

A Historical Look at the Sewerage and Water Board

New Orleans was settled by the French in 1718 on the high ground adjacent to the Mississippi River-only 14 feet above sea level. As a result of its unusual topography, the city was subject to periodic flooding from the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, as well as frequent inundation from the high intensity rainfall.

Often, after one of these floodings, the inhabitants were forced to wade through the streets or be rowed in small boats to take care of their daily business. As late 1884-1885 illustrations in the daily newspapers showed the main business section flooded with two to three feet of water as residents waded and rowed through the streets. It was not uncommon for such regular flooding to last for a week. In fact, many parts of the city were subjected to periodic flooding even after moderate rainfall.

Water for drinking or general use was either collected in large cypress cisterns that stored rain water from the roof tops or taken from the river and allowed to settle in large earthenware jars. At this time, there were no purification or sterilization procedures.

Without a municipal water supply, the greater part of the city burned to the ground in 1788 and again in 1794. Ironically, over 300 billion gallons of water a day were pouring down the Mississippi less than two blocks from the fire. This amount is more than the present city uses in six years.

A sewage collection and disposal system was also non-existent. Human waste was disposed of in the open pit privy, while household wastes found their way into open gutters. Such unsanitary conditions gave rise to typhoid fever, yellow fever, cholera, and other diseases, which decimated the population at regular intervals.

These conditions no longer exist.

Today, New Orleans is provided with water, drainage and sewerage facilities 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, where and when they are needed.

The Louisiana Engineering Society, in honor of its 75th anniversary in 1973, selected the water, drainage, and sewerage systems of New Orleans as among the ten most outstanding engineering achievements in the state. This is a great honor accorded to both our community and the Sewerage and Water Board.

By 1893, it became apparent to city leaders that accommodation of area growth would depend on their ability to keep New Orleans drained, dry, adequately supplied with water for drinking and fire protection, and provided with a sanitary sewerage system. Planning for the three systems began that year.

In 1896, the New Orleans Drainage Commission was organized to carry out a master drainage plan that had been developed for the city. Three years later, in 1899, the Sewerage and Water Board was authorized by the Louisiana Legislature to furnish, construct, operate, and maintain a water treatment and distribution system and a sanitary sewerage system for New Orleans. In 1903, the Drainage Commission was merged with the Sewerage and Water Board in order to consolidate drainage, water, and sewerage programs under one agency for more efficient operations. This combined organization retained the title Sewerage and Water Board, and remains as such today.

The Sewerage and Water Board in earlier years consisted of the Mayor, the two at-large members of the City Council, one district councilman selected by the Council, two members of the Board of Liquidation, City Debt, and seven citizen members appointed by the Mayor, in accordance with the law, for overlapping terms of 9 years. Today, the Board is an eleven member Board of Directors that consists of the Mayor, two representatives of the Board of Liquidation, City Debt, and eight citizen members, of which five represent council districts, one at-large representative, and two consumer advocates. The Board holds committee and regular meetings once each month, to which the public is invited.

Once formally organized, the Sewerage and Water Board set out to fulfill its goals of providing the city with adequate drainage, sewerage collection, and drinking water. Between 1879 and 1915, \$27,500,000 was spent on the construction of water, sewerage, and drainage facilities. At that time, funds for construction came from either a special two-mill tax on all property or one-half of the surplus from the one per-cent debt tax. Today, the Board gets funding in part from sources which include the three-, six-, and nine-mill property taxes.

Such extensive construction was a bold step for a city at that time. Present day construction costs are more than forty times those of the early 1900's. At current prices, such a program could amount to billions of dollars. Furthermore, this monumental program was financed by a population of far less than one-half that of present-day New Orleans.