

THE QUEST FOR WATER
A History of Carthage Water Systems
By Laura M. Prievo, Village Historian

Water is basic, and essential to all life forms, whether animal, vegetable or human. Twentieth century Americans take it for granted. We open a faucet and expect to receive clean pure water, for drinking, bathing, washing our cars, or irrigating our gardens. Seldom do we think of the effort that was involved in bringing this precious liquid into our homes. Yet we needn't go back very many generations to find someone whose household water supply was carried by the pailful from a well in the back yard.

The first settlers in the Carthage region found plenty of water. There was, of course, the broad Black River, and no doubt Jean Baptiste Bossuot dipped a bucket into its waters to supply the needs of his family and the guests at his inn, the first permanent structure in the new settlement.

Another early Carthaginian, Joseph P. Budd, wrote of several springs and wells in the Village. So it seems that the residents of the infant Village should have had no trouble finding water for their household needs.

Following the Village's incorporation in 1841, one of the first acts by the Board of Trustees, was the establishment of a fire company; then the enactment of ordinances relevant to fire prevention. Even so, fires did occur, and the source of water was needed. So a system of reservoirs was established. These reservoirs were located under the streets at various intersections. The first documented was built in July, 1842, at a construction cost of \$98.05.

In March 1884, the Board authorized the construction of another reservoir 38 feet long, 14 feet wide and 12 feet deep at a cost of \$400.00, made of concrete and covered by large timbers. In the same year, two other large reservoirs were constructed in the downtown district; these two would have walls of limestone, 20 inches thick. These and several other reservoirs scattered about the Village, were to be used only for fighting fires. The Board and volunteer firemen probably felt secure in the belief that no matter where a fire might break out, they were ready with a good supply of water for extinguishing it. However, their complacency ended on October 20, 1884, when fire swept through the Village, destroying homes, churches, industries and public buildings. It was reported they pumped their wells and cisterns dry.

That fire may have been the incentive for the construction of a municipal water system. Indeed, a Utica reporter, who was in town to cover the fire story, suggested the idea. He pointed out that the Pleasant Lake was not far away, and might be a good source. The ROME (NY) REPUBLICAN wrote, "The only thing lacking to make Carthage a first class town....is good water works."

Seven months after the great fire, Henry C. Hodgkins approached the Board of Trustees with an application for water works for the Village. Here the record is incomplete. Although Mr. Hodgkins' application was granted, no further action was taken.

In July 1888, Henry Hungerford applied for a franchise to bring water to the Village, from either Pleasant Lake or the Black River. Chemical analyses of both sources were made. Some citizens were reluctant on an outsider having control and were concerned about costs. Local newspapers picked up on the story. The public voted and the proposition was defeated. The question of waterworks was put aside for another year.

In July 1889, the Board received an estimate of \$46,861.90 from Engineer McComb to bring water to the Village from Pleasant Lake. A public meeting was called for July 25th. By the end of the summer, the Village Board was ready to call yet another special election to see if the voters would approve a \$50,000 bond for the purpose of constructing a municipal water works. But another question arose, what about drainage? The Village had always been plagued by water running in the streets, turning them to seas of mud. So the election was delayed one more day, and a second bond issue added to it for \$20,000 for sewers. The taxpayers were ready for some positive changes and on September 17, 1889, they approved the \$50,000 for water works and the \$20,000 for sewers.

In spite of the positive vote, nothing was done, and two more years elapsed before a fifth proposal was brought to the Trustees. The biggest flaw in this proposal was the franchise to construct a water system and provide the Village with thirty hydrants at an annual rental of \$50 each. Most of the citizens had made it clear that if they were to have a municipal water system, the Village should own it outright, and not be at the mercy of some outside company. So that proposal, too, was left by the wayside.

A year later, the firm of Hinds and Bond revived the question of water-works and sewerage in the Village, and in West Carthage. Since the proposal included both the twin Villages, the Republican newspaper made note that West Carthage will also vote upon the questions, with the view of sharing with Carthage in the construction and maintenance of one pump station for both towns. When the votes were counted in West Carthage, only 44 were in favor of the water works, while 82 voted against it. On the other side of the river, it was a different story. The proposition was approved. At last, after six proposals, the Village of Carthage was to have a municipal water system.

In September, the bids were opened and the contract, with a bid of \$46,500, was accepted. Mr. McComb was retained as the engineer in charge. Work on the system, including a 75 foot-long water tower, and a brick pump house was begun in the fall of 1892, and by the following June, water from the Black River was supplying the Village.

The Board of Trustees, acting as the Board of Water Commissioners, went about the task of setting rates for water users, and drawing up regulations as well.

By 1895, West Carthage citizens were beginning to see the benefits of a municipal water system. Another election was held, and this time the majority were in favor of Village

water works, to be connected with the Carthage system, provided such a contract could be agreed upon. So a contract was drawn up, to cover the next twelve years. Under its terms, the Village of West Carthage was to bear the expense of connecting with the Carthage system; rules regarding the wastage of water, and rate charges to users would be the same as in Carthage. West Carthage signed the contract and began laying water mains in the Village and a pipe across the river linked the two Villages with one water system.

That was the way matters stood as the 19th Century drew to a close. But a leading physician in the Village and a member of the Board of Health, was becoming concerned over the number of patients he was treating for waterborne diseases, particularly typhoid fever, dysentery and various liver ailments. It was pretty evident that the water of the Black River was polluted. It was not uncommon to see the carcasses of dead animals floating downstream, or caught in the racks of the power dams. With no regulations to prohibit the practice, household waste, industrial waste and agricultural waste all ended up in the river and other pollutants.

Add in the fact that as water was taken into the pumping station, sand and other sediment came with it, causing excess wear on the machinery and creating daily headaches for the maintenance men who were trying to keep the machinery running. In addition, the riverbanks then were densely populated by industries, each demanding their share of the available water, and in dry seasons, there was not always enough to go around.

In 1900, Dr. Simonds suggested that the Village seek a new source of water. While most Villagers were willing to seek another source, they were concerned on the costs. In 1906 the taxpayers voted in favor of a proposition to raise \$125,000 for the purpose of bringing water to Carthage from the Croghan Springs. An engineer outlined the Village's plans and stated that the springs were capable of producing 2,000,000 gallons of water per day, and that they were far removed from any source of pollution. For over a year, a debate went on as to whether the system is built with cast iron pipe or riveted steel pipe.

The Village election of March 1907, boasted the largest turnout of voters in the Village's history. The proposition for additional funds for the cast iron pipe was carried. In addition, the voters, perceiving that politics already had played too large a role in the whole water situation, showed their disapproval by their ballots. The Republican incumbents were swept out of office, and healthy majorities elected the Democrats. The people had spoken. They would have pure spring water, and cast iron pipes would bring it to them. By July 1907, work began at Indian River, preparing the terrain for the laying of the pipeline.

While work progressed on the pipeline, the Board of Water Commissioners tackled the thorny problem of water rates. Should there be a flat rate per household? Or a rate per faucet? Or should there be a metered system? If rates were too high, people would be reluctant to participate, and if too low, the system would not be self-sustaining.

And, of course, there was the old 1895 contract with the Village of West Carthage, which was about to expire anyway. The Water Commissioners estimated that an annual budget of \$12,000 would be needed for the new water system. Under the old contract West Carthage was paying only \$500 per year and, according to one source, using 40% of the water pumped. West Carthage officials, of course, were quite happy with the contract as it was, but offered to go as high as \$1,000 per year, provided the restrictions on rates, wastage, etc., was lifted. Such a plan, argued Carthage officials, would be undercutting their own citizens, forcing them to subsidize low water rates in another municipality.

While officials of the two Villages debated and negotiated, the pipeline from Croghan was nearing completion. On November 25, 1908, water from the headwaters of the Indian River began flowing through the mains in the Village of Carthage and, for the time being, in the Village of West Carthage, as well.

Carthage offered their west side counterparts two proposals, one for metered water, one for a flat rate. Both were rejected, and West Carthage took an option on the Vrooman springs property. In response, the Carthage Village Board adopted a resolution stating that “the alleged contract of October 5, 1895...be declared void...and that West Carthage be notified to prepare to meet an early action of this board in shutting off water from their mains. That until further order water will be furnished to West Carthage as heretofore.”

As might be expected, the matter did go to law, West Carthage securing an injunction against Carthage. It wasn't settled until February, 1910. Under the terms of the settlement, the 1895 contract was cancelled; the pipe connecting the two Villages was sold to Carthage and, in due course, was removed.

The people of Carthage were delighted with their new water system. The firemen were pleased, too. The old brick pumping station was not immediately abandoned. It was thought wise to keep it in running order in case of an emergency. Such an emergency occurred in 1911, when a break in the water line made it necessary to go back to the Black River for water. Some people, it was said, went thirsty rather than drink the river water.

Three years later, another emergency arose, but this time the pumps were not activated. The following month, December brought extremely harsh weather. Village plumbers were kept busy thawing and repairing broken water pipes, and at Pleasant Lake, ice jammed the intake valve and left West Carthage residents without water for several hours.

These events led Twin Village officials to an agreement whereby their two water systems would be connected for use in emergency situations. The pipe that had been removed in 1910 was replaced, with each Village sharing equally in the cost. This proved to be a smart move, for on a number of occasions, some within recent memory, the pipe has been opened to alleviate a water emergency.

Soon after completing the construction of their water system, Carthage officials turned their attention to making their investment secure for all time. Little by little, the Village bought up the lands surrounding the Croghan springs until Carthage now owns a tract of more than two thousand acres. In 1910, the Village, with assistance from the state's conservation department, inaugurated a reforestation program on the tract. The forest still protects the Village's watershed.

In 1939, the Village began the installation of water meters for all users, abandoning their old complicated system of flat rates for one purpose and metered rates for another. Two years later, the question of chlorination came up, and a proposal for such a step was placed on the ballot and the voters defeated the proposition.

Events in Europe were pushing the country closer to the brink of World War II. The Army gave Carthage an ultimatum: "Chlorinate or else". Then the State Department of Health joined forces with the Army and, faced with this formidable alliance, the Village was forced to capitulate.

As history reveals, the quest for water has not been an easy one for the people of Carthage. It has occupied the time and energies of every Village administration for the past 100 years or more, and the men who guided Village affairs have risen to the challenge. The current administration now faces the need for installation of a filtration system, and the next chapter in the saga will be written as future events unfold.

This story of Carthage will be continued in our next issue of Aquafacts, so please tune in this Winter for the conclusion.