Origins of the Public Bath Movement, 1840–1890

The advance of civilization is largely measured by the victories of mankind over its greatest enemy—dirt.

—Josiah Quincy

In his influential book *How the Other Half Lives*, journalist and social reformer Jacob A. Riis wrote about the children of Jewish immigrants on New York City’s Lower East Side:

The majority of the children seek the public school, where they are received sometimes with some misgivings on the part of the teachers, who find it necessary to inculcate lessons of cleanliness in the worst cases by practical demonstrations with soap and water. “He took the soap as if it were some animal,” said one of these teachers to me after such an experiment upon a new pupil, “and wiped three fingers across his face. He called that washing.”

To correct this situation, every day the teachers asked the children, “What must I do to be healthy?” and the children responded:

I must keep my skin clean  
Wear clean clothes  
Breathe pure air  
And live in the sunlight

Difficult as it may have been for these immigrant children living in New York City’s tenements to follow the rules they recited, they were learning officially that personal cleanliness was very important in America.¹

By 1890, when Riis’ book was published, most Americans had come to believe, as we do today, that the desire to be clean was almost innate and
that to go without bathing for any length of time voluntarily was inconceivable and repugnant. This cultural norm developed gradually during the nineteenth century at the same time that city growth, immigration, and developing urban slums prevented the urban poor from conforming to the accepted standard of cleanliness.

For those Americans interested in improving the lot of the poor, the solution to their lack of personal cleanliness was the public bath which would be open year-round. The demand for public baths initially appeared in the 1840s in response to a variety of factors. The widespread urban suffering among the poor caused by the Panic of 1837 and its aftermath, the massive emigration from Ireland, and mushrooming urban growth presented Americans with new and seemingly insurmountable problems. New York City's population had increased from 202,598 in 1830 to 515,547 in 1850, Philadelphia's from 161,410 to 340,045, and Boston's from 61,392 to 136,881. Most of the 1.2 million Irish immigrants fleeing the famine between 1845 and 1854 got no farther than these port cities, where they lived in districts filled with unimaginable filth and squalor. To Americans these burgeoning slums with their poverty, vice, crime, disorder, drunkenness, and apparently unassimilable immigrants were a threat to the social fabric of American society. Throughout the nineteenth century several generations of urban reformers grappled with the intractable problems generated by the slums, proposed various solutions, found them wanting, and tried new ones.²

However, the problem of the cleanliness of slum dwellers and the solution proposed—public baths—were constant from the 1840s through the Progressive Era. Although urban slums initially generated this concern, a number of other factors contributed to the rising interest in the cleanliness of the poor.

The European Influence

Historical precedent and the European experience were very influential in stimulating the interest of American public bath reformers. These leaders harked back to classical antiquity and often referred to the lavish public baths of the Romans and to the religiously connected bathing of the ancient Hebrews and Egyptians. With the fall of Rome, however, public baths declined in western Europe and did not reappear again until the period of the Crusades. The contact between the Crusaders and the
Byzantine and Moslem empires apparently revived the institution of the public bath. From the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries public baths equipped with small communal bathing pools and steam baths could usually be found in the cities and larger towns of Europe and were licensed by the municipalities. These bathhouses also were often places of amusement which furnished food, drink, music, and women and thus were sometimes the subject of intense antibath campaigns by the clergy. In the fifteenth century separate bathhouses for men and women became the vogue. In the sixteenth century, when syphilis became a new health problem, these medieval communal baths were seen as a focus of infection and fell into disfavor. The influence of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation also played a role as these bathhouses were perceived as places of nakedness, immorality, and sin. By the end of the seventeenth century public baths had vanished from the urban scene in western Europe.  

With the disappearance of the medieval public bath, complete, all-over bathing went out of fashion. Private homes lacked baths and for a time bathing was considered dangerous to the health. By the late seventeenth century, however, interest in bathing revived, as indicated by the one hundred bathrooms Louis XIV built at Versailles, but waned when they were dismantled during the eighteenth century. Toward the middle of the eighteenth century, however, a vogue for bathing in the summer arose and commercial public baths began to appear. This revival of interest in bathing focused especially on medicinal baths. The development of the city of Bath, England, at this time publicized the idea of public establishments for bathing.  

The industrial revolution, expanding urban populations, the growth of urban slums, a series of cholera epidemics beginning in the 1830s, and rising middle-class standards of personal cleanliness all combined to give impetus to the municipal bath movement in Europe, as they did later for the one in America. The movement began in England in the 1820s, reached a peak in the 1840s, and spread to the Continent in the second half of the nineteenth century.  

In England the first indoor public bath built for the people at public expense was the St. George's Bath in Liverpool, opened in 1828. Fees were charged although the bath had been built with public funds. This bath included two large swimming pools, two small plunge baths (smaller pools), eleven private tub baths, one vapor (steam) bath, and one
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

shower bath. In 1842 the Frederick Street Baths and Washhouse opened in the same city. This was the first bath in England to include a public washhouse (laundry) as well as bath facilities, which eventually became the norm for all baths in that country. In 1844 the philanthropic London Association for Promoting Cleanliness Among the Poor built a bathhouse and laundry in East Smithfield. But the English municipal bath movement achieved its greatest success with the passage of “An Act to Encourage the Establishment of Public Baths and Washhouses” in 1846, a law probably passed partly because of increasing Irish immigration to English cities, especially Liverpool, and fear of cholera.6

This enabling legislation, which was voluntary rather than compulsory, provided that any local government could build and maintain public baths and washhouses at public expense to be administered by a board of commissioners. The baths could furnish both first- and second-class accommodations (later amended to include third-class) in swimming pools, warm and cold tub baths, vapor baths, warm and cold shower baths, and public laundries. The legislation called for a minimum of twice as many baths for the laboring classes (second or third class) as for the upper classes (first or second class). The baths were not to be free and a minimum fee of one pence (later two pence) was established for a second-class cold bath.7

By 1896 more than 200 municipalities in the British Isles were maintaining public baths. The average English municipal bath was large, handsome, and costly. For example, the Hornsey Road Baths, erected in 1892 by the Parish of St. Mary’s, Islington, London, cost $175,194. For men it had a first-class swimming pool of 32 by 100 feet with 71 dressing rooms, and for women a swimming pool measuring 25 by 75 feet; also furnished were 108 private tub and shower baths, lavatories, and a public laundry with accommodation for 40 washers. Such baths often included a large meeting or lecture hall, kitchen, and refreshment rooms as well as a steam bath.8

These English baths were extensively patronized by the middle class, who, unlike their American counterparts, lacked bath facilities in their homes, but the baths were often criticized as being too imposing and expensive for the working class. Some suggested a separate entrance for the poor or a reduction of the fee to one pence. Others suggested the building of “cottage baths,” simpler, smaller, and cheaper baths to be located in slum districts. Apparently very few cottage baths were ever
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

built. In the United States, also, the elaborateness of the public baths, especially those built in New York City, was often attacked.9

Whereas large and elaborate baths were most popular in England, more variation was found in continental Europe. In France, for example, bath facilities were less important than public laundries, although after permissive legislation was passed in 1851 most major French cities had a public bathhouse.10

Germany and Austria had a wide variety of municipal bathing establishments. Although laundries were rarely part of German and Austrian bath systems, they did include large elaborate bathing facilities like those in England and were an important source of civic pride. The magnificent Stuttgart Bathhouse, for example, contained 2 swimming pools, 1 for men and 1 for women, 300 dressing rooms, 102 tub baths, 2 Russian-Roman baths for men and women, 2 cold water cure sections for men and women, a sun bath, and a bath for dogs. Its patrons were largely from the middle class, who, like their English counterparts, lacked bathing facilities in their homes. In 1883, however, Dr. Oscar Lasser of the University of Berlin set up his model "People’s Bath" at the Berlin Hygiene Exhibition. This bath was a small corrugated-iron structure divided into ten cubicles, five for men and five for women, each equipped with a shower. At the exhibition several thousand visitors enjoyed a hot water shower at ten pfennigs each, thus proving that it was technologically feasible and inexpensive to use showers in public bath facilities. Following this example, most German and Austrian municipalities, beginning with Vienna in 1887, in addition to their large baths operated a number of small and modest Volksbad for the lower classes, with between 10 and 80 warm and cold showers. In Germany, school shower baths and workers’ shower baths (located at factories) were also common.11

The first use of the shower or rain bath for mass bathing was credited to either the French or the German military, who set up showers in soldiers’ barracks in the middle 1800s. Shower baths rather than tub baths became the ideal type of public bath according to the public bath advocates. Showers were less expensive to build, easier to keep clean and sanitary, used less water, and took less time than tub baths when large numbers of people had to be accommodated.12

By 1891 smaller numbers of municipal baths could also be found in most European countries, including Belgium, Holland, Italy, Hungary, Norway, and Sweden. Buenos Aires had the only municipal bath in
South America. Although most of these foreign municipal baths were very inexpensive for patrons, apparently none of them was free.\textsuperscript{13} 

The extent and success of European municipal bath systems were key elements in the arguments of American bath advocates. Cultural deference as well as emulation played a role. Not only was the United States shown to be lagging behind Europe in this respect, but the European experience had proven that the operation of such systems was feasible. As the Boston bath proponent Edward M. Hartwell wrote, “The teaching of European experience . . . can hardly fail to prove helpful and instructive to those who are endeavoring to ameliorate the conditions due to urban crowding in the United States.” American bath proponents also occasionally referred to the Japanese system of public baths as an example of that nation’s intelligence and progressiveness.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{American Origins}

Although American public bath advocates were inspired by the imposing municipal baths of European cities and considered them to be one of the important amenities which cities should provide for their citizens, American public baths were built for the poor. Like their European counterparts, middle-class Americans during the nineteenth century had become convinced of the necessity for bodily cleanliness but built bathrooms in their homes rather than public baths.

In the colonial period Americans followed the European custom of seldom bathing the entire body. By the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the vogue for spas, mineral springs, and watering places had crossed the Atlantic. There was some resistance to the development of spring baths on the grounds of immorality. For example, in 1761, when plans were made to develop the chalybeate spring in the Northern Liberties area of Philadelphia, the Protestant ministers petitioned the governor to prevent a lottery to be held for the purpose of “erecting public Gardens with Baths and Bagnios among us. Were a Hot and Cold Bath necessary to the Health of the Inhabitants of the City,” they contended, “they might at a small expense be added to the Hospital.” They insisted that a stop must be put to the people’s “Immoderate and Growing Fondness for Pleasure, Luxury, Gaming, Dissipation, and their concommittant Vices.” But this kind of disapproval failed to moderate what became a rage for bathing in and drinking natural spring or
mineral waters as a form of medical treatment or at least as a general aid to good health.\textsuperscript{15}

In the 1760s and 1770s numerous baths and watering places appeared where nature had provided springs or mineral waters. One of the most popular of these spas was at Stafford Springs, Connecticut, which had the reputation of curing diseases such as gout, sterility, rheumatism, and hysteria. Feeling in ill health, John Adams spent four days there in 1771. He recorded in his \textit{Diary}: "I drank plentifully of the water; it had the taste of fair water with an infusion of steel. . . . I plunged in twice, but the second time was superfluous and did me more hurt than good; it is very cold indeed." He later noted somewhat skeptically, "The journey was of use to me whether the waters were or not." The most renowned and fashionable southern watering place was Berkeley Warm Springs, Virginia, where the social elite of the southern colonies gathered. George Washington took the water there on three occasions, one of which was a vain attempt to cure his stepdaughter, Patsy Custis, of her epilepsy. Philip Fithian also visited this spa and noted the very active social life of the patrons, who enjoyed cardplaying and balls as well as the baths.\textsuperscript{16}

As Americans became accustomed to bathing at natural springs, they also apparently wished to be able to bathe closer to home, for commercially operated public bathhouses began to appear in American cities in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In 1792 Nicholas Denise of New York City announced that he had "just established though at great expense . . . a very convenient Bathing House, having eight rooms, in every one of which Baths may be had with either fresh, salt or warm water. . . . The said place is at his home called Bellevue on the East River; prices fixed at 4s per person and attendance at the house at any time." Often these commercial public baths advertised that in addition to bathing facilities, they maintained a garden, teahouse, or restaurant for the enjoyment of their patrons. At this point all-over bathing was considered a form of recreation and diversion but not a necessity. Many of these baths were open only in the summer months.\textsuperscript{17}

Before the Civil War, as municipal water systems were constructed and produced plentiful and cheap water, commercial bathhouses became a fairly common fixture in American cities. They offered to their middle- and upper-class patrons a variety of baths: Russian (similar to sauna baths), steam, vapor, mud, or swimming, as well as other amenities. The new western cities kept pace with their eastern counterparts. By the
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

1840s Chicago, for example, could boast three bathhouses, one with a section for women.\(^\text{18}\)

At the same time that commercial public baths became commonplace, well-to-do Americans began to acquire bathing facilities in their homes. Elizabeth Drinker recorded in her diary in 1798 the installation of a shower bath in the backyard of her Philadelphia townhouse. A year later she described her experience as she finally “went into the Shower bath. I bore it better than I expected, not having been wet all over at once, for 28 years past.” Here she was alluding to the fact that her last complete bath had been in 1771, when she had bathed in the mineral springs at Bristol, New Jersey. Concurrently, “bathing tubs” made of wood and lined with tin became available, and the Drinkers bought one of these in 1803. Owing to the trouble of filling the tub, however, the male Drinkers continued to patronize the public baths sporadically.\(^\text{19}\)

The establishment of municipal water systems which brought running water into the homes of the middle and upper classes and the construction of sewage systems which removed it, as well as the invention of bathtubs with attached plumbing and water heaters, simplified bathing at home. When George Templeton Strong of New York City acquired such facilities in 1843 he wrote enthusiastically in his *Diary*, “Tried our new bath room last night for the first time and propose to repeat the experiment this evening. It’s a great luxury—worth the cost of the whole building.” Two weeks later he noted, “I’ve led rather an amphibious life for the last week, paddling in the bathing tub every night and constantly making new discoveries in the art and mystery of ablution. Taking a shower bath upside down is the last novelty.” Although very few Americans of any social class bathed as frequently as Strong, more and more had the facilities to do so. It was not until 1851, however, that Millard Fillmore had a bathtub installed in the White House amid complaints about unnecessary expense.\(^\text{20}\)

Further impetus to the custom of bathing by getting “wett all over at once” came from the water cure craze of the 1840s and 1850s, which reinforced the association between bathing and health. Developed by Vincent Priessnitz in Silesia, the water cure, or hydropathy, became extremely popular in the United States as a treatment for almost all ailments. Based on the concept that water was the sustainer of life, treatments consisted of a variety of baths, wet compresses, steam, water massage, copious drinking of cold water, exercise, and a simple diet. Between
the 1840s and 1880s over 200 water cure centers were established throughout the United States with women as their chief clientele. The *Water Cure Journal*, with “Wash and Be Healed” as its motto, had a wide readership.\(^{21}\)

Influenced by the message of hydropathy, other health reformers of the mid-nineteenth century also urged frequent bathing. Sylvester Graham’s regimen included taking a bath “in very warm water at least three times a week.” Catherine Beecher, who had personally benefited from the water cure, denounced those Americans who washed only “the face, feet, hands and neck” and proclaimed that “it is a rule of health that the whole body should be washed every day.” Although the water cure craze subsided by the time of the Civil War, hydrotherapy, as it came to be called, persisted as a treatment for some diseases, and bathing was seen as necessary for good health. Simon Baruch, an orthodox physician and a national leader of the public bath movement (and Bernard Baruch’s father), was a leading proponent of hydrotherapy.\(^{22}\)

American interest in health reform and physical fitness, however, did not subside as vogues for various diets, exercise regimens, and sports flourished and declined throughout the nineteenth century to the present day. Health reformers remained almost unanimous in affirming the importance of personal cleanliness and regular bathing to health and fitness. Although they might not agree on whether a daily bath was necessary or what the water temperature should be, they convinced Americans that one could not be dirty and healthy at the same time.\(^{23}\)

By the middle of the nineteenth century, health reformers and household manuals asserted that not only water but also soap was necessary for complete personal cleanliness. In the early nineteenth century soap manufacturers were producing a harsh product suitable for laundering and scouring and perfumers were producing luxury toilet soap for the complexions of wealthy women. Gradually, however, soap manufacturers began to mass produce toilet soap suitable for cleaning the skin and to advertise both their products and the importance of personal cleanliness. By 1885 the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher was advertising Pear’s Soap, announcing that “if Cleanliness is next to Godliness Soap must be considered as a Means of Grace and a Clergyman who recommends moral things should be willing to recommend Soap.”\(^{24}\)

The fact that American middle- and upper-class standards of personal cleanliness were diverging from those of the poor and that cleanliness had taken on a symbolic meaning, also greatly increased demand for public
baths. By mid-nineteenth century, as Claudia and Richard Bushman main­
tained, "Among the middle class anyway, personal cleanliness ranked as a 
mark of moral superiority and dirtiness as a sign of degradation. Clean­
liness indicated control, spiritual refinement, breeding; the unclean were 
vulgar, coarse, animalistic." In the face of squalid urban slums and the
threat of epidemics, particularly cholera, these new standards of clean­
liness led to the first formal investigations of the public health of cities
and to recommendations for sanitary reform, including the provision of
public baths.

The conditions of the slums in which immigrants lived were revealed
by investigations undertaken mostly by physicians. John Griscom, a New
York city inspector, in his eloquent and comprehensive report, The San­i­
tary Condition of the Laboring Population of New York (1845), revealed the
horrors of slum life. Describing the housing available to the poor, Dr.
Griscom wrote, "Every corner of the room . . . is piled up with dirt. The
walls and ceilings, with plaster broken off in many places, . . . leaving
openings for the escape from within of the effluvia of vermin dead and
alive, are smeared with the blood of unmentionable insects and dirt of all
indescribable colors . . . the chimneys [are] filled with soot, the whole
premises populated thickly with vermin, the stair-ways . . . [are] the
receptacle for all things noxious." He cited the very high mortality rates
among the foreign born and their children, for which he blamed the vile
and unhealthy environment that surrounded them. In Boston, Lemuel
Shattuck, an amateur statistician, reported similarly shocking mortality
figures from 1845 on.

The 1849 cholera epidemic which ravaged American cities also pro­
duced increasing demands for cleanliness and for public baths. In this
year Milwaukee built special bathhouses for newly arrived immigrants.
Even more significantly, in this same year the Committee on Public
Hygiene of the newly organized American Medical Association urged the
establishment of cheap public baths on the European model in the parts
of the cities inhabited by the lower classes. Specifically surveying the
cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore, the committee found that although
Philadelphia had five commercially operated public baths, these were too
expensive for the poor. The only baths available to the poor were fur­
nished by "one benevolent institution" established to supply employment
to the poor. They provided hot and cold baths for three cents each or the
equivalent in labor. The committee found no public baths in Baltimore,
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

although it noted that in that city "an appendage to a fashionable house is invariably a bath-room."\textsuperscript{27}

Although the American Medical Association committee felt (rather prophetically, considering the fate of American public baths) that "public baths are no proper substitute for the private bath-room in one's own dwelling," it apparently concluded that this was not possible for the poorer classes and that public baths were the answer. In arguing for public baths, the committee asserted that frequent bathing among the poor and laboring classes would remove "a prominent cause of disease and contribute to [their] moral, as well as physical improvement." It also stated: "That uncleanliness and mental degradation are intimately associated with each other, is now generally admitted; hence, in proportion as the body is kept cleanly, are the moral faculties elevated, and the tendency to commit crime diminished." These arguments foreshadow those later put forward by the bath advocates of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. In the 1840s and later, urban reformers saw the slum not only as a threat to social stability but also as a symptom of the moral depravity of slum dwellers. Cleanliness would produce higher moral standards in the slums.\textsuperscript{28}

Another recommendation that cities establish public baths for the poor came from the Massachusetts Sanitary Commission of 1850. This commission reported that there were twelve or more commercial bathhouses in Boston charging from 12\textsuperscript{1/2} to 25 cents per bath, a price far too costly for the lower classes.\textsuperscript{29}

A somewhat different point of view was presented in an 1846 article in \textit{DeBow's Review} written by a New Orleans physician. Advocating a revival of municipal baths in the ancient Roman style, the author stressed the importance of regular bathing to health and deplored the lack of public baths: "Modern nations have borrowed from the ancient Romans almost everything worth borrowing except their magnificent baths. Such a thing as a public bath, erected at the public expense, and free to all without charge or for only a mere pittance is quite unknown in these modern times." He urged that New Orleans and other cities build public baths like the Roman thermae which would not only promote the health of their citizens but would be "a splendid ornament to the city" as well.\textsuperscript{30}

No city governments responded to these demands for public baths. Pre-Civil War cities were just beginning to expand and regularize their municipal services as they established water and sewage systems, police
and fire departments. Many services were left to private enterprise, such as urban transit and street cleaning. And it was a private charitable organization, the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), that built the first public bath for the poor. This citywide organization had been founded in 1843 in response to conditions magnified by the Panic of 1837 and was the prototype for similar organizations founded in other major cities. Although the AICP reformers tended to blame slum conditions on the degraded moral character of the poor, they also recognized that the physical conditions of the slums could deepen moral failures and contaminate innocent children. Therefore, in addition to attempting to transmit moral values to the poor, the AICP worked for a panoply of public health and environmental reforms usually associated with the Progressive Era, such as medical dispensaries, better housing, pure milk, and public baths.  

In 1849 the AICP was authorized by the state legislature to incorporate the People’s Bathing and Washing Association for the purpose of building a public bath. As a result of AICP efforts, the People’s Bathing and Washing Establishment was opened at 141 Mott Street on the Lower East Side in 1852. This bathhouse cost $42,000 and included laundry facilities, a swimming pool, and tub baths for males and females. The charge for the laundry was three cents per hour and baths cost from five to ten cents. The bath was open only in the summer months. “The object [was] to promote cleanliness and comfort among the poor, at the smallest possible cost—the prices barely paying the actual expense.” This bath was greatly needed, for as Robert Ernst has observed: “When water for bathing and washing had to be fetched from street pumps or near-by wells, bodily cleanliness was more of an ideal than a reality. Not only was it impossible to bathe, but insufficient space and air hindered home laundering.”

The AICP at first deemed the bath a success, maintaining that “it greatly contributed to the health, cleanliness, and comfort of those for whom it was designed” and citing its patronage of nearly 60,000 persons yearly as satisfactory. In 1861, however, the AICP closed the People’s Bathing and Washing Establishment and stated later that “the enterprise was too far in advance of the habits of the people . . . to be appreciated by them and hence it failed through insufficient patronage” and was not self-supporting. What they did not say was that the bath was probably too expensive for the poor it was supposed to serve. A few years after the establishment of the People’s Bath a Verein (association) was formed to
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

The crusade for free baths for the German working population in New York City, but this venture also failed. The Civil War interrupted the movement for public baths but also had a significant effect on public health reform. The well-publicized work of the United States Sanitary Commission and its investigations of sanitary conditions in army hospitals reinforced the idea of the importance of cleanliness to health and the connection between filth and disease.

After the Civil War, Americans concerned with urban slums were faced with constantly accelerating urban growth and new waves of immigration which made the slums more threatening. By 1900, for example, New York City's population was 3,437,202, of whom 37 percent were foreign born. Other cities in both the East and Midwest experienced similar spurts of growth. Labor unrest and frequent economic depressions added to the disorder and violence characteristic of post-Civil War cities, and city bosses assumed control of municipal governments. Yet, as Morton Keller has pointed out, Gilded Age urban social reformers were limited in their capacity to take remedial action against the slums. Their desire for governmental economy, their hostility to governmental activism, and their belief that the poor were responsible for their own condition or that poverty arose out of unalterable social or hereditary laws combined to inhibit effective action. The major exception to this limitation was the area of public health and a wave of sanitary reform swept Gilded Age cities.

Although the provision of public baths was one of the goals of sanitary reformers, the public bath movement gained momentum slowly. Probably the key development prior to 1890 was the establishment by several municipalities of free open-air or enclosed summer bathing facilities along river- or oceanfronts. The erection and maintenance of these baths at public expense probably encouraged the bath proponents by paving the way for popular acceptance of the idea of more expensive year-round baths as a logical extension of municipal services.

In 1866 in Boston a joint committee of the common council and board of aldermen was appointed "to examine and report upon the practicability of establishing within this city one or more Bathing Places for the free accommodation of the public." At first it hoped to set up saltwater baths for the summer and warm and cold freshwater baths for the rest of the year. But the committee found that year-round baths would be too expensive and instead concentrated on summer baths. The sum of $10,000
was appropriated at first with another $10,000 added later. The committee then selected six locations for saltwater baths. In June 1866 Boston opened five floating baths at river sites and one natural beach bath (the L Street Bathing Beach). The floating baths were wooden, dock-like structures, the shape and depth of modern swimming pools, with dressing rooms located around the sides. Some of them had shallow areas for small children; river water was used to fill them. In their first summer of operation these baths were highly successful, recording a total of 433,690 bathers. Boston’s total population at the time was approximately 200,000. In the next thirty years more of these baths were opened, and in 1897 Boston could boast 14 floating and beach baths operating under the supervision of the board of health. In placing these baths under this jurisdiction the municipal government was emphasizing that their purpose was to promote cleanliness, although the patrons probably considered them mainly recreational.

New York City closely followed Boston’s pioneering efforts in the provision of summer bath facilities. In its annual report for 1866 the
board of health had urged the establishment of a system of free public baths, at the same time hoping that this would not "incur an unwarrantable expense to the municipal government." In the decade from 1868 to 1878 the New York State legislature passed a series of laws authorizing New York City to build floating baths to be located in the East and Hudson rivers and at the Battery. The first two floating baths were built and opened in 1870, and by 1888 the city had built and was operating under the Department of Public Works 15 floating baths. These baths cost an average of $9,500 each to build, and after 1888 an average of 2,500,000 males and 1,500,000 females used the baths yearly during the bathing season (approximately June 10 to October 1).

New York's floating baths were free, were very popular among the poorer citizens of New York, and provided welcome relief from summer heat. There was a conflict, however, for the floating bath patrons considered them mainly a means of recreation, whereas the city authorities considered them a means to cleanliness and imposed a twenty-minute time limit for bathing. On hot summer days young boys often went from
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

one floating bath to another, dirtying themselves on the way so as not to be denied admittance. Almost before the last floating bath was built, the problem of the pollution of the river water by sewage was reaching serious proportions. As a result, in 1914 all floating baths were required to be watertight, and if river water was used, it had to be purified and filtered.\(^\text{39}\)

In Philadelphia also, several summer river baths were opened in the Gilded Age. In 1885, however, some of these baths were closed due to river pollution, and the city opened its first swimming pool. By 1899 the city of Philadelphia was operating eight such pools approximately 40 by 60 feet in size, but all its river baths had been closed because of pollution.\(^\text{40}\)

The floating baths, beaches, and swimming pools, which were open only in the summer, did not solve the problem of the uncleanliness of the poor. They did, nevertheless, become an accepted part of the services a city should provide for its inhabitants. The next step, probably hastened by the pollution of the floating baths, was the provision of year-round bath facilities, which, as has been seen, had already been urged by the American Medical Association in 1849, the Massachusetts Sanitary Board in 1850, and the New York City Board of Health in 1866. In 1879 the *New York Daily Tribune* ran an editorial which urged “this great city” to establish year-round hot water baths, maintaining that, “every work of this nature is a direct benefit to the city. . . . A large proportion of the diseases which crowd our hospitals are engendered by uncleanliness much of which might be removed by effective public bathing facilities.” In 1883 another *Tribune* editorial pressed for the construction of public baths, admitting that a municipal bath system would be costly but maintaining that the death rate would decrease and intemperance and immorality would be diminished. It suggested that a wealthy citizen might donate a bath to the city instead of a library, college, or art gallery. Such a person “could not choose a better or easier way by which not alone to keep their memories green, but to ameliorate the lot of their less fortunate fellows and to elevate and civilize both their contemporaries and posterity.”\(^\text{41}\)

While both these editorials met with no response from city officials or philanthropists in New York, a more official statement came from the Tenement House Committee of 1884, which had been created by the state legislature to investigate slum conditions in New York City. Among its recommendations was the following: “That the city shall establish free winter baths throughout the tenement house districts of the city. . . . Free
Origins of the Public Bath Movement

winter baths would greatly enhance the cleanliness of the tenement house population, would lessen the danger of disease, and would be one safeguard against the spread of epidemics."42

Although this recommendation too had no immediate effect, the way was paved for the bath reformers who would become more numerous and insistent in the 1890s. In this decade and the next the movement for public baths gained great momentum and the bath reformers saw their desires become reality, not only in New York but in many cities throughout the United States.