

The Disappearance of Town Branch

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Introduction

Many mid-western cities are laid out on a grid oriented to the four principal directions. Lexington's grid, and its designations of North Limestone and East Main Street are curiously askew from those compass directions. The city originally was oriented along the banks of the Middle Fork of the Elkhorn, also known as Town Fork or Town Branch. But this stream along which the town initially was laid out is now nowhere to be seen. This paper sets out to track the vanishing of Town Branch, the reasons for its disappearance, and its influence on the development of the city of Lexington, linking this particular history with issues in the settlement and development of the United States in general.

While the stream in the earliest years may have been a pretty little creek, it quickly took on an urban character. Water supply was derived from springs, and later, wells, while the creek supported early industry. Tracking the fortunes of Town Branch offers an interesting window on the development of various kinds of urban infrastructure, and a reflection of Lexington's growth, its changing economic base, and local effects of landscape changes occurring on a national level.

Background

At the time of the revolution Kentucky was still very much the western frontier of the colonial territory then belonging to Virginia. Descendants of earlier frontiersmen pressed westward in search of open lands to claim. In 1775 and 1776 a group of land seekers traveled up Elkhorn Creek and many of its tributaries, marking claims and making small "improvements" all throughout the area. Indian attacks prevented them from establishing a viable settlement for

several years¹, but in April 1779 the first block house was built at what is now called Lexington. The location, familiar from the previous explorations up the Elkhorn, was chosen because of a spring there which fed Town Branch.² And in fact, the area contained plentiful springs which provided drinking water for the new settlement.

Many Kentucky settlements were founded near springs. Water supply influenced both the layout and the growth of new communities.³ Lexington's layout was influenced not only by the many springs in the area, but also by the main drainage, Town Fork of the Elkhorn. When the plat was laid out in 1781, the town was to have 87 "in lots" of a half acre each for dwellings, and a slightly lesser number of "out lots" of five acres each for subsistence farming. An extra wide area was laid out called the Commons, containing the course of Town Fork.⁴ This later would become Water Street (figure 1). In an early court deposition one of the founders, Robert Patterson, noted, "the lines of the town were first 640 acres and extended further to the north and

¹ Carolyn Murray Wooley, *The Founding of Lexington, 1775-1776* (Lexington, KY: Lexington-Fayette County Historic Commission, 1975), 9.

² Bettye Lee Mastin, "The Town Branch and Water Street," in *Lexington As It Was: a Memento*, ed. Barbara Sutton, (Lexington, KY: Paddock Publishing, Inc.,1981), 36.; Gary A. O'Dell, "Water Supply and the Early Development of Lexington, Kentucky." *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 67,#4 (October, 1993):435.

³ Gary O'Dell, "Water Supply and the Early Development of Lexington, Kentucky." *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 67, #4 (October, 1993):432.

⁴ "The town layout was not to be oriented to the compass, but rather aligned to the Town Fork of Elkhorn Creek, whose course became the site of an elongated common ten poles (165') wide. Lots were arranged on a grid in three rows, one on the rise south of the stream, extending to Hill (High) Street, and two on the more level north side divided by Main Street and bounded by Short Street." Clay Lancaster, *Vestiges of the Venerable City, a Chronicle of Lexington, Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: Lexington-Fayette County Historic Commission, 1978), 9.

northeast than to the south. Was very little or no land south of the branch.”⁵ Yet the branch was included in the central town area. The area south of the branch was considerably steeper than it is today, and the whole area was somewhat dissected by small streams emanating from the many springs.⁶

Town Branch apparently had enough flow to justify construction of several early mills, some within the area of the “in lots” and some further to the west. Accounts speak of fishing and swimming⁷, but despite Maude Lafferty’s mention of early advertisements, “Who has not read the charming advertisements of Peyton Short in the old Gazette – telling how desirable his lots, ‘bordering the Branch’ – were for homes,”⁸ on reading the records it becomes clear that quite early in the history of the town the branch was befouled and encroached upon. Within the first decade of settlement, the Town Fork had already been “straightened” for the first of many times.

Early Public Works

In the odd paradox of early America, the beautiful “garden” in which the settlers found themselves was to be also the subject of much “improvement.” Boggy places were filled and hills

⁵ Charles R. Staples, Staples, *The History of Pioneer Lexington, 1779-1806*, 1996 edition. (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 10. (copyright 1939).

⁶ Mastin, 37.

⁷ *The Kentucky Leader*, 13 September 1892. p.1,c1 and page 2, c1-3 “ Some idea of the size of the stream may be gathered from the fact that boys often sat on this bridge and along the banks below and caught fish a foot long.

There was another deep hole where Ayre’s alley crosses the railroad, in which perch and bass weighing two and three pounds were caught.”

Also, see figure 2, a map compiled by Gary O’Dell, showing a swimming hole below Main Cross street.

⁸ Maude Lafferty, *The Town Branch* (US:1917), 18.

were lowered. As Wilbur Zelinsky observed, “As subjugators and transformers of nature, Americans tinker with or rebuild its machinery and make it run faster and more smoothly.”⁹ On March 7, 1788, the Lexington Trustees “Resolved that such persons whose lots are injured by the present course of the branch have liberty of turning the course of the same, as near to the center of the public ground as the nature of the situation will admit.” In mid-1787 part of the common had been sold off by the Trustees, but by July of 1790, they regretted that action.

Resolved, Two lots having been sold of what is called the town commons to the great prejudice of the inhabitants in general, for which reason we are under the necessity of purchasing them back again. Resolved, That the unappropriated ground lying eastward of the town be sold for the purpose of refunding the purchase money of said two lots, and for digging a canal to carry the branch straight through the town; also to have a row of lovely locusts planted on each side of said canal.¹⁰

In that same meeting, they “[r]esolved that the part that has been called the town commons shall hereafter be called and known by the name of Water Street.”¹¹ It is unfortunate that the Trustees’ Book only records the decisions and not the discussions, because it would be useful to know more about the decision to channelize the stream.

One might guess that the periodic flooding of the Town Fork was one of the main concerns of the townspeople. In 1797, the town Trustees resolved that “On account of the town branch having overflowed several times, Andrew Holmes is directed to straighten the ‘canal’ on Water street, from where it ends to John Cocke’s water mill, and to build a bridge across same at

⁹ Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), 60.

¹⁰ Trustees’ Book of Lexington, July 3, 1790, quoted in Staples, 67.

¹¹ Trustees’ Book of Lexington, July 3, 1790.

Lower Street.”¹² In further negotiations, “Andrew Holmes and John Cock having proposed to continue the canal on Water Street from where it now ends to said John Cock’s mill race in a straight line and under the direction of this board sixteen feet in breadth, on condition they have the right of property to the stone which shall be taken out of said canal...,” the Trustees accepted the proposal with the condition that they construct a bridge across the canal at Lower Street and finish in five months.¹³ This indicates that the mill on the branch was still in operation in 1798. It also illustrates the value of the stone, presumably as a building material, and implies that in that area, the rock came very near the surface.

In an 1871 speech, Samuel McCullough, born in 1803, describes his experience as a young boy with flooding on the branch. He lived off High Street and attended school on the other side of Main Street. After a full day of hard rain, a friend of the family came to school to get him on horseback.

I wondered at his carefulness, but when we got to Limestone street, corner of Main, I soon saw good reasons for his anxiety....From the present Phoenix Hotel extending far beyond water and vine streets, there was a mass of rushing, roaring, booming waters coming down through “Town fork of Elkhorn Creek,” enough to appal a stouter heart than mine. All Water street, with few houses upon it was a mass of seething, rushing waters. My friend urged on his horse until we came where the water covered his horse’s back....¹⁴

There are many entries in the Trustees’ Book during the first 20 years regarding the construction of bridges to cross the many small streams and gullies in the town, which were

¹² Trustees’ Book of Lexington, May 1, 1797, quoted in Staples, 315-16.

¹³ Trustees Book of Lexington, July 3, 1797.

¹⁴ McCullough, Samuel D. “Reminiscences of Lexington,” Register of the Kentucky Historic Society 27, #79 (1929), 417-418.

eventually filled as streets were leveled.¹⁵ On April 18, 1800, the Trustees

Resolved that the bridge across the branch on Main Cross Street be erected forty feet wide in the clear, that the bridge across said branch on Mill Street be erected twenty two feet wide in the clear and the bridge across said branch on Upper Street be erected twenty two feet wide in the clear, that the foundation or abutments of the aforesaid bridges be made of stone and the arches of brick.

But flooding remained a problem, and in an editorial promoting the construction of a storm sewer for the city, this bit of history is noted.

In 1840 David Megowan built a dam across the branch, back of where the lock factory building now stands. Fowler's milldam was across what in late years has been called Scott's pond. In 1846 a heavy rain fell and the flood swept away the dams, carrying on its bosom a large lot of lumber, with General Leslie Combs on top of it. The flood covered all the bottom. It filled the cellars of the Phoenix, and Landlord Brennan had to fasten down the cellar doors to keep his whisky and bacon from floating away.¹⁶

This same article claims that the first walling of the branch was in 1850, "from above Ayre's alley to Limestone street," and that similar work was carried on downstream in later years. There are city maps which indicate that the oldest enclosed section of Town Branch was completed prior to 1855, while other sections were enclosed in 1880 and 1907.¹⁷

Industry and Development Along Town Branch

Town Branch had a number of mills and factories located along it, both in the town proper, and along its route to the northwest. Mills in young Lexington were powered by steam,

¹⁵ Bettye Lee Mastin, 37. Also Trustee's Book of Lexington, November 12, 1788; December 3, 1798; April 2, 1799; April 25, 1799; April 18, 1800.

¹⁶ The Kentucky Leader, 13 September 1892. p.1,c1 and p. 2, c1-3.

¹⁷ Juliet Galloway, "Town Branch Sewer Gets Weekly Inspections," The Lexington Herald, 23 April 1968.

by horses and by the power of running water.¹⁸ There are extensive remnants of early dry-laid stone walls along sections of the creek between its current outfall and Forbes road,¹⁹ and it is likely these were built to control the stream as it passed various industries. Samuel McCullough recalled playing near the paper factory and the lead factory in his childhood in the first decade of the 19th century.

My own memory long years ago leads me to go back to Cox's grist mill, a little below our present Lexington and Louisville Depot. Firm and heavy posts were planted over the current of the then rapid "Town fork of Elkhorn;" a mill was built by Mr. Cox to grind for the pioneers bringing their loads of corn. They had no wheat ground in that day, simply because they cultivated no wheat....I recollect, and can show you to this day, the mill races, leading down from "Cox's dam," to the paper mill and lead factory formerly in existence there.²⁰

It is possible that "Cox's" grist mill is the same mill described as the first water mill in Kentucky, built by John Cocke in 1788.²¹ There may have been at least two flour mills located on the

¹⁸ Fortesque Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country, through the States of Ohio and Kentucky*, Pittsburgh: 1810. quoted in Staples, p. 262. The date of the entry is 1806. "I employed the forenoon in running over and viewing the town. It contains three hundred and sixty-six dwelling houses, besides barns, stables and other outhouses. The streets cross each other at right angles, and are from fifty to eighty feet wide. A rivulet which turns some mills below the town runs through the middle or water street, but it is covered by an arch, and leveled over it the length of the street. It falls into Elkhorn a few miles to the NW"

Also, quoted in Staples, p. 265 "There is one manufacturer of bailing cloth for cotton wool, who employs thirty-eight hands and makes thirty-six thousand yards, and two cotton spinning machines, worked by horses, yield a handsome profit to the proprietors. An oil mill, worked by horses, makes fifteen hundred gallons of oil per year."

Lexington Public Library, *Historic Shrines in and around Lexington* (Lexington, KY: Lexington Public Library, 1916), 8. This book notes that Town Fork fed mill races for a lead factory, paper mill and other industries on Water street near Merino at the beginning of the 19th century.

¹⁹ Richard Tuffnell, unpublished report for Friends of the Parks of Fayette County, Town Branch Trail project.

²⁰ McCullough, 30.

²¹ Staples, 24. "John Cocke built what is claimed to be the first water mill in Kentucky this same year [1788], at the lower end of Lexington using the waters of Town Fork."

branch,²² and Lexington Roller Mills, shown on the 1886 Sanborn Map as lying directly over the course of the covered stream between Spring and Broadway, was built in 1884.²³ A tanyard was one of the early industries located along the Common.²⁴ A record in the Trustee's book October 12, 1785, "...Ordered that there be laid off half an acre off the commons above Cross Street to Mill Street and sold, reserving sixteen and a half feet of as passage....Resolved that William McConnell have liberty to remove all his improvements from the tan yard." James McConnell apparently also had a tanyard on the branch²⁵, and the Gazette had an advertisement on November 24, 1792, that Archibald Brown had begun operating a hat factory at the corner of Water and Main Cross streets.²⁶ "This plant evidently stood near where an old letter says 'there was a deep bathing and swimming hole, just west of Cross where it joined Water street'."²⁷ In January of 1805, James and Thomas Prentice from New England "set up a woolen mill and paper mills where Tarr's distillery afterwards was located (now covered by the Louisville & Nashville Railroad yards.) They called their settlement for employees "Manchester" and gave the main

²² Maude Lafferty, "... it furnished power to run various manufacturies and, at least, two of the earliest flour mills of the state;" p.23.

²³ J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *The Squires Sketches of Lexington*, (Lexington, KY: Henry Clay Press, 1972), 64.

²⁴ Staples, 26. "William McConnell had a tan yard, the first in the new country, on Hunt's Row (now Water Street)... John Nutt started what is thought to have been the first powder Mill at McConnell's station, one mile below Lexington."

²⁵ Mastin, 39. Early industries that used the branch as a sluiceway included Archibald Brown's hat factory at Broadway and Water, James McConnell's tanyard under the shelter of the fort, and the tanyard of his cousin, "Tanner" William McConnell." Mastin cites Staples, 89,114, regarding the hat factory.

²⁶ Staples, 89.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

street of the settlement the same name.”²⁸ On the 1886 Sanborn Map, the Tarr Distillery is located north of Manchester street, between Willard street and Cox streets. Cox street likely derived its name from Cox’s mill and milldam.

Streambed Real Estate

Many industries located along Town Fork, but the puzzling thing is how buildings came to be erected on top of the branch. An engineer’s report in 1890 describes the state of the stream:

The total fall of the branch from Limestone street to the railway trestle near Cox street is about 29 feet in 4,000 feet. But the fall is not regular, the grade being much less than an average from Limestone street to Merino street, and steeper below. I think the stream passes over some ledges of rock just above Lower street and just below Merino street. For more than half the distance above mentioned it passes under buildings, sometimes under arches of varying sizes, oftener under single plank floors extending across openings from 15 to 30 feet wide, with rough stone walls.²⁹

Looking at maps of the city drawn at different times, one can trace the gradual covering over of the stream. Gary O’Dell made a composite map of the area as it may have been in 1804, showing the location of springs, the Town Fork and the bridges across it, between Mill and Spring streets. He shows the stream as open, but completely straightened, through the center of town (figure 2).

Although O’Dell’s drawing of a few blocks of town shows a modest number of buildings in 1804, in fact, Lexington had grown quickly. Not only were there many immigrants, but a few entrepreneurial souls had begun to trade with the then Spanish territory in New Orleans³⁰, taking

²⁸ Staples, p. 214.

²⁹ A. I. Totten, October 25, 1890 in *The Lexington Leader*, 13 November, 1890, p.4, c. 3.

³⁰ Wilkinson, James. *My Own Times*, Vol. 2, p. 112-116, referenced in Staples, p. 46. Staples writes, “In June, 1787, James Wilkinson took a cargo of hams, flour and tobacco from central Kentucky, which he loaded on flat boats on the Kentucky river, and floated down...to New Orleans, where they were sold at a considerable advance over Kentucky prices for the same

agricultural products overland to Frankfort or Louisville, then down the rivers to New Orleans.

The city reached its peak as a trade and manufacturing center around 1810, but with the advent of steamboats capable of upriver travel, it began to be bypassed in favor of true river ports.³¹ The arrival of rail transportation in the 1830's was critical to Lexington's further growth and development.

In an 1835 map the railroad, which was just being built, is shown as only going as far east as Mill street. Town Branch disappears from view just before Mulberry street, reappearing between Upper and Mill but with a building labeled "Watch House" built over it in the middle of that block. It emerges finally just past Main Cross, with bridges shown over the branch on Spring and Lower streets. The covered block from Mulberry to Upper street is labeled "Market House" while the block from Mill to Main Cross is labeled "Warehouse for railroad." We know, therefore that building on top of the branch began sometime in the early 1800's, perhaps with the market house.

The first Market House of Lexington was built in 1791 on the south side of Main street, and the second Market House was built at Cheapside, to be demolished in 1817 after the new Market House was built. The third Market House covered the entire block from Limestone to Upper between Vine and Water. The fourth Market House was constructed in 1927, and moved west 2 blocks, covering the block between Mill, Broadway, Water and Vine. This was replaced in the same location in 1844 by a building described as having wagon stalls opening on both Water and Vine streets, where the vendors could just back in. The last Market House, Jackson

commodities."

³¹ Staples, 329.

Hall, was built in 1879 on that same site, and finally torn down in 1941 and replaced with a parking lot.³² I can only speculate why the market house would have been built on top of the stream, given the history of flooding in the town. True, the location was a good, central one, even better once the first railroad line in Kentucky, between Lexington and Frankfort, opened after 1834 or 35. But there was other land open along Water street at that time, with equally good transportation access, so it was a deliberate choice to build above Town Branch. Perhaps the narrow block, which allowed frontage on both streets at once was a factor. Perhaps the flowing stream and the humidity acted as a cooler for the produce to be sold there. And maybe it was just easy to allow the rotten lettuce leaves and bruised apples to drop into the stream and be carried away, and when swabbing down the market floors to let it all drain into the branch.

The 1855 Hart and Mapother map shows further encroachment on what once was the commons. "Hunt's Row" is a set of three buildings apparently over the branch (figure 3), filling the space between Vine and Water streets in the block between Upper and Mill which was mostly open in the 1835 map.³³ The eastern disappearance is still at the building just before

³² Coleman, 21-23,30,41,60.

³³ McCullough, 417-418. "More than a half a century ago, the little branch now running under the market house, Hunt's row and the factories built over the stream, was formerly called "Town fork of Elkhorn," and was subject to enormous overflows in the rainy seasons. There were then no arched culverts over the stream as at present. The water coming down from all the streets and farms, and lots from the North and N. East: and from High street south and south west, collected in one mass into that little stream, making it at times, most formidable. The Wisdom and experience of our forefathers, in laying out our little city left an open space between the houses on Water and Vine streets, sufficient to carry off the water, which ran into the "creek." Many has been the time when I fished with a pin, turned up as a fish hook, in the little filthy stream, running now under the market house and Hunt's Row, and many the little minnow and crawfish which I have caught in it. The streets since then, (Water and Vine) have been filled up. Many is the time that I have knelt down and slaked my thirst along with my little school fellows, at bubbling spring, now a well opposite the "Curd House," in front of a barber's shop on Hunt's Row, cane and weeds were then growing down to the water's edge, 10 or 12 feet below the

Mulberry, but there is now a bridge on an alley east of Mulberry (figure 4). The buildings on this map are shaded solid, giving a good sense of the density of development. The Phoenix Hotel is shown and labeled, but east of there, especially along Town Branch, there is still little development. The narrow blocks between Vine and Water through town between Mulberry and Lower are colored solid, indicating that those blocks are filled with buildings.

The western reemergence of the stream is just past Lower street, where it runs open along the depot with a bridge shown at the depot's end at Locust (Merino). The Lexington and Big Sandy railroad appears to stop before crossing Main street from the east, and the Frankfort and Lexington railroad, coming from the west, only is shown as far as Mill street. A building labeled Engine House in 1877 and L &N Round House in 1887 is drawn here, but not labeled, just west of the depot and south of Town Branch. While the first train in Lexington arrived in 1832³⁴, the railroads grew in fits and starts. The enormous capital required made them vulnerable to economic downturns, such as the panics of 1837³⁵ and 1857,³⁶ and of course the Civil War diverted both resources and manpower. In Lexington, as in many other places, the railroads generally followed the path of the watercourses. Topographically, these tended to be the easiest paths, and in Lexington's case, the extra width of the Commons left an open space into which the railroad could fit with less disruption of the urban fabric.

surface of the present streets of Water and Vine.”

³⁴ Coleman, 36.

³⁵ John R. Stilgoe, *Common Landscape of America, 1580 - 1845*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.,1982), 257.

³⁶ Coleman, 45. Notes that the panic of 1857 stopped the Lexington and Big Sandy railroad.

The D. G. Beers Atlas of 1877 (figure 5) shows the eastern end of the stream similarly to the 1855 map, disappearing under a building just before Mulberry street and the start of Vine street. The Market House and Phoenix Hotel are both labeled, as is a Christian church between Mulberry and what appears to be Ayres alley, several liveries, a colored church, and the Phoenix Woolen Factory on the corner of East Vine and Ayres alley. A lumber yard is further to the east, but as most buildings are not drawn, it is hard to tell how much other development has occurred in the intervening years. On this map, the stream's western emergence is about halfway between Lower and Merino streets, from under an unmarked building, and alongside a building labeled Freight Depot, which is on the Louisville and Lexington Railroad. A building marked Planing Mill appears to lie over the course of the stream on the east side of Lower. The railroads now go completely through the town.

The stream as drawn in the 1887 map by A. I. Totten, C.E. (figure 6) abruptly ends at Main street, appearing again just at Merino. There is now a freight depot on Water street between Rose and Ayres Alley. The railroad headed east is labeled Chesapeake and Ohio, whereas the line to the west is the Louisville and Nashville Railway. The Phoenix Hotel is labeled, as is the Main Street church, but the colored church isn't drawn on this map.

Totten's map is virtually contemporaneous with the Sanborn map of 1886 which shows much more detail. In the Sanborn map (see appendix A), the stream is shown running under a lumber shed just east of the Phoenix Woolen Mills, which have now moved east next to the lumber yard. Town Branch reemerges alongside the mill with an outbuilding jutting into its course, taking a sharp bend through a culverted area under East Water street and the railroad tracks, then lying open in the straight canal, passing a foundry at the former site of the Woolen Factory. There is a street-width bridge at Ayres Alley, and a narrow one by a dwelling just west

of there. The canal is drawn up to a building labeled “S”, I presume for store, just east of Mulberry, the location shown on the earlier maps as the start of the undergrounding of the stream. Town Branch finally reappears just west of Lower street, from under a building marked as Agricultural Improvement W’ho.[warehouse], and continues in its canal under a stone bridge at Merino street. The built-out blocks between Broadway and Lower include the Lexington Roller Mill (built in 1884) and McChesney Martin Grain Warehouse, and a small coal yard, machine shop, stable and Bush and Son Planing Mill. Across Water street from the planing mill is the Lexington Gas Works (dating from 1853³⁷), Speyer Bros. Wool, Hides and Junk Shop, and a Marble yard. The center blocks of town, between Mulberry and Main Cross are more mercantile in composition, while either end of Water street, and to some degree the half-block running through town between Water and Vine, is predominantly industrial, including warehousing, supply shops, transportation related businesses, fabricators and factories.

By the late 1800's, the branch is covered through the center of downtown, so the changes involving Town Branch occur on the eastern and western edges of the downtown. The 1890 Sanborn map shows the angled culvert by the Woolen mills drawn with sharper angles, and that a dwelling had been built directly across its buried location. The surrounding area is a little more built up, having added both dwellings and shops. The building which served as the Colored Methodist Church is now a railroad woodshop. The Coal yard that ran between Water and Main near the Church has been replaced by a wholesale grocery oriented to Main street. The branch is now covered in front of 102-104 East Vine street and reappears the other side of the alley to run in front of a new livery stable. It is buried again by the Palace Hotel, which has taken the place of

³⁷ Coleman, 46.

the previous store on the corner of Mulberry, almost tripling the building footprint. There is a strong transportation oriented node here of the C & O depot, the Phoenix and Palace hotels, and three livery stables. Though the one coal yard went out of business, two have appeared next to the Kentucky Copper Works and Iron Foundry, previously the Williams Foundry and Machine Shop. On the western end of downtown, the stream emerges in the same place shown in the 1886 map. In the intervening blocks, the grain warehouse has disappeared, the Marble yard has been replaced with turkey pens, and the machine shop building is being reused as a “transfer stable.”

The Sanborn map of 1896 no longer shows any open water between the lumber yard and Mulberry street, now named South Limestone. The outlines of the culvert are no longer shown and the lot lines for 162-166 Main street are drawn over that area. A few open spaces on Main street have gained buildings, and the Church now contains a Salvation Army auditorium. Along Water street quite a lot of building had occurred, including McGormic Sash, Door and Blind warehouse at Ayres alley, which had its own loading platform on a railroad spur. The foundry has been replaced by a grain warehouse.

On the west side of town, the Agricultural Implement warehouse is still there, but Town Branch is no longer shown flowing out from under it. The stream does not reappear until past the rail yards to the west. Otherwise, not too much changed in these few blocks over the five years. One stable near Bush & Son Planing Mill has been replaced by a Tin & Galvanized Iron Works, but there are still many stables in the area. A line of dwellings across W. Water street from the Implement warehouse is now labeled Negro Tenements.

There are no more visible changes to the channel of Town Branch after the 1896 map. The growth of the railroad affects the Water street corridor, and the mix of businesses is slowly shifting from manufacturing to wholesale and transportation related establishments. One can see

the effect of changing technologies; in keeping with a new century, the Old Seed Warehouse on Patterson has become a Telephone Supply House on the 1901 map.

The next Sanborn map is in 1907, and significant changes have taken place between Limestone and Ayres alley. A viaduct now crosses the railroad tracks at Ayres alley, and just to the west a brand new, grand, passenger station sits facing Main street. The better part of a block was cleared to make room for this building. East of Ayres alley many dwellings have been cleared to the south to make room for the viaduct and an expanded set of train tracks. To the west of the alley the Livery building was cut back to make room for railroad related improvements as well.

In the west end between Spring and Patterson, Justice Builders Supplies, originally in a small building between Water and Vine, has grown to a large complex spanning from Water to Main street, taking over what was the Hide and Wool warehouse and the Bitterman and Son Galvanized Iron Works site. The Lexington Gas Works buildings are all marked “not in use” and the site is labeled “Property of Lexington and Interurban Railways Co.”³⁸

There is a big gap in time to the next available Sanborn map, and of course much has changed, but the area is still largely influenced by transportation related businesses. By 1934 the liveries are all gone, and auto garages are shown, marked with an A. Almost all the dwellings are gone between Ayres alley and Limestone, wiped out by a new street, East Vine. The wholesale grocer on Main is now a Department Store, with a Western Union office next to it. On the other end of town, the tenements and dwellings at Patterson and Water are gone, replaced by a plumbing supply business. Union Transfer & Stage company has several large buildings; a motor

³⁸ Coleman, 46,68. The site was used as the Interurban freight depot between 1902 and 1934; the electric streetcars ran from 1890 to 1938.

freight depot, auto repair shop, and a warehouse. The Interurban site is now the Lexington Utilities Co. & Kentucky Traction and Terminal Co. Next to that, the large site assembled by Justice Builders Supplies is now a block wide parking garage with a capacity of over 200 cars.

What doesn't show on this Sanborn map is the huge public works project to install a new storm sewer system in Lexington. A sanitary sewer system had been installed in 1918, but storm water problems continued to plague Lexington. A series of floods in 1928 and 1932 convinced the city to undertake a project to expand storm sewer capacity. Both storm and sanitary system improvements were constructed through Vine street in 1934-5, with assistance from Federal grants supplied as part of Depression era relief efforts³⁹ (figure 7). But this culminated a long and pungent history of sewage problems related to Town Branch.

Sanitation and a City's Reputation

The newspapers in the late 1800's were full of articles and editorials about the unsanitary condition of Lexington's streets, but these problems began very early in the city's history. Homes and businesses were intermingled in the young city, as was common in the nineteenth century, creating a potent mix of human, household and industrial waste. The Trustees Book records various warnings to citizens to drain stagnant water off, or to remove the filth from, their lots,⁴⁰ and Innis B. Brent was ordered to "make a drain from his kitchen to prevent so much of the filth running into the street therefrom."⁴¹ The owner of a local slaughterhouse was repeatedly ordered

³⁹ Burton Milward. "16 Miles of Sewers Give Reality to Tales of Underground Caverns. 11 April 1935. The Lexington Leader. p1 c3, p 12, c3.

⁴⁰ Trustees Book of Lexington, May 18, 1795; May 19, 1794; May 28, 1794; July 8, 1794

⁴¹ Ibid., May 28, 1794.

to clean up his premises.⁴² The obvious means of disposal was to drain or drop waste into Town Fork, but the topography did not always allow for the adequate drainage of lots or streets into the branch, and the flow of the stream was not always sufficient to carry off the debris which did get to it. In 1871, Samuel McCullough, in remembering the mills of early days, spoke about the stream's downfall. "Nothing is left of the bulging, plunging stream which fed [the mills] and turned their giant wheels, but the little sickly, nauseating, dried up stream, draining its filthy waters under our present market house."⁴³

As early as 1871, newspapers began calling for upgrading Lexington's sanitary infrastructure, both water and sewer.⁴⁴ Throughout the next 2 decades, there were multiple calls to do something about the sanitary conditions of the city, most involving Town Branch. While the majority of the editorials spoke about the potential for disease and the noxious smells in the streets, the underlying concern was that the lack of proper infrastructure was holding back the development of the city and its commerce.

A Leader man visited the horrible place known as Branch Alley to-day to see the condition of the Town Branch, which rolls slimily and turgidly through that delectable neighborhood. It was a stream of almost living filth. Some of the degraded people who live along its rotting banks are reported to use the stagnant, filthy water for washing purposes. It is past description. The *Lexington Observer* says to-day:

⁴²Ibid., May 19, 1794. [Regarding an order to Melchior Meyers and John Cock to] "keep their slaughterhouse clean, so as to prevent any offensive smell."

⁴³ McCullough, 430.

⁴⁴ Frances L.S. Dugan, *Rainfall Harvest*, Gilbert Hind King and the Lexington Hydraulic and Manufacturing Company. Lexington, KY: 1953. Mr. Dugan notes that in August of 1871 the editor of the *Gazette* challenged the Mayor to appoint an engineer to plan a waterworks for Lexington.. He excerpted this from that essay, "The town is in a favorable state for the propagation and spread of disease, mainly owing to the filthy condition of our sewers, alleys, and backyards. Hardly a square in the city is entirely free from some nuisance or abominable odor which is inimical to health."(p.3)

“How about the sewerage of this city? Is there any? How many people have we here? It is claimed thirty thousand. What becomes of the refuse of these thirty thousand people? What is the meaning of these trenches that are being cut through the streets, all leading to Water Street? What becomes of the outflow of these trenches? There is nothing at the end of them, but a long, uncovered cess-poll dry four months in the year, and these the months that breed fevers. Has the city the moral or legal right to conduct this health-destroying matter from all parts of the city to this one place and leave it there uncovered to breed death in that neighborhood, and scatter disease throughout the entire city? Have the people on Water Street no legal remedy? These are important sanitary questions, and may at any time become questions vital to the life of the city.

...There is but one remedy... put a gang of workmen to work on this cess pool of disease, filth and corruption, cleanse it and wall it from Scott’s Pond to the Cincinnati Southern depot.⁴⁵

The next year, the editors of the Transcript were more direct in their concern for the city’s reputation and growth.

Almost every day it is apparent to the casual observer that the draining facilities of this city are entirely inadequate to carry off filth and offal that is constantly being dumped into them.... All the sewerage, or more properly drainage of Lexington if [sic] what is called surface drainage, and the present system of guttering is a very poor example of a very poor kind of drainage. On two occasions in the history of this city has she been visited by the plague of cholera, no doubt superinduced from causes nearly akin to that under consideration. Thousands of dead bodies were then carted out and dumped into nameless graves, and the panic caused by, and the dread of these visitations, has no doubt been one of the factors to retard the growth of this then thriving metropolis of the West, giving her a backset from which she is but now recovering, and making place for Cincinnati and other younger settlements to advance and rob her of her prestige as the great center of the growing western empire. Are we not to take heed of the experiences of ‘32 [sic] and ‘49? Are we to choke it through another summer, and allow our beautiful city to bear the stigma of being an old fogey as compared to her sister cities?

...This matter has grown to such proportions that it is the subject of the first comment made by traveling men who come from other and cleaner towns. Lexington is getting to be too much of a city to ignore this matter....⁴⁶

⁴⁵ “The City’s Shame: The Town Branch a Mass of Corruption and Filth.” Lexington Leader, 13 October 1888, p.2 c.2.

⁴⁶ “Whew! Whew! Filthy alleys and open sewers existing unmolested.” Lexington Transcript, 7 July 1889, p.1 c.5. Note that in Lexington, the first cholera epidemic was in 1833, and the number of victims was 502, not “thousands.” (J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *The Squires Sketches of Lexington*, (Lexington, KY: Henry Clay Press, 1972), 37.

A reliable and sanitary water supply with pressurized water lines was in operation by 1885⁴⁷, but in 1892 the sewer and drainage problems still were unresolved, and the future of the city still in jeopardy. Town Branch and its effect on the city is described in this editorial:

...and at times in summer very offensive, particularly whenever still slops are run into it. This latter source of contamination, which ruined the stock water of farms lying below, was stopped by fines inflicted on the offenders, so that now the only contamination is caused by city sewerage. This of itself is enough to spoil the water and make it necessary for residents below to resort to windmills and ponds for stock water. As the city grows, and the outflow of sewerage necessarily increases, Town Branch will become fouler and more offensive....
Lexington now possesses every modern improvement but a sanitary sewerage system. She has railroads, electric cars, electric lights, telephones, and other conveniences. She needs to cap the climax of her improvements with a perfect sewerage system....⁴⁸

And of course, eventually the city did construct the needed improvements, though even today, storm water and sewage treatment continue to be contentious and expensive problems in this as well as other cities.

Conclusion

Lexington was established near the Town Fork, in part because it was by traveling along the streams that frontiersmen explored the territory; and this is where they found abundant springs for their water supply. The stream provided water power for early industry. But one has to ask why the city was laid out with Town Branch running through it, given the trouble the people had with periodic floods, or “freshets” as they were called then. When the city was founded, the area

⁴⁷ O’Dell, 459-60.

⁴⁸ “Town Branch. Condition a Menace to Public Health.” The Kentucky Leader, 13 September 1892. p.1,c1 and page 2, c1-3.

was thick with trees. In 1785 they were still clearing the last of the stumps from Main Street. Yet by 1796, a visitor described the town as "... situated in the midst of a vast plain, as open as that of Philadelphia, and on which there is not a tree to be seen for miles around."⁴⁹ It is quite likely that the settlers, being unfamiliar with the local climate and soils, did not anticipate the flooding problem to be quite as severe as it was. And in fact, flooding was surely worse after all the cane was cleared from the fields, and the trees which would otherwise drink up much of the water had been cleared away. The settlers lacked an understanding of their surroundings as a system which had its own function and balance, instead viewing the environment as a resource to be put to good use in making a living. The purpose of locating the town around the stream seems all too clearly to be for it to provide a convenient way to dispose of their waste and garbage. Their failure to understand the relationship of clean water and health, coupled with the lack of technology for dealing with waste, created in Lexington similar sanitation problems as were seen in other cities in the nineteenth century.

The stream continued to affect Lexington's development, as the open space of the Common provided a natural route for the railroad in the 1830's. This important transportation link revitalized trade and manufacturing in the city, which had been on a downturn since the development of the steamboat. Because the Town Branch was never big enough for commerce, the city was left behind economically until the railroads negated the importance of having a river port. And as the city grew and prospered, that land along the railroad track became valuable for businesses involved in trade, or which needed raw materials, or had products to ship out into the world. The town branch was foul and unpleasant; clearly the solution was to arch over it and

⁴⁹ Victor Collot. *A Journey in North America*, Vol. 1, 102, as quoted in Staples, 124.

cover it, then use the land productively by building on top of it. Much as Bowling Green advertised itself as having a natural sewer system with its karst topography, buildings atop the Branch could simply drop their waste into the stream. Unfortunately, the mechanics of the stream in terms of its profile and volume made it a very inefficient sewer. Not only did the buildings above the stream use it as a sewer, but the entire town tried to drain toward the Town Branch, with unfortunate results. Eventually the town remedied the situation, at least as far as sanitary sewage was concerned, but unfortunately, Town Branch is unlikely to ever “flow through our fertile fields as pure and clear and sparkling as it was in 1775.”⁵⁰ The history of the development of the city’s infrastructure is not easy to discover. It isn’t something which many historians focus on, and there is much more to be done, searching through editorials, advertisements in the daily papers, city records and memoirs looking for clues to decisions made about the Town Branch.

Romantic views of the early days of Town Branch are evidenced in this excerpt from a James Lane Allen story, “James Gray,” in which the hero relates the tale of the Battle of Blue Licks on the bank of the Town Fork. “This stream flows unseen beneath the streets of the city now and with scarce current enough to wash out its grim channels; but then it flashed broad and clear through the long valley which formed the town common, – a valley of scattered houses with orchards and corn fields and patches of cane.”⁵¹ Or in this statement, “It beautified the landscape; it gladdened the heart of Robert Patterson; it delighted little children, it gratified the aesthetic

⁵⁰ Lafferty, 1.

⁵¹ James Lane Allen, “John Gray” (Lippincott’s Magazine, June 1892) in Wilson, Samuel M., ed. “Sesqui-Centennial Symposium: A symposium of tribute to Lexington on the occasion of the sesquicentennial anniversary of its birth” (Lexington, KY: 1925), 37.

taste of discriminating citizens...”⁵² But the facts point to the conclusion that Town Fork was always seen and used by the citizens as just a piece of urban infrastructure, a sewer, and that the town was laid out around it for that very reason.

⁵² Lafferty, 23.