History of Distribution: From Ancient Times to Present Day

This Timeline provides a fresh look at the history of water distribution from ancient times to the present day.

Credits: This timeline was developed by a Subcommittee of the Distribution and Plant Operations Division (DPOD) of AWWA. The following members contributed to the development of the timeline:

- Ahmad Habibian – Subcommittee Chair & DPOD Trustee
- Jerry Anderson – Subcommittee Member, DPOD Chair & Trustee
- Andrew Chastain-Howley – Subcommittee Member & DPOD Trustee
- Gregg Kirmeyer – Subcommittee Member & DPOD Trustee
- John Donahue – Subcommittee Member & DPOD Trustee
- Jerry Caron – Subcommittee Member & DPOD Trustee
- Colleen Arnold – Subcommittee Member & DPOD Trustee
- Charly Angadicheril – Subcommittee Member & DPOD Trustee
- Tom Walski – Subcommittee Member

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Sources for all information in this poster are provided on the attached page.

ANCIENT

Around 3100-1100 B.C., Mesopotamian engineers built very large weirs and diversion dams to create reservoirs and canals to carry water long distances across the flat countryside.

The Noria, or Egyptian Wheel is thought to be the first vertical water wheel in history. It dates from the early Roman Empire, around 700-600 B.C.

Around 1500 B.C., ancient Egyptians built large, flat-bottomed basins for growing crops along the riverbanks and simple sluices that diverted water into them at the peak of flood.

In 600-501 B.C., a Greek engineer by the name of Eupalinus of Megara built the aqueduct of Samos.

Constructing “qanats,” slightly sloping tunnels driven into hillsides containing groundwater, probably originated in northwestern Persia (now Armenia) around 700 B.C.

By dates 101-200 A.D., during the Han Dynasty, the Chinese used chain pumps that lifted water human foot pedaling, hydraulic waterwheels, or rotating mechanical wheels pulled by oxen.

First valves were most likely introduced sometime after 43 A.D. in Britain.

The Minoans appear to be the first civilization to use underground clay pipes for sanitation and water supply between 2700-1401 B.C.

Archimedes, one of the greatest thinkers of ancient Greece, developed the Archimedes screw invention around 282-212 B.C. It was used to lift water from a lower elevation to a higher elevation by means of an internally threaded tube.
During the Middle Ages (500-1500 A.D.), water supply was no longer as sophisticated as before. These centuries were also known as the Dark Ages because of a lack of scientific innovations and experiments. After The Fall of The Roman Empire, enemy forces destroyed many aqueducts and distribution system structures.

- Cast iron pipe was first installed at Dillenburg Castle in Germany in 1455.
- Between 1301-1400, a 5.5 km lead pipeline was installed to convey water from Tybourne Brook to London.
- Incan engineers constructed a distribution system at Machu Pichu in 1450.
- Leonardo da Vinci’s treatise Del moto e misura dell’acqua summarized the state of the art of hydraulics circa 1500. He was the first recorded to observe that as a size of a conduit decreased, the velocity of flow increased.

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In 1652, Boston incorporated the country’s first waterworks, formed to provide water for fire-fighting and domestic use.

- In 1664 at Versailles, France, the first full-scale cast iron pipe system for the distribution of water was installed.
- Records indicate the first water systems in the United States were in Schafferstown, Pa., in 1746, and in the Moravian settlement that is now Bethlehem, Pa., in 1754.
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In 1804, the first municipal water treatment plant, designed by Robert Thom, was built in Scotland.

- Croton Aqueduct project completed, supplying water to New York City in 1842.
- In 1850, William Sewell developed the first displacement meter for measuring customer water use.
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- Siemens & Halske began production of the first closed-pipe current meters in 1865.

Perhaps the most important pump invention of the industrial age was the centrifugal pump invented by John Appold in 1851.

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In 1885, an engineer with the Chicago Water Company in England, Sir Thomas Simpson, invented the bell and spigot joint, which has been used extensively ever since.
J.A. Tilden received the first patent for a disc meter in 1892, and a conical disc meter was sold by G.A. Bassett in that same year.

Chicago installed its first electric centrifugal pumps in 1910.

J.M. Cron developed the first successful prestressed concrete tank in 1942.

Concrete cylinder pipe was introduced in the early 1940s.

Ductile iron pipe became available in 1946.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt speaks at the dedication of Hoover Dam, which sits astride the Colorado River in Black Canyon, Nevada in 1935.

In 1943, Camp summarized the state-of-the-art of manual hydraulic analysis for networks and noted that better field data were more important than theoretical calculations.

The first compound meter, which contained a low-flow displacement meter and a high-flow turbine unit, was patented by J.A. Tilden in 1903.

There was a large water supply project completed during WWII Colorado–Big Thompson Project from 1938-1957.

PVC pipe was first developed in Germany in the 1930s, and it was introduced in the United States in the 1950s.

Polyethylene encasement of iron pipes was first developed in 1951 to mitigate the effects of corrosive soils on metal pipes. In the mid 1960s the use of polyethylene pipe was developed and used for the first time in water distribution.

A new trenchless technology, horizontal directional drill, was first used in the water industry in late 80’s-early 1990s. This method allowed pipe installs without digging up the ground.

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The McIlroy Network Analyzer was used by utilities from the early 1950s through the early 1970s to simulate water flow.

The first standardization of cast iron water pipes in Britain occurred in 1917 with the publishing of British Standard 78.

The first use of cement-mortar lining of pipes took place in Charleston, S.C., in 1922.

The first commercial hydraulic analysis software was developed by the Datics Corporation in 1957.

Water quality modeling was introduced in the 1980s as well as leak detection technology to prevent loss of water in the systems.

A new method called fusible PVC first was developed and used in the early 1990s. This option allowed for fast installations of pipe for water distribution without using traditional methods to join the pipes together.

A key meeting in 1991, sponsored by USEPA and AWWA, brought together investigators in water quality modeling and led to USEPA’s development of a distribution water quality model.

By 2001, more than 90 percent of the U.S. population is served by community water systems.
To learn more about the awesome history of water distribution, check out these sources:

**Web-based Sources:**
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