



## Water, Pure Water



Historic Takoma Spring



The Pressure

“And God gave them  
Pure Water to drink.”



Pumping Station and Filter

ILLUSTRATION FROM GLIMPSES OF TAKOMA PARK, PUBLISHED IN 1915

**D**asani, Perrier, Poland Spring. These are the most familiar of the names on our ubiquitous bottles of water we carry everywhere these days. If things had turned out differently a hundred years ago, Takoma Spring Water might also be one of them.

The supply of spring water was one of the primary reasons founding father B.F. Gilbert was drawn to this area in the first place. The land was crisscrossed by streams and early settlers counted more than 50 springs. It's hard to imagine today, except when the basement flooding serves as a reminder. (Gilbert wasn't the only one to take notice of local springs – Francis Preston Blair discovered Silver Spring in 1840, only a couple miles to the west.)

The first source Gilbert identified and dubbed Spring #1 was opposite the railroad station, a site is now obscured behind Cedar Crossings and against the concrete wall of the railroad underpass. Once a spot shaded by tulip poplars, there was enough current to power a steam engine which ran an electricity plant.

Half a mile away, at what is now Elm and Poplar, Gilbert found a much larger spring. Named Big Spring (also known as Spring #2), it lent its name over time to the park that surrounds it. Fresh water was so important to the new residents that Gilbert made a pact with the

community, guaranteeing free access to Big Spring. Even with backyard wells providing everyday water, everyone preferred spring water for drinking.

Ever the businessman, Gilbert envisioned the idea of bottling Takoma water. Poland Spring had been selling water since 1845. He thought Takoma water was better, and had the water tested. Sure enough, the assay report verified that it was purer and healthier than Poland Spring.

But Gilbert never got that project off the ground. His money was tied up in additional real estate purchases (four more subdivisions) and a scheme to build a 120 room hotel in North Takoma. In 1891 he abruptly sold the rights to both springs to Takoma Park Springs Company, in an effort to recover his fortunes. Spring No. 1 disappeared shortly thereafter. The company built a pump house at Big Springs and began selling water to New York, Boston and DC. But when the company built a fence around the property to bar the public, citizens went into action. While some took the matter to court, others tore down the fence. Eventually Council reports proved that the terms of the sale specifically guaranteed public use. The owners claim was voided and the City regained control of the property and spring house.

Realizing the precarious nature of the situation, the Council looked for a better solution to providing water. Sligo Creek was an obvious alternative source and in 1898, Council authorized \$30,000 to construct a filtration plant and pumping station just west of where Maple Avenue intersected the creek. Filtered water was then pumped half a mile away to a newly erected water tower rising 164 feet high on Ethan Allen across from the entrance to Manor Circle. With a 50,000 gallon capacity it was ready to provide drinking water to the entire city. By 1919, however, the water tower was deteriorating and the decision was reluctantly made to contract with Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission. The tower was torn down (although the original foundation is still part of a backyard on Ethan Allen). Ruins from the Sligo Creek filtering station are still visible at the foot of Maple Avenue.

For the next 30 years, local folks continued to make

### Walking tour includes site of water tower

The sites of the water tower and Sligo Creek filtering station are two of the landmarks on the Dinky Line Walking Tour, offered by Clair Garman on Sunday, April 23. The two hour walk traces the route of the Dinky trolley line from Carroll Avenue to Sligo Creek, where the Wildwood Resort stood in 1900. The free tour offered by Historic Takoma is part of Walkingtown DC, a weekend-long series of more than 50 walking tours throughout the DC area. The Dinky line tour departs from the Takoma Silver Spring Co-op parking lot (Carroll and Ethan Allen Avenues) at 1 p.m. For further information, call Clair Garman at 301-270-2248.

Also part of Walkingtown DC, Historic Takoma offers a second free tour on Saturday April 22 which explores the commercial and residential origins of B.F. Gilbert's Victorian sylvan suburb. Beginning at 1 PM at the Takoma Metro station, Diana Kohn will cover both the Maryland and District sides of Gilbert's original community, including the stories behind Gilbert's vision, the public buildings, and the private residences that make up DC's first railroad suburb. For further information, call 301-270-8187. The full list of Walkingtown DC tours is available at [www.walkingtondc.org](http://www.walkingtondc.org).

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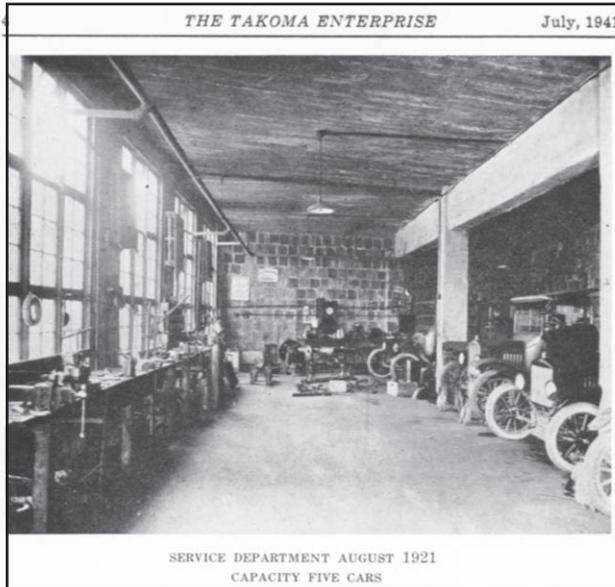
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pilgrimages to Big Springs, lining up with neighbors to fill containers with sweet-tasting drinking water. The last chapter in the water saga finally came in 1948 when Big Spring was declared contaminated (victim of nearby development). Its pipes were capped and the spring house torn down. Park neighbors will tell you, however, that the spring remains alive and

well underground, as the soggy ground attests.

No longer able to sample Takoma Spring water, we have been forced to turn to Poland Spring, Dasani and Perrier for our water of convenience. Who's to say that someday there might not be a resurrection of the Takoma Spring Water that inspired Gilbert's move into the wilderness?

**Find out more about the history of our community**



**Coming soon  
House &  
Garden Tour  
Sunday, May 7**

More articles by Takoma Park historian Diana Kohn can be found at [takoma.com](http://takoma.com) (Select "Features" and look for "Takoma Archives")

**Councilmember undergoes  
“extreme porkover” at wild party**



PHOTO: JULIE WIATT

Ward 1 Councilmember Joy Austin-Lane subjected herself to an “extreme porkover” at a fundraiser party for the satirical newspaper *Takoma PORK* at Sangha on February 11. One of the editor/publishers, Hisao Yatsuhashi, unveiled Austin-Lane's new look: tattooed arms, silverstreaked waist-length black hair, and purple latex pants. Molly Galvin, Benjamin Purow and Marjory Ruderman are co-editor/publishers of *Takoma Pork*—“100% local organic free-range falsehoods.” For misinformation, see [takomapork.com](http://takomapork.com).



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