Western Kentucky University

From the SelectedWorks of Christy L Spurlock

Fall 2011

History and Restoration of the 1928 BGMU Pump House

Christy L Spurlock, Western Kentucky University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/christy_spurlock/4/
THANK YOU

The Landmark Association expresses its appreciation to all those who helped with our Christmas Tour of Homes, especially our sponsor Meyer Mortgage, our Christmas Home Tour chairman Miranda Clements, the poster designer Sheila Flener, our Board of Directors, all the other volunteers who helped at the individual properties, and the donors to the silent auction.

The tour is one of Landmark’s chief fundraisers and serves as an educational event for all those who attend. Our sincerest thanks to those who opened their homes or businesses for the tour:

Jane Morris

Tim & Linda Leigh of Select, Inc.

Montessori School of Bowling Green

Downtown Redevelopment Authority

Doug Gorman

Steve & Patsy Morgenthaler

Ed Faye

Michael & Linda Barron of Morris Jewelry

Greg & Theresa Davis Shea of Tea Squares
History and Restoration of the 1928 BGMU Pump House

By Christy Spurlock

The exterior of the Pump House before (left) and after (right) restoration.

The recently completed restoration of the BGMU Pump House at 700 East Main Avenue has been a labor of love by members of Landmark. Slated for demolition, the structure had been an ongoing topic of discussion by the Landmark Board over a two year period. Landmark board members did not want the city to lose the brick structure with its unique limestone foundation, limestone sills, keystones, quoins, and clay tile roof.

Working in cooperation with BGMU, the structure was leased to Landmark and in the summer of 2010 restoration work began in earnest under the direction of Jason Hildabrand. With his expertise in historical restoration, Jason was able to develop a comprehensive restoration plan for the 1928 Pump House and spent hundreds of volunteer hours himself restoring the structure’s exterior and interior. Security window grills were removed, wooden windows were removed and scraped, painted and reglazed, exterior woodwork scraped, painted, a new door was crafted, roof tiles repaired, new storm windows installed, interior surfaces painted and much more.

Landmark members were committed to saving the structure, not just due to its aesthetic beauty, but also for its historical significance. The 1928 Pump House has an interesting and pivotal role in the city’s water development and the history of Reservoir Park, named after the open air reservoir that once supplied the city’s water.

Before any type of water pumping or filtration system was used, Bowling Green residents relied on a series of wells, and naturally occurring water sources. As the city’s population increased, more came to rely on the public well on the courthouse grounds. Despite efforts to protect the public water supply, contaminated water was the source of much illness for early residents.

By the middle of the 19th century, wells such as Dr. Thomas B. Wright’s at his home on the corner of State and 11th Street supplied water to many residents. Errand boys were sent by many downtown business owners to the Wright well for drinking water. Dr. Wright was a city representative and he championed the building of a comprehensive city water works system.

In 1866, the Kentucky Legislature granted the Bowling Green Water Works Company the right to organize. Land was purchased at both College Knob in 1868 for a reservoir, and on the Barren River end of Chestnut Street. Also in 1868, Louisville civil engineer Charles Hermanny was employed to develop the Bowling Green system. The system designed by Hermanny could pump up to 648,000 gallons a day, cost a total of $125,000.

At the Chestnut Street station, a pump and a pump station were installed, for the purpose of pumping water from the Barren River up to an open reservoir constructed in 1871 atop Hospital Hill. The open reservoir and the grounds surrounding eventually became a popular leisure spot for area residents.

Tales of what was found or fell into the open reservoir over the years ran the gambit form the plausible to the absurd. No doubt by modern standards, the system was unsanitary and many commented on the pollution of the city’s water supply.

The interior of the Pump House before (top) and after (bottom) restoration. The photograph on the bottom shows the interior during the 2010 Christmas Tour of Homes.
Cast iron pipes varying from 2-6 inches in diameter ran throughout the present day downtown area. Once atop Reservoir Hill, gravity assisted in getting the water downtown to residents. In 1886 a Dixon Steam Pump was installed and used until 1909 when the city purchased another steam pump. Semi-diesel equipment was installed with generators to provide current for the pumps around 1920. The system was used until 1921. In 1921 a sediment basin adjacent to the reservoir was erected.

Problems continued as the city expanded and the demand for water increased. By 1926 the water situation was pronounced "serious" and the city appropriated $1,500 for a consulting engineer. The verdict of the report was that the health of the citizenry was in danger due to water not adequately filtered and the pumps at the "old pump house" were inadequate for the demand. The "new" Pump House of 1928 came out of a major expansion to the city's water system.

The city contracted Chester Engineering of Philadelphia to survey the city's water system and offer recommendations. The building at 700 East Main was designed by Chester Engineering of Philadelphia and erected in 1928 to house the high powered water pumps. Dravo, Doppler and Company installed the water pumps. A driving force behind the expansion was Bowling Green mayor A. Scott Hines. Hines advocated the building of both a water plant and for larger pipes. The "new" Pump House was located near the old steps leading to the reservoir. Also in 1928 a 150,000 gallon elevated storage camp was erected on Western's campus. In 1869 pumping capacity was 450 gallons a minute. In 1928, capacity went up to 2,000 gallons per minute.

Over the next several decades the city continued to improve and modify the city's waterworks. In 1970 when the iconic red white and blue water storage tank was built, another underground pump station was used. Later a new pump station was built downhill from the 1928 building. The 1928 pump station was used in emergencies as late as the 1990s to keep the one million gallon red, white and blue tank topped off in very hot weather.

The beautifully restored 1928 Pump House was featured on the 2010 Landmark Christmas Tour of Homes. The Pump House received the 2011 Commercial Award from Operation Pride. The Upper East Main Historic District Neighborhood received a SNAP grant to help with landscaping of the grounds around the structure. Once an eyesore, the structure is now an asset to the community.

Landmark Association would like to thank all members who donated money and volunteer hours to the 1928 Pump House's restoration.

Water was pumped from the Barren River at the foot of Chestnut Street up to the Reservoir, where it flowed via pipe and gravity into town. The pump house was added in the late-1920s to give additional water pressure to the area southwest, particularly the water works' largest customer, Western Kentucky State Teachers College. Eventually a water tank was built atop of Western's hill. Courtesy of Kentucky Library, WKU.

Reservoir Hill became a rustic park for local citizens. Here some ladies take respite by the reservoir's edge with the undulating countryside east of town in the background. Courtesy of Kentucky Library, WKU.

At one time Reservoir Hill featured a fish pond, a wading pond, and a miniature golf course. Here some folks relax on the stone steps leading to the fish pond. Courtesy of Kentucky Library, WKU.

### Highlights of Public Water History in Bowling Green

1866 Kentucky Legislature granted the Bowling Green Water Works Company the right to organize.

1868 Land purchased on College Knob as suitable grounds for a reservoir. Reservoir system developed by Charles Harnam, superintendent of the Louisville Water Works.

1871 Open reservoir was constructed.

1921 Steam pumpers at treatment facility were converted to diesel. Sediment basin erected next to the reservoir.

1926 Bowling Green enters a contract with Chester Engineers to survey and report on the city's water system.

1927 Another contract between the city and Chester Engineers for plans for and supervision of necessary improvements to the waterworks.

1928 Water treatment facility on Chestnut completed. System consisted of Barren River collection pipe, four filters and two sedimentation basins. This is also when chlorination of water began. Pump House and water plant constructed.

1929 Storage tank on Western campus erected.

1957 5,000,000 gallon steel umbrella roof storage tank built on Hospital Hill.

1970 The iconic red, white and blue storage tank was completed.

1972 Nashville Road one million gallon tank constructed.

2010 Pump house restoration by Landmark Association started.

---

**Works Cited:**

---

December 2011

Landmark Report 5