

The Meter Setter



Metropolitan Waterworks Museum Keeps City's Water History Alive



At Chestnut Hill in Boston, Massachusetts, stands a building rich with the city's waterworks history. It is now the Metropolitan Waterworks Museum, though many years ago the site was known as the Chestnut Hill Pumping Station. Built in 1887, the station was created to service the water needs of Boston's rapidly growing population.

An earlier pumping station was located in Roxbury, but the primary location became Chestnut Hill. Over time, as water demands continued to grow, the pumping station was modified and expanded to maximize efficiency.

Once the largest pumping station in New England, this historical building still contains "well-preserved specimens of rare steam engines," according to the museum's Director of Museum Services, Eric Metzger. Of special interest is a custom-designed triple expansion Leavitt engine.

Chestnut Hill is also the site of New England's first dedicated Water Supply Testing Laboratory where the water supplier was the first to use lab results for the improvement and management of water quality. Through the work performed at this laboratory by George Whipple and others, water experts gained an understanding of the effectiveness of using large, well-managed reservoirs as a source of clean water.

As head of the laboratory until 1897, Whipple "paved the way for future research and improvements in water sanitation," Metzger said. Whipple's work also earned him the respect of other scientists, giving him the opportunity to further his career in other laboratories, such as the Brooklyn Laboratory at New York City's Mount Prospect Reservoir. He was soon recognized for the cleanliness of drinking water in all of New York state.

The Metropolitan Waterworks Museum serves as a significant historical site for the story of local water quality and accessibility. This story is kept alive through the museum's mission "to provide educational programming with focuses [such] as public health, engineering, the history of Boston, and all things water." Ford Meter Box celebrates the museum's history as Boston's first official central distribution pumping station. Next time you're in Boston, stop by and take a walk through waterworks history.

