Standing Tall

Baton Rouge Water Works standpipe has dominated the city's riverfront landscape since 1888

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

From the moment it was completed in 1888, the standpipe tower anchored the city as a center for industrial growth and commerce.

The 20-story, concrete-and-steel structure was built to store water for use in the city's growing population. It originally had a capacity of 2 million gallons and was designed to meet the needs of the city's 16,000 residents.

The standpipe was named for its shape and function, which allowed water to be distributed throughout the city. It was a technological marvel of its time, and its construction was a source of pride for the city's inhabitants.

Over the years, the standpipe has undergone several renovations and expansions to meet the changing needs of the city. It now holds 9 million gallons of water and serves as a symbol of the city's history and progress.

In recognition of its significance, the standpipe was listed as a National Historic Landmark in 1987.

The standpipe on Lafayette Street was the city's first elevated water storage facility. It was built in 1888 and in continuous operation until 1963. The tower's construction of riveted wrought iron plates is unusual today. Modern tanks are constructed of steel.

Advocate staff photos by Mark Satta
Local citizens realized they had to do something to ensure a water supply. "Public health and public safety led the city to a modern fire protection system and good clean water," Owen said.

In 1887, the Common Council of Baton Rouge contracted with E. Smedley and John H. Wood of Dubuque, Iowa, to "build, construct, maintain, operate and own water works in the City of Baton Rouge." The standpipe, built the following year for storing water and keeping it at a desired pressure, was 100 feet tall and 15 feet wide. It was built on a foundation 10 feet deep.

Originally painted black, it was made of riveted wrought-iron plates with thicker plates at the bottom. It had a capacity of 132,500 gallons. Behind the standpipe were two concrete reservoirs.

Originally, treated water from the Mississippi River supplied the reservoirs and tank. However, in 1889, a well was dug for the water supply. In 1896, a second deeper well provided better quality water for the city.

In 1910, the original water company changed hands and became the Baton Rouge Water Works Co. with C.C. Bird as its first president.

The main water company building sat on top of a reservoir there," said Phil Witter, whose family owned the majority interest in the water company for many years. "The pumps were right by the Capitol House."

The larger reservoir had a capacity of 500,000 gallons, Owen said, with the smaller reservoir holding a "couple of hundred thousand." The water works facilities were located on property adjacent to the standpipe.

Witter stressed the importance of the facility for fire protection for downtown Baton Rouge. "Between the standpipe and the reservoir, there was enough water for any fire," he said.

The pumps were originally steam driven. Early photographs show a smokestack behind the water tower for the machinery that ran the pumps.

Witter remembered once as a child seeing the reservoir overflow because the pumps were not working. "It made a pretty nice fountain," he said.

In the very early years of the water company, employees went from house to house in horse-drawn buggies to read the water meters. They would later return to the offices at 131 Lafayette St., where the water bills were prepared. The bills then were hand delivered to customers the following day.

In the 1930s, the standpipe was painted silver. In 1937, it was extended to its present height of 110 feet, adding about 13,000 gallons to the capacity. A year later, the present metal umbrella roof was added to replace the original wooden cover. The top, decorated with an ornamental crest, could be reached by an access ladder at the side of the tank.

In an article in the State-Times May 15, 1978, the late Ernest Gueynard, former managing editor, recalled an incident years before when Vernon E. Lacour, then a very young boy, "climbed the access ladder to the top and promptly fell in.

Gueynard described how Powers Higginbotham, who later became mayor, happened to be passing by and dashed up the ladder to rescue the little boy. Shortly thereafter, the access ladder was covered with wood.

The standpipe remained the only elevated water storage facility for the Baton Rouge Water Works Co. from the time it was built until 1938, when a second tank was built on Margaret Street. In 1953, the water company discontinued use of the old Lafayette Street standpipe.

As a bicentennial gift to the city, the Baton Rouge Water Co. and BREC jointly dedicated a fountain in a small park built around the water tower. The park is located on property originally part of a right-of-way for a boulevard that was never constructed.

Located on Lafayette Street between Convention Street and North Boulevard, the half-acre site was named Rest Awhile Park, and in 1968 it was dedicated to Louisiana veterans of all wars by the

Lawrence P. Bahan Barracks 2199, Veterans of World War I park, now called Lafayette Par adjacent to the property still owe by the water company.

The major water works built behind the Lafayette Street standpipe has preserved itself as its old smokestack. Visitors to the park now have a view of Mississippi River.

Baton Rouge's water system is considered the most modern in the United States, Owen said. It includes a massive computerized security system.

That's a far cry from the system operated in the early part of the 20th century. "Back in the days the old building, we used to hire a man to sleep at the water company," Owen said. If anyone called a problem, the overnight employee knew who to call for help.

Even though the standpipe is no longer used, the water company still uses the two wells and distribution facilities on the proper.

"A few years ago, we considered restoring the 500,000 gallon reservoir back into service," Owen said. "But we decided against it."

The old standpipe is recognized today as an American Water Landmark designated by the American Water Works Association as "significant in the history of public water supply."

In 1973, the standpipe was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It was the first East Baton Rouge Parish landmark to receive the designation.

What makes the tower so unique is its riveted wrought-iron construction. Modern water tanks are made of steel. Welding has replaced riveting in modern construction.

Local architect Iveson "Butch" Noland calls the water tower a "historical curiosity."

"Nobody rivets any more," he said.