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## **The Big Thirst** *New York at the Turn of the Century*

***Diane Galusha***

It was a celebration for the history books. Booming cannons and ringing church bells greeted the dawn. Throngs of marchers stepped smartly along a seven-mile parade route that started at the tip of Manhattan, wound up Broadway, circled a spouting fountain at Union Square, and headed back down to City Hall Park. There were speeches, balloon ascensions and receptions held at bunting-bedecked buildings all over the city.

Such rejoicing welcomed the completion of the Croton Reservoir and the 42-mile long underground aqueduct that delivered water from the wilds of Westchester County to save city dwellers from the ravages of disease, pestilence and fire. The cholera outbreak that killed thousands in 1832, the conflagration of 1835 that reduced 700 buildings to smoldering ruin, the suffocating stench of horse manure, pig offal and human waste in the gutters were now, it seemed, bad memories, washed away by water.

Wrote diarist Lydia Child "Oh, who that has not been shut up in the great prison-cell of a city, and made to drink of its brackish springs can estimate the blessings of the Croton Aqueduct? Clean, sweet, abundant water!"

Abundant, at least for the 350,000 people who lived on Manhattan island in 1842, the year Croton water was introduced to the thirsty city. But by 1850, the population had grown to more than half a million and, spurred by the development of the modern bathroom, with tub, washbasin, shower and "water closet," water consumption nearly tripled, from 30 gallons per day per person, to 78 gallons a day.





People lined up at Ellis Island, their first step in becoming Americans.



Immigrants enroute to America were packed on the deck of this passenger liner. Many would find accommodations in New York City tenements to be equally cramped, while in the city (below), water from the Croton System was not just for people.





As New York City grew, so also did its need for water to battle fires.

By 1880, there were 1.1 million people in Manhattan. A decade later, 1.4 million residents, perhaps a third of them recently arrived immigrants, were consuming 145 million gallons of water each day. The city rushed to keep up with demand, building more reservoirs in Putnam and Westchester Counties, and trying to curb water waste by installing meters.

But there never seemed to be enough water. And with want, came misery. Jacob Riis, a police reporter and photographer, documented in his 1890 book *How the Other Half Lives* the plight of a million city residents who lived in cramped squalor in 37,300 tenements. "It no longer excites even passing attention when the sanitary police report counting 101 adults and 91 children in a Crosby Street house . . . Or when a midnight inspection in Mulberry Street unearths a hundred and fifty 'lodgers' sleeping on filthy floors in two buildings."

Describing an airless tenement on Cherry Street, Riis wrote, "The sinks are in the hallway that all the tenants may have access and all be poisoned alike by their summer stenches. Hear the pump squeak. It is the lullaby of tenement house babes. In summer when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain."

And then, in 1895, the city got even larger—and the imperative for reliably delivered water even greater—when the residents of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, the Bronx and Manhattan voted to unite. Consolidation became effective on January 1, 1898, when fifty-six separate cities and towns—including the City of Brooklyn, which had been the third largest city in the country prior to consolidation—merged into "Greater New York," a 360-square-mile metropolis with a population of 3,350,000. And, believe it or not, 2,000 farms.

At that time, Manhattan and the Bronx were getting water from the Croton system; Brooklyn was pumping from the water bearing sands of Long Island; Queens and Richmond (Staten Island) were supplied from local wells operated by private companies. Brooklynites' worry about salt water intrusion and pollution of ground water by the steadily increasing pressures of development was among the factors that spurred the consolidation movement.

During the decade that followed, 135,000 more people (more than five of today's Kingstons) moved to the expanded city each year. And almost a quarter million more commuted every day from New Jersey, Westchester, and Connecticut to jobs in Manhattan. Even after the construction of 12 Croton System reservoirs and the claiming of three lakes, the need for water threatened to outpace the city's supply.

In 1905, after three years of investigating potential new sources of water, New York City successfully made its case to New York State lawmakers. They passed legislation allowing the city to acquire land and build dams and aqueducts to provide "an additional supply of pure and wholesome water."

Later that year the newly formed Board of Water Supply submitted to the State Water Supply Commission its plans to develop the Esopus, Rondout, Schoharie and Catskill Creek Watersheds. On May 14, 1906, approval was granted, forever linking the fates of Catskill Mountain residents with those of millions of thirsty strangers.

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*Sources: Water for a City*, Charles H. Weidner, 1974; *Water for Gotham*, Gerard Koeppe, 2000; *Liquid Assets, A History of New York City's Water System*, Diane Galusha, 1999; *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York*, John Kouwenhoven; NYC 100 web site ([www.nyc.gov/html/nyc100](http://www.nyc.gov/html/nyc100))



Diane Galusha, author of *Liquid Assets: The Story of New York City's Water System* (1999, Purple Mountain Press), is Communications Director and Education Coordinator at the Catskill Watershed Corporation.

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