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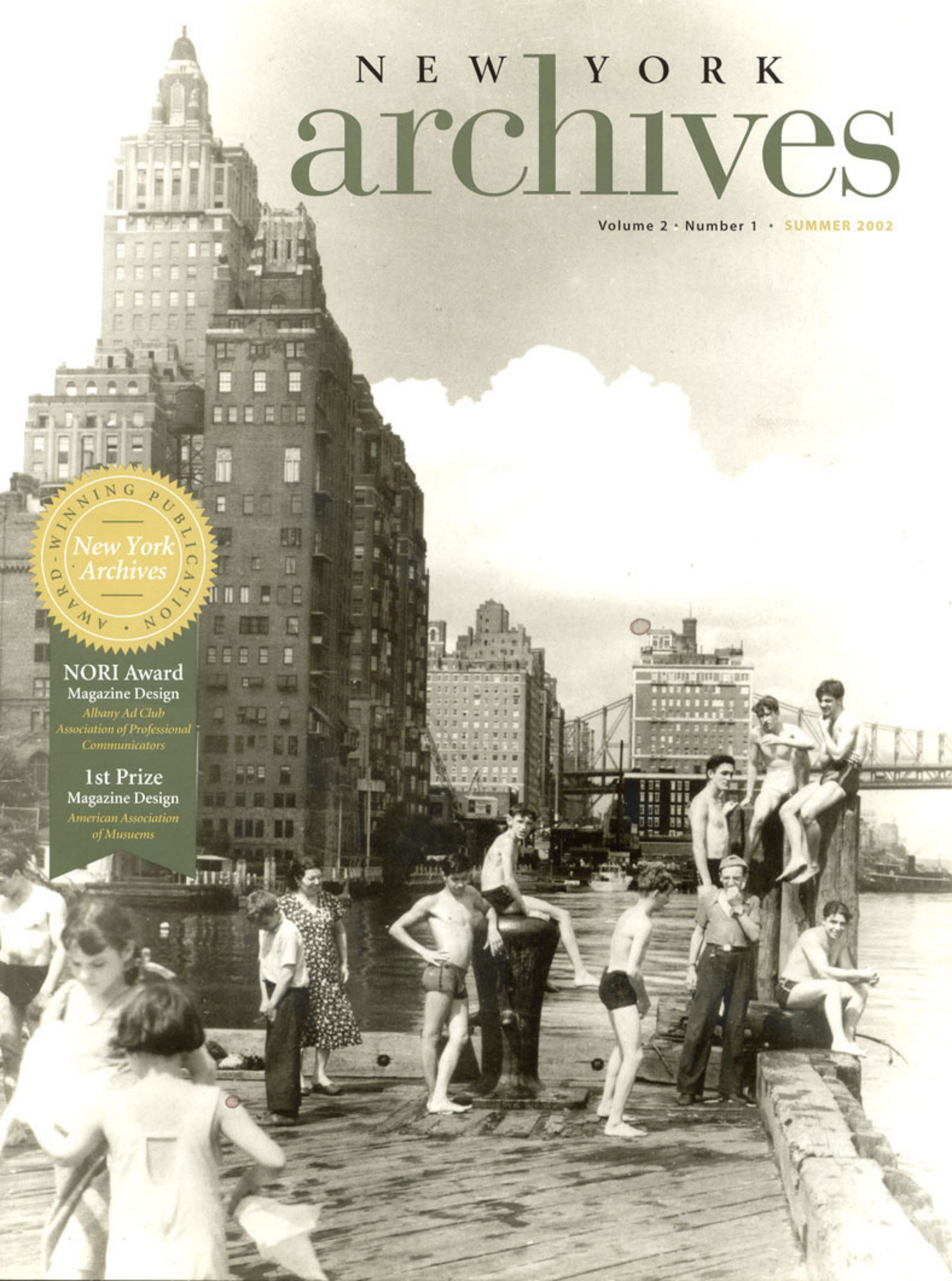


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Awash in New York City

A Chronicle of the City's Floating Baths

BY ANN L. BUTTENWIESER

A century ago, and fewer than ten blocks from today's South Street Seaport, the delighted shrieks of several hundred wet New Yorkers echoed from the Grand Street Floating Bath, one of almost two dozen seasonally movable pools berthed in the middle of the economic life of the city. These floating saltwater baths, resembling giant houseboats with inner courtyards of seawater, offered their patrons exercise, relaxation, and—coincidentally—a place to wash.

As early as 1817, Edmund March Blunt's *Stranger's Guide to New York* advertised two privately owned marine baths, located on Manhattan's West Side near the Battery. By 1830, the baths had become elegant, private, saltwater floating pools. Upon payment of a fee, fashionable New Yorkers could enter the baths through frame buildings erected on both sides of Castle Garden, the stage for singer Jenny Lind.



Floating baths were segregated by gender. The girls here are being taught how to swim on "Ladies Day," when this public bath at West 51st Street and the Hudson River was restricted to women and girls.

"The Great Unwashed"

After the Civil War, public health advocates and temperance societies made cleanliness a public obsession. Citing the bathing practices of the Greeks and Romans, nineteenth-century reformers believed that a clean body ensured a sound mind, whereas clogged skin caused such societal evils as ill-temper, business failure, divorce, immorality, and criminal behavior. They clamored for legislation to institute municipally owned "free floating baths."

By 1870, when New York's population had reached 1.4 million and an average of 2,000 new immigrants arrived each month, public baths came to be regarded as a necessity rather than as a novelty. Newcomers, crowded into tenement districts that lacked basic facilities such as showers or tubs, gravitated to Manhattan's greatest natural resource, its rivers. On the wharves that rimmed the city, the *New York Times* reported that people "exposed their naked persons at all hours." Such adventurers offended the sensibilities of commuters and workers who used the rivers for daily commerce and travel, so New York's first free baths were opened in June, 1870 by William Marcy ("Boss") Tweed, Commissioner of Public Works. Reformers applauded the public river baths as one way to accommodate what the *Times* called "the pressing needs of the great unwashed" in a contained, supervised setting.

Novel Constructions

Initially a pair, and growing to a fleet of fifteen by 1890, the pools were novel constructions. Afloat on eight pontoons, a single-story wood structure surrounded a rectangular atrium that contained the outdoor pool. A decorative tin-roofed cupola in the center of one wing capped a small second-story apartment that provided year-round office space and living quarters for one bath attendant. Patrons entered the bath from the pier or bulkhead by way of a portable gangway, and were ushered by a "keeper" to one of several dozen tiny dressing cubicles that opened onto a narrow deck that



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Immigrants who were crowded into tenements without showers or tubs found relief in Manhattan's greatest natural resource, its rivers.

girdled the pool. The cubicles were outfitted with hooks for belongings and latchless doors for ease of supervision. The absence of locks, however, also encouraged thievery, often forcing swimmers to walk home stark naked, shielded by helpful friends.

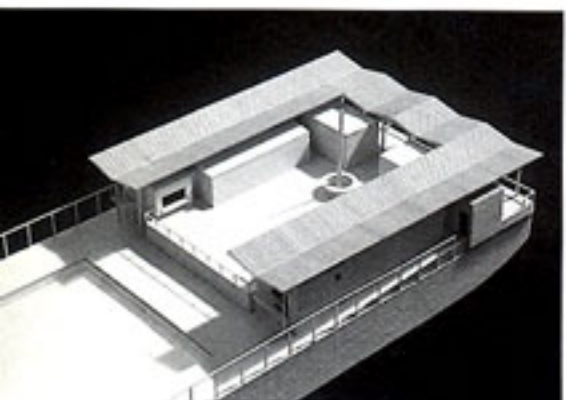
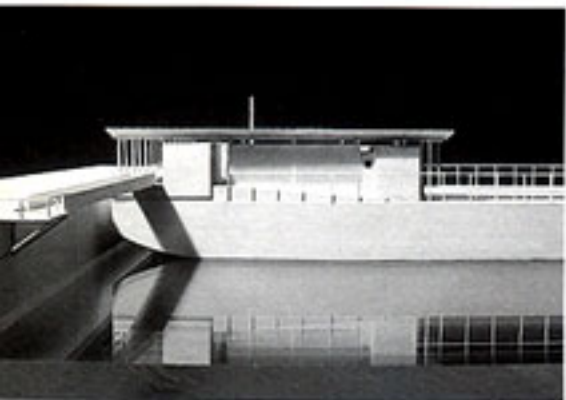
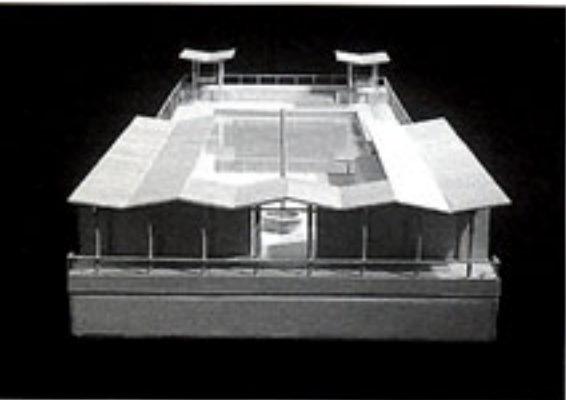
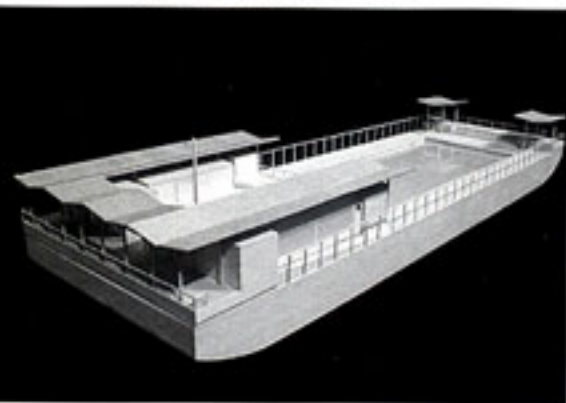
The swimming area—an open well, typically ninety by sixty feet—was lined with pine slats. These were attached far enough apart to allow river water to circulate, yet close enough to safely contain the swimmers. The depth of the water could reach a man's armpits, depending on the amount of air in the pontoons. Adjacent to one side was a narrow and shallow "aquatic kindergarten" that separated children from the adult swimming area.

Bathing in the River

On a steamy summer day, several hundred people often packed into a single pool. A policeman was stationed outside to control the crowds, who often stood in line for hours for a twenty-minute turn in the brackish river water. To keep order inside, each bath had a staff of two men and two women who acted as lifeguards, traffic directors, and aquatic janitors, but who were often both the brunt and cause of disorder. One rescued a drowning boy, only to find that

These floating saltwater baths resembled giant houseboats with inner courtyards of seawater.

JONATHAN KIRSCHENFELD ARCHITECTS



Architects Jonathan Kirschenfeld and Charles Cushing have designed a new floating bath for New York City's waterfront in the twenty-first century.

his pocket had been picked as a reward. Some augmented their meager salaries—\$13 a week for women and slightly more for men—through graft, charging admission to impatient, well-off patrons who miraculously appeared at the head of the line.

The pools, which were open from the end of June to October, were rigidly segregated by gender. Although male patrons outnumbered females two to one, the pools were equally accessible to both men and women. On "Ladies' Days"—Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from dawn to dusk, and a half-day on Sundays—women and girls could learn to swim. A fashionable woman's swimsuit was a below-the-knee dress whose sleeves had been cut off and whose skirt had been split and sewn down the center to form "legs." The remainder of the week the pools were open to men and boys, for whom nude swimming was the height of fashion.

Pools Attract Millions—and Opposition

As more pools were constructed, municipal and private facilities were often stationed within the same block. There was a distinction in clientele, however, based on the ability to pay. Uptown businessmen, clerks, and housewives visited the private baths and were charged 25¢ a visit, or \$7 for the season, while the free public facilities were patronized mostly by working-class families who could not afford carfare for a beach outing. Thus to survive financially, the public baths were forced to fight for space with other city industries. Williams and Guion, a top shipping firm, obstructed the berthing of a pool at West 11th Street because it threatened the safety of their merchandise. In an impassioned remonstrance to the Dock Department in 1876, the company described the "young men and half grown boys" who ignited three fires on the pier with their "careless use of Segars."

Nevertheless, by the summer of 1895, fifteen public baths were operating at the edges of Manhattan. Attendance exceeded four million, since the pools were stationed at waterfronts contiguous to the most crowded residential

sections of the city. They were not immune to vandalism; Bath Number 3 at Pike Street ended one season submerged in the East River because nearby residents, angry at being turned away, deflated its pontoons. Nor were people deterred by the pollution that plagued New York's rivers, even though the Board of Health questioned whether the baths were sanitary, describing the river water that flooded through them as "saturated with animal and vegetable matter in a state of decomposition."

Health Concerns Force Cleanup

By the turn of the century, as raw sewage poured into the rivers through new sewer outlets located at the ends of most streets, a second generation of reformers began a campaign to abolish the floating baths altogether. Jacob Riis and the Association for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor (AICP) saw the baths as unsanitary rather than polluted and pressed for permanent structures to replace the seasonal pools. The Merchants Association of the City of New York published a study that enumerated the flies on sewage and decayed fish, described open manure dumps on piers adjacent to the pools, and stated that the waterfront at the East 96th Street Bath contained "swimming children with masses of filth collected on their heads and shoulders." The Metropolitan Sewage Commission laid to rest any doubts about contamination in the pools when investigators injected dye into a sewer at Rutgers Street and watched the water in the bath at Pier 33 turn bright red.

By 1910, one bath had been beached and three others were stationed in purer waters in the outer boroughs. By 1916, with the help of the AICP, permanent in-ground bathhouses had been constructed, and the Board of Health refused to allow any floating pools near sewers. Wells were made watertight and were continuously filled with fresh water, which was beginning to flow abundantly from the new Catskill aqueduct. As insurance against contamination, lime was added to the pools, and dozens of showers were installed at every possible entry. Patrons



Large crowds at the public baths made swimming from the docks and piers a viable alternative for some.

complained of stinging eyes and cold water; some sidestepped these improvements altogether by using the side of the bath as a springboard into the river. In all, eight floating pools were refurbished for service, and were soon praised as models to be emulated by other waterfront cities.

The Floating Baths Decline

Ironically, just as the baths' problems were overcome, alternative facilities became available. A seemingly endless supply of aqueduct water allowed the city to add indoor pools, open all year, to existing bathhouses. In summer, municipal parks turned on sprinklers, and showerheads were placed on hydrants in play streets. In 1936, the Parks Department opened ten huge in-ground swimming pools—and a year later, when the floating baths began the annual journey from their winter headquarters in Claussens Point, Queens to their summer berths in Manhattan, only four baths remained. Age, winter storms, skirmishes with river traffic, and the new swimming pools had taken their toll. It was left to the vision of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses to try to modernize the half-century-old floating baths into a twentieth-century beach complex.

In February, 1938, the Parks Department, now formally in charge of municipal swimming facilities, previewed the summer opening of a "modern swimming hole" at the unlikely location of 96th Street and the Henry Hudson Parkway. Three old barges were reconstructed with federal relief funds, and two outdoor pools floated on either side of a buoyant bathhouse. The floating baths once again became a public attraction,

and crowds of would-be swimmers waited in line on the banks of the Hudson.

That July, Robert Moses sought city funds to operate the new pool complex. But, as he wrote, "The City did not fund them... the barges fell apart and there was no money to repair them." The baths were beached and continued to decay. In 1942, the War Department wrote their epitaph: "The baths are adrift, hazardous to the waterways of New York."

The Lure of the Waterfront

Since then, re-creation of the floating baths has been proposed several times without success. In the 1960s, the Lindsay Administration commissioned a study for a portable floating pool on a renovated Liberty Ship that would travel the waterfronts contiguous to low-income neighborhoods. In the 1980s, a consortium of city officials solicited reactions to a "floating beach club" to be berthed at the South Street Seaport, where barges would house a pool, a sundeck, dressing rooms, and dining and shopping facilities. But the lure of the waterfront remains strong. The Neptune Foundation has recently obtained funds to build a prototypical, twenty-first-century floating swimming pool, designed by architects Jonathan Kirschenfeld and Charles Cushing. Look for it soon, in the waterways of New York. ■

This is a modified and updated version of an article that first appeared in the Spring/Summer 1984 issue of Seaport magazine.

Ann L. Bittenwieser first learned about New York City's floating baths while conducting research for her book, *Manhattan Water-Bound* (Syracuse University Press, 1999, second edition). Working in storage files in the dank basement of the Battery Maritime Building, adjacent to an abandoned ferry slip and an indoor basketball court that was used by Department of Ports and Terminals workers on lunch break, she repeatedly found references to "opening and closing the floating baths." Searching through previously untouched files by pier number and street name, she found a complete record of the locations of and repairs to the baths, from the founding of the Department of Docks in 1870 to the 1930s. Intrigued by the story that lay behind these documents, she expanded her research to include articles in local newspapers and journals and annual reports of various city agencies.

Sadly, the basement files from the Department of Ports and Terminals were all destroyed in the 1990s when its successor agency was disbanded and the city archives lacked funds to access the files. The only primary record of the baths that remains is in the author's notes.