The Municipal Baths of Boston

The inauguration of winter bath-houses for the free use of the people is something of a novelty in any city in this country, and Boston has the proud distinction of being the pioneer in the work, which is sure to be an important consideration in the growing demand of the larger municipalities in the near future.

On October 15, 1898, the Boston Herald proudly reported the opening of Boston's first year-round municipal bathhouse, the Dover Street Bath. The opening ceremony was attended by more than 500 persons, with the Back Bay well represented, as well as a "large number of men and women who [were] identified with educational and sociological questions of the city." Mayor Josiah Quincy, the leader of Boston's public bath movement and the main speaker, proclaimed, "The opening of this bath marks the full recognition by the city of its duty to bring within the reach of all in winter as well as in summer, facilities for securing the physical cleanliness that bears such close relationship to social and moral well-being." This occasion marked the culmination of many years of effort by Boston sanitarians and social reformers to provide the poor with a means of attaining personal cleanliness.¹

As we have seen, the massive Irish immigration of the 1840s and the overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and filth of the slums in which these
immigrants lived, as well as economic depression and cholera epidemics, prompted the first demands for public baths. The Massachusetts Sanitary Commission in 1850 and a special joint committee of the board of aldermen and the common council in 1860 had urged that Boston provide bathing facilities for its poor, but the city had not responded to these recommendations. Beginning in 1866, however, the city had built fourteen floating baths and one beach bath, which were operated by the board of health during the summer months. These baths did not resolve the question of year-round cleanliness, but the Commonwealth of Massachusetts took a step in this direction in 1874, when it passed enabling legislation permitting any town to purchase or lease lands, erect public baths and washhouses, and raise or appropriate money for these purposes.2

It was not until the early 1890s, however, that any action was taken to implement the Massachusetts Bath Law. The need for year-round public baths was first publicized by Robert A. Woods, who became head resident of Andover House Settlement in Boston's South End in 1892. Believing that settlement-house workers ought to call attention to the needs of their neighborhoods, Woods and the residents of Andover House made regular trips to city hall to appeal to the city council for a public bath. The council listened to their requests but refused to appropriate the money.3

Woods, whom Arthur Mann has called "the philosopher and tactician of the university settlement," was born in Pittsburgh in 1865 of middle class, Scotch-Irish, rigidly Presbyterian parentage. He graduated from Amherst College in 1886 and then attended Andover Theological Seminary. Rather than entering the ministry, however, Woods was attracted to the idea of service through the social settlement movement. In 1891 he went to England to study Toynbee Hall so that a similar establishment could be set up in Boston under the auspices of Andover Theological Seminary, with Woods as its head.4

Woods' approach to municipal reform was realistic and pragmatic rather than doctrinaire and monistic. As Mann has noted, Woods scorned the reformers who thought the millennium would come by throwing out the bosses and getting honest businessmen to run the city. . . . The question was not who ran the government but how it was run; the crucial municipal issue was to extend political functions to satisfy the needs of the poor, to give them baths, gymnasiums, sanitary tenements, parks, playgrounds, clean streets, industrial education.
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Thus, municipal baths were only one aspect of Woods' campaign against urban poverty, but in Josiah Quincy, who was elected Boston's mayor in 1895, he found an ally in his realistic approach and in particular in his demand for baths.\footnote{5}

Josiah Quincy, a member of a patrician and public-spirited Boston family, was the third Mayor Quincy of Boston, for his father and great-grandfather had been mayor before him. Quincy was born in 1859 and was educated at Harvard College and Harvard Law School. He entered politics in 1884, when as a Democrat he campaigned for Cleveland against Blaine. In 1887-88 and 1890-91 Quincy served in the state house of representatives, where he was a member of the committee on cities and worked for the secret ballot law. He was chairman of the Democratic State Committee in 1891-92. In 1893 he was appointed assistant secretary of state by President Cleveland, a position from which he resigned to run for mayor of Boston.\footnote{6}

Raised in a tradition of social paternalism, inspired by the progress of the great cities of Europe in meeting the needs of their citizens, and influenced by his creative friendship with Robert Woods, Quincy, as mayor, determined to bring to Boston a panoply of social innovations including public baths (which were probably his favorite project), playgrounds, public gymnasiums, boys' summer camps, public concerts, and free lectures. Although Quincy is usually considered a reform mayor, he was supported in his election bid by boss Czar Martin Lomasney and worked with Boston's other bosses (Smiling Jim Donovan of the South End, Joseph Corbett and Patrick J. Kennedy of East Boston, John F. Fitzgerald of the North End, and other district leaders) through an informal group dubbed the Board of Strategy. He also cooperated with organized labor and with Boston's leading citizens, social reformers, and philanthropists, whom he involved in the municipal government by appointing them to unpaid commissions, departments, and ad hoc committees in a kind of "participatory bureaucracy." Quincy wrote of his vision of Boston as a community:

The duty of a city is to promote the civilization, in the fullest sense of the word, of all its citizens. No true civilization can exist without the provision of some reasonable opportunities for exercising the physical and mental faculties, of experiencing something of the variety and of the healthful pleasures of life, or feeling at least the degree of self-respect which personal cleanliness brings with it. The people of a city constitute a community, in all which that significant term
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implies; their interests are inextricably bound up together, and everything which promotes the well-being of a large part of the population benefits all.7

The municipal government of Boston in 1895 at the time of Quincy’s election as mayor was unwieldy and in the hands of Irish bosses. The mayor had only moderate executive power, and most of his executive decisions had to be approved by the board of aldermen, which was composed of twelve members elected at large. The common council, the legislative branch, had 72 members elected by district. The real power in the municipal government was in the joint committees of the board of aldermen and the common council, of which there were 56 in 1895. In the same year the mayoral term was changed from one year to two. During his two terms as mayor, Quincy was able to link the diverging classes and interests of the citizens of Boston and for a brief time to make it, as Geoffrey Blodgett noted, “the cutting edge of urban reform in America.”8

In his inaugural address on January 6, 1896, Quincy promised to take action on the issue of public baths:

The maintaining of public baths, open all the year seems to me to be a project for encouraging social and sanitary improvement by municipal action which promises large return for a comparatively small expenditure, and I am of [the] opinion that the experiment of establishing such a public bath in a suitable locality should be tried. I shall recommend such an appropriation to be provided for by loan.

On January 20, 1896, Quincy, probably following the precedent of New York City’s reform mayor William L. Strong, announced the formation of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Public Baths with Robert A. Woods as its chairman. The committee was to investigate the subject, estimate the cost, and recommend the best location for a public bath. It planned to visit New York City to confer with Mayor Strong’s bath committee and inspect the People’s Baths erected by the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor.9

In addition to Woods, the membership of the Boston Bath Committee included Dr. Edward Mussey Hartwell, who was director of physical training in the public schools of Boston. Hartwell was born in 1850 in Exeter, New Hampshire, attended the Boston Latin School, and graduated from Amherst College in 1873. He received a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in 1881 and an M.D. from Miami Medical College in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1882. Hartwell had taught in high school in the 1870s and
was an instructor at Johns Hopkins from 1883 to 1891, when he became Boston’s director of physical training. Hartwell was strongly in favor of public school baths and was also a prominent member of the National Municipal League, which was devoted to municipal reform. He wrote extensively on both municipal reform and public baths. In 1897 Mayor Quincy appointed him secretary of Boston’s newly created Department of Municipal Statistics.10

Two women were also members of the mayor’s advisory committee, Mary Morton Kehew and Laliah Pingree. Kehew, a very active social reformer, was president of the Women’s Educational and Industrial Union, an organization founded to encourage both trade unionism among women workers and labor legislation beneficial to them. After the American Federation of Labor convention in Boston in 1903, Kehew organized the National Women’s Trade Union League for the same purpose on a nationwide scale. Pingree was a former member of the Boston School Committee.11

Labor was also represented on the mayor’s committee by two members, Edward J. Ryan, president of the Buildings’ Trades Council, and Michael W. Myers, president of the Plumbers’ Union. The seventh member was Edmund Billings, superintendent and treasurer of the Wells Memorial Institute, a social and educational club for young workingmen which provided them with space to meet, socialize, and hold informal classes and which housed a small library and a gymnasium with hot and cold water baths.12

In April 1896, the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Public Baths, after studying New York City’s People’s Baths, issued its preliminary report. The report recommended that the city build its first year-round bath in the vicinity of Dover Street and Harrison Avenue in the heart of the Irish slums of Boston’s South End, that the bath be built on a 50 by 100-foot lot, contain at least 40 showers, and accommodate both men and women in absolutely distinct compartments with separate entrances and waiting rooms. It also stipulated that the bath be completely free to all and that at least $50,000—and preferably $65,000—should be appropriated for land and building. In May 1896, Mayor Quincy referred the committee’s recommendations to the Joint Standing Committee on the Health Department of the board of aldermen and the city council.13

The Joint Standing Committee also visited New York City and was much impressed by the People’s Baths. Its report to the board of alder-
men and the city council, issued in June 1896, made recommendations similar to those of the Mayor's Advisory Committee. It proposed that $65,000 (to be raised by issuing 20-year bonds at 4 percent interest) be appropriated for a bath similar to the People's Baths and that it be located on a 50 by 100-foot lot. The committee also advised that a public lavatory not be connected to the bath and that public baths should not be located in public schools, although schools could maintain showers for the use of schoolchildren only. It urged that the municipal bath be placed under the jurisdiction of the board of health but made no recommendation on the matter of whether the baths should be free or subject to a small fee.  

The Joint Standing Committee's recommendations were the basis for a feature story in the *Boston Herald* which also contained photographs and descriptions of New York City's People's Baths. In addition, the *Herald* editorially urged the board of aldermen and the city council to take "prompt and favorable action" on the committee's recommendations, pointing out that other cities, including Chicago, Brookline, Yonkers, and Philadelphia, were well on the way to constructing their municipal bath systems. The *Herald* also recommended the building of school baths, noting that the school board was already conducting cooking and sewing classes and asking, "Is not cleanliness, rather than cooking, next to godliness?"  

During the summer of 1896, plans for Boston's first bathhouse advanced as the board of aldermen and the city council appropriated the $65,000 requested (a few months later the amount was increased to $86,000). Land was purchased at 249 Dover Street near the recommended site for $14,150, and Peabody and Stearns were chosen as architects. In November the architectural plans—which called for a 43 by 110-foot, two-story bathhouse with 50 showers (17 of them for women)—were approved and construction began.  

Controversy did arise during this time, however, over the provision of baths in the public schools. This involved the question not only of whether baths should be located in the public schools but, if so, whether they should exist for the exclusive use of schoolchildren or be opened to the general public after school hours. Hartwell had suggested that 28 shower baths be included in the plans for two new school buildings to be constructed in the near future. The school board was divided on the issue and school baths were rejected outright by the Schoolhouse Committee,
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which was in charge of school buildings. In October 1896, the controversy was resolved, however, when the Joint Committee on Hygiene of the board of aldermen and the city council reported favorably on school baths, and such baths were included in the two new school buildings. These baths, however, were used exclusively by schoolchildren until 1906, when they were opened in the evening to the general public under the supervision of the Baths Department.17

Another controversy arose over the question of whether the baths should be free. Those who favored a fee felt that the baths should not be a charity. Others argued, in Mayor Quincy’s words, that “free baths would not pauperize the people any more than free textbooks and free public schools.” The Boston Herald agreed with Quincy, asserting that free baths would be more democratic, that all citizens were indirectly or directly taxpayers and therefore joint owners of the bath, and that at any rate parks and libraries were free already. In the end it was decided that Boston’s baths would be free, for “it was felt that the charge of even one cent might keep away the very people who most needed bathing.” There was a fee of one cent each for soap and towel, however.18

While Boston’s first municipal bathhouse was being constructed, Mayor Quincy, with the approval of the board of aldermen, created a Department of Baths, headed by an unsalaried Bath Commission of seven Boston citizens appointed by the mayor for one- to five-year terms. The secretary of the Bath Commission was also the superintendent of baths and a paid official. In addition to having jurisdiction over the new Dover Street Bath, the commission operated Boston’s 14 floating baths, 2 swimming pools, its natural beach baths, public comfort stations, and a combined gymnasium and bath in East Boston donated to the city by Mrs. Daniel Ahl in 1897. The chairman of the Bath Commission was Thomas J. Lane, an Irish Catholic leader from East Boston who was active in community improvement efforts there. Of the original Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Public Baths, only Robert A. Woods was a member of the Bath Commission. Other members were two physicians, John Duff and Henry Ehrlich; two women, Mrs. Lawrence Logan and Mrs. Jacob Hecht; and Leonard D. Ahl. As has been noted, bath reformers in general advocated the supervision of public bath systems by this type of commission.19

The formal opening of the Dover Street Bath took place on October 14, 1898, with Thomas J. Lane presiding and Mayor Quincy as the main
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speaker. Quincy declared with civic pride that "if a few American cities have been a few years ahead of us, we can truthfully claim that Boston now possesses the finest and most modern public bathing establishment upon this continent." This bath, which cost approximately $86,000 to build, was most certainly a monumental and luxurious municipal bath. It was 43 feet wide, 110 feet deep, and three stories high. The facade was granite on the first story and gray mottled brick with limestone trimming on the upper stories and was surmounted by an ornamental cornice of galvanized iron. There were two entrances and two waiting rooms, one for men and one for women. The waiting rooms had terrazzo mosaic floors and Knoxville marble walls, and marble staircases led to the baths on the second floor. The men's section had 30 showers and 3 bathtubs and the women's section 11 showers and 6 tubs. Each shower consisted of a dressing alcove with a seat and a bathing compartment. The partitions were marble, as was the floor in the bathing section. The third floor was devoted to janitor's and matron's quarters, and the basement contained a laundry for washing towels at which family laundry could also be done at moderate cost. The opening of the Dover Street Bath prompted the Boston Herald to urge in an editorial that permanent baths be established in every part of the city where needed (although it did not specify any exact locations) and to commend Mayor Quincy for the progress made in that direction.²⁰

The Dover Street Bath, however, proved to be Boston's last structure built for the primary purpose of providing baths for those without such facilities in their homes. After 1899, municipal bath facilities were combined with gymnasiums, and the emphasis shifted slowly from cleanliness to physical fitness and recreation. From 1899 to 1902 four combined baths and gymnasiums were added to Boston's bath system. Typical of these was the Ward 13 Gymnasium and Bath, which had on its first floor a gymnasium and locker and dressing space for men and on its second floor locker and dressing space for women and 20 shower baths. Regular programs of physical examinations, exercises, and games were arranged and supervised by the Baths Department, which also arranged for swimming lessons at the floating baths, beaches, and swimming pools.²¹

Several factors probably account for this shift in emphasis from cleanliness to recreation. By 1898 Mayor Quincy saw a close connection between bathing and recreation: "It is . . . impossible to draw any line between the maintenance of an out-door bathing place in summer and an
indoor bath in winter, or between a shower bath and a tub bath, serving only the purpose of promoting cleanliness, and the swimming-pool which answers the further purpose of affording facilities for exercise and recreation." Quincy felt that ideally the municipality would furnish for each local group of 20,000 or 25,000 people, "divided upon lines which are carefully drawn in reference to social conditions and affiliations," a bathing establishment (including showers, tubs, and swimming pool), gymnasium, and playground. The Bath Commission was also enthusiastic in its support of combined gymnasiums and baths. It claimed very optimistically and unrealistically in its 1902-03 Annual Report:

As to the general public benefit accruing from the work of the department, we were able to show a year ago from the report of the Institutions Registration Department that there had been a marked decrease in juvenile arrests during the past ten years, and we believe that the work of the Bath Department had been the greatest single agency in effecting this vital improvement in public morals. We believe also, that in due time it will become clear that the baths and gymnasium are serving distinctly to lower the disease rate and the death rate of the city.

Economy also played a role, for combined baths and gymnasiums generally were less expensive than the Dover Street Bath, and one criticism of the Quincy administration was that his social reforms brought an increase in municipal indebtedness and produced an "insolvent utopia." As was the case in New York City, after the turn of the century tenement-house reform required builders to install a toilet in each new apartment; most builders installed a bathtub as well, thus decreasing the need for public baths.22

During Mayor Quincy's second term, the Yankee-Irish coalition which had been the basis of his power began to disintegrate. His attempts to increase and concentrate executive authority and rationalize operations of the city government were thwarted by Martin Lomasney and opposed by other Irish bosses. Structural reformers were also dismayed by the increase in the city's indebtedness rising out of his social reform programs, for as John Koren has noted, his "administration of four years was assuredly progressive but also expensive." For these reasons he was not nominated for a third term as mayor.23

Quincy's first two successors, Republican Thomas N. Hart (1900-02) and Democrat Patrick Collins (1902-05), were fiscal conservatives who felt that Quincy had spent too much on social reforms. Collins criticized
“benevolent socialism,” opposed city borrowing, reduced debt levels, and vetoed many spending ideas, including a 1902 appropriations bill that would have provided for additional gymnasiums and baths.\textsuperscript{24}

Yet, despite these mayors' lack of interest, Boston continued to build municipal baths and gymnasiums, if more slowly than bath advocates would have hoped. Under Mayor Hart four combined baths and gymnasiums were opened, although planning for these had commenced during the Quincy years. Also during his term in 1901 construction was begun on the large and elaborate Cabot Street Bath and Gymnasium in the Irish Roxbury section, but its opening was delayed until 1905 due to lack of appropriations. This bath, which cost approximately $100,000 to build and equip, had, in addition to approximately 50 showers, a swimming pool and a "large, finely equipped gymnasium."\textsuperscript{25}

Boston's bath movement, however, was enthusiastically supported by Mayor John F. Fitzgerald, the first of Boston's Irish bosses to achieve the mayoralty and President John F. Kennedy's grandfather. During his first term, 1906-07, plans were completed for the construction of seven municipal buildings to be located in the slum wards of Boston to serve various ethnic groups. These buildings generally housed municipal offices, a public hall, a branch of the public library with a reading room, a gymnasium, swimming pool, and shower baths. During his second term, 1910-13, Boston acquired its largest and most imposing municipal bath, the North Bennet Street Bath and Gymnasium, located in the North End, Fitzgerald's birthplace and the seat of his early power as ward boss. Although land was secured and a preliminary appropriation was made for this bath in 1902, it was not completed until 1910 due to fiscal constraints. By this time Italian immigrants had replaced the Irish inhabitants of the North End. Built in Italian Renaissance style, this bath was an adaptation of the Villa Medici in Rome and cost about $130,000.\textsuperscript{26}

Baths and gymnasiums were only part of the numerous social reforms supported by "Honey Fitz" which would serve to improve the lives of Boston's ordinary citizens. Promising a "Bigger, Better, Busier Boston," he built the High School of Commerce for boys and the School of Practical Arts for girls, many playgrounds, the City Point Aquarium, and the Franklin Park Zoo, improved garbage disposal, and extended sewers and the subway to Cambridge, as well as sponsoring many other projects.\textsuperscript{27}

During his first term Mayor Fitzgerald's largesse, his toleration of vice, and especially his abuse of patronage produced a public outcry and
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enraged Boston’s structural reform progressives. Boston’s net debt had increased from $39,418,000 in 1895 to $106,789,000 in 1907 or from $79.33 to $175.13 per capita, the largest per capita debt of any city in the United States. In response to progressive opinion, Mayor Fitzgerald created a Finance Commission made up of representatives from major Boston civic groups to investigate municipal affairs. Although the Finance Commission found corruption, especially in the awarding of contracts and job patronage, they did not uncover serious wrongdoing. Their revelations, however, were enough to seriously discredit Fitzgerald and to lead to the formation of a Committee of One Hundred, which succeeded in defeating him in his bid for reelection and electing a reform mayor, Republican George A. Hibbard.28

The progressive reformers also convinced the state legislature to amend Boston’s charter in 1909 in an attempt to curb the power of the Irish bosses. The amended charter provided for nonpartisan elections with nomination by petition rather than by primary, increased the power of the mayor and raised the term of office from two to four years, eliminated the board of aldermen, reduced the city council to nine members elected at large, and created a permanent Finance Committee. This structural reform, however, did not keep Boston out of the hands of the bosses, for in the mayoral election of 1910, the first under the new charter, Fitzgerald, after a bitter campaign, was elected to the new, stronger mayoralty by a slim margin. His successor as mayor in 1914 was James Michael Curley, one of the United States’ most notorious city bosses.29

Mayor Curley, like Fitzgerald, was a social reformer and big spender who continued to provide bathing facilities for the poor which increasingly were combined with gymnasiums, municipal buildings, children’s playgrounds, and indoor swimming pools. In 1916 the Boston bath system included the following fifteen year-round baths:

Dover Street Bath
Cabot Street Bath
North Bennet Street Bath
Ward 16 Bath and Gymnasium
Ward 7 Bath and Gymnasium
Ward 9 Bath and Gymnasium
East Boston Bath and Gymnasium
L Street Bath and Beach

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D Street Bath and Gymnasium
Copley School Baths
Curtis Hall Baths
Girls Latin School Baths
Ward 3 Bath and Gymnasium
Ward 15 Bath and Gymnasium
Ward 17 Bath and Gymnasium

As in New York City, Boston's public baths were located in slums largely populated by immigrants (see map 2). But the ethnic composition of these neighborhoods was not homogeneous and was constantly changing. Boston's first bath, the Dover Street Bath, and the Ward 9 Bath served the Irish population in the South End, as did the baths located in South Boston, a predominantly Irish working-class community, and the baths located in Charlestown and Dorchester. The South End, however, was also home to Russian Jews, Italians, Poles, and African Americans. Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Antin noted in her autobiography, The Promised Land, that she lived on Dover Street across from the public bath, although she did not indicate whether she ever patronized the bath.

The baths in the Roxbury section—the Cabot Street Bath and the Ward 17 Bath and Gymnasium—also served a mainly Irish population. Settlement house workers noted with satisfaction of the Irish in ward 17 that "two generations of living in America has . . . brought about an American standard of cleanliness." By 1905 African Americans had moved into Roxbury in considerable numbers but there was no public bath in ward 18, where they were concentrated. The Ward 7 Bath and Gymnasium near the Tenderloin district probably served a transient population. The North End, the site of the Bennet Street Bath, had originally been an Irish neighborhood but had become largely Italian, as has been noted, by the time the bath opened in 1910, although some Jews lived there also. The East Boston Bath and Gymnasium served a mixed group of Irish, Italians, and Jews.

In 1909 the Baths Department had recommended that its name be changed to Municipal Gymnasia and Baths and that all beach bathing establishments be transferred from its jurisdiction to that of the Park Department. Probably as a result of these recommendations, as well as of the reorganization of Boston's government under the Amended Charter of 1909, in 1912 the Public Grounds, Baths and Music departments were
1. Ward 3 Bath and Gymnasium, Corner of Bunker Hill and Lexington Streets, Charlestown
2. East Boston Bath and Gymnasium, 116 Paris Street, East Boston
3. North Bennet Street Bath and Gymnasium, North End
4. Ward 7 Bath and Gymnasium, 75 Tyler Street, central city
5. Dover Street Bath, 249 Dover Street, South End
6. Ward 9 Bath and Gymnasium, Harrison Ave. and Plympton St., South End
7. Cabot Street Bath and Gymnasium, 203 Cabot St., Roxbury
8. Ward 17 Bath and Gymnasium, Vine and Dudley Streets, Roxbury
9. Ward 16 Bath and Gymnasium, Columbia Road and Bird Street, Dorchester
10. D Street Bath and Gymnasium, South Boston
11. Ward 15 Bath and Gymnasium, Broadway between G and H Streets, South Boston
12. L Street Bath and Gymnasium, 1663 Columbia Road, South Boston
merged with the Board of Park Commissioners to form the Park and Recreation Department. The demise of the Baths Department marked the official end of the cleanliness function of Boston’s municipal baths and the definite combination of baths with recreation.33

Unlike in New York City, there were no complaints about the lack of patronage of Boston’s baths. Bath attendance rose from 581,431 in 1901 to 1,113,291 in 1915 and 1,549,480 in 1920. Part of this increase was no doubt due to the continued opening of new baths and gymnasiums, but the association of baths with recreational facilities probably best explains the growing popularity of Boston’s baths, for the patronage at the Dover Street Bath, the only one without recreational facilities, steadily declined from a high of 363,755 in 1901 to 232,851 in 1915. Like New York, however, the yearly maintenance costs of Boston’s bath system increased steadily, except during the administration of reform mayor Hibbard. Certainly there was some padding of the Baths Department’s payroll accounts, and the Finance Commission did report some irregularities in the granting of bathhouse contracts during the first Fitzgerald administration.34

Boston, therefore, established a bath system that was adequate to meet existing needs and flexible enough to accommodate change. Its baths, unlike those in other cities, were not all of one type. Although it did build monumental, elaborate bathhouses, it also built several modest neighborhood gymnasiums and baths, as well as multipurpose buildings which contained baths and gymnasiums, libraries, meeting rooms, and municipal offices; its school baths were open to the general public in the evenings.

Boston’s public bath movement was a reform that achieved its first success under the Brahmin Mayor Quincy, who brought to Boston many amenities which improved the lives of ordinary citizens. Quincy, in addition, for a brief time involved many disparate groups in the municipal government’s efforts. Both contemporaries and modern historians considered Boston in the 1890s an especially well-governed city which had achieved many of the reforms associated with Progressivism by the time that movement was well under way. Quincy himself became a leader of the national movement for public baths. He wrote extensively on the subject in social reform periodicals and was one of the main speakers at a mass meeting on public baths held in Baltimore, Maryland, in November 1898. No doubt he was influential in convincing other American cities to follow Boston’s example in providing public baths. It is ironic
that Boston's progressive reformers were most concerned with efficiency, fiscal responsibility, and structural reform and left it to the city's Irish bosses, Mayors Fitzgerald and Curley, to continue the social reforms and innovations begun under Quincy, including public baths.\textsuperscript{35}

Faced with high expenses and low patronage, Boston officially discontinued its municipal bath program in 1959. Its cleanliness baths, including those connected to recreational bathing facilities, were gradually phased out and ceased operations by the early 1970s.\textsuperscript{36}

**The Municipal Baths of Chicago**

Women are the natural housekeepers of a great city. They have time to think, time to plan. Their intuitions are fine, and they keenly realize the necessities of the people. It is their prerogative to suggest and were this power relegated to them the work of city officials would be simplified and public funds judiciously expended.\textsuperscript{37}

With these words the women leaders of the Free Bath and Sanitary League, the organization responsible for the successful campaign for municipal baths in Chicago, explained their actions and asserted their special abilities as women in fulfilling the role of "municipal housekeepers."

During the Progressive Era many women became involved in urban reform movements, ranging from the efforts of the settlement houses to alleviate conditions in the slums to campaigns for better schools, pure milk, and an end to the "social evil" of prostitution. Many of these women activists were, like Jane Addams (head of Hull House), members of the first generation of college-educated women, who felt an obligation to use their education for the betterment of society. Others were middle-class wives and daughters who first organized women's clubs as a means of self-education and cultural enrichment and then extended their mission to encompass improved urban services and various social reform efforts.\textsuperscript{38}

Most of these women reformers did not consider themselves feminists and did not openly challenge women's traditional sphere of proper activity. Rather they saw their activities as a logical and natural extension of their domestic responsibilities as homemakers and mothers and saw themselves as experts in the uniquely feminine skills of housekeeping. The reforms which they advocated would produce cities that would be
clean, healthful, attractive, and moral—suitable places for children and family life. As Frances Willard, the leader of the WCTU, asserted privately in 1898, "Men have made a dead failure of municipal government, just about as they would of housekeeping, and government is only housekeeping on the broadest scale." Or as Jane Addams wrote in the Ladies Home Journal in 1910:

If woman would keep on with her old business of caring for her house and rearing her children she will have to have some conscience in regard to public affairs lying quite outside of her immediate household. . . . They must take part in the slow up-building of that code of legislation which is sufficient to protect the home from the dangers incident to modern life.

"May we not say," she asked on another occasion, "that city housekeeping has failed partly because women, the traditional housekeepers, have not been consulted as to its multiform activities." As municipal housekeepers, women began their efforts in female-dominated institutions, such as settlement houses and women's clubs, and found that to achieve results they had to move into the male-dominated worlds of politics and economics and demand action from local and state governments. Their reform activities steadily obliterated the dichotomy between the private and public spheres.39

Chicago's municipal bath system, the result of the efforts of some of the city's women reformers, came closest to the bath reformers' ideal. After a brief campaign, the city opened its first modest neighborhood bathhouse in 1894 and by 1920 had constructed 21 of these small economical baths throughout the poor and working class districts. Chicago built no monumental or expensive baths, and its bath construction program was never diverted from the primary purpose of the municipal bath movement: providing easily accessible year-round bathing facilities for the poor. As the Department of Health asserted: "These baths have not been established as places of diversion and pleasure, but to promote habits of personal cleanliness by enabling those who are not provided with bathing facilities . . . to observe the fundamental rules of health and sanitation."40

Chicago's municipal bath movement began with the organization in 1892 of the Municipal Order League (later renamed the Free Bath and Sanitary League) by a group of Chicago women (and a few men) to improve the sanitary conditions of Chicago. To this end the league at first
concentrated on such issues as the problem of streetcar spitting, street beggars and cripples, and the need for drinking fountains, park lighting, rubbish boxes, and municipal baths. Within the Municipal Order League, the chief exponent of municipal baths was Dr. Gertrude Gail Wellington, who had come to Chicago in 1892 to practice medicine. Horrified by the lack of bath facilities among Chicago’s poor and anticipating public health problems as the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition approached, Dr. Wellington was converted to municipal bath advocacy. Carroll Wright’s federal Bureau of Labor investigation in 1893 revealed that in Chicago’s slum districts only 2.83 percent of families and 3.76 percent of individuals were living in houses or tenements with bathrooms. Wellington visited New York City, consulted with Simon Baruch, and inspected the AICP’s People’s Baths and then returned to Chicago to convince the Municipal Order League to mobilize its effort for the cause of municipal baths.\(^41\)

In March 1892 the league appointed a committee of three women physicians, Wellington, Sarah Hackett Stevenson, and Julia R. Lowe, to investigate the need for public baths, assigning each to a different section of the city. Of the three, Sarah Hackett Stevenson was the most prominent. Graduating in 1874 as valedictorian from the Women’s Hospital Medical College of Chicago, she was one of Chicago’s leading physicians. A pioneer among women in medicine, she was the first woman member of the American Medical Association, the first woman appointed to the staff of Cook County Hospital, the first woman appointed to the Illinois State Board of Health, and the first woman instructor at Northwestern Medical College. She was also one of the founders of the Illinois Training School for Nurses. “Welcome in the upper circle of Chicago society,” Stevenson was president of the Chicago Woman’s Club during the World’s Columbian Exposition year of 1893 and also was a member of the Twentieth Century Club and the exclusive Fortnightly Club.\(^42\)

Julia R. Lowe was a graduate of the Chicago Homeopathic Medical College in 1881 and of the Harvey Medical College in 1895 and was therefore both a homeopathic and regular or orthodox physician. She was a dermatologist on the staff of the Mary Thompson Hospital, professor of gastroenterology at Harvey Medical College, consultant at the Women’s Charity and Streeter Hospital, and attending physician at the Church Home for Aged People. The third member of the committee, Gertrude Gail Wellington, was a graduate of the New York Medical
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College and Hospital, a homeopathic institution. In the 1890s homoeopathy and regular medicine were converging as medical scientific knowledge advanced and the majority of homeopathic physicians moved toward an accommodation with regular practitioners. In spite of the opposition of the American Medical Association in the 1860s and 1870s, homoeopathy had gained recognition and respectability; by 1903 homoeopathic physicians could become members of the AMA.43

It is not surprising to find women physicians as leaders in the public bath movement, for those who supported the entrance of women into the profession expected that they "would become zealous advocates of public health and social morality." During the Progressive Era "their visibility in various progressive programs for health reform measured far out of proportion to their actual numbers." Their concerns ranged from industrial medicine to improving health and housing conditions in the slums and involved campaigns against tuberculosis and venereal disease.44

The three physicians conducted a strenuous campaign for municipal baths for Chicago. They personally approached many members of the city council, held public meetings, aroused the interest of the press, and received editorial support from the Chicago Tribune, Herald, and Staats-Zeitung. Jane Addams and the residents of Hull House added their voices to the demand for public baths, citing the fact that in 1892 in a predominantly Italian immigrant slum a third square mile adjacent to Hull House there were only three bathtubs. In a circular letter to the mayor, Hempstead Washburne, Wellington summarized the reasons that Chicago must establish a system of free public baths. Citing the success of the AICP's People's Baths of New York City, she argued that "men are vicious when dirty, as well as when hungry"; that a "free public bath will help prevent typhoid, cholera and crime"; that "the beneficent act—the giving of a free public bath—will win you the loving regard of the poor and lowly, the rich and the wise"; and that "the free public bath will inspire sweeter manners and a better observance of the law."45

Whether or not influenced by these arguments, which reiterated those of the bath movement, especially the linking of cleanliness to good character and to public health, Mayor Washburne endorsed the principle of municipal baths. The women also received some support from the city council, particularly from Martin Madden, chairman of the Finance Committee, who was converted to the cause of public baths. Madden later remarked:

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I have been importuned both night and day for I don’t know how long to lend my aid toward the construction of public bathhouses. The persuasive manner in which these ladies came upon the Council at all times and hours is what led that body to finally conclude that there was plenty of money in the treasury to be used for the purpose they desired.⁴⁶

Martin B. Madden, an English immigrant, was a self-made businessman who had begun work in stone quarries at the age of ten and had become president of the Western Stone Company and owner of extensive real estate holdings in Chicago. A Republican, he was elected to Chicago’s city council in 1889 and served there until 1897, although the reforming Municipal Voters League had tried unsuccessfully to unseat him. He was elected to Congress in 1904 and served there until his death in 1928.⁴⁷

Before any money was appropriated for municipal baths, however, Chicago had a municipal election in which a new mayor, Carter H. Harrison, was elected. Harrison proved to be sympathetic to the cause of municipal baths, as was the press, which during February 1893 publicized the issue and urged the municipal government to build a bath for the poor. In March the council appropriated $12,000 for a bathhouse to be located on Chicago’s Near West Side.⁴⁸

The municipal government of Chicago in 1893 was similar to Boston’s in that it consisted of a city council composed of seventy aldermen, two from each of the city’s 35 wards, and a weak mayor elected for a two-year term. Chicago, however, had a greater amount of home rule than other major American cities. Local political machines were strong and until 1895, when the nonpartisan Municipal Voters League was organized, the city council was characterized by contemporary political scientist Delos Wilcox as “one of the most shamelessly corrupt governing bodies in the United States.” “Bathhouse John” Coughlin, one of Chicago’s most notoriously corrupt aldermen and ward bosses, acquired his nickname because he had been a rubber in a Turkish bath and the owner of two private bathhouses, not because of his support for the municipal bath movement. Reform efforts by the Municipal Voters League were aimed mainly at ensuring the election of honest aldermen, and the league was quite successful, although the municipal government was still plagued by graft and corruption. As Lincoln Steffens wrote in 1903, the reformers in Chicago were “half free and fighting on.”⁴⁹

Chicago’s mayors were of a much higher caliber than the city council,
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even before reforming efforts. Hempstead Washburne, who was mayor from 1891 to 1893, had a uniformly good record and instituted such reforms as reorganization of the police department, breaking up of the gambling syndicates, and upgrading of building standards. His successor, Carter H. Harrison, was elected in 1893 to serve his fifth term as mayor of Chicago. Harrison, a very colorful and charismatic figure in Chicago politics, was born in Kentucky to a patrician southern family. A graduate of Yale University with a law degree from Transylvania University Law School, he moved in 1855 to Chicago, where he practiced law and speculated in real estate. He entered politics as a Democrat and served in Congress before he was elected mayor in 1879. Harrison was widely popular in Chicago among all ethnic groups and social classes and was recognized by all as he rode around the city on his white horse wearing his political trademark, a black felt slouch hat. Harrison had officially retired from politics at the end of his fourth term as mayor in 1887, but he emerged from his retirement in 1893 because he wanted to be mayor during the Columbian Exposition. Failing to receive the regular Democratic nomination, Harrison ran in 1893 as an independent and defeated both his Democratic and Republican opponents in spite of opposition from the political machines, the reformers, and the press. Harrison had the pleasure of presiding over the opening of the Columbian Exposition but was assassinated by a disappointed office seeker.  

Harrison's successors included machine politicians, reformers, and his own son, Carter Harrison II, who also served five terms. Although none of these mayors seemed actively to work for the cause of municipal baths, none of them was opposed to it either.  

Once the city of Chicago had appropriated the sum of $12,000 for its first municipal bath, Mayor Harrison turned planning for the bath over to Wellington and the Municipal Order League. They selected 192 Mather Street, one block north of Hull House on the Near West Side, as the site; the lot had been given to Hull House by its owner rent free for two years and Hull House offered it to the city for its first bath. Later the owner sold the land to the city. Wellington had originally projected a bath equipped with 36 showers and dressing rooms, but she was overruled by the league, which, on the advice of Stevenson and Jane Addams, head of Hull House, insisted on including a small swimming pool (20 by 30 feet) in place of more than half the showers. Apparently the swimming pool was intended to attract patrons to the bath, especially children. But
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the pool was not a success, probably because of its size and "the aversion of even the working people to sharing so small a body of water with each other." It was also difficult and expensive to heat the water for the pool, so in 1898 it was removed and 17 more showers were installed in its place.52

The Municipal Order League had recommended naming Chicago's first bathhouse after Simon Baruch, but after the assassination of Mayor Harrison the bathhouse was named in his honor instead, and a later bathhouse was named for Baruch. Chicago bathhouses were generally named in honor of prominent citizens of the city or historical figures.

The Carter H. Harrison Bath was formally opened on January 9, 1894, with Martin B. Madden as the main speaker. Other speakers included Wellington, Stevenson, and Jane Addams. The bathhouse measured 25 by 110 feet and was two stories high, with a front of Milwaukee pressed brick with brownstone trimmings. It contained a waiting room, 17 showers and dressing rooms, and 1 tub bath, was partitioned in corrugated iron, and had a small swimming pool on the first floor. The second floor contained the superintendent's living quarters. It had cost $10,856 to build, although the later removal of the swimming pool and the installation of more showers increased that cost.53

This first of Chicago's baths, which became a model (except for the swimming pool) for all the baths built subsequently, was much smaller, simpler, and more economical than the baths built by New York or Boston. It did not have separate facilities for men and women but instead was reserved for the exclusive use of women, girls, and small children with their mothers on two days per week. The bath patrons did not have individual control of the water and its temperature. These settings were regulated by an attendant who turned on the showers for seven to eight minutes during the twenty minutes allowed for a bath. The brief time allotted for bathing stressed the strictly functional aspect of bathing for cleanliness and allowed little time for relaxation or pleasure. The bath was free and soap and towel were also provided free of charge. Apparently neither the city government nor the Municipal Order League felt that this would pauperize its patrons.54

Once the Carter H. Harrison Bath was opened, the Municipal Order League, Wellington, and Madden turned their attention to Chicago's South Side, which they felt also needed a bath. They received the backing of Mayor John P. Hopkins, who requested an appropriation of $20,000, and in March 1894 the city council appropriated $12,000 for Chicago's
second bath. A site 50 by 100 feet was purchased in the heart of an industrial and tenement district east of the stockyards. Wellington envisioned a much more elaborate bath for this site with separate facilities for men and women, 68 showers, a barbershop, public laundry, and soup kitchen, but these plans were altered several times.\textsuperscript{55}

In 1895 the Municipal Order League surrendered its charter, and Chicago's bath advocates, under the leadership of Wellington, organized the Free Bath and Sanitary League to concentrate on the cause of municipal baths. Neither Stevenson nor Lowe was a trustee or an officer of this organization. The mayor of Chicago was the honorary president; Wellington was president. The vice-president was Lucy Flower, a prominent social welfare leader who with Stevenson founded the Illinois Training School for Nurses. She was also active in school reform as a member of the Chicago Board of Education, worked for the establishment of juvenile courts, and in 1894 was the first woman elected to state office in Illinois when she became a member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois. Flower was an active member of the Woman's Club and had been its president in 1890–91. The working membership of the Free Bath and Sanitary League was comprised entirely of women, but there was an honorary membership of about 300 of Chicago's most prominent male citizens.\textsuperscript{56}

It is apparent that the Chicago women involved in the municipal bath movement were an integral part of the network of women reformers in that city, which was centered in the women's clubs and settlement houses. Sarah Hackett Stevenson, Julia R. Lowe, Lucy Flower, and Jane Addams were all active members of the Chicago Woman's Club and of the more exclusive Fortnightly Club, as were several members of the Board of Trustees of the Free Bath and Sanitary League. Although Gertrude Gail Wellington does not appear to have been a member of either club, she was able to plug into this network and use its influence and support to convince the city government to inaugurate a municipal bath system.\textsuperscript{57}

In addition to its work of advocacy of public baths, the Free Bath and Sanitary League, in the women's club tradition, also served the causes of self-improvement and sociability for its members. The league met monthly, usually at Palmer House, and enjoyed a variety of educational and other programs.\textsuperscript{58}

With an appropriation secured for a municipal bath on the South
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Side, the Free Bath and Sanitary League recommended that free bath facilities be provided for the North Side. However, Mary McDowell, head resident of the University of Chicago Settlement House, and the Women’s Club of the settlement urged the league to propose that the next bath be located in their neighborhood, near the stockyards on the South Side. They circulated a petition throughout the Packingtown neighborhood to demonstrate to their recalcitrant alderman the people’s interest in having a bath established there. These efforts were successful because Chicago’s third municipal bath, the William Mavor Bath, opened there in 1900. Several subsequent baths were located on the North Side.59

The Free Bath and Sanitary League also recommended that the Park Commission open a summer bathing beach in Lincoln Park on the shores of Lake Michigan. The Park Commission complied with this request almost immediately and the beach opened in July 1895. In Chicago, unlike other American cities, the opening of year-round municipal baths preceded the opening of municipally supported summer bathing facilities. Wellington and the league also supported the Medical Women’s
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Club in its petition for the appointment of two women physicians (unnamed) to the Park Commission. In a letter to the city government Wellington noted that the older medical women had worked hard in the cause of hygiene and public health and such an appointment would be complimentary to them. She also asserted somewhat sarcastically: "I cannot imagine that either of these noble women would have boodled or flirted or smoked in the faces of the men during a board session. Their years of stability along those lines have justly placed them above princes."60

Chicago's second municipal bath, which was not as large as Wellington had planned, opened in April 1897 and was named in honor of Martin B. Madden. It had a waiting room, was equipped with 32 showers and dressing rooms, and had a soup kitchen in the basement. The bath was arranged so that an additional wing could be constructed which would double its capacity if the need arose. This, however, was never done. The total cost of building and equipment for this bath was $15,361.61

In the twenty-one years following the opening of the Martin B. Madden Bath, Chicago constructed nineteen more municipal baths in its slum districts and planned one more, which apparently was never constructed. During the construction of the Kosciuszko Bath in 1903, the people of the neighborhood "seemed bent on its destruction," and the city was compelled to station a policeman at the site during the day and two detectives there at night. The explanation for this neighborhood opposition was either that the people believed that they would be forced to bathe or that the new structure was a prison or a workhouse. At any rate when they were assured none of their assumptions was true, their opposition ceased. The construction of Chicago's other baths apparently proceeded without incident. A list of Chicago's baths is provided in table 4.1. There is no evidence that the Free Bath and Sanitary League continued to play an active role in the construction of these subsequent baths. It apparently had become the policy of the municipal government to construct an adequate bath system for the poor, and baths were opened at regular intervals until 1918 without any pressure from the bath advocates.62

Chicago's municipal baths, like those of New York and Boston, were located in slum neighborhoods, especially those inhabited by immigrants, or in industrial districts to serve working men (see map 3). For
Mayors, Bosses, and "Municipal Housekeepers"

Table 4.1. Municipal Baths of Chicago, 1918

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Opened</th>
<th>Cost of Land</th>
<th>Cost of Building and Equipment</th>
<th>Total Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carter H. Harrison</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>$3,750</td>
<td>$16,899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin B. Madden</td>
<td>1897</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>15,361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty-second St.</td>
<td>1898</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourteenth St.</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Mavor</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>5,327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert A. Waller</td>
<td>1901</td>
<td>3,270</td>
<td>10,107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosciuszko</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>3,350</td>
<td>14,410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Wentworth</td>
<td>1905</td>
<td>2,850</td>
<td>16,703</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William B. Ogden</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>1,650</td>
<td>16,241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph M. Medill</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>1,839</td>
<td>15,419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore T. Gurney</td>
<td>1906</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>16,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Gahan</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>2,189</td>
<td>17,286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pilsen</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>19,155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fernand Henrotin</td>
<td>1908</td>
<td>5,000</td>
<td>20,043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Loeffler</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>17,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon Baruch</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>24,677</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graeme Stewart</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>1,720</td>
<td>38,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeWitt C. Cregier</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>3,750</td>
<td>14,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kedzie Avenue</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>5,750</td>
<td>70,222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln Street</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>42,348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawler</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>16,750</td>
<td>41,375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Chicago</td>
<td>in progress</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>$81,968</strong></td>
<td><strong>$437,756</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


*bThese were shower baths for men only located in pumping stations.

*cThis bath also housed an infant welfare station, and its waiting room was large enough to serve as an auditorium.

*dThis bath was apparently never constructed.

For example, the Harrison Bath, near Hull House, served the residents of a district that was largely Italian but also was home to eighteen other nationalities as well, including Russian Jews, Bohemians, and Irish. The Pilsen Bath, located in the neighborhood called Pilsen, accommodated mainly Bohemians, while the Loeffler Bath was located in the Jewish ghetto. The Cregier Bath served the Italians of Little Sicily, and the
MAP 3
The Public Baths of Chicago, 1918

1. Fernand Henrotin
   2415 North Marshfield
2. Kosciuszko
   1446 North Holt
   (now Greenview)
3. DeWitt Cregler
   1153 Cambridge
4. Theodore T. Gurney
   1141 West Chicago
5. Lincoln Street Bath
   1019 North Lincoln
   (now Wolcott)
6. Joseph M. Medill
   2140 West Grand
7. Robert A. Waller
   19 South Peoria
8. Carter H. Harrison
   192 Mather
9. Frank Lawler
   806 South Paulina
10. William Loeffler
    1217 South Union
11. Pilsen
    1849 South Throop
12. Simon Baruch
    1911 West Cullerton
13. Kedzie Avenue Bath
    2401 South Kedzie
14. John Wentworth
    2838 South Halsted
15. William B. Ogden
    3346 Emerald
16. Graeme Stewart
    1642 West 35th
17. Martin B. Madden
    Wentworth near 39th
18. Thomas Gahan
    4226 Wallace
19. William Mavor
    4645 Gross
   (now McDowell)
Lincoln Street and the Kosciuszko Bath’s patrons were mainly Polish and Ukrainian immigrants. Lithuanians, Poles, Croatians, and Slovaks were the main inhabitants of the Packingtown neighborhood, the inspiration for Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* and the site of the Mavor Bath. Irish were the majority patrons of the Medill Bath located in Bridgeport, the home of the late mayor, Richard J. Daley. Chicago’s other baths were established in similar ethnic neighborhoods. Exceptions were the Gurney Bath, which was located in an industrial area, and the Waller Bath, which served the Skid Row population.63

During the peak use of Chicago’s public baths (1894–1920) the African-American population of the city was small, although it grew rapidly from 1.3 percent in 1890 to 4.1 percent in 1920. There was an increasing concentration of African Americans on the South Side in this period but there were also important enclaves in several other sections of the city. On the South Side the Madden Bath was at the edge of the rapidly developing “black belt” and may have been patronized by African Americans, but contemporary evidence is silent on this point.64

The Bureau of Hospitals, Baths and Lodging Houses within the Department of Health operated Chicago’s bath system, thus emphasizing the cleanliness function of these baths and their separation from any association with recreation. As we have seen, Chicago’s baths were strictly utilitarian and only one, the first, had a swimming pool, which was subsequently removed. One bath, the Lincoln Street Bath, which opened in 1918, had a public laundry where the housewives of the neighborhood could do their wash. The municipal government of Chicago did maintain free swimming pools and bathing beaches, but these were controlled by the Bureau of Parks and were in no way connected to the municipal baths. The Department of Health, noting in 1910 that police were no longer stationed in bathhouses, stated: “More and more people are beginning to realize that the bath house is not a place for diversion, but for utilitarian purposes only.”65

In spite of the functional emphasis of the Chicago baths, bath attendance, as in other cities, fluctuated greatly between the summer and winter months. For example, in 1910 bath attendance was heaviest in July with 173,222 baths taken and lightest in February with 45,517 baths. Many of Chicago’s bath patrons, like those in New York City, did not have the habit of bathing regularly except in the summer months. The Department of Health attempted to educate bath patrons in the habit of
bathing regularly summer and winter and observed hopefully in 1910 that "where the bathhouses have been established the longest there is the least fluctuation in the number of baths given."66

Chicago not only had the problem of underutilization of its baths in the winter but also that of declining overall attendance. Peak bath attendance was reached in 1910, when a total of 1,070,565 baths were taken in the 15 bathhouses in operation in that year. By 1918, with 21 bathhouses in operation, attendance had declined to 709,452. The Department of Health attributed the declining attendance in the summer months to the opening of swimming pools and free bathing beaches along the lake shore by the Bureau of Parks. Chicago's Tenement Law of 1902, which required all new tenement apartments of more than two rooms to have a private toilet, also had its effect as most builders also included a bathtub. By 1921 attendance had declined further to 524,912, and Chicago consolidated the operation of its municipal bath system within the Department of Health under the Bureau of Hospitals, Baths and Social Hygiene, which was also responsible for the operation of comfort stations, bathing beaches, and swimming pools. Thus ultimately Chicago did combine the administration of its cleanliness and recreational baths.67

Like New York and Boston, Chicago either converted its public baths into swimming pools or gradually closed them down after World War II. By the 1970s only one of its municipal baths remained open to serve Chicago's Skid Row residents and that too closed in 1979.68

Boston and Chicago each achieved a municipal bath system, but with different advocates and with different outcomes. In Boston it was a reform mayor, Josiah Quincy, who led the movement, and in Chicago it was a woman physician, Gertrude Gail Wellington, who was the primary advocate. In both cases the settlement houses lent their support to the movement. In both cities the municipal government responded to the reformers and proceeded to construct adequate bath systems. However, in Boston the baths were closely connected with recreation whereas in Chicago the baths were solely for cleanliness.

Not all cities, however, had municipal governments as willing to provide baths as New York, Boston, and Chicago. Where municipal governments were reluctant to provide this service, bath reformers turned to private philanthropy.