

**WHERE LIVING WATERS FLOW: AN OVERVIEW OF
ASHLAND'S WATER SOURCE**

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INTRODUCTION

The major water source for native peoples and later for settlers, Ashland Creek has sustained life in the upper Bear Creek Valley for thousands of years. Its generous flow determined Indian habitation sites and eventually the location of Ashland. From the stream they called Mill Creek, the first Euro-American settlers took water for drinking and cooking, powered a sawmill and a flour mill, and irrigated crops. Residents drew water from the creek in buckets, from wells, or received it through ditches that ran through town.

As the population grew, water pollution, drought, and fires increased. By the turn of the century, competing demands on Ashland Creek for water for domestic uses, fire protection, electric power generation, commerce, industry and agriculture frequently brought bitter conflict. Several times in the late nineteenth century, residents watched floodwaters cut through their fields taking barns and fences down its course. By the mid-1920s, consistent seasonal water shortages frayed citizen nerves and plagued City officials. For a few years following construction of a dam and reservoir in Ashland canyon the city had enough water. Later in the 20th century, distribution, water quality, water shortages and environmental concerns again challenged municipal leaders. In more recent years watershed management has grown more complex with the joint involvement of several agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service (Rogue River National Forest), and the State of Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and the Oregon State Department of Forestry.

Ashland citizens have always wanted plenty of clean water but often disagreed on how to obtain and pay for it. Changes came slowly as officials and residents wrestled to solve immediate needs and prepare for the future. The use and protection of its primary water source have always been critically important to Ashland. Most of the issues facing us now are not new. Cycles of debate over water quantity, quality, distribution, and disposal have repeated continually over the past 150 years.

Where Living Waters Flow: An Overview of Ashland's Water Source traces the watershed, weather, water shortages, other sources, distribution and water rights, as well as residents' and City government's roles in water resource management. A review of the past can help us make decisions about Ashland Creek, assess environmental issues, and understand how our decisions affect people's lives.

The continuity of water usage on Ashland Creek is a long one. In this hospitable place people have sustained life over thousands of years. During the last century, experience and technology have offered us a distinct perspective on the past – a view unavailable to those who came before us. Unlike people of previous centuries we have both the opportunity to review past human interaction with the watershed and to plan thoughtful choices for the future.

THE EARLY YEARS, 1852-1884

The explorers and trappers who passed through southern Oregon between 1825 and 1850, camped along the streams but moved on. In the winter of 1851-1852 miners discovered gold on Jackson Creek near the present site of Jacksonville and newcomers flooded into the area. At the same time, the Donation Land Claim Act, passed by Congress in 1850, encouraged settlers to head west in search of free, farmable land. In late 1851 a few cabins stood at scattered locations in the Bear Creek valley.

During the first week of 1852, Abel Helman and Eber Emery, miners-turned-settlers, crossed the Siskiyou Divide and stopped on the banks of what they soon called Mill Creek, now Ashland Creek. Here they built a sawmill, flour mill, boarding house and simple frame houses. The Oregon-California Trail passed near the little settlement and each year more wagons lurched over the ruts. Soon the north-south route made a permanent loop in front of the flour mill. By 1855 the small community of Ashland Mills had a post office, hotel, store, cabinet shop, livery, blacksmith shop and several homes. By 1864 Ashland Mills had fifty residents. In 1867 investors built the Ashland Woolen Mill on Ashland Creek and used waterpower to produce woolen underwear, shawls and blankets. A local resident's description of Ashland suggests a prosperous small community:

Ashland ... has a nice waterpower with one grist mill, one woolen factory, one planing mill, furniture factory, three sawing mills, one foundry, a soap and candle factory, one paper, three stores, three blacksmith shops, two shoe-makers, two tailors, two doctors, one hotel, one hardware store, but not a lawyer. ...¹

The water harnessed for power to run the mills also provided the main source of water for domestic and irrigation use. Ditches diverted water from Ashland Creek and carried it to different areas of town. The West Ashland Ditch served several properties. The Hargadine Ditch (constructed in 1854), the Million Ditch (1856), the Helman Ditch (1858) and the Smith-Myer-Roper Ditch (1864) also took Ashland Creek water for domestic and agricultural uses. The farmers who used these ditches held some of the earliest water rights on Ashland Creek. The fair use of these rights and perceived injustices often created intense discord among residents.

In December 1861, all Ashland residents as well as other Bear Creek Valley folk suddenly received more water than they needed. In mid-December 1861, the ground was saturated from heavy rainfall and as more rain fell, the snow pack melted and severe flooding began.

On the night of Friday, [the 6th] a heavy rain set in and continued to pour down heavily without interruption until Sunday evening... and in consequence [high water] spread over a considerable portion of the valley... t he farmers along Bear Creek have suffered. One

gentleman who owns a farm on that stream tells us that, on Sunday he stood by and watched his property, in fences, float off at the rate of about one hundred dollars per hour....²

In 1874 however, despite it's beautiful setting and growing prosperity, Ashland had serious problems. Poor sanitation, frequent fires, muddy, rutted streets and water shortages plagued the town's 300 residents. Fires burned everywhere. Faced with a pressing need for public services, Ashland applied for incorporation and on October 13, 1874 the Oregon State Legislature granted the town a charter.

Water and sanitation problems continued. Stock ran loose, garbage lay everywhere, and outhouses were steeped in filth. Storm run-off drained directly into the creek. Contaminated streams, polluted wells and stagnant drainage water posed critical health dangers. On one occasion the newspaper warned that the water running down Main Street spread pestilence. The town board expressed concern over the broad prevalence of "fevers" in town. Officials' attempts to clean-up Ashland were largely unsuccessful.³ At one point the news editor stated that a "beautiful frog pond now adorns the public square, and the plaintive piping of the frogs at eventide accords harmoniously with the wail of the city Fathers, that "they can't help it."⁴ An exchange of letters in the local newspaper in 1876 indicates residents' divided opinions concerning pollution of Ashland Creek. One worried citizen wrote:

A great many children live near the ditch... [and] have a desire to play... in the water. In they go, hands, or head, or feet... If the hands and feet were all, I could stand that; but, well, I'll not say anymore for the children... Some "respectable" persons even indulge in emptying soap-suds not two rods above the stream knowing it cannot avoid going direct to the ditch. Some have a notion that near the ditch is a good place for the progressive development of young "canines"... Beef bones, chicken bones, bad bread, dish rags, and even old dirty pot-rags have been found lodged in the water, and you know not how long you have been drinking the nourishing qualities of such things. It is high time the people of Ashland were looking after the common beverage of this city.⁵

A resident responded:

The idea of nice running water being made dirty by children playing in it! He does not seem to know that flowing water purifies itself. With the fall the water ditch has, though two dozen boys were soaking in it at any given point by the time it had plunged and tumbled over two rocks it would be as pure and clean and when it first ran from the mountain's brow... We want our children to play in the water, because it's healthy for them and play in it they shall.

I saw [a man] washing his nose in the water... talk about filth after that! And was it not a man who put a dead dog to soak in the ditch? And is it not the men who delight to build their stables, pig pens, and other out-house close--jam upon the ditch? And is it not the men, who kill the fish, that get stinking, and have to be thrown in the water-ditch to get rid of them?⁶

Civic improvements were painfully slow. Money was scarce and many residents refused to support services they believed yielded no personal benefit. The lack of a municipal system limited the water supply for domestic use and hampered sanitation and fire protection efforts. In 1876, three Ashland homes burned while neighbors tried to quell the flames with water from Ashland Creek and the West Ashland Ditch.⁷

Citizens continued to depend on wells or water from creeks and ditches. The few wooden pipes installed in 1875 to bring water into the center of town were narrow and they leaked.⁸ Most summers the water supply ran out. Leading citizens suggested building a reservoir and piping system, but a lack of money and labor delayed action. Several residents dug wells to provide a good supply of necessary water. Some residents dug wells to provide necessary drinking water:

A large number of wells for drinking water have been made in Ashland this season. The water is generally good, and in very hot weather is much better for drinking than that carried a long distance through ditches in the hot sun.⁹

At 4:00 a.m. on March 11, 1879 disaster struck Ashland when a fire that began in the blacksmith's shop roared through the business district. Within an hour all the wooden buildings on the west side of the plaza were gone. In the week following the fire, the newspaper editor laid the blame squarely on Ashland's town board and citizens:

There is no town in the country where nature has done so much toward furnishing water works for such purposes, and where the people have done less... When affairs were in a prosperous condition, the light tax necessary to secure the much-needed protection, would not have been felt by those upon whom it would have fallen ... It behooves our citizens to move in the matter as soon as they shall have recovered from the blow which their past negligence has brought upon them.¹⁰

The lack of adequate fire protection sparked the initial effort to pipe water into the central part of town. In early August 1884, after a citizen committee report stressed the community's desperate need, the town board recommended that pipes be laid to various areas of town, and that hydrants be placed at strategic locations. The Ashland Tidings noted that "The Town Board seems to have been aroused, at last, to the necessity of some protection for the town against fire."¹¹

In 1884 a new ditch was constructed to provide water to residents in the southerly Ashland environs. The newspaper reported:

The water ditch on the east side of the creek, which is to take the water from the waste flume of the Messenger saw mill and run it across the ridge above the Hargadine estate, is now being made, and will prove of great value to the people on the hillside in the southern part of town.¹²

Ashland looked forward to the railroad's arrival. The line had reached Roseburg in 1872 before financial problems halted construction. By the early 1880's construction resumed and the rails pushed northward. In early 1884 Ashland's first big burst of growth was underway. Surveyors completed work on the new railroad addition that more than doubled Ashland's size almost overnight. The rails finally reached Ashland on April 16, 1884. Businesses reported that total sales had doubled. Eighty-nine new houses and twenty-two other buildings had been constructed by the end of the year.

This rapid growth intensified the difficulties that Ashland already faced -- no water system, no fire protection, chronically poor streets and sidewalks, and serious sanitation problems. Residents grew impatient with the town board's slow response to community needs. The board's responsibilities however, had increased dramatically during the decade. In December 1884, a committee drafted a new charter for incorporation as a city, with a mayor and city council to replace the town government.¹³ Ashland's need for a new form of government lay both in size and in changes to its population. Ashland citizens wanted leadership that would recognize different interests and allow them a more direct voice in their government.

At the end of 1884, Ashland was over thirty years old. Incorporated as a town for ten years, the community had grown substantially, but it lacked a water system, fire protection, and sanitation. With the railroad's arrival, Ashland residents faced tremendous additional pressures on their municipal water system.

CITY BEGINNINGS, 1885-1899

During the last fifteen years of the nineteenth century, the City of Ashland developed many critically important facilities. The water- piping system for fire protection was completed in 1887, the waterworks constructed in 1889-1890, and the electric power plant built in 1889. City government and the local newspaper generally supported these advances. Citizens' attitudes seemed often divided, as "progressive," supporters of public projects faced fellow residents who continually raised concerns about cost. Debates were often heated and progress was slow. This period also saw continued problems with sanitation and disease, increasing water shortages and a growing concern about future water availability. In 1893 the Ashland Creek Watershed was proclaimed a federal reserve.

On December 17, 1887 the rails from the north and south joined at Ashland and the town became the division point and working station for all passenger and freight trains through the area. Ten new additions to Ashland were platted in 1888. Thirty-four new dwellings were constructed in 1889. By 1890 lodging houses, saloons, restaurants, shops and warehouses formed a commercial district in the Railroad Addition where passengers, railroad crews and residents could trade without walking to the plaza. Ashland's population, which had numbered 841 in 1880, reached 1784 by 1890 – an 111 per cent gain in ten years.

As this period opened, the rapidly increasing number of residents put pressure on the city's water supply. Additional problems surfaced in 1885 when a hydraulic mining operation began work on the creek above town. In disgust, the newspaper editor wrote:

The mining in Ashland creek above the town makes the water unfit for drinking purposes, but of course the people of Ashland won't grumble. It is too much trouble to attend to the matter and the three hundred families in town will go on drinking mud for the benefit of two or three miners.¹⁴

When two months had passed with problem still unresolved, the editor wrote again:

The pollution of the water supply of Ashland by the trifling mining operations up the creek is an outrage which the citizens of the town should not tolerate [for] an instant. For nearly thirty years this pure mountain stream has furnished the people of Ashland with most of the water used by them for all purposes. It has given the town its location, its life, its character, and is today its main prop and its chief attraction....

Ashland has the right to demand that this stream be kept pure and to see it deliberately turned into the muddy tailrace of a mining claim

is exasperating enough to rouse a less sluggish people than ours to an immediate resentment...

The water is rendered wholly unfit for drinking, and most of the time, also, for any domestic uses, while people of experience in such matters declare that it is injured even for irrigating purposes. Already the damage done is more than temporary. If the mining were to be stopped finally today, it would be months before the stream would run again as clear as before the mining was begun...

... The town authorities should see that the nuisance is abated at once. [The miners] have recklessly damaged the water supply of the town to a degree which will compel the citizens to put an end to the mining sooner than might have been done had the miners been content to throw only a moderate quantity of mud down our throats.¹⁵

Although city officials repeatedly warned the miners, the men refused to slow their operation. Finally they were arrested on a misdemeanor charge for fouling the city's water supply. The two were sentenced to pay a \$10.00 fine plus costs, but chose to serve five days in jail rather than pay.¹⁶

In early 1886 Ashland citizens still fiercely debated whether to spend money on a fire engine or on water mains. The issue was expense. The Ashland Tidings supported the piping system and called for a five-inch pipe, yielding at least 120 pounds of pressure, to be laid from the creek above Marsh's Mill to the Plaza."¹⁷

In early July 1886 Mayor George Engle appointed the city council as a committee to meet with Ashland citizens regarding fire protection. The committee, with citizen input, was to determine what kind of protection residents wanted and how it would be financed.¹⁸ Prior to the meeting councilman Lyttleton wrote an open letter to the public in which he firmly supported purchasing equipment as the cheaper method of protection:

...In matters of expenditure of public money small tax payers have a right to be consulted, at least to the extent they are concerned; and that money collected from them for fire purposes should not be expended at the will alone of those paying \$10.00 and upward. In short, there should be no property qualification to entitle hearing on this question... Remembering that I was elected councilman less than a year ago ... and still believing that your interests will best be promoted by a fire extinguishing apparatus that will be available in all parts of the town, and the cost which will not irretrievably sink your city in debt, I advise you to make plain to the council your wish in the matter.¹⁹

At the meeting, residents favored the piping plan but believed the cost to be prohibitive. Proposed piping would cost \$6000 more than the \$1200 the fire fund currently on hand. The

council instructed the mayor to determine if \$6000 at eight percent could be obtained.²⁰ On August 6th the Ashland Tidings wrote:

... It is generally admitted that the best plan would be to lay a water main through the streets with fire plugs at convenient intervals and secure a fall from a point high up the creek, sufficient pressure to give all the force and quantity of water desired without the use of any engine. But the heavy expense which would be required precludes the possibility of laying the pipe all over town, and as only the most exposed business center could be given protection in that way now, many of the citizens object and think it would be better to buy a little hand engine that could be dragged anywhere in town.

...A majority of the city council favors the proposition to lay a pipe that will cover the business center and rest at that for the present
...Opposition to this proposition developed at once, and a meeting to consider the question was called...²¹

Citizens attending this meeting ruled that only property owners could vote on the resolution and that the votes were to be taken by ballot. Seven attendees approved the council's action, thirty-five voted against it. Those present appointed a committee to report the resolution vote at the next city council meeting.²² This committee, however, failed to attend the council meeting, and the governing body took no action on the issue.²³

In early September, with a vote of three to one, the council authorized the City to negotiate a loan of \$6,000 for "the purpose of establishing a water works or purchasing such fire apparatus as the present wants of the city may demand..."²⁴ The funds were available in October, but the project was stymied when some council members rebelled. The newspaper reported:

...The plans of the city council have been blocked and it appears that nothing further can be done in the matter at present. When the matter was discussed and the decision arrived at to borrow money and put in pipes with hydraulic pressure for fire protection, three members of the council, Messrs. Bish, Hill and Martin, voted together for the project. Mr. Lyttleton, the other member of the council, wanted a fire engine...

Afterwards, an agent of some fire engine house spent several days in Ashland and Martin promptly changed his mind and became a warm advocate of the engine plan. This leaves the council evenly divided on the question, but as the Mayor ... is known to favor the original plan of laying pipes, the two engine men, Lyttleton and Martin, have resorted to the novel method of blocking all business in the council by absenting themselves from the meetings and thus leaving the council without the quorum required for the legal transaction of business. Their object is to prevent any action in the

matter till after the annual election, which should occur on the first Monday in November, in the expectation of seeing a new council elected favorable to the purchase of a fire engine.²⁵

The editor questioned whether an election could be legally held until after a quorum of the council had met to appoint election judges as provided for in the city charter. The newspaper explained that if no election were held, “the present officers will hold over, and the blockaders will be beaten at their own game ... since they will expel themselves from the council by refusal to attend six consecutive regular meetings.... Meantime,” the editor continued, “There is considerable other business besides water works which needs the attention of the council, and the spectacle of everything being neglected in this way is one calculated to make more than a few people thoroughly disgusted, to say the least.”²⁶

In the few remaining weeks preceding the election, piping system proponents and the steam fire engine backers promoted their plans. Mayor Engle, backed by councilmen Hill and Bish, asserted that the piping system would cover the greater part of the town for the money. Supporters of the engine plan stated that pipe for the system had been underestimated and that it would always need repair. They warned that the water pipe would be expensive and, being only for fire protection, would produce no revenue by sale of the water. In addition, they stated, the taxation burden would be too much on local citizens. The fire engine would be cheaper, give better protection to all parts of the city, and go places the pipe wouldn't reach.²⁷



Ashland View, 1886, City of Ashland Collection

The November election brought out 221 voters. There were two slates of candidates proposed; one by the water pipe convention, and the other nominated by a group opposed to the water pipe at a meeting held a few days before the election. At the last minute, the water pipe system opponents adopted resolutions abandoning the engine idea entirely. They favored a plan to loan the \$6,000 in the fire fund to a responsible company that would lay the pipes for fire protection and then be able to sell water to citizens for domestic use.²⁸

The action of the anti-water pipe convention diffused the hotly debated issue that had divided the city council before the election. Mayoral candidate J.M. McCall and the "water pipe ticket," received 133 votes. Candidate W.F. Songer for the "equal protection ticket," received 84 votes.²⁹ The Tidings stated, "The people have spoken in unmistakable terms in favor of water pipe protection, and the council can now proceed with the matter knowing that they are endorsed by the people...."³⁰

In December 1886, twelve years after the town's incorporation and seven years after the disastrous Plaza fire, the council invited proposals to construct Ashland's water works. Major components of the project were the pipe on the creek to achieve a 140-foot fall, pipe for the rest of the system, the head works, and sixteen "double hydrants at appropriate points."³¹ On January 12, 1887, the city council authorized construction of the water works and agreed to pay John Barrett of Portland, Oregon, \$7,000 for the job.³²

In January, 1888 the new piping system and hydrants were tested when severe cold hit Ashland. Nearly all the house hydrants and small water pipes in town froze and residents carried water from wells and ditches. Although citizens feared fire, the local newspaper stated reassuringly:

...So far as the city water pipes are concerned, there need be no uneasiness. The pipes are buried deeply, and water is running through. The hydrants are made in such a way that they cannot be frozen, as all the water above the ground is allowed to escape from them when they are closed...³³

In April, Ashland residents observed a decrease in the amount of water in Ashland Creek and worried about water availability for the coming summer. The newspaper reported:

Parties who are taking water out of Ashland Creek say the volume of water is less for this time of year than has been noticed for a long time. The cause of this is probably due to the fact that, while we have been having very pleasant weather, there has been an entire absence of successive warm days and evenings combined, hence the large amount of snow on Ashland butte doesn't melt.³⁴

Early in 1889 Ashland became the first town in Jackson County to have electric power. Eight streetlights, ordered from New York, were placed in the central area.³⁵ The local paper reported:

Ashland Plaza was lighted for the first time last Friday by a 1200 candle power arc light suspended in one of the upper doorways of the Ashland Flouring Mills. The light was a bright surprise to most of our citizens... It was supplied with electricity by a small dynamo.³⁶

Power to run the system came from Ashland Creek. A plan for electric power was first discussed in late 1888 when a group including H.B. Carter and S.B. Galey organized the Ashland Electric Power and Light Company, incorporating with a capital stock of \$15,000. The company stated their purpose, "to establish, maintain and conduct a system of electric lights throughout the city of Ashland and adjacent country..."³⁷

Ashland Ordinance No. 62 granted a perpetual franchise to the company on January 30, 1889. The company sold stock, bought water rights and land, and soon purchased two Edison direct current dynamos – each with a sixteen-candle power capacity. The first plant was constructed on the present site of the tennis courts in Lithia Park.³⁸

On February 21, 1889 a new Ashland charter was filed with the Secretary of State. Work on the charter had seen extended and often bitter, debate. Opponents complained that it gave the council too much power in issues such as water rights, borrowing money, liquor control, and alteration of city limits, without going to a vote of the people.³⁹ Specifically, the council was empowered to borrow on "the faith of the city," money not exceeding \$50,000 for a new water works.⁴⁰

Although the water works built in 1887 helped fire protection efforts, the city badly needed a more comprehensive water system. The newspaper noted:

One of the pressing needs of Ashland is the establishment of a proper system of water works, which will supply the whole town through pipes and supersede the open ditches which now furnish the greater portion of the supply. The city already has a system of water pipes, laid for fire protection chiefly, which covers the business part of town, and furnishes water with a pressure sufficient to afford as much protection as is given by an ordinary fire engine.

The water committee of the last city council recommended that this system of pipes be extended as rapidly as could be done, till it covers all parts of town... Something should be done and done soon, to give the city an adequate water pipe system...⁴¹

The issue resulted in more political turmoil. On May 22, 1889, the city council set a special election for bonds for the city water system.⁴² In June 1889, the Tidings came out strongly for the proposal, explaining that the old ditches, which had supplied the city with water for years, were insufficient and a health menace. Critics of the proposal complained that the council had not sufficiently planned location for the pipes, that they had not

gathered adequate estimates of cost, and that they had no legal right to take enough water from the creek for a system.⁴³ The Ashland Tidings editor wrote:

It is a question of the gravest moment; an issue on which hangs the destiny of our city ... The ditches which have supplied the people and the city with water the years past cannot meet the requirements of today, to say nothing of the future. Open ditches, with water soaking the soil constantly along their course, a surplus running where it should not, and the ditches themselves catching surface washings, may do well enough for a hamlet, but as constructed and used in Ashland they become a positive menace to health in a town of the size of ours, even when the natural drainage is good.

In open canals so small, and of such length, running through dooryards and other yards, the water can be kept neither cool in hot weather nor pure at any time. Taken in pipes from a distance far enough up the creek to cover the whole town, the water supply will be the purest, the freshest, and the best of any city in America.⁴⁴

Citizens held a mass meeting on the plaza to hear speakers on both sides of the issue. Council member J.S. Walter presented the council's case, defended the plan, and described the system and costs. J.T. Bowditch spoke for the opponents. He said that the City had no definite information about plans and costs, and stated that "he didn't agree with Dr. Walter in anything." A project supporter said, "the city must have the water works..." adding, "Let the city get the water the best way it can, and let the council proceed in a business way and put in the best system of water works that can be had." S.B. Galey stood to speak for the opposition, but the crowd was impatient and tired and he moved to adjourn the meeting until the next week...⁴⁵ On election day, voters approved the water works proposal by a vote of 248 to 38. The newspaper stated:

Ashland followed her record of enterprise, pluck and progress last Thursday by a practically unanimous vote in favor of the proposition for a city bond for \$50,000 for waterworks... Of the 38 who voted against the proposition, nine-tenths will protest today that they want the new water works, but voted against the bond issue because... they can't possibly vote the same way that some of the neighbors do, or because it has become a habit to vote against any proposition made by the city government.⁴⁶

The Council accepted the proposal of the John Barrett Company in Portland, the corporation that had built the earlier system. The plan called for two components, an upper system to serve the hilly area above the Boulevard and North Main Street, and a lower system, to serve Iowa Street, Hargadine Street and the railroad area. The Bank of Ashland bought the water bonds in October 1889, and they went at a premium. Within a month the city accepted bids for construction of an open reservoir on upper Granite Street, pipe and

