BAS 250 Big Hole Pump Station Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

A booming population and huge industrial demand meant that Butte needed imaginative solutions to the problem of water supply in semi-arid country, in headwaters country where the only rivers were small streams and creeks.

One solution was to take water from a major river, the Big Hole, but that required pumping water up and over the Continental Divide. The Big Hole Pump Station was constructed near the town of Divide in 1899 to accomplish that, and the water source still serves Butte today.

The first pump, a horizontal triple-expansion two-stage plunger pump made by the Nordberg Manufacturing Co. of Madison, Wisconsin, was powered by steam generated by burning coal. In 1906 a second pump was added, doubling the total capacity to about eight million gallons per day. The pumps were electrified in 1907, but the 150-foot steel smokestack that served the boilers still stands.

Over time, four more pumps were added: #3 in 1916 (six million gallons a day), #4 in 1930 (seven million), and #5 and #6 in 1954 (3.5 million each, replacing the old #1 pump).

The water was raised 840 feet to the divide and flowed on to a reservoir on the South Fork of Divide Creek west of Feely, from which it was then carried by gravity 28 miles into Butte through redwood pipes. By 1914, some high-pressure sections had been replaced with steel, but most of the route was still 24- to 26-inch wooden pipes wrapped in wire.

The original Big Hole Pipeline came into Butte’s west side, crossing Silver Bow Creek about a half mile west of Williamsburg. Water flowed through a pipe along Emmet Street to the 14-million-gallon West Side Reservoir near Big Butte. From there, water went east and south in multiple pipes to serve Centerville, the Uptown Business District, and the West Side.

In 1914, water rates ranged from $1.50 a month for a residence without a bath or toilet to 20 cents to 50 cents per thousand gallons per month for larger users. Butte’s daily water consumption at that time was around nine million gallons a day.

Eugene Carroll managed the Butte Water Company essentially from its beginning in 1891 until his retirement in 1944. He and his wife lived in the Italianate home at 315 West Granite from about 1897 until the late 1940s, and that’s a house that still stands. In 1918, the Butte Water Company occupied the Montana Independent Telephone Company Building on Granite Street, which still serves as the water company’s headquarters today.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.