

Water, water everywhere, except for fire

Should a moratorium be declared on new large scale developments because of water supplies? This can be a real problem today but one that did not exist in years gone by.

Anyone putting up a new house merely dug, or drove, a well. In time the "old oaken bucket" and the hand pump in the side yard gave way to modernization in the form of a hand pump at the kitchen sink or the ultimate in convenience, a windmill that would raise the water to a tank in the attic from which it would flow through lead pipes to a faucet.

While satisfactory for domestic use in a private home, a single well afforded little fire protection. We are told that, "when Shaw's store and the church under which it was located (in North Chelmsford) was destroyed by fire in the year 1893, Dr. N. B. Edwards rode his horse bareback to Lowell and secured the services of the Lowell Fire Department."

It was obvious that a reliable source of water was needed, especially in an industrial community. About three yers later, through the influence of mill owner George C. Moore, some water pipes were laid in the North village and water was supplied by the Moore Spinning Company. A few homes were included in this first water system but the water was not fit for drinking.

In 1906 the State Legislature passed an act allowing the formation of the North

The way it was

By George A. Parkhurst



Chelmsford Fire District. (The name was later changed to North Chelmsford Water District.) Wells were driven near the shore of what was then Leach's or Newfield Pond (later Crystal Lake, but now called Bruce Freeman Lake) and a standpipe and pumping station were erected.

An attempt to get Town Meeting support for a unified municipal water system in 1895 failed and it was not until 1911 that the voters agreed to appoint a committee to look into "the best means of providing better fire protection in that part of the Town known as Chelmsford Center."

The 1915 report of the Commissioners of the Chelmsford Water District tells us that "At eight o'clock p.m. February 20, 1913, a meeting of citizens of Chelmsford Center interested in the establishment of a Water System was held in the Lower Town Hall. After extended discussion, by a standing vote all present expressed themselves as desirous of establishing a system of some sort,

although opinion was divided as between a Town Water System and a Fire District." The former was eventually agreed upon.

The Legislature granted a charter to establish a Water System subject to the acceptance of the voters of the District. The vote for acceptance was carried 92 to 3. (It would be interesting to find out why there was a 3-vote opposition.)

A 225,000 gallon concrete reservoir was constructed on Robin's Hill. Wells were driven along River Meadow Brook and a pumping station was erected at what was then the dead-end of Warren Avenue. Thus was the Chelmsford Water District born.

During the next several years, both the North and Center Water Districts gradually extended their mains. However, it was not until 1933 that the East Chelmsford Water District was organized and two years later the South Chelmsford Water District was formed. The latter merged with the Chelmsford Water District about two years ago.

Every few years there is a movement to consolidate the various wter systems into a single unit as was proposed in 1895 but the idea has never met with the approval of the voters in the various Districts. Undoubtedly unification will take place some time in the future, but...

That's the way it was.

George A. Parkhurst is a Chelmsford historian whose family has lived in town since 1654.