

The Great Boom: Modernizing the Village

As the great boom began in the early 1890s, Washburn was still in some ways a primitive village. Human and animal sewage was dumped into open cesspools or gutters and drained into the ground, while water for consumption was drawn from the waste saturated soil, creating serious public health problems. Homes, churches, halls, and businesses were illuminated with oil lamps, creating dangerous fumes, depleting the oxygen, and posing a fire hazard. As the population of the village increased during the boom, the need for these sewage, water, and lighting systems could no longer be ignored, although the town board and the village leaders did not act as quickly as the situation would seem to have required.

Several cases of typhoid fever in January 1885 highlighted the need for sanitary sewers, but it was not until May 1890 that the town board employed an engineer to plan a system and work did not begin until August 1893. It is not known when the system was completed but it was

probably during the following summer. All street and avenue lines fed into a main collection line under Washington Avenue, which discharged the raw sewage into the bay through an outlet directly south of the avenue near the city dock. This outlet can still be seen from the bay

CJ 8/27/09
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shore hiking trail.

In April 1888 the town electorate approved the construction of a village waterworks system. Delayed by controversy over who should be awarded the contract for constructing the system, work did not begin until early June 1889, interrupted by bad weather and occasional labor problems. A brownstone pump house was constructed

on the bay shore at the end of Fourth Avenue East. Water was drawn from the bay through an inlet pipe located only a few blocks from the outlet of the sewer system through which untreated sewage was discharged into the bay. A large open reservoir was constructed above the village near the intersection of Washington Avenue and Third Avenue East, providing an irresistible target for the stones of generations of boys. Water was distributed throughout the village in cast iron pipes, which were connected to a house when the occupant subscribed for service. Fifty fire hydrants were also installed at suitable locations throughout the village. Construction of the system was completed in the fall of 1889.

For the most part the village closed down after dark, the unlit streets deserted. Only the numerous saloons provided intermittent pools of light along Bayfield Street. Washburn never had a gas light system, but moved directly, if slowly, to electric

lighting. After the usual controversy, the contract to construct and operate a lighting system was finally awarded in May 1891. A brownstone powerhouse was constructed on the southeast corner of Wisconsin Street and Sixth Avenue West, and the power lines were strung on poles erected throughout the village. Hi-intensity arc lights were installed at 20 street locations throughout the village and came "on-line" on October 20 1891. Electric lights were soon installed in buildings and houses around the village, including the opera house, where they illuminated a festive masquerade ball in mid-November.

With the completion of the three public utility systems, Washburn became a modern and prosperous village, confidently anticipating that the boom would continue indefinitely and that some day it would be a great city. As it turned out it did become a city, if not a great one, at the same time that the boom was coming to an end, but that is a story for another time.