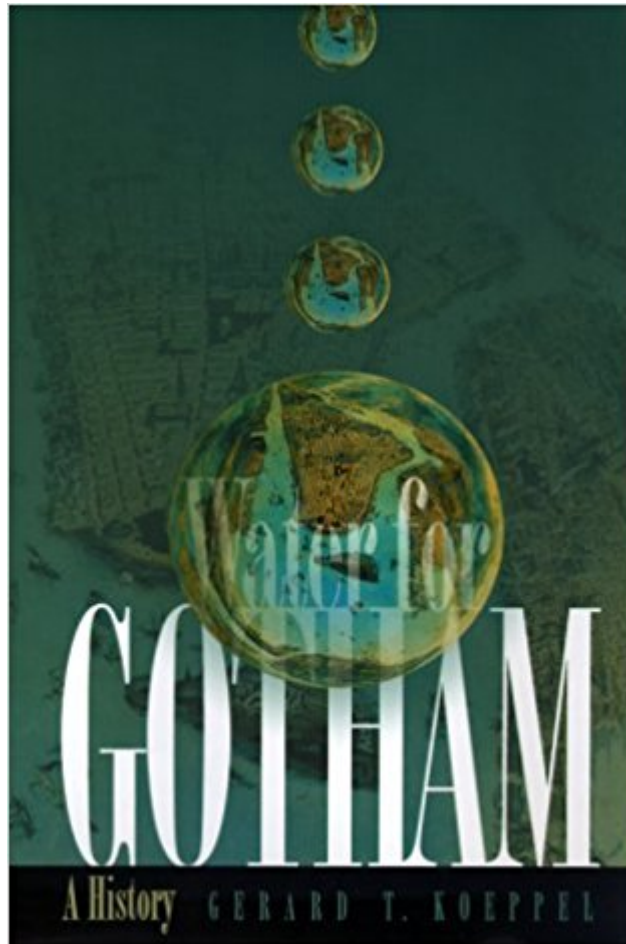




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# Water For Gotham: A History.



## Synopsis

Water for Gotham tells the spirited story of New York's evolution as a great city by examining its struggle for that vital and basic element--clean water. Drawing on primary sources, personal narratives, and anecdotes, Gerard Koeppel demonstrates how quickly the shallow wells of Dutch New Amsterdam were overwhelmed, leaving the English and American city beleaguered by filth, epidemics, and fires. This situation changed only when an outside water source was finally secured in 1842--the Croton Aqueduct, a model for urban water supplies in the United States. As the fertile wilderness enjoyed by the first Europeans in Manhattan vanishes and the magnitude of New York's water problem grows, the reader is introduced to the plans of Christopher Colles, builder of the first American steam engine, and of Joseph Browne, the first to call for a mainland water source for this island-city. In this vividly written true-life fable of the "Fools of Gotham," the chief obstacle to the aqueduct is the Manhattan Company. Masterminded by Aaron Burr, with the complicity of Alexander Hamilton and other leading New Yorkers, the company was a ruse, serving as the charter for a bank--today's Chase Manhattan. The cholera epidemic of 1832 and the great fire three years later were instrumental in forcing the city's leaders to finally unite and regain New York's water rights. Koeppel's account of the developments leading up to the Croton Aqueduct reveals it as a triumph not only of inspired technology but of political will. With over forty archival photographs and drawings, Water for Gotham demonstrates the deep interconnections between natural resource management, urban planning, and civic leadership. As New York today retakes its waterfront and boasts famous tap water, this book is a valuable reminder of how much vision and fortitude are required to make a great city function and thrive.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"The chief disadvantage of New York," observed the Swedish botanist Peter Kalm in the mid-18th century, "is the want of good water." The Dutch farmers who settled on Manhattan in the 1600s found the island, which is fronted by a salty inlet of the Atlantic Ocean, to have only small quantities of surface water. Hampered by the hard rock that underlay the island, subsequent generations of Manhattanites had difficulty sinking wells, and many had to make do with polluted, dangerous sources of drinking water. In *Water for Gotham*, Gerard T. Koeppel relates the complex history of how the metropolis came to acquire dependable sources of water for an ever-expanding population. Those sources lay far from the city, but engineering problems were much less difficult to overcome than was the political opposition to this reliance on the world beyond Manhattan Island. Even after a cholera outbreak killed scores of New Yorkers in 1832, some of the city's leading financiers insisted that the old wells would do just fine. Finally, Koeppel writes, through the efforts of DeWitt Clinton and other farsighted civic leaders, New York raised money to build a system of canals and aqueducts leading up the Hudson and Croton river valleys into the water-rich Catskill Mountains, getting the funds for the construction from European banks and private bondholders. Nearly a century later, all five boroughs were finally well served by pipes that brought in nearly 400 million gallons of fresh water a day--scarcely a third of the present metropolis's demands. *Water for Gotham* is, well, dry at times, but it does a fine job overall of making sense of an overlooked aspect of New York's history. --Gregory McNamee

From its founding as New Amsterdam in 1624 until 1850, Manhattan was plagued by two disasters that killed thousands of residents and caused millions of dollars of damage: unrestrained outbreaks of infectious diseases, including small pox, yellow fever and cholera, and uncontrolled fires that destroyed blocks of stores and residences. The reason: no clean water supply. Koeppel, a former editor at CBS News, has written a vivid history of how Manhattan finally got reliable drinking water. Relying on primary documents, diaries, personal histories and maps, he charts the internecine schemes and failed business ventures to alleviate the island's water problems, from Christopher Colles's attempt to build a reservoir and a steam engine in 1774 to Aaron Burr's and Alexander Hamilton's fraudulent 1789 Manhattan Company (which never delivered promised water but did become the hugely successful Chase Manhattan bank), to John Jervis's successful 1850 project to

divert the waters of the Croton River into the rapidly growing city using a complex set of aqueducts and waterworks. Each element in Koeppel's panoramic view of Manhattan's past--including the histories and medical records of families who died in epidemics and the brutal reaction to the Great Negro Plot of 1741, in which slaves sent to fetch spring water for their masters may have organized a series of thefts and fires--is intricately bound to the public's need for clean water. Though it lacks a strong narrative drive, Koeppel's graceful history is written with a wit and intelligence that will please fans of urban history. Agent: Russ Galen. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

As a resident of the Croton Watershed, I was pleased by the detailed history of this system presented in "Water for Gotham." At one time, I was a member of New York City's Croton Citizen Advisory Committee. My knowledge of the NYC water supply system almost got me into trouble once when I arrived at the bottom of my favorite hiking trail to find it guarded by two uniformed officers. I said: "Oh, you must be here for the access shaft to the Catskill Aqueduct." That was the wrong thing to say. I had to do some explaining. Today the Croton system contributes more than ten percent, typically 100 to 150 million gallons per day, to the water supply of 9 million people. The quality of Croton water is as good today as it was at the beginning of the twentieth century. It meets all federal health standards. Despite this, New York City is building a multi-billion dollar filtration plant to filter water that does not need to be filtered. The consequence of the filtration plant scheme will be the abandonment of protection of the Croton Watershed. Many of today's watershed residents appreciate the reservoir system that lends so much to the beauty of the area, but also see New York City as a distant imperial power whose officials often have little regard for the integrity of the watershed. If you wish to know where your water comes from, this is an excellent place to start.

Water for Gotham: A History provides a chronicle of the drinking water system of New York City (Manhattan) from its founding through the completion of the Croton Aqueduct. It is interspersed with anecdotes about the characters involved; the author doesn't seem to like Aaron Burr very much. The book details the political more than the technical challenges involved in getting plentiful clean water to the city. Personally, I would have liked more engineering and less Whigs vs. Democrats. I did learn that Chase Manhattan Bank was started in a somewhat less-than-honest fashion. Who'd ever suspect that a Wall St. outfit would exploit loopholes in regulations? The diagrams in the paperback version are a bit blurry, so some details are not easily read. The book is HEAVILY footnoted and well-researched. The footnotes are citations of sources used, so they needn't be read. Overall a good read. It should be in school libraries in the 212 Area Code. It could teach

children that their little island is not all that hospitable.

New York City has always struggled to meet the demands of its citizens and visitors and few challenges have been as controversial and contentious as the search for adequate water. In *Water for Gotham* Koeppele related the story of the high minded idealists and the low down scoundrels (including a Vice President of the United States!) who alternated between working together and fighting among themselves to establish a permanent solution to this most vexing of the Big Apple's problems. While he does delve a bit into the engineering of the many solutions, this is more a book about the people and the stories of the many projects from precolonial times to the end of the nineteenth century when a steady supply was finally assured, at least for the moment. This is a fairly fun book to read with its many characters and story lines. It does at times slow down in the discussion of the political battles for that most important element of any construction project (money!) but most of the time it keeps up a good pace for the reader. There are adequate maps and illustrations to view. And it does have a happy ending... so far.

For folks interested in drinking water, "*Water for Gotham*" is a good read. The first third, focuses on the public health needs of New York City water and the limits of wells on Manhattan. The second third of the book presents a review of the political history towards finding a solution to the need for water and provides a colorful history of politicians in New York City and Albany. That is interesting, but doesn't give enough attention to explaining and providing the details of the problems of moving huge volumes of water from upstate to Manhattan. I would have liked more details of the technical and engineering solutions of the problems.

I have always had a great interest in NYC and surrounding history. The book *Gotham*, one of the greatest history books ever, covers everything, BUT, this book brings you the rough, tough difficult rise of NYC from the perspective of WATER. This resource we take for granted everyday literally shaped the development and the problems of that development of NYC. While much of the book deals with the politics and fights (same thing) to find the right water source for a modern day reservoir, namely the Croton, I particularly enjoyed the earlier parts of the book. My only complaint about the book and understand it was a necessary evil to do the issue justice, was just how much detail was included regarding the political shannigans to finally get the Croton Aqueduct built. I would have like more detail of the earlier parts of NY and their water. It is amazing to envision, NYC as an island of valleys, ponds, streams, large hills, etc. Further amazing to think of its now concrete

harbors as tidal marsh lands, where yellow fever harbored in the never ended mosquito propagation. While people like myself, look back at those early days with envy, reading about their "sewage" and how it tainted their so called water supply makes me happy that I am reading about it rather than living it. My impetus to read this book stemmed from my interest of the "Collect Pond" and how it shaped NYC industry and how amazing to think there was actually a lake in Manhattan that was 70 feet deep! I highly recommend this incredibly well written book, that I just couldn't put down. I would find a map of NYC and follow the streets as you follow the history. It makes it much more interesting.

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