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water tank

*2 Jan 93*

For a tad more than a century the city's first stand-pipe, located on Powder House Hill, one of the highest points around, has towered over the surrounding landscape, still serving well the purpose for which it was erected.

It's quite an historic bit of ground on which it is situated: as far as anyone now knows its base is near the center of the Outer Glebe, ceded by the town to what has become the North Parish. That was in 1670.

There were two Glebe tracts. The smaller one of 12 acres is bounded by Congress street on the north, Chestnut street on the west, Court street on the south, and Pleasant street on the east. The purpose of the cession was <sup>to</sup> provide the minister with a serviceable tract which he could use to eke out his salary.

In addition, the town ceded 38 acres at the head of "Strawberry Banke Creek" (Islington Creek), and students of the deeds have decided that Powder House Hill is about in the center. This isn't the time or place for a discussion of the Glebe.

Suffice to say that the first practical use the town ever made of the Outer Glebe came in 1811, when the brick Powder House was erected out of materials from the old one. The town had become aware that a new and safer facility was badly needed, and, at that time Powder House Hill was <sup>remote</sup> ~~only~~ a high spot in fertile farm land.

As early as 1791, the warden <sup>S</sup> of the North Parish had auctioned off the Outer Glebe in various sized lots. In 1797, Islington road to The Plains was laid out, thus opening the area up to development. For many years <sup>S</sup> much of the area had been let out to John John Sherburne of The Plains tribe.

Over the years, the Powder House was repaired fairly often. In 1876 repairs were carried out, and the Portsmouth Journal <sup>ital</sup> said that there had been found in the old structure "a quantity of powder, belonging to no one knows whom, and cartridges prepared for the War of 1812, on which are written, 'This is for the heart of General Hull.' 'This is for the heart of General gates,' etc. These missiles seem not to have performed their work, but have slept in quiet over 60 years."

On July 15, 1876, the Journal reported the item had prompted response from two sisters, Mrs. Abbie S. Vaughan and Mrs. Sarah H. Nutter. "They are now past the allotted three score and ten, but recall the times when, in the old town house in Portsmouth, their young fingers helped make those missiles...."

In 1904 the city abandoned the old Powder House, constructing a new one in a more southern <sup>n</sup> part of the city. Agitation started immediately to tear the old structure down, "In 1903, the Portsmouth Herald <sup>ital</sup> published an article including the deed from Joseph Akerman, which was dated Sept. 11, 1811.

In the century that has passed since the steel stand-pipe was erected, the Powder House has escaped razing more times than a nine-lived cat. In 1925, F.M. Sise led the drive for preservation and the Board of Public Works reluctantly did some fixing up.

To Barbara and John Paterson, and their committee, go the credit for the latest preservation of the 182-year-old building. As part of the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, the Powder House was again put in repair, and still stands behind its taller neighbor, a reminder of days long gone.

Again a bit of background is necessary to explain the construction of the stand-pipe. For almost a century, Portsmouth's

water supply and mains had been owned by the Portsmouth Aqueduct Company, a privately owned utility whose original pipes were hollow logs laid out to a <sup>s</sup>pringy area between Pannaway Manor and the former Pease Air Force Base, *known as the Fountain Head.*

In the early days, it was one of the marvels of the time. A customer could take his pail out to a stand pipe in his yard and draw water without recourse to a well. And for years that was satisfactory, but industrial development, especially the breweries, began putting tremendous demand on the system. In its own fashion, the Aqueduct Co. did try to upgrade its plant spasmodically, but it finally became impossible to cope.

Frank Jones, the brewer, installed his own water system, using wells out in the ~~former~~ Pease Golf Course area. Later on, the city had to acquire that operation as well.

However, within a year after the city acquired the Aqueduct Company in 1891, it was obvious that a high-pressure system was <sup>ital</sup> mandatory. The Journal reported on Dec. 19, 1891:

"The water commissioners on Saturday last [Dec. 12] awarded the contract for the stand <sup>d-</sup> pipe to be erected on Powder House Hill, on Islington road, to E. Hodge & Co. of East Boston, for \$8,405. The pipe will be 95 feet high and 30 feet in diameter." <sup>P</sup> Parenthetically, it can be speculated that it probably costs ~~that~~ <sup>at least</sup> much to paint and clean the tower nowadays.

Foundation work for the stand pipe was reported finished on April 30, 1892, and ~~in October~~ <sup>Oct. 1,</sup> was tested on ~~the 1st~~ "and was found to leak badly. During the test one of the mains on Islington street broke from the pressure upon it and had to be replaced. A trial of the hydrant at Cass and Islington streets showed that a stream would be thrown about 130 feet in the air."

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( It's unfair to draw any conclusions from that inasmuch as the system's piping wasn't intended for high pressure work, and the Public Works Dept. hadn't been able to relay all the old pipes. In the middle of October, a pipe burst near the residence of Josiah Morrison, ~~blowing~~ blowing a big hole in the highway. Morrison was Frank Jones's brother-in-law and master brewer. The Dover street reservoir was being filled at the time.

~~Such incidents were fairly frequent in the stand pipe's early days. For instance, in the Herald on March 23, 1907.~~

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( Such incidents were fairly frequent in the stand pipe's early days. For instance: "The new water tower on Powder House Hill leaks badly, and it is said that not over 60 feet of water can be kept in it." Again, on June 16, 1893: "Needed repairs have been made on the water tower; part of the time high service patrons have been short of water." Feb. 12, 1898: The stand pipe was under repair and "while the work is in progress powerful pumps will supply the city mains."

( The Herald on March 23, 1907:

( "The standpipe is being repaired by a crew from some firm in Boston and holes recently discovered are being patched up. The tank, it will be remembered, was built during a strike of iron workers 15 years ago and by many it is thought that its construction was not the best possible, under the circumstances existent at the time of the building. Anyhow, the past winter was a hard one for the reservoir and the ice and the cold weather caused lots of trouble. It means a new cistern before many years."

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The trials and tribulations of the standpipe have continued over the years. For example, only a score of years ago, some environmental expert, probably self-appointed, discovered that the people of Portsmouth were slowly being poisoned because there wasn't a cover on the tower. The intimation was that bird droppings were highly prejudicial to the general health. Of course, people had flourished for 80 years while drinking the water, and the flavor of malt beverages from the breweries might have been ~~been~~ enhanced. Anyway, a cover was put on in 1972.

Year in, year out, athletic types from Portsmouth Senior High School demonstrate their manliness by seeing how high they can climb the tower to spray-can graffiti on the outside walls, so on occasion the Water Dept. does the painting necessary.

Development in the general area moved along slowly, although given some impetus in 1900 when Dr. William O. Junkins, a former Portsmouth mayor, for whom Junkins avenue was named, acquired land near the standpipe and built a two-tenement house. The tenements each included a parlor, dining room, kitchen, pantry and three bedrooms. No mention was made of a bathroom. They were designed for workingmen and were to rent for \$12 a month. Dr. Junkins planned to build more, if the first one was successful.

Essex avenue, the race track between Islington street and Middle road, was laid out in 1917, the lots having 50-foot fronts; other streets have branched off.

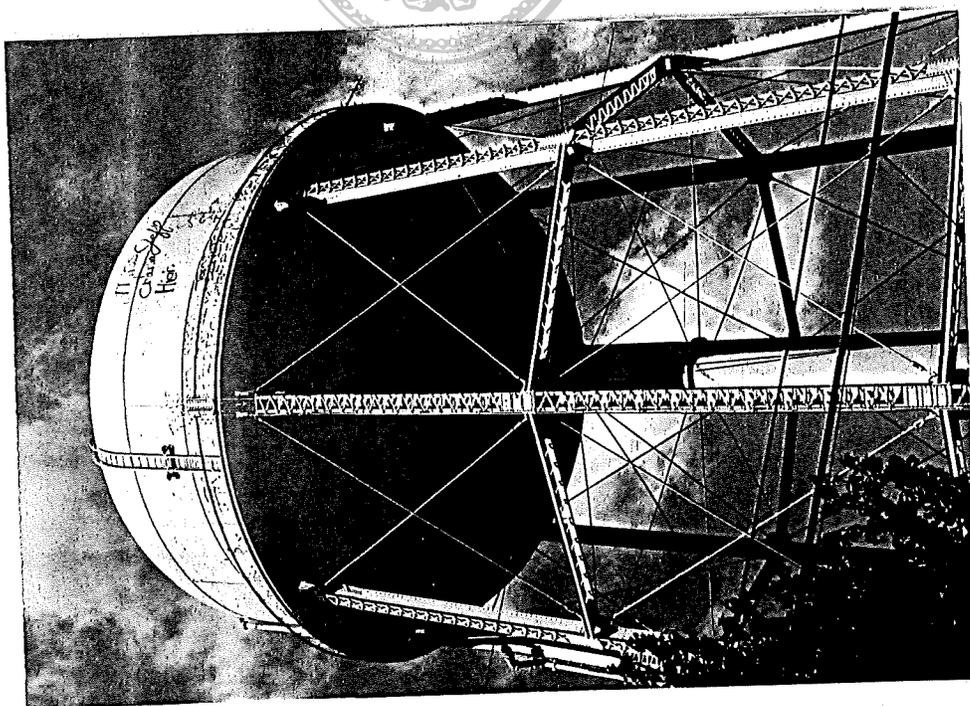
But the observation of the Herald in 1907 that "a new cistern" would be needed before many years, *proved prophetic* As anyone can observe a huge tank on stilts stands on Spinney road, towering to the heavens. It was built in 1941 but that's a story for another day.

10 Jan

A CENTURY OLD - The Islington street standpipe has towered over the ancient Powder House for a bit more than a hundred years, and bids fair to go another hundred. The water in the tank isn't steaming; it was only a passing cloud. (Brighton photo)



HALF A CENTURY OLD -- Since 1941 the water tank on top  
of spidery legs has helped the city's Water Dept. meet an ever-  
increasing demand. It's located on Paradise Hill, Spinney road.  
(Brighton photo)



Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenæum, Portsmouth, N.H.