

More of the Story

from the

Mt. Tabor Reservoir History Project

While you are visiting Reservoir 1...

The reservoirs built into Mount Tabor were always intended to provide a pleasant excursion for visitors, including you. We hope you enjoy some of the story we share below, as you stroll around today.

Our First Publicly Funded Reservoir

When you are about three-quarters of the way up to the summit of Mt. Tabor, on the south side, that reservoir you see there empty and looking neglected (it's having cracks filled), that is Reservoir Number 1. And it is, in fact, the first storage facility built for that exceptionally clean water that was channeled into town from the Bull Run watershed as part of the new municipal water system conceived by Portlanders in the late 1880's.

Access to clean water has always been one of the natural resources that has drawn people to this region. But as white settlers established a city, and as that city grew, the primary water sources (the Willamette River and neighborhood creeks) became badly polluted. In the late 1800's contaminated drinking water -- laced with sewage, domesticated animal waste, and industrial runoff -- led to outbreaks of typhus and cholera, and demand for a publicly managed, clean water system mounted.

For its new water source Portland chose Bull Run River, located in a pristine forested watershed roughly twenty-five miles east of here. The Bull Run watershed was wild and remote territory, so dense with undergrowth that in places horses couldn't pass. And yet, engineers designed and built a system of conduits that would use the force of gravity to move water downhill all the way to Portland, without requiring pumps. Engineer Isaac Smith sited the first two reservoirs on Mount Tabor, an extinct volcano in what was then a rural area outside the city limits, because its elevation (636 feet at peak) would create enough gravity pressure to continue pushing water on from here, through pipes under the Willamette, and then up hill again to Washington Park.

This gravity-fed system was no accident. This design was prized for its cost-effectiveness, its low consumption of electricity, and its sustainability -- all features worth fighting for still today.

Did you know that's a dam?

Standing on the south side of Reservoir 1, that expanse of lawn you find yourself on, between the reservoir and the stairs down to Lincoln Street -- that is the top of a 100-foot thick concrete and earthen dam. This dam forms the south face of the reservoir, which is otherwise nestled into the landscape of a natural ravine. And here's something: this is not the only dam you likely don't know is a dam up here! (More on that another time.)

White males only?

Construction of Reservoir 1 began during an economic depression. It provided much-needed employment for 1,500 workers, but exclusionary policies in force during that era allowed only white males to apply for those jobs.

What are those castle-looking buildings, anyway?

The oval, turret-like buildings are called gatehouses, because they sit atop the gate valves that control the flow of water into and out of each reservoir. They are done in a Romanesque architectural style because it was considered beautiful. The reservoirs on Mt. Tabor could have been just the facts, nothing pretty. Instead, a lovely promenade encircles each, as does ornamental wrought iron fence work. On one end of Reservoir 1, a little fountain used to offer free and much needed refreshment for those that made the long trek all the way from town. Though no longer functional, it is a sweet reminder of those early days of the park and the reservoirs.