

# "Early Water Supplies For Firefighting In Portland"

Source Unknown

In the early days, Portland had no general water system. Prior to 1856, when Stephen Coffin and Finice Caruthers diverted water from Caruthers Creek to supply Portland with water, Portlanders drew their water from wells, streams, and springs.

With the growing use of hand pumps by the fire department, the need for a more convenient and abundant supply of water for fighting fires became urgent. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1855, the following resolution was acted upon at a meeting of the Common Council:

*“Be it resolved that the Committee on Streets and Public Improvements be instructed to obtain from the City Surveyor an opinion or report upon the expediency of constructing at the present season, Reservoirs for the use of the Fire Department. Also to obtain from him a proposed plan for constructing said Reservoirs in detail and also an estimate of the cost thereof. . . .”*

In a meeting of the Common Council held January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1856, the reservoir plan was adopted in the following resolution:

*“Be it resolved by the Council of the City of Portland: That they adopt the plan recommended by the Committee of the Whole upon arising from the consideration of a plan which had been laid before the Council at a previous meeting. The plan thus adopted is that the Cisterns are to be built of wood and of the particular manner and mechanism as is represented by a model that is presented to the Council of said Committee, the Capacity of said Reservoirs to be fifteen feet square and nine feet deep to be caulked and pitched . . . .”*

The construction of the fire cisterns began immediately and soon every important intersection in the congested section of the city had a cistern – installed and filled with water. At first, certain parties contracted to haul water from the river with which to fill the cisterns. Subsequently, the various cisterns were connected by a system of conduits and water was piped from Balch and Caruthers Creeks to keep them supplied.

The early pitched-timber cisterns were difficult to keep in repair so they were replaced by brick reservoirs. These brick reservoirs were added to from time to time as the city grew. In 1938, Portland had more than 80 fire cisterns located at convenient points in the metropolitan area. In the event of failure of the water supply due to a landslide at the Bull Run headwords, earthquakes, or other local calamity which might affect the normal functioning of the water system, the fire cisterns (at that time) would afford ample protection against advance of any conflagration. This added safeguard was taken into account by fire underwriters in establishing insurance rates for Portland property at that time.