



A Brief History of Public Toilet Advocacy

www.PHLUSH.org

We have tried to include in this Toolkit information relevant and useful to public toilets advocates. Applicability of tools depends, however, on local context, community history, advocacy group resources, and other factors. Public restroom projects can be expensive, time consuming and divisive rather than unifying. We recommend that you work closely with urban design specialists, public officials, and those with knowledge of the legal environment.

Waterless toilets have served humanity in the past and ecologically sound technologies are likely to prevail in the future. The rise of cities, however, brought waterborne sanitation. The Indus Valley Civilization, Ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire all had flowing water systems and Roman toilets were built over them. Nonetheless, water borne sanitation got a slow start. John Harrington designed a flush system in 1596 but it didn't catch on until the 1800s. Here we start in the 19th century.

1829 First record of shared toilet facilities is in Boston's Tremont House, designed by architect Isaiah Rogers. Ground floor toilets and basement bathrooms become common in hotels while municipally owned facilities are extremely rare, except in Europe.

1840s Thomas Carlyle and Charles Dickens advocate with the Commissioners of Sewers. When they refuse to act, the Society of Arts engages George Jennings to build facilities for the Crystal Palace. Public health awareness increases with Chadwick's Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Laboring Population of Great Britain.

1843 By 1843, Paris has 468 urinals as well as elegant privately-run 'cabinets' to serve both men and women. London has only 74 urinals by the end of the decade. Public toilets in the United States get a slow start because it's thought their presence will offend the sensibilities of women.

1850s In this period of sewer building, scientific and technical papers circulate among cities. Toilets in homes and businesses are popular but still not connected to an integrated sanitary system.

1851 The Great Exhibition at London's Crystal Palace features public conveniences for women and men designed by sanitary engineer and public toilet crusader George Jennings. Urinals were free but good revenue was had from the 22 men's and 47's women's WCs. Many visitors return to their home cities requesting public conveniences.

1852 Society of Arts builds model public conveniences in central London in an attempt to prove they can become financially self-sustaining with users paying a penny. However, these fail.

1858 The Great Stink. With the summer heat, the smell of untreated human waste and industrial effluent permeates central London.

1857 Baron Haussmann begins upgrade of Paris' sewer system.

1861 European cities follow sanitary trends of rivals London and Paris. Vienna sends city official to London to buy urinals.

1862 Glasgow foundry owner Walter MacFarlane includes in his catalogue of affordable cast iron urinal and water closet offerings an essay entitled "A New System of Sewerage, and Other Sanitary Arrangement, for Converting the Excrementary Refuse, Dry Garbage, Ashes, etc of Towns into their Proper and Most Valuable Purposes"

1863 Florence Nightingale writes about hospital sanitary facilities.

1867 Tourists at the Grand Exposition in Paris take tours of Haussmann's famous sewers, which carry only storm and grey water.

1875 Thanks to James Moir's activism, Glasgow builds nearly 200 urinals. George Jennings and Walter MacFarlane both were passionate about the civilizing properties of sanitary appliances.

1870s Ladies' Sanitary Association campaigns for public conveniences for women in the face of popular sentiments that women had more self control and could hold it.

1889 London's first municipal public convenience for women is built underground in Piccadilly Circus.

1890s The number of facilities for women lags behind those of men. Many feel that public conveniences will bring women to city streets in ways not congruent with contemporary ideals of femininity. Advocates such as George Bernard Shaw point out that working-class women cannot afford the penny charge.

1892 Overall progress in British sanitary system is source of civic pride - waterborne sewerage combined with public health laws. Underlying civic pride: the public may not have wanted to engage or even was opposed to measures but sanitation is a source of civic pride.

1893 Chicago World's Fair has 3,000 toilets with washbasins, most installed by the Chow Sanitary Company, at 32 locations around the fair. Simple ones are free to users; fancier ones cost 5 cents.

1894 *Tout a l'égout* campaign in Paris hooks buildings and businesses to sewer. London initiates inspections of WCs for workers in bakeries and food establishments.

1894 National Purity Congress finds no toilets or urinals in Chicago and only a few in parks in St Louis and Brooklyn but 500 in Birmingham and 800 in Liverpool and urges US to follow Europe.

1897 New York Mayor sends committee to Europe to assess various models of what Americans call 'comfort stations'. London facilities impress them but the street urinals of Paris offend.

1900s The subway system had 1,676 toilets and employees conducted regular inspections.

1907 As its first community service project, the service club Rotary builds a comfort station near Chicago City Hall. It serves only men.

1930s By this time, many cities have built fairly elegant underground restrooms with attendants below their main squares. By end of decade, all New York City's 1,500 parks have comfort stations.

1941 The Pentagon is built with extra restrooms to accommodate racial segregation laws. Following complaints, signs for "white" and "colored" are never painted on doors.

1950s Jim Crow laws in the US South start to fall. The federal highway system expands, people flee cities for suburbs, restrooms in the urban core fall into disuse.

1960s As women flood the workforce and are elected to office, they fight for restrooms in factories, offices, and in US and state capitols.

1970 Committee to End Pay Toilets in America (CEPTIA) forms to protest the 50,000 US toilets now fitted with coin operated locks. As women pay to use stalls but men use urinals for free, the campaign focus moves from basic human rights to gender.

1974 California Secretary of State March Fong Eu sledgehammers a toilet on the steps of the State Capitol in Sacramento to protest pay toilets. California outlaws them and New York follows.

1987 First successful potty parity legislation passes in California. By 2009, 21 states in the US have them.

2000s A mere 78 public toilets serve New York's 468 subway stations. Fear of terrorism closes toilets in cities across the US.

2010s The second decade of the 21st century sees transgendered people win significant victories claiming their right to safe restrooms.

Sources: Gerling, "American Wasteland: A Social and Cultural History of Excrement;" George, R. *The Big Necessity*; Gershenson, O and B. Penner; *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender*; Molotch, H. and L Norén. *Toilet*; Penner, B. *The Bathroom*; Vogel, "The Pentagon;" and various articles in Wikipedia.