By Leslie Faulkenberry

The fountains in Hanover Square were more than decoration. In the aftermath of yellow fever outbreaks in 1876, townspeople of Brunswick began to examine everyday aspects of their lives fearfully, hoping to isolate singular causes of the terrible disease that brought so much suffering and death to the coast of Georgia in the late 19th century. The entire Old Town area of the city is built on a honeycomb of reclaimed marshland. The low areas were filled in with dirt hauled and scraped from areas all over the peninsula of land where the city’s existence began in the late 18th century.

Although the water table on coastal property lies a scant few feet beneath the surface of the sandy soil, in the southern section of the town, relatively shallow wells were subject to saltwater infiltration and collapse. In fact, a group of local ladies of stature petitioned the City Commissioners of Brunswick to provide the building materials for deeper, safer wells for families that could not afford to install them on their own. Beseeching the head of the local Board of Health to support their request, the venerable Mrs. D.T. (Mary) Dunn, also of the Ladies Park Association, was quoted in the minutes of the City Council meetings as she reminded them that good water would keep the city “clean, sweet and healthy.” No doubt she had their ear, for her husband was a prominent businessman, at one time the Federal revenue collector and Postmaster for Brunswick. He was a City Alderman from 1880-81, and was elected Mayor of Brunswick in 1887 and 1888.

Providing a number of private wells would have been a daunting task in the late 1800s, when the mantle of Reconstruction was still heavy on the shoulders of the struggling city. Property owners with holdings on the outskirts of town fought a grim battle with the slippery economy of rebuilding. They were forced to choose between paying taxes on the land they could no longer farm with labor-intensive crops like rice and cotton, and selling the acreage off piece by piece. Higher than usual storm tides overtook private shallow
wells, and residents needed a source of safe, clean water, even if it had to be hauled into households one bucket at a time.

**Medicinal Purposes**

The city moved the county courthouse and city hall, jail, and Masonic Temple buildings out of Hanover Square in 1882. In their place, in 1884, an artesian well was drilled to a depth of 313.5 feet. The well tapped into an aquifer that yielded an average 60 gallons of cold, clean water per minute. In 1885, the city of Brunswick invested in an ornate fountain to be placed over the well in the center of Hanover Square, for all to use.

The state chemist had already tested the water from the well, and had certified it as unusually pure, possessing minerals that were “much prized...for certain classes of diseases.” The healing properties of Hanover Square’s water became well known throughout the southeast. Guests at the venerable Oglethorpe Hotel, located at the opposite end of town, would dress in their finest clothing to ride to the Hanover Square fountain and “take the waters.”

Considering the era in which this curious blend of socializing and health pursuit was a popular practice, it is not surprising that it offered some benefits. Lead was a commonly used component in paint and other finishes in homes–on toys, furniture and walls. It was routinely used in maritime finishes to prolong the protective coating on both wood and metal. Extremely strong, durable lead pipes were the “gold standard” for piping in residential drinking water; it was unknown at the time that they slowly leached the toxic substance into the water.

A survey of nostalgic advertisements for patent medicines, a profitable enterprise in the late 1800s and early 1900s, reveals that a large percentage of them dealt with the symptoms of lead poisoning. Headaches, joint pain, digestive and skin problems apparently plagued our forebears at an alarming rate. All of these symptoms are also related to lead poisoning. But when sufferers ingested the highly sulfurous artesian well water from the Hanover fountain over a period of several weeks, their claims of miracle cures might not have been so quaintly overstated as it might seem.

Sulfur, a prominent component in the Hanover Square fountain’s water, is still used today to combat such ills as a variety of heavy metals poisoning, arthritis and skin ailments. While not as effective as more modern chelation treatments, ingesting sulfur
water would have offered some measure of relief, both from the presence of the mineral and from the absence of ingesting the usual water from lead pipes at home. Additionally, the vigorous flow of the Hanover well prevented any water from lingering in contact with lead piping; considering the yield of over sixty gallons per minute, anyone who drank the water could be reassured that it was fresh from the deep aquifer.

Curiously, the high sulfur content of the water that gave it the characteristic “rotten egg” smell so objectionable to modern sensibilities was considered a sign of its therapeutic value. Some citizens who grew up in Brunswick, drinking water from Hanover Park’s graceful fountain, developed a preference for it. Reid Harris, a local attorney and environmental advocate, recalled a time in his childhood of falling ill with a high, resistant fever. The only thing he wanted was “some of that sulfur water” from the Hanover Park fountain. His somewhat delirious pleas for the water moved a relative to fetch a container of it for him. He quickly recovered after drinking it.

When hard economic times befell Brunswick in the early 1890s, the city released its Parks Keeper to save money. Without regular attention and maintenance, the fountain fell into disrepair until the city commissioners allocated the money to restore it in 1897. At that time, rules for its use were published, including racially separated drinking fountains on the sides of the structure. Over the years, the fountain became somewhat of a barometer of the city’s fortunes. During times of economic downturn, the fountain and its smaller drinking basins would often run dry. In boom times, it was restored to its former beauty.

**War and Water**

During the early months of World War II, the rapid expansion of nearby J.A. Jones Company shipyards overwhelmed the city with urgently needed workers who had no place to live. Lifelong Brunswick resident, Theresa Martin, remembered her grandfather’s strict warning about staying away from the woods behind their Hanover Square home. She remembers watching curiously from her front porch, or on her way to school, as new arrivals for shipyard employment emerged from their makeshift camping spots or their cars hidden in the woods. The temporarily homeless workers hurriedly washed up at the fountain in the early morning hours before the first shift. Others filled pails with water from the fountain and washed their clothing in the few hours of free time they had.

Essential industries of paint manufacture, shipbuilding and construction of the nearby Naval Air Station converged in Brunswick, creating a fierce competition among companies hiring help. People from small rural communities and towns within a hundred-mile radius, hungry for work after the difficult years of the Great Depression,
simply arrived in town. They eagerly accepted what was considered high paying jobs without worrying about lodgings. Although it was officially prohibited, some desperate workers spread out bedrolls near the fountain and bandstand in the first few weeks of their wartime employment, taking care to vacate their sleeping places before sunrise. It would be nearly a year before the city’s frantic efforts to provide housing would catch up to the demand. But in the meantime, the fountain in Hanover Square helped the city meet the needs of defense workers.

Rescue from Ruin

Over the decades after World War II, the park at Hanover Square was used less frequently for concerts and other gatherings. The center of commerce moved from the downtown area to the new mall and adjacent retail areas in the northern part of the city. Banks, professional offices and the Glynn County Courthouse were still near the Old Town sector, but new housing areas moved northward near the city’s new junior college and the mall. Priorities shifted, and the parks and squares of the city drifted into neglect.

By the 1990s, Hanover Square’s historic fountain was in ruins. Vandals damaged the fountain, so the top two tiers were removed and placed in storage for safekeeping until funds became available to repair it. Over time, the tiers were lost, and the fountain and its base deteriorated into a soggy puddle of rusted, broken parts and foul water. (Only the base bowl remained, and was later repurposed into a fountain for Jekyll Square West.)

As historic homes on the square changed hands in the new century, owners invested significant effort and funds into restoring the houses and gardens. Their civic pride extended into a plan to recapture the beauty and integrity of Hanover Square. A small but determined group of citizens formed Signature Squares of Brunswick, Inc. and resolved to tackle the project themselves, with the support of the City of Brunswick, other preservation-oriented non-profit groups and volunteers.

Signature Squares of Brunswick undertook the restoration of Hanover Square and its fountain as its first major project. The organization raised funds necessary to replace key elements of the cherished landmark. Organizers researched the design of the original Hanover Square fountain, which had been replaced at least once in the history of the landmark, and discovered that a foundry in Alabama still made the graceful Tall Crane design that was very similar in form to the original fountain installed in 1884. The replacement fountain was ordered, delivered and installed after extensive work was done on the base and pool that holds the water reservoir.
On July 4, 2006, the refurbished park was dedicated with a fanfare of Civil War re-enactors, and a crowd of supporters standing by. Careful attention has been paid to every detail, from the graceful herons encircling its base to the top jets that invite visitors to enjoy the sights and sounds of the sparkling waters.