

Water for the Cities: New York and the Croton Aqueduct

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The modern world depends on fresh water. The well being of society-its health, wealth, and security-requires the efficient movement of this dwindling resource to the right places at the right times. The ready availability of water for multiple uses has inured us to its sources, its social value and its history while continued urbanization and industrialization of the world has created what one commentator called “a slow motion public health emergency.”

In the first quarter of the nineteenth century New York City’s inadequate and polluted water supply precipitated municipal crises which threatened its future. The City responded by building the Croton Aqueduct in 1842, a modern water supply system which carried fresh water forty miles from its Westchester source to Manhattan. The development of the Croton Aqueduct, which established a precedent for other cities in the United States and the world, involved the tension between the forces of culture and nature, the limits of the geographical resource base, technology’s transformation of the landscape, the process of urban development and a public health issue. If we recast these tensions as interpretative frames they will help illustrate the complex interplay of issues any city faces in securing sufficient fresh water for its growing population and its rapid industrialization.

The Croton Aqueduct provided New Yorkers with adequate fresh water which changed their patterns of consumption and sanitation. Yet before century’s end the city would find it necessary to build a second aqueduct and then a third and a fourth. What contributed to this endless search for more water and how did the first Croton Aqueduct condition the public response for the future and influence the citizen’s notion of the availability of fresh water? Securing a reliable and sufficient quantity of fresh water is an ongoing struggle in modern society one which we can fully appreciate by examining New York’s nineteenth century response.

Question: Apply the interpretive frames used in analyzing the building of the first Croton Aqueduct to another municipal water supply system in the United States or the world. In what ways, if at all, is the experience of nineteenth century New Yorkers representative?