

City of Charleston Sewerage Department Records, 1892-1916

Descriptive Summary

Title and Dates:

City of Charleston Sewerage Department Records, 1892-1916

Creators:

R. Blum Olney, Superintendent of Sewers, 1895-1901

John Gadsden, Jr., Superintendent of Sewers, 1901-1904

James H. Dingle, City Engineer, 1894-1938

Quantity:

1.25 cubic feet (9 folders)

Forms of Material:

Correspondence, expense ledgers, invoices, minutes, newspaper clippings, and reports

Processed by:

Rebecca L. Schultz, 2021

Location:

AR-A-017 and AR-OS-032

Abstract

The collection consists of records created by the administrators of the Sewerage Department, R. Blum Olney, John Gadsden, Jr., and James H. Dingle. The records consist of correspondence, expense ledgers, and reports pertaining to the creation of the first public sewerage system in the City of Charleston.

Background

The problem of what to do with waste has been a topic of concern in Charleston since its founding. The prevalence of yellow fever and cholera, among other maladies, necessitated the focus of City leaders on vectors of disease. While the spread of illness was not yet well understood, many believed a correlation existed between stagnant, dirty water and the sweltering climate of the South. Early systems of drainage frequently combined sewer and storm waters. When flooding occurred, as did frequently in the low-lying areas of Charleston, sewage mixed with tidewaters to create a noxious, toxic environment.

As early as 1764, the Commissioners of the Streets barred residents from moving any polluted water from their houses into the public streets. After the creation of the Board of Health in 1815, that body held responsibility for ensuring the removal of all “offensive substances or nuisances” from the “streets, lanes,

alleys and wharves.”¹ The advancement of the germ theory in the mid- to late nineteenth century increased focus on eliminating sources of contamination. The Board of Health embraced the work of sanitary engineer, George E. Waring, Jr., who advocated for the separation of sewage and storm drains.

In 1882, the Board condemned the lackadaisical attitude of Charlestonians toward the creation of a regulated sanitation system. They wrote, “it is most extraordinary with our mortuary statistics for constant admonition, that the citizens of a City so favorably located for complete cleanliness should remain longer inactive on such a subject.”² The following year, an act of the South Carolina Legislature allowed for the formation of a Committee on Sewerage in Charleston to investigate the creation of a public sewage system.

Largely due to budgetary constraints and the objection of residents to new taxes, it took another twelve years for the City to take action on the Committee’s recommendations. In October 1894, City Council approved the employment of Capt. R.F. Hartford to engineer a new separate sewerage system in the area south of Broad Street. Construction began the following month. Capt. Hartford oversaw the work with the assistance of the Engineering Department until June 1895 when City Council created the Department of Sewerage with then Assistant City Engineer R.B. Olney accepting the position of Superintendent of Sewers.³

Scope and Content Note

The collection consists of the files of the Sewerage Department under the administration of superintendents R.B. Olney and John Gadsden, Jr. and City Engineer James H. Dingle, who assumed control of the department after Gadsden’s death in 1904. The material found in the collection is arranged chronologically and includes correspondence, expense ledgers, invoices, minutes, newspaper clippings, and reports. These documents offer insight into the City’s efforts to advance sanitary reform through the creation of a modern sewerage system.

Folder List

Box Folder

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| 1 | 1 | Graduation Thesis: <i>Sewerage and Drainage with a Review of the Tidal System of Charleston, South Carolina</i> , James Hervey Dingle, Cornell University, 1892 |
| | 2 | Board of Sewer Commissioners Minutes and Ordinances, 1894-1897 |

¹ *Digest of Ordinances of the City Council or Charleston from 1783 to July 1818*, (Charleston, S.C.: Archibald E. Miller, 1818), 22.

² *Yearbook 1882, City of Charleston, South Carolina*, (Charleston, S.C.: The News and Courier Book Presses, 1892), 54.

³ For more in-depth information on the history of sewerage in Charleston see: Butler, Christina Rae, *Lowcountry at High Tide: A History of Flooding, Drainage, and Reclamation in Charleston, South Carolina* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2020).

Box	Folder	
1	3	Sewerage Department Time Book, 1895
	4	Sewerage Department Account Book, 1896-1902
	5	Sewerage Department, Index of Streets to be Sewered, 1898-1904
	6	Third and Fourth District Sewerage, 1901
2	1	Sewerage Extension, Sewer Bond Account, 1910-1911
	2	Sewerage Department Letter Book, 1910-1916
	3	Sewer and Plumbing Inspections, 1913-1914