

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

The Gaskill Street Baths

In just 16 years — from 1860 to 1876 — Philadelphia's population swelled by more than a quarter of a million people, most of them immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.

With this sudden crush of people came typical urban problems of overcrowding, poor sanitation and disease, especially in the densely populated areas of Southwark (an area bounded by the Delaware River on the east, 5th Street on the west, Lombard Street on the north and Washington Avenue on the south).

These newcomers to the City of Brotherly Love were considered unclean, unhealthy and uncivilized. Spurred by proof in the 1880's that specific microorganisms could cause typhoid, cholera, tuberculosis, diphtheria and more, public baths became the answer to all three problems.

The Philadelphia Ledger proclaimed: "Every dirty man or woman is a menace to the health of the community," says David Glassberg in *The Design of Reform: The Public Bath Movement in America*. A Chicago bath advocate went even further: "The greatest civilizing power that can be brought to bear on these uncivilized Europeans crowding into our cities lies in the public bath."

Naively believing that the immigrants had a moral defect that kept them from bathing, the movers and shakers of the time overlooked one simple fact: the lower classes simply didn't have access to baths.

In her book *Washing 'The Great Unwashed': Public Baths in Urban America, 1840-1920*, Marilyn Thornton Williams notes that not one in twenty families in Philadelphia had access to a bath in 1899.

Sarah Dickson Lowrie, a prominent upper-class Philadelphian in the mid-1890's, was the first to recognize the problem, says Melissa M. Mandell in her article, "The Public Baths Association of Philadelphia and the Great Unwashed," published in the *Historical Society of Pennsylvania's* magazine, *Pennsylvania Legacies*.

While teaching a Saturday sewing class in the mission building in the most dense and wretched of the city's slums, presumably Southwark — "she was informed by her students that there was no way for them to take a bath in the winter."

Finally grasping the issue and becoming an advocate, Lowrie proposed an idea at a private dinner party hosted by retail mogul John Wanamaker: establishing public baths.

One attendee, Barclay H. Warburton, editor and publisher of the *Philadelphia Daily Evening Telegraph*, assigned a reporter to investigate the lack of bathing facilities in the poorer areas of the city. Later, he helped raise money for the effort and urged the formation of a group to carry out the effort.

The result was the establishment of the Public Baths Association (PBA) of Philadelphia, which was incorporated in March 1895.

The PBA formally opened its first baths April 20, 1898 at 410-12 Gaskill Street in "one of the oldest and most thickly populated sections of the city." By the PBA's own count, says Williams, in a typical slum block near the new baths, there was "but one bathtub for 155 people."

The PBA considered the Gaskill Street Bath an immediate success, noting that it was "patronized by all nationalities, Hebrews, Italians, Germans, Irish, English, Japanese, Hungarians, as well as Americans, black and white."

"The majority of patrons, however, were Jewish," Williams says. "The total number of bathers in 1898 was 21,656, or an average of 88 per day, although the capacity of the bath was over 900 per day; only 256 persons patronized the laundry. As in other cities, the patronage also varied greatly between winter and summer; in July 1898 there were 4,945 bathers and in November the total was 787."

In 1903, PBA set up another bath — for women only — across the street at 413-15 Gaskill. Eventually it constructed six public bath sites in the city.

However starting in 1929, around the time of the Great Depression, patronage and surpluses declined and repair costs and deficits mounted. In 1942, the PBA closed the Gaskill baths, and dissolved the entire organization in 1950.

But in its time, the PBA filled a serious civic need, and left behind a sustained record of public service. Not a bad legacy.



Public baths at Gaskill and Leithgow Streets.

Two separate bathhouses served residents of 1890's area "slum."



Women at Public Baths Association laundry.

FAST FACTS

Fee: Five cents for a shower bath, towel and soap, 365 days a year; no charge for children under ten years of age with parents

Claim to Fame: first public baths in the U.S. with a public laundry

Promotional Slogan: "Baths for everybody: For comfort, for health, for cleanliness"

Photos from the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia records at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.