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New York

Soaking the poor

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By Gerard T. Koepfel.

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NEW YORK'S history is richer in villains than heroes. When considerations of personal profit and power have conflicted with those of civic well-being, the citizens have invariably emerged the losers. Nothing illustrates this better than the long struggle to provide Lower Manhattan with a clean and ample supply of water, achieved only after thousands had died from the diseases that thrived in its putrid wells, and acres of property had been destroyed in fires that raged through lack of water to fight them.

Gerard Koepfel tells an absorbing tale of corruption, incompetence, delay and political chicanery. Few, then, should be surprised that one of the principal characters in the early scenes of the drama was a colourful senator, and later, vice-president, Aaron Burr, notorious for slaying Alexander Hamilton in a duel. After an epidemic of yellow fever in 1798, in which coffins had been sold by itinerant vendors on street corners, Burr established the Manhattan Company, with the ostensible aim of bringing clean water to the city from the Bronx River but in fact designed as a front for the creation of New York's second bank, rivalling Hamilton's Bank of New York. (Today's Chase Manhattan is a direct descendant of the Burr enterprise.)

Once Burr had persuaded the city's politicians to approve a permissive charter allowing his company to undertake in effect whatever commercial activities it liked, water was always a secondary consideration. The Bronx supply never materialised and for years New Yorkers had to make do with water fed into public wells and standpipes from the increasingly unhygienic Collect Pond, on the edge of the settled area. The supply was inadequate, the

company incompetent, and discontent mounted. Washington Irving complained that “so rich and luxurious a city, which lavishes countless thousands on curious wines, cannot afford itself wholesome water”. New York brewers protested that the poor raw material led to their losing market share to the purer beers of Philadelphia.

A cholera epidemic in 1832 finally persuaded the city council that provision had to be made for a proper water supply, piped from an upstate river. A bond issue was authorised and a water commission established. After much discussion and a citywide referendum it was agreed that the Croton River, although 40 miles away, would be the most suitable source. Plans were drawn for an aqueduct that would bring its unpolluted water by force of gravity to reservoirs in what is now Central Park and at the Fifth Avenue site of what is now the New York Public Library. Their capacity would be 150m gallons, compared with the half-million gallons of the old system.

The ink on the initial plans was barely dry before before a disastrous fire destroyed a large swathe of the city in 1835: it could perhaps have been contained if the Manhattan Company's meagre supply and pipes had not been frozen solid.

Inevitably, the Croton project took longer and proved more expensive than expected, and was beset with political bickering and indecision. Power in City Hall alternated between the Whigs and Democrats, and with each change of administration came new commissioners and altered priorities. Westchester landowners were reluctant to give up land for the required dams and aqueduct, and there was a long, heated controversy about whether the water should be carried across the Harlem River on a high bridge or a lower crossing. A deep recession made it hard to raise money to complete the project. Labour disputes, occasionally flaring into drunken violence, caused further delays, and so did winter flooding.

Eventually, on July 4th, 1842, amid much excitement and rejoicing, the first Croton water flowed into the Fifth Avenue reservoir. “Clean, sweet, abundant water!” enthused Lydia Child, a visitor from Boston. Promenading around the top of the reservoir wall became a popular recreation for New Yorkers, until it was pulled down 50 years later. Today only a small proportion of the city's water originates in the Croton, but it has maintained its sweetness and cleanliness—in sharp contrast to the murky processes that brought the supply system into being.

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