

Iconic Symbol: Louisville's Water Tower celebrates 150 Years

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Iconic Landmark: Louisville's Water Tower

By Steve Wiser, AIA

For 150 years, the Water Tower at Zorn Avenue and River Road has stood tall as a proud symbol for Louisville. The Greek revival architecture has been admired by all who view it. While its accessible location and beautiful appearance are appreciated by today's residents, a century and a half ago few Louisvillians were able to actually see this structure. A horse ride from downtown took about 30 minutes. If the Water Tower were being built now, a comparable time travel distance would place it up Interstate 71 near Crestwood, Kentucky. Thus, in 1860, the Water Tower was a long trip to visit for the majority of residents.



Above: Historic photo of the Water Tower at Zorn and River Road

Below: Charles Hermany, who not only was an innovative water engineer, but also a visionary civic leader.



So, why was the Water Tower built at such a remote location and of a high quality aesthetic few would enjoy?

The first answer is simply resolved: it was built upriver, above of any possible pollution from the city, especially Beargrass Creek. Beargrass Creek's route to the Ohio River had been shifted to the north in the 1850s, and it was basically an open waste sewer for Butchertown's slaughterhouses. Thus, clean water was the strategic reason for the Zorn and River Road site.

The second answer though takes a bit of conjecture. Theodore Scowden and Charles Hermany, the two engineers behind the Tower's construction, wanted a 'practical and pleasant' facility that would be the best water works in the country. They greatly exceeded their expectations.

While the Water Tower was an important utility function, the classical aesthetic is similar to the Philadelphia water works, which was built in 1822. This distinctive appearance seeks to offer an image of purity and reliability for the drinking water.

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But, it also served as a welcoming civic beacon for the thousands of passengers aboard the hundreds of steamboats headed down the Ohio River. Searching for a better place to live 'out west', these weary travelers no doubt were impressed by the sight of this strategic building and had positive initial thoughts on Louisville. It was a visual progressive statement similar to the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. Louisville offered opportunity for innovative achievements.



Above: *Layout of original park system by Charles Hermany as published in the courier-Journal newspaper on June 5, 1887. The "East Park" location was at the Water Tower site. It was eventually shifted to where Cherokee Park is now.*

In the decades that followed, local businesses grew into prominent national companies such as American Standard and Vogt Industries. And, in 1887, water company engineer Charles Hermany was involved in another significant civic improvement effort. He proposed a layout for three parks around the perimeter of Louisville, with the eastern park encompassing the Water Tower site.

water, the Water Tower has been at the forefront in making Louisville one of America's most livable cities for the past 150 years.

The resulting Cherokee Park was eventually built elsewhere, but the Water Tower had served to promote our acclaimed Olmsted Park system. Along with its bold classical style and superior tasting drinking

For more information on the history of the Water Tower, there is an excellent new book just published by Butler Books entitled "Water Works: 150 Years of Louisville Water Company" by Kelly Dearing Smith, \$29.95, 112 pages. (Steve Wiser, AIA, is a Louisville architect and historian, who has written several local design and history books. His latest book is "Modern Houses of Louisville")

Below: *left, the Louisville Water Company's headquarters at Third and Chestnut; and, right, the Crescent Hill Reservoir*



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