

Backgrounder: Moncton's First Water Works

In 1857, residents of the Town of Moncton, then also known as the "Bend", began to voice their opinions about the need for an abundant and permanent supply of good water. The importance of water for domestic and manufacturing purposes was equally important to the urgent need of water for fire protection. In Moncton, as in many other Canadian towns or cities, insurance companies either refused to sell the resident and businesses fire insurance or charged them excessive insurance rates because the town or city did not have a proper water system.

Over the next 20 years, Moncton grew to a population of 6,000, and the need for an abundant supply of good water was even more prevalent.

By early September of 1877, accumulated data pinpointed Lynch's Brook as the best possible source of water for the town. P.S. Archibald, Esquire, Civil Engineer, indicated that the new water works could be built for a total cost of \$50,000, which included water service for approximately 200 houses in the town of Moncton. The first water pipes would be laid on the principal streets in the city and approximately 20 fire hydrants would be installed in the business district. Sources of revenue for the water works included \$10 a year from each homeowner connected to the water system, between \$400 and \$500 a year for large factories, and approximately \$3,000 a year from the largest consumer, the Intercolonial Railway.

On September 13, 1877, the Bank of Montreal on Main Street began receiving subscriptions for stock in the Moncton Gas, Light and Water Company. Shares could be purchased \$25 a piece and each shareholder had an equal number of votes, regardless of the number of shares purchased.

Within one month, well over 1,000 shares had been sold. It was very important to the directors and stockholders of the company that the remaining shares be purchased by residents of the town rather than people from outside the area. As a result, they encouraged the leading citizens who had not yet subscribed for stock in the company to purchase their shares as soon as possible.

The following summer, three ships from Philadelphia discharged over 750 tons of pipe for the water works at the Public Wharf on the Petitcodiac River.

The town council reported that the work in town and at the reservoir appeared to be on schedule, and if things continued to progress at the present rate the residents of Moncton would have water by the end of the year.

By mid-summer, a wage dispute developed between the contractor hired to dig the water pipe trenches and his employees, who expected to be paid more money for a greater workload. When their request was denied, they immediately went on strike. The men, most of who were not from this area, were fired and unemployment rates being high in Moncton, the contractor had little difficulty in finding replacements.

The new reservoir soon became known as the Fitzsimmons Reservoir.

The task of digging the trenches and laying the pipe along town streets and in the direction of the reservoir took approximately three months to complete. By late September, almost all of the work was completed and many of the residents along Main Street had connected their premises to the pipeline so that they could take full advantage of the water as soon as it became available.

Approximately three weeks later, on October 19th, 1878, the water works authorities officially turned on Moncton's first water system. As the people rejoiced, the water company crews worked quickly to repair the many leaks that had developed along the pipeline.

Insurance agents from Saint John visited Moncton to test the water system. They were very satisfied with all aspects of the water works and thus informed the directors of the company that fire insurance rates in Moncton would be considerably lower in the future.

Over the next few years, the Moncton Gas, Light and Water Company extended the water lines throughout most of the town. Since the water ran by gravity alone and there was an increased number of people using the system, the overall water pressure began to dwindle.

In response to the public demands and the demands placed on the water system, the company built the Crow's Island pumping station in the early 1890s next to Hall's Creek on the main pipeline to the reservoir. The quality of water began to improve as a result of new filters and the overall water pressure increased substantially.

As Moncton continued to grow and new equipment became available the city found it became necessary to build a new pump house and a new reservoir. In 1913, the McNutt Reservoir was built on the McLaughlin Road and a new pump house was built at the top of Highfield Street.

The Fitzsimmons Reservoir was eventually designated as a secondary supply of water for the city and the Crow's Island Pumping Station was completely abandoned.

The Crow's Island Pump House has since been torn down, and the only material evidence still in existence that relates to Moncton's first water works can be found at the Fitzsimmons Reservoir. The reservoir and cut-stone gatehouse dating 1870's are now just silent reminders of one of Moncton's greatest municipal achievements.