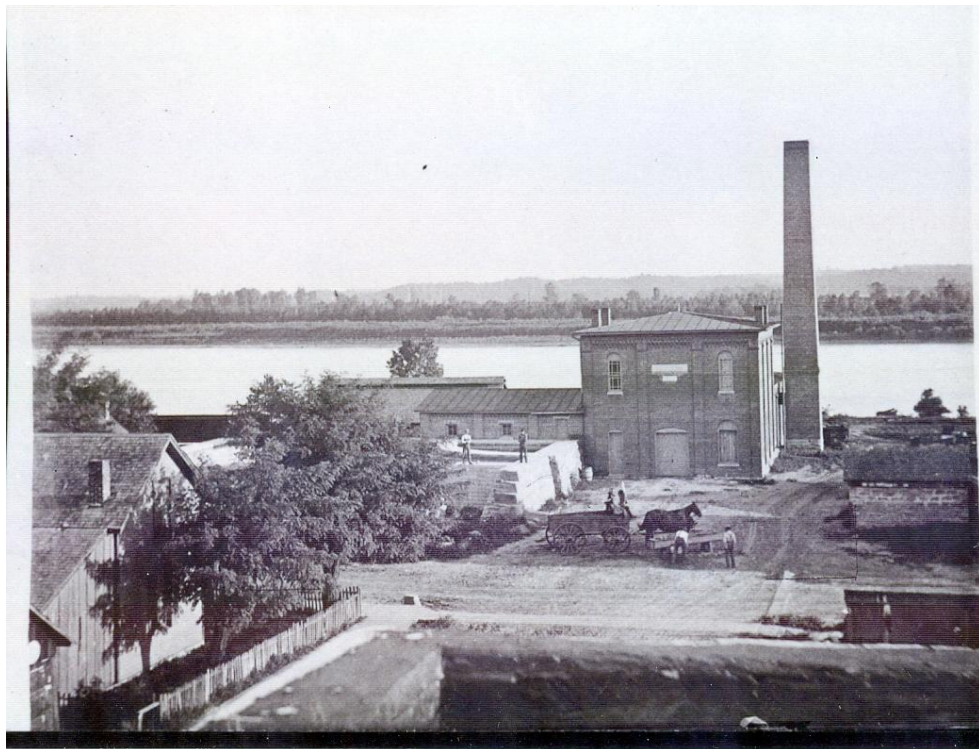


IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE – DOWNTOWN WATER PLANT

One day while driving to work I noticed that bulldozer and front loader operators were busily removing the Missouri American Water Company building that has stood on the corner of First and East streets for many years. It was then that I thought I should take a picture of the place before it was gone because part of it—an old limestone settling basin that had been built by Park College in 1900 – would surely be demolished along with it. I determined to take a photo of it in the next day or two but lo and behold, when I went there to do just that, the old limestone structure had been broken up and hauled away. So why was the basin built in the first place? Here is a condensed version of that story.

Park College, founded in 1875 with only 17 students, quickly became a major success and soon moved operations uphill from its original location by the river. Providing water to the growing campus had always been a struggle, and by 1897, old tedious methods of hauling water from wells had become intolerable and inefficient. Plans were eventually drawn up for a steam-operated water plant to be constructed on land the school owned at First and East streets and construction was completed in 1900. For the first time in its history, Park College was to have indoor plumbing once the lines were laid and buildings were retrofitted.



The much anticipated steam powered pumping station siphoned water out of the Missouri River [which then flowed past Parkville just on the other side of the railroad tracks] through filters into two settling basins. The clean water was then pumped up into a reservoir on the campus and piped into the various buildings. Business manager H.B. McAfee also created the Park College Water Company, laid waterlines through the streets of Parkville and sold water to business owners and residents.

The building pictured above was constructed with the assistance of student labor – among other tasks, the young men quarried and cut the stone for the settling basins which can be seen in the center of this 1900 photograph to the left of the horse and wagon. Originally, there were two settling basins “...covering two 40 X 80 foot lots. The walls are 9 ½ feet high, 7 ½ feet wide at the base and 3 ½ feet at top, all built of native stone and largely by student labor. (*Park College Record*, Sept. 15, 1901). The square smokestack was designed and constructed by master builder Charles Patrick Breen, who supervised a crew of professionals and students.

The major drawback to this new system was that the Missouri River had a mind of its own back then and often changed its main channel from the Missouri side to the Kansas side with little warning. This caused the college to either extend the water intake pipe or to shorten it in order to safely reach water. The intake often filled up with silt as well, often shutting down the plant in order to clean and repair the huge pumps. Another drawback was the amount of fuel (coal) expended to pump the water up hill to the campus, as well as around town for customers. By 1915, it was evident that this was a money-losing proposition and that another solution was desperately needed.

The final blow came in October 1918, when the river shifted its bed one-half mile towards Kansas. Even though the school purchased 2,700 feet of pipe and a stronger pump, the intake kept filling with silt and Park finally had to give up dependence on the river for water.

This need was met in 1919 when President H.W. Hawley constructed a dam on the White Alloe Creek and created Hawley Lake as a reservoir for campus and town. This continued until 1941 when Park got out of the water business and sold its original water plant site to Layne-Western Company of Kansas City, Missouri – the first on the list of subsequent owners of the operation. The old plant was demolished and a new plant, encompassing the 1900 limestone settling basin, was constructed by the new owners.

It was at least one of those basins that remained until just a while ago when it disappeared before I could get a photo of that fascinating piece of history – literally, it seemed -- in the blink of an eye.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Hawley Lake and the acreage around it was eventually sold to Mr. Richard Riss – but that is another story.

Carolyn McHenry Elwess, Park University Archivist, September 2019.

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