

🔊 **ALERT: Board of Directors Meeting - March 25, 2024 - 2:00 PM — DISMISS**

🔊 **ALERT: EPA & DOH requests Navy provide more PFAS sampling — DISMISS**

🔊 **ALERT: Text Messages from Hawaii Low-Income Home Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP)
— DISMISS**



OAHU'S WATER HISTORY

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Ancient Times

In ancient times, Oahu's earliest inhabitants -- the native Hawaiians -- drew their water supplies from fresh water springs, lakes, streams, and shallow wells. Incredibly, a population that may have amounted to hundreds of thousands thrived on the island through wise management of their lands and water resources.

Strict kapu -- laws -- governing water resources were enforced. The kanawai -- laws of water -- eventually became the law of the land. You could draw water from only the upper parts of the stream. Bathing was to be done downstream. Damaging irrigation systems or harming the water source was severely punished. Water conservation was a preeminent law of the land. Living on this island surrounded by salt water, ancient Hawaiians learned the value and preciousness of its limited surface water sources.



1700s

The Hawaiians' advanced agricultural irrigation systems enabled them to turn vast areas into farm lands, feeding a thriving population over the centuries before Westerners arrived. But after the arrival of western contact in the late 1700s, disease and recruitment by plantations drew Hawaiians away from their traditional taro system and led to the transfiguration of these acreages into abandoned fields. Westerners brought in cattle that roamed the open areas of Ewa and the mountain slopes. Pineapple growers experimented and were successful in some areas.



1800s

Whalers visited the islands regularly in the 19th century and needed a steady source of fresh water to fill their ships' barrels. Natives helped bring water down from upper Nuuanu and other mountain sources to supply this growing need.

In 1879, cattle rancher James Campbell brought in a well-driller to search for water on the plains of Ewa. After drilling several hundred feet down, they discovered a vast underground source of pure, fresh water. Within 10 years, a series of artesian wells were drilled within the Honolulu city limits. By 1888, artesian water was supplying most of Honolulu's needs.



This discovery led to a water boom on the island, as ranchers and plantation developers began drilling furiously for more of the precious resource. Within 20 years, the boom came to a bust. Artesian wells, abandoned and neglected, wasted millions of gallons of water.

By the turn of the century, Oahu suffered a water panic. Wells were salting up. Water levels were dropping. The problem was that the system had grown too much, too fast and too haphazardly. There was a complete lack of long-range planning. Because of the absence of a united reliable water system, fire protection was minimal and the threat of disease in the water was constant.



When drought hit the city in 1891 and again in 1894, plans were formulated for the installation of the first units of the present pumping station at Beretania and Alapai Streets.

Before the fall of the Monarchy in 1893, the Minister of the Interior of Hawaii was responsible for Honolulu's Water Works. After Hawaii became a Territory, the water system became a department under the Superintendent of Public Works of the Territory of Hawaii.

1913-17

In 1913, the Department of Public Works, which was under the Mayor and Board of Supervisors, took charge of water distribution. In 1917, the department appointed a Commission of five men (the Honolulu Water Commission) to investigate and report upon the present and future water system of Honolulu. This Commission's report said that the most urgent need was to protect the Nuuanu water supply. It also recommended establishing a separate body to take charge of all the water works.

1920s

Honolulu was reaching a crisis in regards to its water supply. The old system was not meeting the demands of the city. It was not until 1925 that the legislature responded to the city's emergency conditions.

That year, the legislature gave the governor power to appoint a commission of five members to be known as the Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission. It was directed to "expedite and complete the sewer and water systems and to ensure its adequacy and to safeguard the watersheds and artesian base of Honolulu." The report of the Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission in 1927 said:



"In the creation of the Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission, the Territorial Legislature morally assumed the responsibility of solving the Honolulu water problem..."

This Commission acted as the agency for planning and constructing new facilities. Upon completion, these facilities were turned over to the City Water Works Department for operation. In its report dated December 31, 1926, the Sewer and Water Commission said, in part:

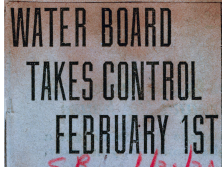
"The City is supplied with water through antiquated equipment which is by no means a system, but an unplanned patchwork of unrelated units. There are frequent water shortages in many parts of the City. There is an ever-present fire menace, growth is hampered, and, in general, the water system has lagged far behind the needs of the City."

The Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission lasted for four years. During this time, water shortages continued to plague the city.

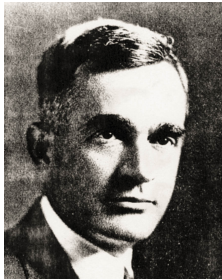
Public sentiment was aroused. The Honolulu Advertiser and Honolulu Star-Bulletin both told their readers about tunnels running dry in Kalihi and of water use being restricted to certain hours in Kaimuki. Several important meetings were held in Honolulu during this

time, with citizens, legislators, engineering experts, and water works officials all working together to solve the critical water problem.

The recommendation by local citizens and experts alike was the removal of water works management from political control and establishment of a commission. This commission would be within the municipal government, but not be subject to change of personnel at every change of administration. Efficiency would be increased by having members of this Commission serve overlapping terms.



The 1929 Legislature considered these proposals. As a result, by Act 96, the Honolulu Sewer and Water Commission was dissolved and the Board of Water Supply (BWS) was created. This Board assumed the powers of the Sewer and Water Commission as to water projects within the District, and succeeded the City and County Board of Supervisors in full management of the Honolulu Water Works. Its immediate objectives were to modernize the system, to meter all water distributed and to seal all faulty, leaking artesian wells in an effort to halt the waste of fresh water. In the ensuing years, these and other goals were attained.



The first Board manager was engineer Fred Ohrt. Under his direction, the first truly effective water management system was put into effect. The new Board capped wasteful artesian wells. It put casings inside leaky wells. It installed water meters for consumers and billed them at fixed rates. The water table stabilized, and the water scare receded into history.

In addition to establishing the Board, the Territory protected the mountain watersheds as forest reserves. Forests were planted or replanted. Today in the forest reserves you see many eucalyptus trees standing in strangely geometric rows. They are a monument to an early understanding that the well-being of the entire island is tied to the well-being of the areas with high rainfall.



1950s

The BWS has continued to strive for farsighted planning and more efficient management of the water system. An example of this is the acquisition of the Suburban Water System in 1959, thereby incorporating the water works into an islandwide operation. Another is the Board's long-range plan providing for the demands of the island as far ahead as the year 2020.

1970s

On January 2, 1974, the Division of Sewers of the City and County of Honolulu was transferred to the Board of Water Supply in accordance with provisions of the Revised City Charter. However, this union of water and sewer systems was short-lived for, on November 5, 1974, the voters approved the return of the Division of Sewers back to the City Public Works Department.

1980s - Present

In 1987, the State Water Code was adopted by the Hawaii Legislature, which set in place various layers of protection for all waters in the Hawaiian Islands. The State Commission on Water Resource Management -- also known as the Water Commission -- sets policies and approves water allocations for all water users, including the Board of Water Supply.

Although under the Code, primary responsibility for the protection of groundwater resources was assigned to the Hawaii State Department of Health, the Board of Water Supply continues to maintain policies to regulate and protect watersheds and activities over the island's basal aquifers.



Select Language | ▼