

Waterworks Museum a pipeline to the past



Gary Higgins/The Patriot Ledger

Burt Kliman and son, Ian of Newton, formerly of Milton, check out the museum.

By Jody Feinberg

[The Patriot Ledger](#)

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We turn on the tap without thinking, but 19th-century Bostonians were so excited about the first public water system in the city that 100,000 celebrated at the dedication ceremony on Boston Common in 1848. But it took another three decades – and the trauma of a massive fire and many water-borne illnesses – for the city to build a pumping station to get the water into homes throughout Boston, Quincy and other surrounding communities.

You can explore the fascinating story of water in the new Waterworks Museum, which opened March 27 near Boston College in Chestnut Hill. The museum preserves both the beautiful, original waterworks building designed by Quincy native Arthur Vinal, as well as three of the massive steam-powered engines that pumped running water to a rapidly expanding population.

What could have seemed like a dull warehouse for defunct machinery is made lively through innovative touch-screen displays and a living history video presented on three flat screens.

“We tell the story of the pumping station, but it’s really a story about public health, engineering, social history and architecture,” said director Beryl Rosenthal, who previously was director of the Tsongas Industrial History Center in Lowell. “In a site like this, you get to see the connections.”

Located on busy Beacon Street across from popular jogging paths around the Chestnut Reservoir, the 1887 Boston Waterworks High Service Pumping Station has aroused plenty of curiosity since the station closed in 1976, replaced by electric pumps.

“People say, ‘I’ve always wondered what this building was for,’” Rosenthal said. “When they find out, they wonder why pumping machinery would be put in a building like this.”

The Richardson Romanesque building is designated a Boston Landmark and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Vinal emulated prominent Boston architect Henry Hobson Richardson, who designed Trinity Church in Copley Square. Like the church, the waterworks building is made of light Milford granite, with dark Longmeadow sandstone defining the windows, doors and arches. It has a commanding tower, and decorative details carved into the sandstone, including Vinal’s face. Only the tall chimney hints at its former use.

The late 19th century was a time when Boston was considered the Athens of America, a place of culture and wealth, and civic leaders wanted to reflect that in the architecture of municipal buildings.

“People were celebrating technology in this era, but the Transcendentalists felt industrialization was dangerous to the moral spirit,” Rosenthal said. “By putting the pumps in this building and surrounding it with a park, they expressed civic pride and an appreciation for both technology and nature.”

The museum preserves the six-story engine room with its handsome bead board ceiling, brick walls, tile floor and walls of tall windows. The Allis, Leavitt and Worthington engines – named after their designers and installed in 1887, 1894 and 1921 – are massive, with huge flywheels, cylinders, pistons and bolts, softened with brass and wood detailing.

Together, the pumps propelled to higher elevation millions of gallons of water arriving through aqueducts from the Cochituate and Sudbury reservoirs. From Fisher Hill, gravity moved the water throughout the area.

Since its March opening, the museum has attracted people interested in civil engineering, architecture and history, as well as kids who get a kick out of seeing the huge machines.

“Wow, look at that!,” exclaimed 6-year-old Thomas Savage to his father. “That is a big engine.”

What brings the museum to life are the touch screens and living history video. Animations show how the machines worked, from different angles. The touch screens explain the engineering technology, as well as issues in public health and architecture, illustrated through archival photographs, cartoons and other images.

Dressed in 1908 clothing, station engineer Desmond Fitzgerald explains that, prior to the pumping station, wealthy people had tap water, but most people had to haul water from communal pumps. These often were contaminated with soot and human waste, especially as the immigrant population swelled to create crowded living conditions. The inadequate water supply

also was partially the reason why Boston's Great Fire of 1872 burned out of control to destroy 800 buildings over 65 acres.

Biologist George Whipple, who created the first water supply testing lab associated with a pumping station, explains the newly discovered connection between unclean water and cholera, typhoid fever and other illnesses. No longer standing, the 1889 testing lab house can be seen in archival photographs.

The museum would not exist had not residents from Brookline, Newton and Boston advocated to preserve the building and engines, when they faced demolition in 1991. The state Legislature finally approved the project in 2005, which included the creation of four condominiums in the museum building as well as 108 condominiums in another pumping station building on the property.

Kathy Griffin of Boston, a librarian at the Massachusetts Historical Society, was impressed on her first visit.

"It's striking to see how huge the equipment is and how beautifully preserved the building is," Griffin said. "I think it will give people a sense of how precious water is as a resource."

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IF YOU GO

WHAT: The Waterworks Museum

WHEN: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesdays, and 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Thursday to Sunday.

WHERE: 2450 Beacon St., Boston

PHONE: 617-277-0065

ADMISSION: Free, although a donation is recommended

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