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Detroit's Water Supply

One of the provisions of the "Act authorizing Peter Berthelet to erect a wharf on the River Detroit" stipulated that there should be erected at or near the end of this wharf next the channel of the river a "good and sufficient pump." As a supplement to private wells, any resident of the city was to have the use of this pump and might freely cross the wharf with "carts, wagons, sleighs or other machinery" in order to reach it. As the city grew, it became impossible to obtain one of the greatest of life's necessities by individual effort. The discussions as to a remedy for this condition reached the ears of Bethuel Farrand and Rufus Wells of Aurelius, Cayuga County, New York. In the winter of 1824-25 Mr. Farrand came to Detroit on foot, along the southern shore of Lake Erie. On February 17, 1825 he submitted to the Detroit Common Council, his plan for supplying the city with water. Following is a partial draft of their "Act granting to Bethuel Farrand and his legal representatives the sole and exclusive right of watering the city of Detroit and for other purposes" which was passed on the 22d of February, 1825.

The Farrand Water System

Whereas the introduction of a sufficient and ample supply of clear pure and wholesome Water into the City of Detroit would essentially contribute to the health comfort convenience and interest of its inhabitants as well as materially tend to the protection and preservation of the said City from the destructive effects of fire.

To the intent therefore that these great and important objects and benefits may be attained & secured to the said City and to its inhabitants as aforesaid— In the manner & form and on the conditions to be herein expressed

Be it therefore ordained By the Mayor Recorder, Aldermen & freemen of the City of Detroit in Common Council Convened And it is hereby ordained by the authority of the same:

That there be granted by virtue of these presents to Bethuel Farand and to his legal representatives the sole and exclusive right of introducing into and supplying the City of Detroit and the inhabitants thereof with clear pure and wholesome water from the Channel of the River Detroit for the full term of fifteen Years to be computed from the date of [June 1, 1826]; on the express condition That the said Bethuel Farand or his legal representatives shall within the period of one year from the date hereof introduce furnish supply or cause to be supplied all that part of the City of Detroit from the River Detroit extending up in a line with the Court House and Jail across from the Brush line to Govr. Cass' line and all the inhabitants comprised within the said limits with Clear pure and wholesome water and that he shall extend the said Water Works to any other part or parts of the said City within a reasonable time thereafter on the application of any inhabitant who may require the same; And it is expressly understood that

none of the inhabitants of the said City of Detroit shall be in any manner bound to take or receive the said Water or to pay or contribute any sum towards the said Water Works unless they shall wish to have it introduced into their premises and in that case they shall in no instance whatever be taxed above the sum of Ten Dollars for the Yearly use of said Water and during such term only as they may require the same.

And upon the application of any inhabitant to obtain and use the said Water, the said Bethuel Farand or his &c. shall be bound to supply the same within a reasonable time within any part of said applicants premises free of expence within 50 feet of the front walls of said applicants premises to any interior part of said premises where the same may be required without additional charge provided that the expence of the [removal of the] walls &c. shall be at the owners expence. That for the aforesaid consideration of Ten Dollars annually to be paid to the said Bethuel Farand or his legal representatives by each and every respective family he shall be bound to supply each and every family that may require the water to be introduced by him with one good and sufficient pent stock with a Cock fixed therein which shall be at least half an inch in diameter and shall be kept in good order and repair by the said Bethuel and that a constant supply of water shall always flow from said pent stock or Cock uninterruptedly if required for the use of each family paying for the same----

And if any individual shall require more than one pent stock within his premises he shall be at liberty to obtain the same by paying an additional reasonable allowance not exceeding [ten] Dollars for each year.

And the pipes and conductors to convey the said Water within the City shall be well and substantially laid and made with good durable materials and laid in such manner as not to be affected by the frost and otherwise in such manner as the Common Council for the time being shall approve. And the said Bethuel shall at all times furnish and supply for the use of the said City for the purpose of extinguishing fires or for any other purpose which the Corporation may require so many reservoirs of pure running water as the Corporation for the time being may think proper or require not exceeding six in number which reservoirs shall at all times be kept full—But the expence however of building these reservoirs shall in no wise be chargeable to the said Bethuel Farand or his &c. but belong exclusive to the Corporation of the City

And the said Bethuel Farand in consideration of the grant now made to him & his &c. shall pay to the May &c. for the use of said City one Hundred Dollars annually for the first five years.

(From the John R. Williams papers)

Mr. Farrand's obligation for the second five years was increased to \$150.00 annually and for the third five years to \$200.00 annually. At the end of the fifteen years "all things appertaining to the work" were to be surrendered to the city. None of the water conveyed was to be used for manufacturing purposes or for watering horses and cattle. There was to be no borrowing of drinking water by neighbors since "no water shall be taken from any pent stock and made use of, except on the premises where such pent stock is erected, and by the family or inhabitant paying therefor."

The right granted by this act was later transferred to Rufus Wells. He finished the works and put them in operation. In the spring of 1829 other investors became interested and an ordinance was passed on July 3 of that year granting to Rufus Wells, Phineas Davis Jr., Lucius Lyon and A. E. Hathon the right to supply Detroit with water until 1860. The Common Council also selected a lot on Fort Street, the second from the southeast corner of Wayne and Fort streets for the experiment of boring for water. The results appear in the following which was recently discovered among the papers of Lucius Lyon by Mrs. J. H. Campbell of Grand Rapids and presented to the Burton Collection.

The Hydraulic Company

To the citizens of Detroit -

The undersigned members of a company formed for the purpose of supplying the city of Detroit with water from the channel of Detroit River or from some other source, beg leave to state, that in the prosecution of their design, and at the suggestion of many very respectable citizens, and as they believe in accordance with the wishes of the people generally, they were induced to make the experiment of trying to procure water by boring into the earth, an experiment which in N. York, N. Jersey and many other parts of the United States has succeeded beyond the most sanguine expectation, and the ultimate success of which in this city, the undersigned see no good reason to despair of—They have now bored and tubed with cast iron 127 feet in earth and bored 80 feet in lime rock, making in the whole two hundred and seven feet that they have perforated the earth at an expense of about \$1500.

And Though the subscribers believe that the greatest obstacles to the continuance of the work, have now been overcome, and that hereafter interruption from accident would be but seldom, yet as it is uncertain to what depth it may be necessary to go to obtain water, and as the city can be watered from the River at an expense that can with some certainty be estimated, we think it inexpedient and individually feel unable to risk a further expenditure without some certainty of receiving an adequate remuneration—But as many persons have expressed a desire that the experiment may be more fairly tested, and we ourselves feel loath to abandon it, we propose to those who are interested, to receive such sums as they may feel disposed to subscribe and apply them in the most economical manner keeping an account of the same, and also give the use of our Blacksmith's shop, drill, Horse and machinery to carry on the work and if water sufficient to supply the city should be found to rise to the surface of the earth, we hereby bind ourselves to refund to each subscriber the amount that may have been paid by him

Detroit Decr. 29th 1829

We the undersigned being desirous that the experiment of boring for water to supply the city of Detroit should be more fairly tested than it has yet been, promise for that purpose to pay when called on, to the agent of the Detroit watering company the several sums set opposite our respective names which several sums it is understood are to be refunded by said company whenever by boring sufficient quantity of water shall be obtained to water the City.

This proposition does not appear to have been greeted with any enthusiasm by the Detroiters who watched, for some years, the attempts of the Hydraulic Company to fulfill its obligations and expressed their sentiments from time to time by petitions to the Common Council of which this may serve as an example.

A Petition for Purer Water

Resolved, That We consider with mingled emotions of anxiety and concern, the important and interesting period, of the approaching Summer months; Considering the Health of the City, as inseparably connected with its prosperity; and the Welfare and happiness of its inhabitants.—Therefore, to secure, as far

as in us lies, those desirable and important objects; We trust, that every proper measure, will be promptly taken, by our City Authorities, towards perfecting and maintaining a vigilant police; and to prevent during the Warm Season, the opening of drains or foul Sewers, or the exposure of any foul matter to the action of the Sun.

Resolved, that we consider it of the first importance, that the City should be permanently supplied with pure and wholesome Water; inasmuch, as the health of its inhabitants, and the Cause of Temperance, must essentially depend upon, and be either promoted by an abundant supply of good Water, or materially affected, or destroyed, by the introduction of a filthy and deleterious liquid, in its Stead. Obtained, as the Water now is, below the City; after having been amalgamated with all the filth, issueing from drains, Sewers and other sources of impurity, along the whole front of the City; immediate measures, should therefore be taken, to remedy so great an evil; by changing diametrically, the source, from which our inhabitants are to be supplied with water; from the lower, to the upper extremity of the City.

Resolved, that the principal object, which the Corporation had in view, in Chartering an Hydraulic Company; was to secure a sufficient supply of pure and wholesome Water, for the use of the inhabitants—That We Consider, that the water which has been, and is now furnished the inhabitants, by the Hydraulic Company, to be positively impure; and consequently, deleterious to the public health; And, therefore introduced, in violation of one of the principal and moving considerations, contained in the Charter to said Company.

Resolved, therefore, That We consider, that the Charter to said Hydraulic Company, has been, and is constantly, violated, in one of its principal and essential Conditions and Stipulations; by the introduction of impure and unwholesome Water, instead, of pure and Wholesome Water.

Resolved, That We Recommend to the Common Council, that immediate measures be adopted, to cancel and abrogate the aforesaid Charter, to the said Hydraulic Company, either by purchasing their improvements and unexpired term, at an evaluation or appraisalment, by disinterested individuals; or by any other means, which the Common Council may deem equitable, expedient or proper.

Resolved, That the period has arrived, when the Water Works, and all other public Works, appertaining to the City; should be placed on the most solid, durable and improved basis, both in relation to Style and permanency.

(From the John R. Williams papers)

[There is a proposition before the Common Council to buy the Hydraulic Co.'s plant.] We do earnestly hope that such an arrangement will be effected. It has been a real luxury to us to drink the water which has been upon our tables this winter at our public houses, and which has been taken directly from the fresh current of the river.

(From the Detroit Free Press, April 27, 1836)

On May 23, 1836, it was announced, in the same journal, that the City had purchased the whole of the property and outfit of the Hydraulic Co. for \$25,500, the property to be surrendered to the City by June 1, and that a committee had been appointed to select a site for the erection of suitable buildings for the use of the Hydraulic works.

A wooden water pipe four inches in diameter bound with wire and covered with tar was discovered December 19, 1919, while repairing the pipes of the present system in front of the Priscilla Inn, corner of Cass Avenue and Ledyard Street. It is now in the Burton Collection, a connecting link with the era of private wells and bucketfuls of river water.