

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the Fair at Lowell, the Fair at Lowell, Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

Doing Laundry in Lawrence in 1860



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Laundry Buckets and Wringer
1860
Image from pioneerthinking.com

—Whenever anyone has nostalgic longings for the ‘good old days,’ I never fail to recall all the hardships and miseries most people endured. There were no antibiotics, nor vaccines for most disease; no one was aware of the dangers of environmental contamination; houses did not have central heating; and unless a person was white and male, there were few or no laws to uphold their rights. Beyond all those drawbacks, just the physical labor needed for most household tasks took more time than we realized. Machines, and even some robots, give us much needed help today.

One household task that takes a fraction of the time than it did in the past is laundry. The work of washing clothes usually required women—because it was almost always women—to set aside an entire day every week to devote to the tedious task of laundry. During the early 1860s, the Annalist at St. Mary’s Convent In Lawrence described in detail the work the sisters faced when dealing with their weekly wash. Because the area around the convent was sandy, the Annalist said that, “*the pump water in the yard was too hard for washing, so ingenuity was shown by placing hogsheads close to the house to catch the rain falling from the eaves.*” These early rain barrels made the work somewhat easier, in that the water supply for their laundry was just beside the house.

But when there was little or no rain, the sisters, and probably most of the people in the area, had to head down to the only other local source of water—the Merrimack River. The sisters loaded a cart with the wash tubs needed to collect the water from the river, a half mile away, “*while their return was patiently waited [by the sisters at the convent].*” Little did the sisters, or anyone in the city of Lawrence, know then that the river was one of the most polluted sources of water in the area. Raw sewage, dyes and other chemicals from the textile mills poured into the Merrimack River, untreated. This was the water the population in the area used for drinking and for their laundry.

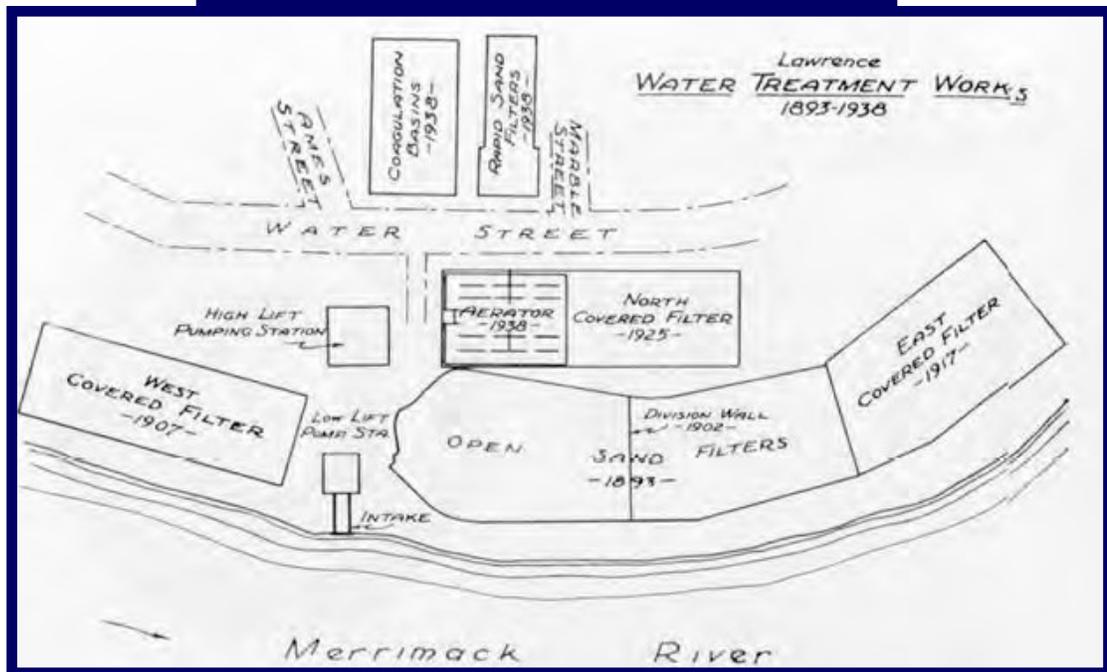
The untreated water was the cause of many typhoid and cholera epidemics during those years, as well as the numerous health problems among the poor who not only did not have access to clean water, but also lived in crowded tenements. It was the quality of the water and the slowly growing awareness of the connection between the river and the health of the citizens in Lawrence that led Massachusetts to open the Lawrence Experiment Station in 1886, the first facility in the state to begin treating water and filtering sewage from the river. It was also this station that began to use slow sand filtration to eliminate harmful bacteria from the water.

Despite this progress, the first real study regarding the effects of the toxins being pumped into the Merrimack wasn’t conducted until 1908. During this time, the local officials knew that waste from more than 270,000 people in the area was still being discharged, untreated, into the river. Not much was done to correct this until the 1960s when the first steps to clean up the Merrimack River began.

The sisters knew little, if nothing, about the dangers found in the Merrimack during the 1860s. Fortunately, they didn’t always use the river for their laundry, relying as much as possible on the rain barrels positioned beside the convent. In the winter however, dealing with the wash posed its own challenges and hardships, though water was often close by. The convent’s

laundresses knew that the “ice and snow proved a boon, for they could be brought in and melted.” Another plus was that melted snow and ice was usually much cleaner than the water from the Merrimack. No doubt, though, drying the habits, veils and other heavy clothing offered its own hardships, as hanging them outside in the frigid weather would turn all laundry to ice, forcing the sisters to bring their garments inside to dry.

It wasn't until 1908 when the first electric washing machine was invented. Three years later, the sisters at the Notre Dame Academy in Boston purchased such a machine. It took several more years before Lawrence was able to do the same.



Above, Slow Sand Filtration Center, Lawrence, 1893
 Below, Changes to Water Treatment Facility in Lawrence, 1893-1938
 Images from mwra.com

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Pioneerthinking.com
- ◆ Lawrence, MA Convent Annals, 1859-1907.
- ◆ *New England Water Supplies, A Brief History*, by M. Kempe, mwra.com