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West Chester Gets a Sewer System

By Jim Jones

The current brou-ha-ha over health care reform has what electronics experts refer to as a *low signal-to-noise ratio*. In other words, there is relatively little substance in some of the arguments being made, and it tends to get drowned out by the noise that surrounds it. It recalls an episode from the early twentieth century in West Chester history when local government tried to get approval to install a Borough-sized sewer system.

West Chester was founded on the top of a hill, and for more than a century, when rain fell, it ran downhill and nobody thought much about it. The liquid wastes produced by Borough residents followed the rain water downhill, and started to cause concern in the mid-19th century. About the time of the Civil War, Borough Council adopted an ordinance that regulated the size and depth of cesspools -- covered pits designed to hold liquid sewage until a contractor came to pump it out and carry it away from the Borough. Those regulations were not enough to prevent people from discharging sewage out into the streets however, and that became one of the priorities of the Board of Health after it was formed in 1885. Even then, violations continued, and since liquids from the Borough ended up in either the Chester Creek or Brandywine Creek, communities located downstream complained.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the downstream communities found a way to make West Chester pay attention by filing lawsuits. Others took a more benign approach, like the roughly 300 people who presented a petition to Borough Council in September 1904. Many owned land which bordered streams leading away from the Borough, while the largest number were residents of the Borough who believed that civic improvements would invigorate the business climate. A newspaper article from that time published an approximation of a snippet from the discussion that took place among Council members:



The sewer pump house in Everhart Park

- Mr. Heed: "I can't see how all this business in West Chester damages Wilmington."
- Mr. Marshall: "Ah, Wilmington!"
- Mr. Turner.: "It [sewage] will purify itself in that distance."
- Mr. Heed: "They say there are no water closets [toilets] connected with the sewer system in town."
- President Brown: "If some of the property owners were put on a committee to investigate they would have to report themselves, for there are closets in West Chester connected and they know it."
- Mr. Meed: "We all know we have no money to do any work with. It will require a vote of the people for this purpose. I say, make the Board of Health responsible."

- Mr. Ingram: "I will vote for It, but I will say right here that there are some property owners, who, if their taxes should be raised, would fall dead."

Therein lay the problem -- to create a municipal sewer system would require more money than the Borough had ever spent on anything, and its main benefit -- rendering Borough sewage harmless -- would go to downstream communities which drew their drinking water from the Brandywine and Chester Creeks.

A succession of lawsuits applied pressure to Borough Council, which was responsible for paying the lawyers to defend them and the penalties when they lost. Additional pressure came in the form of contaminated water wells in the East End of the Borough, but since most of West Chester's residents relied on municipal water, they were able to shrug that off. Nevertheless, by 1909 Borough Council felt the need to ask the voters for permission to build a sewer treatment plant and a system of pipes designed to connect it to all of the houses in the Borough.

They failed, not once, but three times between 1906 and 1910. Newspaper articles in the weeks leading up to the third referendum in 1910 gave broad coverage to the supporters, which included Borough officials, State Normal School professors, and the West Chester Merchants' and Business Men's Association. Opponents got less coverage, but their position can be reconstructed from the arguments put forth by the supporters: \$200,000 was too much to ask Borough residents to pay; the current system works just fine; all that's needed is more enforcement of the cesspool ordinance; and the supporters of sewers are only looking to benefit their own businesses.

After the third defeat in May 1910, Borough Council recognized that it would probably be unable to win a fourth attempt. Instead, they opted to construct the system in segments by borrowing money for the treatment plants and then adding sewer pipes as the money became available. By 1912, an engineer had created an acceptable master plan which featured two treatment plants on Goose Creek (southeast) and Taylor's Run (northwest) plus pumping stations to transfer sewage from the Borough's other watersheds to a transfer pipe which used gravity to conduct it to the treatment plants.

Construction got underway along S. Matlack Street in 1913, the tunnel under Wayne Street was finished in fall 1915, and the pumping station in Everhart Grove (now Everhart Park) opened in early 1916. Meanwhile, the next political battle got underway -- how customers would be charged for their use of the sewer system.

The first proposal was to set the rate equal to one half of the water bill paid by each property. Borough Council approved that in September 1916, but Burgess (the old name for a Mayor) J. Paul MacElree vetoed it. Then Borough Council approved a new ordinance that charged users a base fee linked to the value of their property, plus a separate fee for each sink, toilet or drain connected to the system. The Burgess let this one go through, so by the end of 1916, the system began to pay for itself.

The naysayers were right about one thing -- the introduction of sewers had at least one bad side effect. The many new toilets installed to replace outhouses all consumed water, and the result

was increased demand on the Borough's reservoir system. By the summer of 1917 there was discussion of an ordinance to prohibit the washing of automobiles -- itself a new practice in the Borough -- although once the rain began to fall again in the late fall, such talk subsided.

Another chronic problem was caused by people who allowed trash to fall into the sewer. In late 1917, the superintendent of the sewer department told the newspaper that "Persons still dump all kinds of articles in sewer pipes. How some get through without clogging closets (i.e. toilets), etc., is a wonder, yet no horse blankets, pillows, washtubs have been raked out of the big well, but there are brushes, broken china, articles of clothing, and well, a good many things." A third problem was caused by people who refused to pay their sewer bills, which led to a flurry of summons issued by the Justice of the Peace.

During the ensuing ninety-three years, the Borough's sewer system has needed upgrades and improvements, but no one has ever suggested that it should be removed or that it was a mistake to construct it. From our vantage point, it's hard to imagine what the opponents argued during the referenda on bond issues that took place between 1906 and 1910. Perhaps there's a lesson in all this for those engaged in the debate about health care.