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Antiques

Moonlight and More From a Victorian Artist

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Linda Rosenthal/Metropolitan Waterworks Museum

A 19th-century water-pumping station in the Chestnut Hill section of Boston will be showcasing history and industrial elegance as the new Waterworks Museum, opening on March 27.

NEW LIFE FOR WATERWORKS

Steam engines in an 1880s water-pumping station at the western edge of Boston have been shut off since the 1970s. In the last few weeks new walkways have been laid out around the pistons, tanks and gauges. Their turreted granite-and-sandstone building opens on March 27 as the [Waterworks Museum](#), and wall labels and tour guides will tell stories of Bostonians' brushes with death.

Before the pumping station and its feeder reservoir system opened, "Boston had been periodically going up in flames, and there wasn't enough sustainable water to put out the fires," Beryl Rosenthal, the museum's director, said. Another scourge in the region, she added, was foul-smelling contaminated water. "Communities had been getting slammed by cholera and typhoid," she said.

Given the scale of the museum's artifacts, "a lot of people are going to go nuts in here," Ms. Rosenthal said. Pipes fork like tree limbs and take sharp elbow bends under the 60-foot-high pine ceiling. Bizarrely dainty scrollwork brackets and glass vials of machine oil appear throughout the machinery.

During four decades of disuse, the building was assailed by squatters, thieves and roof leaks. “It was collapsing,” Ms. Rosenthal said. “It was just a wreck.”

Preservationists persuaded the water authority to shore it up, and its museum conversion has been partly financed by the development of apartments on the grounds. Four condominiums in the pumping station are marked “private residence” to deter tourists.

Despite the site’s longtime abandonment, tool sets have survived, and the new museum will hang huge wrenches in the workers’ original neat arrangements. Ms. Rosenthal hopes to interview former pump operators to gain insights into what the plant was like when the machinery was spinning.

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