

From Birmingham to Torresdale: Burlington Sand and Philadelphia Boodlers

Jim Alexander



Philadelphia Inquirer sketches from 1906 court hearing on Torresdale Water Plant sand contracts

From the August 21, 1906, Mount Holly News:

The puffing, snorting and blowing of a large mogul locomotive awakened many people out of a sound slumber and put them in bad humor because of the unpleasant noise which lasted entirely too long for comfort. The trouble was caused by the overloaded engine pulling a train of cars loaded with sand upgrade near the fairgrounds, going to the filtration beds in Philadelphia over the Burlington branch. The engineer is said to be responsible for the trouble. While at Birmingham, he attempted to take more cars of sand than the engine could pull.

South Jersey, and in particular Burlington County, being on the Coastal Plain, provided large sources of sand which were mined for commercial and industrial uses, often outside of the county. This was especially true in areas along the Rancocas Creek.

Historically, Philadelphia has always relied on the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers for drinking water. With the advent of the Industrial

Revolution, the water of both rivers became increasingly dangerous for human consumption. The Schuylkill carried nasty byproducts of upstream coal mining and industries, while the Delaware was fouled by both industry and the growing discharge of untreated sewage from upstream cities.

During the last half of the 1800s, the residents of Philadelphia had suffered repeated bouts of typhoid fever, caused by a species of Salmonella bacteria that thrived in the polluted Delaware. One outbreak that occurred in the 1890s caused over 5,400 deaths. A clamor arose to treat the water, which led to the Torresdale Filter Plant being built, along the Delaware in northeast Philadelphia. A major feature was the use of large sand filter beds to clean up the water before it was fed into the city's water mains. Sand filtering is still in widespread use around the world today. While it might seem that it works by physically capturing most of the impurities as the water passes through it, actually most of the work is done by a miraculous film of bacteria,

fungi and protozoa that forms on the top layer, called Schmutzdecke, which metabolizes the impurities.

This presented a splendid opportunity for the politicians controlling the Philadelphia city government to expand their wealth. The mayor who had taken office in 1899, Samuel H. Ashbridge, pursued his widely quoted objective of public service: to “get out of this office all there is in it for Samuel H. Ashbridge.” Other politicians were already participating in nefarious schemes that led muckraker Lincoln Steffens to characterize Philadelphia as “corrupt and contented.”

Other insiders seized the chance to profit from the waterworks project. State Senator James P. “Sunny Jim” McNichol already controlled construction contracts in north Philadelphia, while another group controlled those in the southern part. Thus, McNichol’s companies received lucrative contracts for building Roosevelt Boulevard, the Market Street Subway, and the Torresdale project (now known as the Baxter Water Treatment Plant). When it came time to buy the large amounts of sand needed for the filter beds, a murky, corrupt alliance arose.



Torresdale Water Plant under construction in 1903

So as a major controversy and court hearings disclosed, Caven provided the sand through an initially undisclosed subcontract with the firm of Norcross and Edmunds, whose sandpits were in Birmingham (part of Pemberton, east of today’s Route 206). S. Budd Norcross was a prominent businessman, farmer, and land owner who lived in Mt. Holly. He had purchased many properties in the area, including from the son of James Still, the Black Doctor of the Pines. Norcross’s partner, N. Perry Edmunds, was a Philadelphia businessman, whose lawyer brother Charles drafted the subcontract. Some 268,000 tons of sand were reportedly provided, all being carried by special trains from Birmingham.

It was also charged that while the contract called for the sand to be properly washed of contaminants by the supplier, it was not, and that the city had quietly incurred added expenses to get it washed, without penalizing the contractor.

At some point during the controversy, Norcross and Edmunds started washing the sand at their Birmingham location, but John Weaver, who had succeeded Ashbridge as mayor, and was himself awarding city contracts to members of the political establishment, was forced to take action.

From the *Allentown Messenger*, July 6, 1905:

Sand Washery Shut Down

The sand plant at Birmingham, operated by Norcross & Edmunds, has closed down. This was made necessary by the action of Mayor Weaver, of Philadelphia, in probing the work of the contractors. This firm received a subcontract to supply the sand for the Torresdale filtration plant. The closing down will throw nearly a hundred men out of employment.

The washing of this sand has polluted the water of the Rancocas creek to a serious extent, making it

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Burlington County to Philly's Rescue Again

Jim Alexander

A new late-breaking example of how Burlington County has aided Philadelphia occurred when an accident caused Interstate 95 to be closed following a collapse.

Rebuilding bridges can take years, but engineers quickly came up with a solution. The center part of the roadway gap will be piled high with foamed glass aggregate, which will be temporarily paved with blacktop, allowing

traffic to resume in the center while permanent rebuilding takes place on both sides of it.

The product, similar to stone but lighter, is manufactured at the Eddystone AeroAggregates plant south of Philly, and uses as its main ingredient glass from recycling. Each year, Burlington County's recycling plant sends 7,000 tons of crushed glass to the plant! ■

Boodlers (continued from previous page)

unfit for domestic purposes, and destroying a fine fishing stream.... A continuation of the washery, it is believed, will in the course of time fill up the creek to such an extent as to destroy the power by which the large machine works at Smithville are operated. The officials at the Mount Holly Water Company claim that the muddy condition of the water adds to their expense of filtration.

Newspaper accounts of the investigation revealed multiple layers of corruption, all part of a pattern that continued for decades after. The Birmingham wash plant later reopened. Sand continued being mined there at least into the 1950s, as well as at many other locations along both branches of the Rancocas, including Willingboro, Masonville, Hainesport, and even adjacent to today's Lumberton Leas, in many cases scarring the environment and destroying historical artifacts.

Observers at the time characterized what went on in Philadelphia as involving "big piles of plunder," and "boodlers, thieves and embezzlers." As bad as it was for the citizens of that city, the people of Burlington County and its natural resources also bore a heavy cost as well. ■



The Philadelphia Times, October 23, 1900