Tammany Hall versus Reformers: The Public Baths of New York City

Reform in the Progressive Era was not always the product of mass protest movements as many have described it in the past, but of a relatively small group of people who saw possibilities of “social engineering” through organized and bureaucratic effort, private as well as public.

—SAMUEL P. HAYS

The Campaign for Municipal Baths in New York City, 1887–1900

The quotation at the head of this chapter very aptly applies to the events leading up to the building of public baths in New York City, for this reform was largely the result of actions taken by private individuals and a variety of charitable organizations whose agitation for more than a decade finally forced the city government to take action. The impetus came neither from the city government itself nor from the tenement dwellers for whose benefit the baths were built. Bath advocates were most successful with the New York State legislature, and the history of the public bath movement from 1887 to 1901 (when the first municipal bath was opened) is that of a struggle to force city authorities to implement existing legislation.

The antibath forces do not appear as an organized group. In fact, the only group which actively opposed the building of public baths was the owners of commercial bathing establishments, and they were few. Suc-
cessive city administrations under control of the Tammany Hall Demo-
cratic machine in the 1890s were not interested in building public baths
and were largely responsible for the delay in the implementation of legis-
lation. Public baths were not a major vote-getting issue, and the lack of
popular ground swell in favor of them probably accounts for Tammany's
lack of interest. Only under the reform administration of Mayor William
L. Strong (1895–97) did the construction of the first municipal baths
begin, and even during this period there were delays and misunder-
standings.

As we have seen, the construction of floating baths in New York City,
beginning in 1868, paved the way for demands that the city build year-
round baths. Sporadically during the 1880s, the press, the Tenement
House Committee of 1884, and the New York State legislature all recom-
mended the establishment of free year-round baths to no avail. However,
by the beginning of the 1890s the leadership of the bath movement had
emerged and solidified and the effort began to achieve some success.¹

New York City Progressives in general (the settlement-house workers,
those involved in charitable organizations, and the anti-Tammany coal-
tion of business and professional groups) favored the municipal provi-
sion of public baths, but baths were not high on their list of reform
priorities. Settlement houses and other charitable organizations, for ex-
ample, often provided a few shower baths for the public, but all these
organizations were more active in promoting reforms other than public
baths. To these reformers the need to root out corruption in urban
government and correct more life-threatening slum conditions took pre-
cedence over the provision of public baths.

The leaders of the bath movement were more single-minded and
worked primarily for the achievement of this one reform. In New York,
Simon Baruch was the foremost individual bath advocate; the charitable
organization, the New York Association for Improving the Condition of
the Poor, lent its early and continuous support. On the state level, Good-
win Brown furnished the necessary leadership. The New York City press
and physician's organizations also consistently supported the cause. In
most American cities women played an important role in the public bath
movement, but this did not occur in New York.

Simon Baruch, usually acknowledged as “the father of the public bath
movement in the United States” and also the father of the more famous
Bernard, was born in Germany and emigrated to South Carolina while in
his teens. A regular, or orthodox, physician, he was awarded an M.D. degree by the Medical College of Virginia in 1862. He immediately joined the Confederate army as an assistant surgeon and served actively until the end of the Civil War. He settled in Camden, South Carolina, and practiced medicine there until 1881, when he moved to New York City. Baruch became prominent in 1888, when he successfully operated in a case he had diagnosed as appendicitis. This was supposedly the first time this operation had been performed in America and became standard treatment thereafter. He was best known, however, as a leading exponent of hydrotherapy and was the author of two standard texts on the subject, *The Uses of Water in Modern Medicine* (1892) and *The Principles and Practice of Hydrotherapy* (1898). He was also professor of hydrotherapy at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. Baruch was not interested only in hydrotherapy but wrote in medical journals on a variety of topics including malarial fevers and strychnine poisoning. A bibliography of his works runs to thirty-two pages.

The step from hydrotherapy to municipal bath advocacy was a logical one. Baruch became interested in the cause of public baths after a European trip in the late 1880s during which he was greatly impressed by the German municipal bath systems. From this point onward Baruch devoted more and more of his time to the cause of public baths. He was one of the founders of the American Association for Promoting Hygiene and Public Baths and served as its president from its inception in 1912 until his death in 1921. He wrote: "I consider that I have done more to save life and prevent the spread of disease in my work for public baths than in all my work as a physician."

The background of Goodwin Brown, the state's other leading bath advocate, was quite different from that of Simon Baruch. Born in Henderson, New York, in 1852, Brown was a graduate of Cornell University and practiced law in Buffalo. As a member of the newly established State Lunacy Commission in 1889, Brown became interested in public baths. After introducing shower baths in state institutions for the insane, Brown was the leading force in ensuring passage of the New York State municipal bath laws of 1892 and 1895 by the state legislature. In a series of letters to New York City newspapers in 1900 Brown claimed sole credit for the passage of these laws, although he and Baruch had apparently conferred as early as 1892.

Inspired by the European example, Baruch began his campaign for
municipal baths in New York City in the late 1880s and early 1890s. He was responsible for the shower baths set up in the New York Juvenile Asylum and was active in addressing medical societies, the board of health, and other groups on the need for public baths. He succeeded first in interesting the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, which built the very successful People's Baths on the Lower East Side, which opened in August 1891.5

Baruch also approached the Tammany-controlled city government in 1891 but was rebuffed by Mayor Hugh Grant. He then communicated with Alderman Henry Flegenheimer, who already had indicated his interest in the cause of public baths by offering in the New York Sun to open a subscription for this purpose by donating $250. Although nothing had come of Flegenheimer's offer, he and Baruch were able to persuade the board of aldermen on May 11, 1891, to pass a resolution "appropriating $25,000 for an experimental Rain Bath, and asking the Mayor to appoint a committee of three to supervise its construction." However, after several interviews with Mayor Grant, Flegenheimer stated that the mayor would "not act in the matter unless pushed to it by an overwhelming public sentiment," so nothing came of this resolution.6

A year later, the efforts of New York City's bath advocates produced a response in the New York State legislature. Under the leadership of Goodwin Brown enabling legislation (Chapter 473), which authorized any city, village, or town to establish free public baths and to make expenditures for this purpose, was passed in May 1892. This law remained a dead letter and was never implemented by New York City.7

The election of Thomas F. Gilroy as mayor of New York City in 1892 gave the bath advocates some hope, even though he was associated with Tammany Hall. He had been commissioner of public works and was closely identified with the very popular floating baths, but as mayor he was no more responsive than Grant had been. Again the bath reformers turned to the state legislature. In February 1893 Assemblyman Otto Kempner, after consultation with Baruch and New York City's health commissioner, introduced in the legislature a bill to establish a bureau of public baths in the city of New York and to provide for the construction and maintenance of six permanent public baths.8

Once more the opposition of Tammany obstructed the realization of bath reform. In March 1893 Baruch urged Mayor Gilroy to support Kempner's bill, which had no hope of passage if it was opposed by the
Tammany Hall versus Reformers

mayor. The New York Times and Evening Telegram endorsed the bill editorially and many physicians favored it. However, Baruch reported, "I cannot say that Mayor Gilroy was especially impressed. He said he believed there was no public sentiment in favor of such baths." At committee hearings on the bill, city authorities were "bitterly opposed" to it and the bill was not reported out of committee. The reasons for this opposition are obscure, but most likely public apathy and fiscal restraint played a role.9

The years 1894 and 1895, however, marked a turning point for New York City's public bath movement. The bath reformers had done little specifically to produce this change, although their earlier work had its influence. It was rather the result of a wave of revulsion against Tammany government, which prompted a general city reform movement beneficial to all reform—including the cause of public baths. The reforming spirit of 1894 began in February, when the Republican-controlled legislature formed a committee to investigate New York City's police department. The crusading Reverend Charles H. Parkhurst had already charged the department with blackmail, extortion, and corruption. These charges were largely substantiated by the Lexow Committee hearings, which also traced the close connection between the police department and Tammany Hall.10

In May 1894 the state legislature established another committee to inquire into conditions in New York City. This was the Tenement House Committee of 1894, whose chairman was Richard Watson Gilder, former editor of Scribner's Monthly and well-known reformer. The committee's careful and factual study of the appalling conditions in New York City's slums had a significant effect on the municipal bath movement. As has already been noted, the committee found that in a slum population of 255,033 people only 306 had access to bathrooms in their dwelling places and also found that the year-round public bath facilities available to this slum population were meagre. Stressing the importance of cleanliness to health and to the prevention of disease, the committee asserted that the fact that "several hundred thousand people in the city have no proper facilities for keeping their bodies clean is a disgrace to the city and to the civilization of the nineteenth century." The committee's Report to the state legislature recommended that, "in addition to the free floating baths, maintained in the summer months, the city should open in the crowded districts fully equipped bathing establishments, on the best European models, and with moderate charges."11
In September 1894, the anti-Tammany forces in New York City began to unite for the purpose of electing a reform mayor. Good government clubs, the German American Reform Union, the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York, anti-Tammany Democrats, Protestant moral reformers, Protestant and Jewish charity trustees, and Republicans were included among the members of New York City's elite who put together the Committee of Seventy. Formed as a result of a Madison Square Garden mass meeting on September 6, 1894, of a “representative body of citizens,” the committee’s purpose was to take “advantage of the present state of public feeling to organize a citizens’ movement for the government of the City of New York, entirely outside of party politics and solely in the interest of efficiency, economy, and the public health, comfort and safety.” The chairman of the Committee of Seventy was Joseph Laroque, a former president of the city’s bar association, prominent member of the chamber of commerce, and mugwump. Members included J. Pierpont Morgan, investment banker Jacob Schiff, Gustav Schwab of the North American Lloyd Steamship Company, Carl Schurz, Elihu Root, former reform mayor Abram S. Hewitt, and the Reverend Charles Parkhurst.\textsuperscript{12}

The Committee of Seventy was organized into executive and financial committees, and a series of subcommittees were set up to attack specific city issues, such as street cleaning, garbage disposal, small parks, public schools, tenement house reform, and public baths and lavatories. In addition, the platform of the Committee of Seventy included a call for “the establishment of adequate Public Baths and Lavatories for the promotion of cleanliness and increased public comfort, at appropriate places throughout the city.”\textsuperscript{13}

The Committee of Seventy’s first task was to select a mayoral candidate to run against Hugh J. Grant, the Tammany candidate. Its choice was one of its own members, William L. Strong, a millionaire businessman, banker, and former president of the Business Men’s Republican Club. Strong won the mayoral election of 1894 in a substantial victory for New York City’s coalition of reformers. The work of the Committee of Seventy, however, did not stop with this success. After the election, in early 1895, the subcommittees began to issue their reports.\textsuperscript{14}

The members of the Sub-Committee on Baths and Lavatories were men of varied backgrounds. The chairman was William Gaston Hamilton, a grandson of Alexander Hamilton and a retired businessman who
had been chairman of the People's Baths Committee of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. The vice-chairman was Moreau Morris, a physician who had long been interested in public health, having served in the 1860s and 1870s as health commissioner and as superintendent of New York City's health department and was still serving as a sanitary inspector with the health department. Morris had also served as a member of the Tenement House Committee of 1884, which had unsuccessfully recommended the building of public baths. William H. Tolman, the secretary of the subcommittee, was a professional reformer, general agent for the AICP, and secretary of the Reverend Charles Parkhurst's City Vigilance League. Later in his career he organized, with Josiah Strong, the League for Social Service (later the American Institute of Social Service). He was also the author of several books, including *Municipal Reform Movements in the United States*, *The Better New York*, and *Social Engineering*.15

The three other members' interest in the issue of public baths is less clear. James P. Archibald was a prominent labor and political leader. Born in Ireland, he migrated to the United States at the age of twenty and had become a paperhanger. In 1894 he was president of the Brotherhood of Paper Hangers and Decorators and secretary of the Central Labor Union. Active in politics, he had been a member of the United Labor party, the People's Municipal League, and the Henry George movement, and was an anti-Tammany Democrat and president of the Democratic Association of Workingmen of Greater New York. As a representative of labor, Archibald was an important member of the Committee of Seventy. Another member was John P. Faure, secretary of the Committee of Seventy. A businessman, he was active in charitable work and was chairman of the Floating Hospital, St. John's Guild. In 1895 Mayor Strong appointed him commissioner of Charities and Correction. The other member was David H. King, Jr., a socially prominent contractor who built Madison Square Garden and the Washington Arch.16

It is not clear why Simon Baruch was not a member of the Sub-Committee on Public Baths and Lavatories. Logically he should have been a member and he was eager to serve. John P. Faure, secretary of the Committee of Seventy, called on him in November 1894, after Strong's victory, and apparently informally invited him to become a member. Yet in the end, Baruch's membership was officially rejected, probably because of his identification with the regular Democratic party.17
Tammany Hall versus Reformers

The Sub-Committee on Baths and Lavatories issued its fifteen-page Preliminary Report in early 1895. The report began by asserting that New York City was lagging far behind European and other American cities in the building of baths and urged that the city begin immediately to remedy the situation. It recommended that the city build modest bathhouses on 25 by 100-foot lots, each equipped with 40 shower baths and public laundry facilities, and suggested six sites in tenement neighborhoods. It felt that this would be preferable to "two or three great bathing institutions costing large sums of money." The subcommittee further recommended that the city equip public schools with baths and requested that the architects of the People's Baths, Cady, Berg, and See, submit a plan for a bathhouse.\(^\text{18}\)

Bath advocates, in addition to support from the Strong administration, achieved another major victory on April 21, 1895, when the New York State legislature passed a law (Chapter 351) making the establishment of public baths mandatory for all first- and second-class cities in the state (at that time, New York City, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Troy, and Utica). The local board of health was to determine the number of baths necessary, baths were to be kept open fourteen hours per day, and hot and cold water were to be provided. This law, which was framed by Goodwin Brown, passed without difficulty. The background of its passage is obscure, and seemingly it had no direct connection with the Committee of Seventy, except that perhaps the Republican-controlled legislature wanted to assist the newly elected Republican mayor of the City of New York in producing demanded reforms.\(^\text{19}\)

In July 1895, Mayor Strong began to take action on the question of municipal baths. The Committee of Seventy had disbanded on June 19, but on July 5 the mayor requested that the Sub-Committee on Baths and Lavatories reconstitute itself as the Mayor's Committee to continue its investigations and make further recommendations. The membership of the Mayor's Committee, therefore, was identical to that of the subcommittee except for John P. Faure, who did not serve because he had been appointed commissioner of Charities and Correction. The creation of the Mayor's Committee received wide coverage in the New York press, which for the first time showed a sustained interest in the municipal bath movement, not only in its editorial pages but also in reports on the preliminary recommendations of the committee and feature articles on the already existing public baths operating under charitable auspices.\(^\text{20}\)
The Mayor's Committee, although not issuing its final report until 1897, quickly made preliminary recommendations which were substantially the same as those of its original Committee of Seventy report. However, it did upgrade its recommendation on the type of bath to be built, suggesting a 50 by 100-foot lot and a building containing 80 baths rather than 40. The secretary of the committee, William H. Tolman, recommended that the majority of the bath facilities (about 75 percent) should be subject to a fee and the remainder be free. Although the mandatory bath law required that municipal baths be free, Tolman contended that "a bath is not a charity . . . but should be a municipal provision for cleanliness on the payment of a fair charge. Then the user retains his independence." 21

With these recommendations, New York began to implement the mandatory bath law of 1895. In August of that year, the board of health approved plans for a large bathhouse and the city began to search for a site as well as for the necessary appropriation. What followed, however, was an almost comic series of delays which prevented the opening of New York City's first municipal bath until 1901. 22

The first cause of delay was the passage by the state legislature in March 1896 of an additional bath law (Chapter 122) which empowered the city to issue $200,000 worth of consolidated stock to cover the cost of public baths and authorized the city to locate public baths and toilets "in any public park of the City of New York." Mayor Strong had apparently requested this last provision to save the city the expense of buying land for bathhouses and comfort stations. 23

A site was selected on Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side, but this choice resulted in strong opposition from the residents of this predominantly German and Irish neighborhood, who held an indignant meeting on May 26, 1896, protesting the construction of a public bath on this site. The New York Daily Tribune reported that the residents, in "proceedings . . . of a vehement, impassioned and turbulent nature," asserted that there was no need for a bath to be located there and suggested a site farther to the south on the Lower East Side, where the residents were newer Jewish and Italian immigrants. Tompkins Square residents felt further that locating a public bath in their park (which was small and the only park in the area) would "ruin the enjoyment" of those using the park for recreation and would be a detriment rather than a gain for their neighborhood. Although they did not actually state it, these people were
rejecting the idea that they were so poor that they needed a public bath. They then appointed a committee, which included their alderman, assemblyman, and the pastor of the local Roman Catholic church, to testify at a meeting of the board of aldermen to be held the next day, where the Mayor’s Committee on Public Baths and Lavatories was to make a report. Although the representatives of the neighborhood did not have the opportunity to speak, their opposition had its effect; they were joined by the editorial voice of the New York Times, which affirmed that the city needed more parks rather than fewer and that, in any case, parks were no place for free public baths. The Times’ objection to locating baths in parks failed to move the city authorities, who were, however, impressed by the neighborhood opposition, and the Tompkins Square site was dropped. In June 1896 a new site was selected in a proposed new park, also on the Lower East Side. This bath, the Seward Park Bath, which did not open until 1904, was the first of four baths to be located in public parks.24

Once this decision was made, the question of municipal baths was quiescent for the remainder of 1896, but interest revived in early 1897 mainly as a result of the publication in book form of the Mayor’s Committee official Report on Public Baths and Comfort Stations. This report, an important document in the municipal bath movement and the first major work on the subject to appear in this country, was mostly the work of William H. Tolman, the secretary of the committee. It was 249 pages, lavishly illustrated, and surveyed municipal baths in detail in Europe and the United States. The cost of publishing the report was raised by private subscription after the city government failed to provide the necessary funds. The report once again urged that the city build public baths: “It is needless to mention the imperative necessity of a sufficient number of free public baths in a great city like New York.” The report further asserted that the operation of public baths was “clearly a municipal function.”25

The Mayor’s Committee Report prompted favorable editorial comment in the New York press and criticism of the Strong administration for its inaction. The New York Daily Tribune expressed hope that the report would “not be left to moulder among the musty documents of things talked about” and chided the city for going no further in the building of public baths than picking out a “site on a small park yet to be created.” The New York Times also editorialized that there was “an urgent need of cheap and attractive public facilities for bathing” in New York City and once again urged the Strong administration to act quickly.26
In spite of the revival of interest in public baths, further delay ensued as confusion developed over the issue of whether the Public Bath Law of 1896 actually required that baths be located in public parks. The mayor and his committee thought it did, but Simon Baruch, supported by the press and his fellow physicians in the New York Academy of Medicine, insisted that baths could be located on sites other than parks. It is not clear whether Baruch and his supporters were able to convince Mayor Strong of the correctness of their interpretation, but a site at 326 Rivington Street, where the city owned the land, was selected for New York City's first municipal bath. In December 1897, two and one-half years after the passage of the mandatory bath law of 1895, ground was broken at this site. The Rivington Street Bath, which did not open until March 23, 1901, cost $95,691 and had 91 showers and 10 bathtubs. In building such a large bath, the city was following the recommendation of the Mayor's Committee rather than that of Baruch and the New York press, which favored smaller baths. 

In 1897 New York City's reformers organized for the mayoral election of that year. Mayor Strong had declined to run for another term, and the coalition of reformers who had formed the Committee of Seventy had disintegrated. Although Strong had achieved success in reforming the police department, the sanitation department, and the public school system, questions of patronage, of economy and efficiency versus increased expenditures for education and welfare, and conflict over Sunday closing laws combined to destroy the coalition which had elected him. In its place a narrower group of reformers, mainly Protestant and Jewish philanthropists, charity workers, and moral reformers, organized the Citizens' Union under the leadership of R. Fulton Cutting. Cutting, a patrician descendant of Robert Livingston and Robert Fulton and a leading New York financier and philanthropist, was active in the cause of municipal baths as president of the AICP from 1892 to 1921, president of the Citizens' Union from 1897 to 1909, and one of the founders of the Bureau of Municipal Research. All these organizations played an important role in New York's municipal bath movement. It is no surprise then that the Citizens' Union's first publication was a pamphlet entitled Public Baths and Lavatories, which urged the construction of more municipal baths.

The mayoral election of 1897 was a crucial one both because the mayor would serve for four years instead of two and because he would be the mayor of Greater New York, as a result of the proposed consolidation of
New York City and the surrounding areas, including the city of Brooklyn, into one giant city. The reformers selected as their candidate Seth Low, former mayor of Brooklyn and president of Columbia University. Republicans, however, put forth their own candidate, General Benjamin F. Tracy, a close friend of the Republican boss, Thomas Platt. The Tammany Democrats ran Judge Robert Van Wyck on the slogan “To hell with reform.” With Republican and reform votes divided, the election of Van Wyck was a foregone conclusion.\(^{29}\)

The loss of reform influence apparently disheartened the bath advocates temporarily, for during the first eighteen months of Van Wyck’s administration there was little activity, except for a mass meeting of Lower East Side residents at the University Settlement who demanded public baths. By the middle of 1899, however, both the *New York Daily Tribune* and Simon Baruch, in a letter to that newspaper, praised the efforts of the Strong administration to comply with the mandatory bath law of 1895 and deplored the failure of the Van Wyck administration to build more municipal baths.\(^{30}\)

Finally, in June 1899, the Van Wyck administration moved to placate New York’s municipal bath advocates by requesting approval from the board of estimate of a bond issue of $300,000 for municipal baths to be located in all five boroughs of the city. But no subsequent action was taken, apparently because of opposition from the city controller, who stated later that he felt the city had too many other expenses and was dangerously near the debt limit.\(^{31}\)

From this point in 1899 until the Rivington Street Bath opened in March 1901, no further progress was made by the municipal bath movement in New York City. In 1900, after more than a decade of agitation and a great deal of ostensible progress, the city still did not have a single year-round municipal bath.

Several factors account for this lack of actual accomplishment. In the early 1890s the Tammany-controlled mayoral administrations of Hugh J. Grant and Thomas F. Gilroy showed no interest at all in the bath movement. Despite the passage of the permissive bath law no move was made by the city administrations to implement it. They explained their reluctance in terms of lack of public interest, which probably was an important factor. At no time during this period was there much genuine popular demand for municipal baths. Reformers and the local press were the main supporters of public baths.
Tammany Hall versus Reformers

The election of the reform mayor William L. Strong, who supported public baths and the passage of the mandatory public bath law of 1895, should have brought prompt success for New York's municipal bath movement, but for various reasons it did not. Confusion over whether the public bath law of 1896 required that baths be located in parks caused delay, as did the ongoing move toward the creation of Greater New York, which became reality on January 1, 1898. This impending change gave the Strong administration a sense of impermanence and insecurity and made it unwilling to commit itself to change in many areas. The return of Tammany control in 1898 caused further delay as Tammany was still not interested in the subject and made only a token move to plan for further baths, which achieved no results.32

It was not only the political situation, however, that contributed to the comparative failure of the movement for public baths. The leaders of the movement were also responsible. They were not unified and never organized as a group to put effective pressure on the municipal authorities. Their activities throughout most of this period were sporadic rather than sustained. The activities of Goodwin Brown in Albany, which resulted in the passage of the laws of 1892 and 1895, were not coordinated with those of the city bath reformers, and he, in fact, jealously stated that he was solely responsible for these laws. Although Simon Baruch worked with the AICP in the building of the People's Baths and attempted to influence the Tammany administrations, he was not a member of either the Committee of Seventy's Sub-Committee on Baths and Lavatories or of the Mayor's Committee and thus did not lend his influence to their efforts.

From 1887 to 1900 the political situation in New York City, confusion during the administration of its one reform mayor, public indifference, and the disunity of the bath reformers themselves all combined to produce only very modest results in the municipal bath movement.

Success and Misgivings, 1901–1915

The fourteen years following the opening of the Rivington Street Bath in March 1901 were in complete contrast to the previous decade, for now the bath advocates, under the leadership of the AICP, at last achieved resounding success. The city heeded their demands and built sixteen more public baths in Manhattan, seven in Brooklyn, and one each in the
Bronx and Queens. Only rural Staten Island did not get a public bath. Shower baths were also set up in twenty-six public schools. During this period, the AICP also assumed a watchdog role by attempting to ensure that the baths were well patronized and economically and efficiently operated.

Even before the Rivington Street Bath was opened, the AICP criticized the Van Wyck administration for extravagance. Commissioner Henry S. Kearny of the Department of Public Buildings, Lighting and Supplies, under whose jurisdiction the new bathhouse fell, had requested the sum of $51,947.50 for the first year's operation of the bath, and $35,000 had been appropriated. The AICP, in a letter to the mayor, objected and stated:

It is the belief of the Board of Managers of this Association, founded upon eight years' practical knowledge of the matter, that the expenditure of any such sum as $35,000 for one year's maintenance of the Free Public Bath in Rivington Street, is unnecessary, unwarranted, and prejudicial to progress in extending the public bath system.

They further offered to operate the bath for the first year for $17,500.33

This controversy was well publicized and debated in the press. Kearny defended himself by noting that the bath was much larger than the People's Baths and was required to be open sixteen hours per day and that city employees worked only eight hours per day while AICP employees could work twelve. The AICP responded by renewing their $17,500 offer. An editorial in the New York Daily Tribune commented that the difference between the AICP figures and Kearny's figures represented "the margin of official waste in the Tammany method of conducting a public enterprise as compared with the cost of doing the same work under the management of plain businessmen." In the end Kearny was forced to reduce his estimate of the amount necessary to maintain and operate the bath to $24,272. He pledged that he would try "to keep the expenditures within this estimate and can assure you that I will hold myself responsible for any extravagance or wanton expenditure of money."34

The official opening of the Rivington Street Bath in March 1901, although it occurred without fanfare, received ample coverage in the press in both favorable editorials and feature stories. The New York Daily Tribune reported that the new bath had "been received with joy by the men, women and children of the overcrowded district of the East Side."
strongest press campaign for more municipal baths came in July 1901, when the *Evening Post* published a three-part series of feature articles on its front pages. Appealing to civic pride, the *Post* pointed out how far New York City lagged behind the cities of Europe and other American cities in the building of public baths. It attributed the delay to Tammany Hall and asked why "Tammany ever anxious to undertake building jobs and to compass public works which appeal ostentatiously to the people" had shown so little interest in public baths. Citing the great need for public baths and the necessity of educating the poor on the importance of regular bathing, the articles asserted that it was the city's duty to provide public baths. Editorially, the *Post* urged economy: "What New York needs is a large number of small cheap baths, scattered throughout the crowded districts, not on such a lavish scale as the one bathhouse in Rivington Street."\(^{35}\)

In the face of these demands and the upcoming mayoral election in November 1901, the Van Wyck administration took action. First, the president of the board of education requested an appropriation of $30,000 for shower baths to be located in the basements of ten public schools, stating that he considered "the school bath system as important as the system of school libraries." Then Commissioner Kearny recommended that five new baths be built in Manhattan, three in Brooklyn, and one each in the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island at a cost of $33,000 each, these new facilities to be smaller and less costly than the first bath.\(^{36}\)

The AICP was quick to criticize this recommendation. Its president, R. Fulton Cutting, and its general agent, Frank Tucker, claimed that the city had underestimated the cost of land and building. Inexpensive baths of this kind, they said, would not stand up to the wear and tear of constant use and would not provide enough light and ventilation. At the October board of estimate meeting, a resolution was introduced calling for a bond issue of $350,000 to provide for eleven free baths. The board, however, referred the matter to the city controller and no further action was taken at that time.\(^{37}\)

It seems obvious that the flurry of activity regarding the question of municipal baths on the part of the Tammany administration of Mayor Van Wyck was a response to the concentrated newspaper campaign for baths in the summer of 1901. More than likely it was also in preparation for the approaching mayoral election of November 1901. In this cam-
Tammany Hall versus Reformers

Campaign both Tammany and the reform and Republican forces, now united behind the candidacy of Seth Low, came out for the establishment of more free baths in New York City.

Seth Low won the mayoral election of 1901 and proved to be an effective, if not especially popular, reform mayor. A former businessman, two-term mayor of Brooklyn before the Greater New York consolidation, and former president of Columbia University, Low provided the city with an honest and progressive government which strictly enforced existing laws and enacted many reforms.38

The bath reformers were not slow in presenting their case to the Low administration. In February 1902, the Public Bath Committee of the AICP, chaired by John Seely Ward, Jr., and including among its members Eugene Delano, former president of the board of trustees of the Public Baths Association of Philadelphia, sent a report to Manhattan’s borough president, Jacob A. Cantor, who was now charged with responsibility for the existing bath. This detailed report began by reviewing the success of the People’s Baths and the Rivington Street Bath, as well as municipal baths in other cities, such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston. It asserted that public baths should be located in the centers of densely populated districts and “should look clean, feel warm, smell sweet, have a generous supply of hot water and be conducted in a quiet, orderly way.” The report recommended that the city construct sixteen more bathhouses in Manhattan to attain an adequate municipal bath system in the borough, as well as suggesting sites and including architect’s plans for these new baths. In spite of the feeling on the part of many bath advocates that future baths should be smaller and less expensive than the Rivington Street Bath, the AICP’s recommendations were for the larger, more expensive type of bath, which, it maintained, would be more economical to build (cost less per shower compartment) and to maintain. The city followed these recommendations for larger baths and located future Manhattan baths, as a rule, in the vicinity of the sites suggested in this report (see table 3.1).39

The AICP report and recommendations were publicized by the press, and for the first time the people as well as city officials supported the municipal bath reformers in New York. Borough President Cantor expressed his approval of the report and promised to have a measure introduced at the next meeting of the board of aldermen appropriating $300,000 for municipal baths.40
## Table 3.1. Municipal Baths of New York City, 1915

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bath</th>
<th>Year of Opening</th>
<th>Cost of Opening</th>
<th>Cost of Construction</th>
<th>Cost of Land</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Manhattan</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>326 Rivington St.</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>$95,691</td>
<td>City owned</td>
<td>$95,691</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>327 West 41st St.</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>101,550</td>
<td>$33,750</td>
<td>135,300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133 Allen St.</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>92,935</td>
<td>34,805</td>
<td>127,740</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>538 East 11th St.</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>102,989</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>124,989</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>243 East 109th St.</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>110,953</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>129,953</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>232 West 60th St.</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>126,550</td>
<td>12,750</td>
<td>139,300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>523 East 76th St.</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>104,844</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>115,844</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83 Carmine St.</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>132,954</td>
<td>77,190</td>
<td>210,144</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23rd St. and Ave. A</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>259,432</td>
<td>City owned</td>
<td>259,432</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Cherry St.</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>150,985</td>
<td>54,363</td>
<td>205,348</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Rutgers Pl.</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>184,195</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>264,195</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>342 East 54th St.</td>
<td>1911</td>
<td>244,800</td>
<td>72,500</td>
<td>317,300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>407 West 28th St.</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>170,000</td>
<td>56,000</td>
<td>226,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brooklyn</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hicks St.</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>58,043</td>
<td>3,750</td>
<td>61,793</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitkin Ave.</td>
<td>1903</td>
<td>84,436</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>88,456</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montrose Ave.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>95,792</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>96,042</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huron St.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>97,924</td>
<td>5,800</td>
<td>103,724</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duffield St.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>97,493</td>
<td>13,500</td>
<td>110,993</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson Ave.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bronx</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156th St. and Elton Ave.</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>b</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a New York City, *Annual Report of the Business and Transactions of the President of the Borough of Manhattan, City of New York for the Year Ending December 31, 1915*, excerpt from table A. The baths in public parks were located at Seward Park, 138th St. and 5th Ave., 52nd St. and 11th Ave., and 111th St. and 1st Ave. (William Paul Gerhard, *Modern Baths*, 107; Stanley H. Howe, *History, Condition and Needs of Public Baths in Manhattan*).

b Figures unavailable. The location and cost of the bath located in Queens are also unavailable.
Within three weeks, the Citizens' Union sponsored a mass meeting on public baths held in Pacific Hall on the Lower East Side. The speakers included R. Fulton Cutting, president of both the AICP and the Citizens' Union, who spoke on the hygienic virtues of frequent baths, and W. H. Baldwin, Jr., the president of the Long Island Railroad, who spoke on the historic baths of Rome. The principal speaker was Charles Sprague-Smith, who, with Cutting and others, was a founder of the People's Institute, which offered a forum for adult education on the major issues of the day. Sprague-Smith urged the fulfillment of the Low administration's campaign promises to establish "public baths open all year through" and climaxed his speech with the peroration, "Thus, with physical and mental health renewed through cleansed bodies, the people will more intelligently consider the great problem of democracy—which is theirs to solve." The meeting concluded with the adoption of a resolution requesting the city to provide a public bathhouse in the vicinity of the block bounded by Chrystie, Forsyth, Bayard, and Canal streets, one of the sites suggested by the AICP report. In midtown Manhattan, about three hundred persons attended a West Side Neighborhood House meeting urging the city to establish a municipal bath in their neighborhood (West 50th Street).

In Brooklyn, both the Citizens' Union and the Women's Municipal League held public meetings urging board of estimate approval of municipal baths, and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* added its editorial voice to the agitation: "We shall never have a beautiful city till we have a clean city, and the city will never be clean when masses of its inhabitants are dirty." It urged the city to "build baths, big ones, handsome ones, and in every crowded quarter of the town."

In the face of mounting demands, the Board of Estimate and Apportionment in June 1902 approved an appropriation of $480,000 for public baths, an appropriation which had already been approved by the board of aldermen by a vote of sixty-two to one. Three baths were to be provided for Manhattan and two for Brooklyn. Sparked by the election of reformer Seth Low and by the publication of the AICP report, the bath reformers had achieved a substantial victory. Moreover, they had now succeeded in arousing public opinion in favor of municipal baths. It cannot be ascertained how many of the bath advocates who attended the meetings described above would become bath users, but it seems that at least some slum dwellers were actively in favor of municipal baths, es-
Tammany Hall versus Reformers

especially in Manhattan. In Brooklyn, most of the support came from middle class reformers.43

During the remainder of 1902, plans moved forward quickly for the five baths for which appropriations had been made. Sites were chosen by the borough presidents of Manhattan and Brooklyn, and architects' plans were approved by the Municipal Art Commission. The baths were to be located on 50 by 100-foot lots and each was to contain about 100 shower baths with connecting dressing rooms and a few tubs. They were to be imposing in appearance with an architectural style recalling ancient Roman public baths with classical pilasters, columns, arches, and cornices. Substantial materials were to be used throughout; one bath, for example, was to be constructed with brick, terra cotta, stone marble, and copper, and the front was to consist of "ornamental iron work, brick, white Italian marble and granite."44

While plans for the new bathhouse proceeded, the New York press continued to publicize the progress of the bath movement in 1902. In feature articles it not only reported the selection of sites and approval of architect's plans but also discussed the virtues of the Rivington Street Bath. Editorially, the press cited the necessity for municipal baths, congratulated the Low administration for its great progress, and urged the city to build more baths so that every slum dweller would have access to them.45

Although the city government was now assuming responsibility, private philanthropy did not abandon the public bath movement. In June 1902, Elizabeth Milbank Anderson announced that she would donate a public bath, to be built on a 50 by 98-foot lot on East 38th Street, to the AICP. Anderson was heiress to one of the founders of the Borden Condensed Milk Company and was a leading New York philanthropist. During her lifetime she donated approximately $5 million to various institutions, with Barnard College as the chief beneficiary. The bath which she donated, known as the Milbank Memorial Bath, opened in January 1904. A large and imposing facility, it cost $140,000 to build and could accommodate 3,000 bathers daily. In 1914, after a canvass of the neighborhood, the AICP established a wet-wash laundry at the Milbank bath.46

The Low administration continued its interest in municipal baths, and in 1903 appropriations were approved and sites selected for five additional baths in Manhattan. The largest and finest of these was the neo-
Roman East 23rd Street Bath, which was to include a swimming pool and would cost $225,000. This bath, now housing indoor and outdoor swimming pools and renamed the Asser Levy Bath, has since been designated an official landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission. After years of neglect, it underwent an $8 million restoration and reopened in 1990.47

In 1903, control of the city government reverted to Tammany, as the Democrats elected George B. McClellan over the incumbent Low, again nominated by the reformers. In this election both candidates had come out strongly for expanding the municipal bath system, but it remained to be seen if Tammany, so long indifferent to the cause of public baths, would fulfill its pre-election promises.48

By now, however, Tammany, under the more enlightened and progressive rule of boss Charles Francis Murphy, seemed to have wholeheartedly endorsed the cause of municipal baths, for in May 1904 the sum of $1,050,000 was appropriated by the Board of Estimate and Apportionment for eight additional baths: four to be located in Manhattan, three in Brooklyn, and one in the Bronx. With the building of these
baths, New York's municipal bath system was nearly complete. Construction closely followed the suggestions of the AICP report of 1902. The bathhouses were large, elaborate, and imposing edifices which eventually cost the city almost $4 million to build.49

Table 3.1 shows that the municipal baths grew increasingly costly; the least expensive bath was the first one built. The baths also grew more elaborate, and by 1915, six of them were equipped with indoor swimming pools. The West 28th Street Bath, for example, in addition to showers and an indoor swimming pool, had public laundry facilities, a gymnasium with an indoor track, and a roof garden and playground. Five other baths also had gymnasiums. Very likely the growing emphasis on the recreational as opposed to the cleanliness function of the public baths accounts for more public enthusiasm and Tammany support.50

New York City's public baths were located mostly in slum neighborhoods and customarily served one immigrant group, although no neighborhoods were completely homogeneous (see map 1). In Manhattan, baths on Rivington Street, Rutgers Place, and in Seward Park served the Jewish Lower East Side. Irish immigrants and their children could bathe in the bathhouses on Cherry Street on the Lower East Side, West 28th Street in Chelsea, East 23rd Street in the Gashouse District, and West 60th Street in Hell's Kitchen. The proximity of the West 60th Street Bath to the African-American neighborhood called San Juan Hill caused clashes between Irish and black youths who used the bath. Baths were located in Little Italys at Carmine Street in Greenwich Village and East 109th and East 111th streets in Italian Harlem. The East 76th Street Bath was in Little Bohemia, a Czech and Hungarian neighborhood within Yorkville, a larger German neighborhood. The East 54th Street Bath accommodated a largely poor Irish clientele when it opened in 1911, but this bath was located near Beekman and Sutton places, which became fashionable addresses in the 1920s. The juxtaposition of slums and luxury apartment houses here is supposed to have inspired Sidney Kingsley's 1930s play Dead End, although the Dead End kids bathed in the East River rather than the nearby public bath, which had a swimming pool. The 138th Street Bath served African Americans in Harlem, and the East 11th Street Bath was in the heart of the old German district.51

New York City also situated two public baths in vice and entertainment districts. The Allen Street Bath was in a red light district on the
1. The People's Baths
   9 Centre Market Pl.*
2. Milbank Memorial Bath
   325-27 East 38th St.*
3. 326 Rivington St.
4. 5 Rutgers Pl.
5. 100 Cherry St.
6. 133 Allen St.
7. 538 East 11th St.
8. Seward Park
9. 83 Carmine St.
10. 23rd St. and Avenue A
11. 407 West 28th St.
12. 327 West 41st St.
13. 52nd St. and 11th Ave.
14. 342 East 54th St.
15. 232 West 60th St.
16. 523 East 76th St.
17. 243 East 109th St.
18. 111th St. and 1st Ave.
19. 138th St. and 5th Ave.

*Built and operated by the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. The People's Baths closed in 1909.
Tammany Hall versus Reformers

Lower East Side, and the West 41st Street Bath was in the Tenderloin near Times Square. Mostly likely these baths were meant to serve a transient population as well as the residents of the area.\textsuperscript{52}

Despite their success in achieving an elaborate system of municipal baths in New York City, the bath advocates did not rest on their laurels. From 1905 to 1915 they pressed increasingly hard for improvements in the public bath system. Their chief criticisms of the public baths were that the patronage did "not begin to tax their capacity" and that they were extravagant in construction and inefficient in their management. Bath reformers, like other progressive reformers of this era, became obsessed with economy and efficiency. The AICP led the attack in its 1905 annual report, which criticized the administration of the bath system on several counts. It noted the delay in completion of new baths as contractors repeatedly violated the time limits of their contracts. It asserted that the city government was spending large sums of money "filtering water for bathing purposes, which the bathers use for drinking purposes in their own homes unfiltered." The AICP also found payroll and repair accounts unnecessarily high and maintained that the city was not receiving a fair return for money expended. There is no evidence that the municipal government made any response to these criticisms.\textsuperscript{53}

The AICP not only criticized the municipal bath system but took steps to increase the patronage of the baths, as in the case of the East 109th Street Bath in the Italian section of Harlem. Built at a cost of over $129,000, this bath was equipped with 122 showers, seven tubs, marble partitions and floors, and hot and cold filtered water. Despite the bath's attractiveness, only 150 persons patronized it during the first week after its opening in March 1905. The AICP then sent an agent to the neighborhood to publicize the new bath. He visited stores, shops, and factories, and addressed classes at the local public and parochial schools. He and the teachers took groups of children to the bath and sent them home with letters printed in Italian and addressed to their parents regarding the bath. During the fourth week after the opening, patronage increased to 4,712 and the publicity campaign was deemed a success.\textsuperscript{54}

Robert E. Todd of the Bureau of Municipal Research also criticized the public baths on the grounds of underutilization. In two articles which appeared in the magazine Charities and The Survey in 1907 and 1910, Todd noted that during the cooler months the baths were used at only 4–25 percent of capacity, a utilization "disproportionate to the extravagant
expense under which the municipal baths are maintained." This lack of patronage, Todd felt, was due to the fact that the baths had "been constructed on a social base that [was] narrow and largely false, the purpose having been to meet a 'felt want' in the crowded tenement districts." Todd believed that this "felt want" did not exist except in the heat of summer and that the only way to increase public use of the municipal baths was to include swimming pools and gymnasiums, which would attract patrons, especially children and young persons, who would be educated in the habit of bathing regularly. This educational purpose was what Todd considered, very perceptively, to be the most important function of the municipal baths. Actually the New York City government recognized this fact, and most baths built after 1904 contained a swimming pool and some also had a gymnasium.

In 1913 the AICP once again urged the city to improve the municipal bath system. Observing that the capacity of the municipal baths was 61,965 persons daily and that in 1911 the average daily attendance had been only 9,813, it recommended that the city immediately begin a campaign of popularization of the baths to make them more widely known and generally attractive. The AICP also recommended the formation of a Bureau of Public Baths with a superintendent at its head rather than supervision by the individual borough presidents. The association urged that all new baths include public laundries as part of their facilities, that public school baths be open during evening hours, and that all public baths be open all day Sunday. It felt that the baths should be permitted to close early in the winter months when patronage was low, a change which would have required amendment of the Bath Law of 1895. Finally, although the AICP criticized the municipal government for its failure to attract patrons to the baths, it urged the city to build additional small baths in the tenement districts. Once again the municipal government did not respond to any of these criticisms or implement any of the recommendations.

This list of recommendations from the AICP appears to have been the last action taken by the bath reformers to improve the baths of New York City. Although the press reported the AICP's recommendations, it did not support them editorially, and there seems to have been no reaction on the part of the public. The opening of the West 28th Street Bath in 1914 brought to a close the period of construction of New York's municipal system, except for the building in the late 1920s of an additional bath
on West 134th Street to serve Harlem, where African Americans had moved in large numbers during and after World War I.57

The major concern of the bath reformers, once an adequate system of baths was under construction, was the fact that the baths were not patronized to anywhere near their capacity except on the hottest summer days. In Manhattan, for example, patronage for 1906, when seven baths were open, amounted to 3,162,811; in 1915, the first year that all the municipal baths were in operation, it was 7,385,496; in 1920 it was 7,500,056; and in 1933 it was 6,811,605. When it is considered that the actual capacity of Manhattan’s baths was over 20 million per year the patronage seems very low indeed. Meanwhile the cost of maintaining the bath system steadily increased: for example, from $254,040 for 1913 to $362,919 in 1919 in Manhattan.58

The underutilization of New York’s municipal baths except on the hottest summer days can be explained partly by the fact that, although a need for public baths existed in view of the lack of bath facilities in slum tenement dwellings, this need was not felt by the majority of the tenement house population for whom the baths were intended. Tenement house dwellers apparently did not have the habit of bathing regularly year-round or preferred the limited facilities of their own homes. The increased patronage of the baths in the summer and the continuing popularity of the floating baths can be explained by the fact that people were sweater and dirtier in the summer and felt more need for a complete bath. No doubt they also used the baths as a means of cooling off or as recreation.

Another reason for the low patronage of the baths was the increasing number of tenements equipped with bathing facilities. Although the Tenement House Law of 1901 did not require that each new apartment have a bathtub, it did require that each apartment have a private toilet, and most new tenements included a private bathtub as well. A consequence of this new construction was that the owners of many older buildings were forced to add separate bathing and toilet facilities or risk having their tenants move. In 1906 Superintendent of the People’s Baths R. E. Taylor explained their declining patronage to the AICP: “Landlords are putting tubs—bath tubs—in all new flats down this way and when they overhaul an old building. [sic] One place only two blocks from here there have been twenty-four bath-tubs installed during pass [sic] month.” Perhaps if the bath system had been completed in the 1890s, before such
housing reform was instituted, it might have been better patronized. Or, if the baths had not been so large and expensive, the amount of patronage that did exist would have been considered satisfactory.\textsuperscript{59}

After 1915, the bath movement lost vigor, and those reformers who remained interested transferred their efforts to the American Association for Promoting Hygiene and Public Baths, a professional organization of bath reformers and administrators founded in 1912 with Simon Baruch as president. Most of New York’s municipal baths were renovated in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration and continued to operate during World War II. After the war, however, they were either demolished to make way for other structures, converted to other uses, or maintained by the city as public swimming pools and gymnasiums. Only one of Manhattan’s baths, the Allen Street Bath, continued to serve its original purpose until New York’s fiscal crisis of the 1970s forced its closing.\textsuperscript{60}