

Friday, December 31, 2010

Teen writes about construction of Wachusett Reservoir



Eamon McCarthy Earls became interested in the reservoir after a visit six years ago.
(T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

By Karen Nugent TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

[1 comment](#) | [Add a comment](#)

WEST BOYLSTON — One wouldn't think a book about a 115-year-old engineering project written by a 16-year-old would draw a standing-room-only crowd of all ages and interests.

But this project, the 1895-1908 construction of the Wachusett Dam and Reservoir, besides being one of the largest civil engineering feats in New England history, forever changed the four towns — Boylston, Clinton, Sterling and West Boylston — that sacrificed land for Boston's public water supply.

Author Eamon McCarthy Earls, 16, of Franklin, told the packed audience at the Beaman Memorial Library Wednesday evening that he first became interested in the dam, in Clinton, after a 2004 visit. That piqued his interest in the Boston-area water system, which the reservoir still supplies, and, at age 14, he decided to read all he could about the Quabbin Reservoir, which feeds the Wachusett.

The Quabbin, in Belchertown, was constructed in the 1930s — about 40 years after the Wachusett. But according to Eamon and several audience members, it gets all the publicity.

“To my surprise, there is hardly any mention of the Wachusett, and there were no published books that I could find,” he said.

So, Eamon embarked on his own research, using material from the Clinton Historical Society, the Clinton Daily Item newspaper, with its day-by-day accounts of the project; libraries, and government documents, especially information from the-then Metropolitan Water Board, something he found fascinating.

“There are strange details, in there, and they (Water Board documents) are strangely literary in their own way,” he said.

His 156-page book, titled “Wachusett: How Boston's 19th Century Quest for Water Changed Four Towns and a Way of Life,” describes everything from the westward quest by Boston politicians to find bigger water supplies as populations and industry expanded in the late 1800s, to the squalid shanty towns that sprang up in the four towns around the Nashua River bed.

The \$11 million project drew more than 4,000 immigrant workers from Italy, Hungary and Finland, and a group of African-Americans from Virginia, many of whom perished because black workers were often sent into tunnels to lay down explosives. There were 37 recorded fatalities in all, with 1896, the year a 12-mile-long aqueduct was built to connect the reservoir to the Sudbury Reservoir, claiming the most lives.

Many of the skilled laborers, such as stone masons, later moved on to a similar dam project on the New York-Connecticut border, while the unskilled workers settled here.

Eamon said there were deaths and injuries from many locomotive accidents, as trains were used for transporting supplies. The Central Mass Railroad, one of the longest in the country, had to be re-routed for the water project.

While most locals have heard the stories of how nearly half of Clinton's land was flooded to make way for the reservoir, necessitating the moving of coffins from a cemetery — now under water — to Lancaster; and the loss of the Oakdale section of West Boylston, where most of its mills stood, Eamon expounded on the how early planners in Boston went about finding new water sources.

His presentation began with an 1848 colorized photograph of “Boston's water celebration” showing folks admiring a gushing water pipe on Boston Common.

The source was Lake Cochituate in Natick and Wayland. Eamon said Boston officials for years had been annexing similar bodies of water in Sudbury, Hopkinton and Ashland for years as stopgap measures to provide more public water as factories and populations increased. Earlier, parts of Boston itself were flooded.

By the 1890s, Eamon said, things were so desperate, lakes in Maine and New Hampshire were considered as possible water supplies. But they were found to be too costly, and somewhat of a political hot potato if water were to come from out-of-state.

The Merrimack River was also considered, but it was too polluted with factory dyes and chemicals.

That's when the South Branch of the Nashua River, with headwaters in Clinton, came into the picture.

Eamon pointed out that an economic depression second only to the Great Depression created havoc in the 1890s, so flooding the mills in West Boylston, and all of South Clinton, did not garner any favors with local officials.

When initial surveyors began to show up, he said, suspicious residents found plans for the reservoir hard to believe.

“No one really understood the scale of the Wachusett Reservoir project at the time. It was just beyond their comprehension,” Eamon said.

When work began, thousands of wooden carts appeared, and began moving soil for the reservoir to the current two-mile North Dike in Clinton and Sterling — a popular walking area — where there is still a hidden dam from a cut-off trench.

There were odd-looking contraptions on the river taking drill borings. A photograph shown by Eamon of a man standing on solid ground would today be 60 feet under water.

The massive dam, he said, was built from the bottom up, with the first stone placed 25 feet beneath the surface. Today, the dam stands at 115 feet.

Throughout his talk, Eamon emphasized late 19th-century fascination with art and technology. His presentation included several travel postcards depicting work at the dam and reservoir. He said travelers from the Boston area made regular excursions to see the dam, with its picturesque fountain and landscaping by the Olmsted Brothers, sons of the creator of Boston's “Emerald Necklace” system of parks.

“The recreation area in front of the dam was designed as a celebration of clean water,” he said. “Because the Wachusett supplied all the water to Boston, a lot of people came out to

see this area.”

Terrance P. Ingano, a Clinton historian who has spoken and written on the Wachusett Dam project for years, commended young Eamon on his book.

“It truly is the best resource on the Wachusett,” said Mr. Ingano, who is also the Clinton school superintendent.

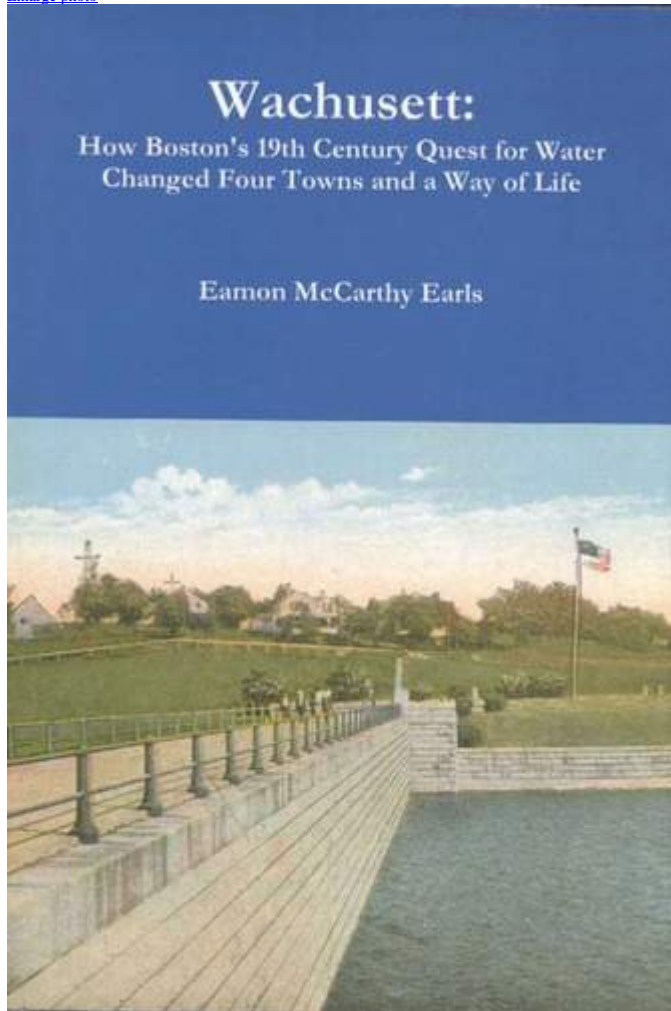
Eamon, who has an earlier book, “Kearns on the Double,” a mystery that takes place in a fictitious Massachusetts town, based on Southbridge, will speak on the Wachusett book twice on Jan 8. At 10:30 a.m. Jan. 8, he will be at the Sterling Public Library, followed by a presentation at 1 p.m. at Tower Hill Botanic Garden in Boylston.

His new book, which sells for \$21.99, is available at Borders in Marlboro, Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, the Friends of the Worcester Public Library book shop, the Wellesley Booksmith, and the Audubon gift shop at Drumlin Farm in Lincoln.

Contact Karen Nugent by e-mail at knugent@telegram.com.



[Enlarge photo](#)



[Enlarge photo](#)



Construction of the dam.

[Enlarge photo](#)

Photo galleries

- [SLIDESHOW: Wachusett Reservoir](#)

Related

- [Fun facts about the Wachusett Reservoir](#)

Read more:

<http://www.telegram.com/article/20101231/NEWS/12310463/1116#ixzz19i4Q1yXQ>