

"Portland's Fire Cisterns"

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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. On November 10th, 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.... "

At a meeting of the Common Council held January 12th, 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 peculiar manner and mechanism as is represented by a model that is presented to the Council by 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.

When the fire department began using hand pumps, and following the city's acquisition of a steam fire engine, the need for a more convenient and abundant supply of water for fighting fires became urgent. The early pitched-timber of cisterns were difficult to keep in repair so were replaced by brick reservoirs. These brick reservoirs were added to from time to time as the city grew and in 1938 there were 80 fire cisterns located at convenient points in the metropolitan area.

As previously noted, fire cisterns came into being in early days when Portland had no general water system. In recent years Portland's water supply system has been improved in capacity and reliability. The arterial system to the principal business district is good. Quantity of water for fire protection in the principal business district and other areas is adequate. The system is operated by capable and experienced personnel.

Fire cisterns are difficult and costly to repair, and deterioration is rapid due to their being underground and subject to continued hydraulic conditions. The National Board of Fire Underwriters did not recognize fire cisterns in their 1963 grading report on the City of Portland's fire defenses.

Although the fire cistern did play an important part in the City's fire protection system, their value has diminished and the cisterns are being phased out of service as age and deterioration makes continued maintenance impractical.