. MURRAY, to proceed to Albany and to co-operate with Mr. EMMET in procuring the passage of the measures pending before the legislature.

It then appeared that several of the members of the Senate and Assembly, representing the city, and to whom the various subjects had been referred, and especially Senator STEPHEN ALLEN, were opposed to granting to the Common Council the power asked for in the bill, and this opposition proved fatal.

The new Common Council were sworn into office in May, 1832. HENRY MEIGS, Esq., was elected President of the Board of Aldermen; MYNDEBT VAN SCHAICK was appointed Chairman of the Committee on Finance; JAMES PALMER, on Water, and JAMES B. MURRAY, on Streets.

Shortly afterward, New York was, for the first time, visited by that terrific scourge, the Asiatic cholera, before which the affrighted inhabitants fled *en masse*; and the attention of the civil authorities became riveted to the subject of devising means which, under Providence, might save us from its future ravages.

Its effects were most fatal in impure and intemperate districts, of which there were many; and numerous thrilling incidents might be related, where the courage, as well as the judgment of the members of the Board of Health, were subjected to trying tests, resulting in the full establishment of a character for both.

An executive committee, invested with plenary powers to provide all the requisite supplies for hospitals, almshouses, &c., was appointed, consisting of Aldermen WOODRUFF, ROBERTSON and MANDEVILLE, who held daily sessions at the Hall, and by whose incessant labor and excellent judgment, aided by that of Alderman VAN SCHAICK, as treasurer, added to a wise economy, won the approbation of their fellow-members, and the community at large.

The fidelity with which each member of the Board of Health sustained the others, in that perilous ordeal, not only formed a bond of permanent personal attachment,

but cherished a remarkable spirit of harmony in action, and especially in establishing the conviction that an abundant supply of water and a universal system of sewerage had become indispensably requisite for the public health.

Gross errors in constructing sewers, already in use, had created a general prejudice against the system, which those who had witnessed their successful operation elsewhere, found it difficult to overcome.

The Street Committee, to which belonged the direction of the sewerage, consisted of Aldermen JAMES B. MURRAY, M. VAN SCHAICK and T. T. WOODRUFF, who, anxious to obtain all possible information on the subject, communicated with several other cities, and made a personal visit to Philadelphia, where the subject had already received much attention.

Aided by the public officers of that city, they examined their water and sewer system thoroughly, and returned, convinced of the indissoluble connection between both, which views were fully reported to the Board.

On the 1st October, 1832, President MEIGS offered a resolution, which passed unanimously, that "the Committee on Fire and Water be instructed to report such measures as ought to be adopted for securing, with the least possible delay, the introduction of pure and wholesome water into the city."

On the 15th October, the Joint Committee, of which Alderman JAMES PALMER was chairman, made a unanimous report in favor of obtaining further information,

through competent engineers, and appropriating one thousand dollars toward an examination; which report was adopted with great unanimity.

Colonel DE WITT CLINTON, (son of the deceased Governor,) was, at this period, a civil engineer in the service of the United States, whose talents were particularly well known to Alderman VAN SCHAICK; and under his recommendation, and through his influence, the services of Col. CLINTON were procured from the General Government, and his elaborate examination and report, since extensively circulated, justified their selection.

It was difficult, however, at the time of Col. CLINTON'S appointment, to disturb the well-settled conviction that the Rye pond was the only true source of supply, although many doubted its eventual sufficiency, and an informal committee, consisting of Aldermen PALMER, VAN SCHAICK and MURRAY, accompanied by Col. CLINTON, made a visit of inspection and discovery to Bronx river and Rye pond.

Having made a diligent personal examination, and conferred with several of the old residents, and having been most hospitably entertained by Mr. OLIVER MATTHEWS, formerly in trade in New York, and an old acquaintance of Alderman VAN SCHAICK, and who was a native of that locality and resided immediately at the outlet of Rye pond, the whole matter was thoroughly examined and discussed, and the testimony of those who were, from their infancy, acquainted with the capacity of Rye pond, disclosed the fact that it had undergone

a progressive annual diminution; and this testimony created a determination in the minds of the Committee to grapple with the largest project and adopt the Croton river as the source of supply.

On the 24th December following, the report of the Joint Committee on Fire and Water was presented, accompanied by those of Col. CLINTON and Messrs. DEWEY and SERRELL, civil engineers, whose services had been procured, and the whole were ordered to be printed, as well as the opinion of the Supreme Court, demolishing the monopoly claimed by the Manhattan Company and affirming the exclusive right of the Common Council over the whole subject matter.

The jealousy of a majority of the city delegation at Albany, as to granting any power to the Common Council; and which had thus far paralysed all their efforts, demonstrated the necessity of selecting an able and influential advocate in the senate to succeed the Hon. STEPHEN ALLEN, whose term was about to expire, and the efforts of the friends of the Croton project were concentrated in favor of the Hon. MEYNDERT VAN SCHAICK, and resulted in his election, and he took his seat in the senate of the state in January, 1833. Under his prompt action two bills were originated and passed into laws. The first of these bills was designed for the purpose of procuring additional information respecting the practicability of the route, the character and quantity of the water and the expense of bringing it into the city, and was



intended to confirm the report of Col. CLINTON by another report, which might tend to impart confidence to many who doubted the expediency of an undertaking so stupendous. That bill received the unanimous approbation of the Common Council, and was passed by the legislature, February 26, 1833.

The perseverance with which our senator pursued his measures was shown by his coming down from Albany on the 7th of January to vote on its passage in the Board of Aldermen.

That law effected its object, and upon the coming into the legislature of the report of the Commissioners at the next session, in favor of the Croton, it was followed by him with the comprehensive act of twenty-four sections, passed May 2d, 1834, which enabled the Commissioners to bring the Croton river into the city.

When the appointment of Commissioners was about to be made under the first of these laws, Senator VAN SCHAIK explained to his colleagues, in the Common Council, that he had not included in the list of names which he had presented to the Governor, any member of that body, assigning as the reason that a course so apparently selfish would certainly be attributed to interested motives, and would be likely to prejudice the object, by raising a suspicion that personal interests were connected with the project. The propriety of making the sacrifice of the natural expectation that some one or more of those members of the Common Council, who

had been most active in promoting the design, would be allowed the opportunity of deriving some honor from its development, was fully appreciated and acquiesced in.

The beneficial result of the policy inaugurated by the Common Council of 1832, and matured by the decisive movements of Senator VAN SCHAIK, will be fully realized when that river shall discharge its full volume through a commercial metropolis, extending from the Battery to King's Bridge.

When the question of permitting the Commissioners to proceed in this work came to the ballot-boxes, as required by the act of 1834, a strong opposition was organized to prevent its ratification, but, thanks to the intelligence of the people, it was decided in the affirmative by an overwhelming majority.

It is due, however, to many of its opponents to add that experience has converted them into a zealous support of the measure which has brought so much comfort and prosperity to the city of New York.

This brief memoir of events connected with this great undertaking, has been prepared, in a succinct form, as a tribute to those who successfully aided in its origin and consummation, and especially to the members of the Common Council of 1832-3, as its originators and advocates; and although a majority are beyond the reach of mortal eulogy, their descendants may be gratified by this reminiscence of their intelligence and firmness, and their successors in office encouraged in an imitation of their patriotism.

It is a consolation, also, to the survivors to know, that although their names may pass into oblivion, the great work has been consummated, and one of their most devoted co-laborers still lives to superintend and assist, as President of the Croton Aqueduct Board, in discharging the important duties of developing, more extensively, the benefits of a system, the foundations of which were laid in the measures adopted in 1832-3-4.

The names of the members of the Common Council of 1832 will close this memoir. They are as follows:

<i>Wards</i>	<i>Aldermen.</i>	<i>Assistants.</i>
1.	JOHN YATES CEBRA,	JOHN J. LABAGE,
2.	PETER SHARPE,	WM. VAN WYCK,
3.	WM. MANDEVILLE,	JAMES MONROE,
4.	GEORGE E. SMITH,	CHARLES G. FERRIS,
5.	MYNDERT VAN SCHAICK,	DAVID BANKS,
6.	JOHN R. RHINELANDER,	DENNIS MCCARTHY,
7.	JAMES R. WHITING,	THOMPSON PRICE,
8.	ERASTUS BARNES,	JEREMIAH TOWLE,
9.	HENRY MEIGS,	GEORGE SUTTON,
10.	JOHN PALMER,	PETER S. TITUS,
11.	HENRY P. ROBERTSON,	FRANCIS FICKETT,
12.	CHARLES H. HALL,	WM. W. HOLLY,
13.	JAMES PALMER,	JAMES RIKER,
14.	THOMAS T. WOODRUFF,	SAMUEL DUNSHEE,
15.	JAMES B. MURRAY,	GEORGE W. BRUEN.
	ROBERT EMMET, <i>Counsel.</i>	
	BENJAMIN WRIGHT, <i>Street Commissioner.</i>	
	GEORGE B. SMITH, <i>Assistant Street Commissioner.</i>	