

# **The Old Pump House Victoria's Original Water Works**

## **I. CONTEXT**

At the point where Stayton Avenue descends to meet Riverside Park, one encounters a series of interconnected brick buildings sitting 65 feet above sea level. Immediately behind them lies one of Texas most historically significant waterways: The Guadalupe River. These buildings (1890-1936) were for many years the center of Victoria's water system. The history of Victoria's public water supply system begins with the construction of the "water works" which was completed early in 1885.

The land where the Old Pump House stands is a part of the Four League Grant to the Corporation of the Town of Victoria by Sam Houston President of the Republic of Texas, dated December 20, 1841. This grant encompassed one hundred million square varas of land.<sup>1</sup> This land would remain in the possession of the City of Victoria until March 17, 2010. We pick up the narrative in 1884.

Mr. William Wheeler, born August 9, 1861, in Cerney Wick, Gloucestershire, England, left his native land in 1880, landing at Philadelphia in February of 1880. Two years later he was employed by the C. E. Gray Construction Company, which was building a system of water works in St. Charles, MO. Upon completion of this work he was sent to Texas to install water works for Palestine, Tyler, Taylor, Columbus, and eventually Victoria. Mr. Wheeler arrived in Victoria on June 20, 1884, along with J. T. Jones, the construction engineer for the Gray Company, and upon the completion of the water works contract here early in 1885, was hired as Superintendent of Water Works.<sup>2</sup> Included in the system was "the Old Standpipe" which measured approximately fifteen feet in diameter, one hundred feet in height, and rested on a concrete footing directly in the center of the public square downtown. The weight of 150,000 gallons of water yielding to gravity provided the pressure to send it flowing into the homes serviced by the system. It remained a landmark for the next forty years.

In 1904 when the municipal sewer system was built, it was also placed under Mr. Wheeler's supervision.<sup>3</sup> "In April of 1909 the city council voted to connect city hall and all public watering places to the sewer, and in May the water and sewer superintendent, William Wheeler, reported there were 616 water connections and 163 sewer connections in the city."<sup>4</sup>

"The first boiler house was of frame construction, dating from 1884. Five years later this structure was destroyed by fire (believed to have been set by an arsonist). A new building was built, probably from bricks made on the site at the old Brown or Owens

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria County Deed Records, Vol 3 p 67.

<sup>2</sup> Obituary, William Wheeler, Victoria Advocate, July 21, 1931. Copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc., 205 W. Goodwin Avenue, Victoria TX 77901.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Roy Grimes, editor, *300 Years in Victoria County*, p. 487, printed by The Victoria Advocate, 1968; reprinted in 1986.

Brick Yard.”<sup>5</sup> This work was done with the assistance of local architect, Jules C. Leffland (building #1).

Two boilers were installed in addition to two large pumps. The boilers were fired by wood. At this point there were no wells; water was pumped directly from the river into the mains and up to the old Standpipe. The water was untreated, being deemed safe enough for consumption.

In 1901 William Wheeler built a new home at the corner of William St. and Goodwin Avenue. In the central hall there remains to this day a pressure gauge, which Mr. Wheeler would consult after hours. It measured the water pressure in the city lines. If more pressure was needed, he would hop on his bicycle, ride to the pump house, and set things straight.<sup>6</sup>

The first underground storage tank (reservoir) - 100 feet in diameter - was built by Frank Reuben Rockwell, a resident of Decatur IL.<sup>7</sup> It had a wooden top, later replaced by concrete. Completed circa 1908, it is still standing at this date. At this same time two deep wells were drilled by Layne and Bowler of Houston, and the use of untreated river water was discontinued. These two wells were not the first city wells. At some undocumented early date the city authorized a hand-dug well on Market Square, and prior to 1873 a well was drilled at the center of the public square. Water was pumped by a windmill with a large wooden cistern underneath. A decorative fishpond near Main Street was kept full from this cistern.

Beaumont oil soon came to be used as fuel for the boilers. Mr. Wheeler retired as superintendent in 1922 and H. G. King was hired to fill that position. Mr. Wheeler passed away July 21, 1931.

In 1926 the first major additions were made to the facility since its completion (building #2). This addition, designed by the Terrell Bartlett Engineering Company, was built by local contractor, Ed Wagner. This addition is an unusual double height room with a battery of tall windows on each side. A third structure was designed by architect Kai J. Leffland, son of Jules Leffland, and built by J. W. Kimbrough in 1936 - the year of the Texas Centennial (building #3).<sup>8</sup> This third structure connects with the 1926 building and extends eastward toward present-day Memorial Park Drive and the West Outfall. It contained two boilers and the large pump to furnish power; two additional deep wells, a steam engine to run the pumps, a settling basin, additional underground storage tanks, and a tank to store the fuel oil.

There were a number of men who worked for the water works from 1884 until Jacob Henry Fox, Jr., began his job as engineer about 1895. Known to the people of Victoria as “Noonie” Fox, and as “Mr. Noonie” by all the kids who frequented the site.

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<sup>5</sup> Sidney R. Weisiger, *Vignettes of Old Victoria*, p.36. Edited by Robert W. Shook, Ph.D., Nortex Press, Austin TX, published 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Dunnam, *A History of the William Wheeler House*, 2006 Historic Homes Tour booklet, copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from M. J. Breeden regarding her grand-father, F. R. Rockwell. Letter on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc., 205 W. Goodwin, Victoria TX 77901. Also included is a photo of the reservoir with a wooden top, under construction.

<sup>8</sup> National Register of Historic Places, Reference number: 86002610. Historic Resources Survey and national Register Applications on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc., 205 W. Goodwin, Victoria TX, 77901.

Noonie Fox was the son of Jacob Henry Fox, a native of Cernay, Alsace, Germany. The elder Fox had farmlands adjoining the old Pump House property to the north, now a part of Riverside Park known as Fox's Bend.

Gus Hoffman came to work shortly after Mr. Fox. This working relationship lasted until Fox's death in 1935. These men faithfully kept the grounds mowed, including the ditch known today as the West Outfall. They trimmed trees, repaired and maintained the equipment, and kept a good supply of water pumped into the mains and standpipe.

In the early days there was no electrical power to the pump station. A series of Leyden jars were maintained to make and store electricity. The current was used to operate the big fire bell in the tall tower in back of the fire station in the 100 block of East Constitution. After 1889 or 1890 telephone lines were strung to the pump house to report fires.

When news of a fire was called in, the engineer on duty placed the proper disc on the alarm system to start the big alarm bell ringing. He then ran to the boiler, gave the fire more fuel oil, then to the pump pit to get the big pump going, thereby pumping water to the mains in order that the firemen would have pressure.

In addition to these duties, the engineers raised several generations of Victoria boys who spent much time around the river and the pump house. These men acted as unofficial lifeguards, and a number of drowning persons were snatched out of the Guadalupe River by these watchful gentlemen.

There came a time that the ladies went along the banks of the river near the plant. This caused the city council to ban skinny-dipping at the pump house, and yet another chore was added to the long list of jobs at the station. The engineers were ordered to see that the boys wore bathing suits.

As the city grew, so did the need for newer additional equipment. New wells were drilled around the perimeter of the city in order to meet the demand for more water. By 1970 all of the old steam boilers had been removed and sent to the scrap pile. The large steam pumps from the old pit are long gone, the pit filled in and concreted over to make a level floor. Gone is the steam engine with the big belt wheels which operated the pumps on the first two wells.

Some of the buildings comprising the Old Pump Station were used primarily as a workshop until the new water treatment plant was completed in the year 2000. Water meters were repaired at this site until it became cheaper to replace the meters rather than repair them. For over forty years the facility appeared to be vacant, and less and less maintenance was performed. Within the last decade there was talk of razing the structures, as they were deemed both an attractive nuisance and a liability to the city. Fortunately, these efforts came to nothing.

On December 12, 1986 portions of this property were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as "City of Victoria Pumping Plant/Waterworks."<sup>9</sup> They include building #1, Building #2, and the reservoir. At the time the research was done and the National Register application filed, Building #3 was not yet 50 years old, and was deemed to be non-contributing to the nomination.

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<sup>9</sup> U. S. Department of the Interior, Letter of confirmation of listing on National Register, dated December 19, 1986. Copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc., 205 W. Goodwin, Victoria TX 77901.

On March 17, 2010, the subject property - 1201 W. Stayton Avenue - was sold to Dennis and Louise Hull Patillo, both of whom own successful businesses in Victoria. Deed records in the office of the County Clerk, Vol 3 p. 67 of the Map and Plat Records of Victoria County, describe this as “Being a 1.73 acre tract of land out of the “Victoria Waterworks” tract shown by the map of the Original Townsite of Victoria.”<sup>10</sup> It is uncommon that a piece of property such as this would have had only three owners in its 169 year history.

Plans have been unveiled for a restaurant and bar to occupy the Art Deco structure. The existing interiors, with the exception of the floor, will become a part of the décor, thereby honoring the unique history and architectural integrity of the structure.

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<sup>10</sup> City of Victoria, Official Records Instrument #201002392 3 pgs. Special Warranty Deed - 1201 W. Stayton. Copy on file in Office of Stewart Title of the Coastal Bend (GF# 2100344), 202 W. Goodwin Ave, Victoria TX 77901 and office of Victoria Preservation Inc., 205 W. Goodwin Ave, Victoria TX 77901.