

Brief History of Plumbing

Plumbing has profoundly influenced the development of modern society by improving public health and safety. Plumbing systems allow people to have safe, fresh water for drinking, washing, cooking, and other uses. Plumbing also reduces the spread of diseases by safely draining away waste water that contains harmful organisms. Improved sanitation contributes to longer life expectancies for men, women and children. Plumbing systems also allow people to fight fires, water their lawns, fill their pools, and do many daily activities. But this was not always so.

Plumbing, as we know it today, is the result of thousands of years of improvements, inventions, and innovations. Rudimentary plumbing systems were in use as early as 2900 BCE. Earthenware pipes, masonry sewers, water closets, and drainage systems have been found in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to prove this.

In 312 BCE, the Romans began bringing water into Rome through aqueducts. Most aqueducts were open, stone-lined trenches that used gravity to move water downhill. The more famous arched aqueducts were not nearly as commonly used as the simpler trench system.

By 100 CE, the aqueducts system was so advanced that Rome built and maintained public bathhouses and fountains throughout the city. The aqueducts were also used to drain waste and discharge them into river, downstream from the city. The Romans also gave us the word that we use today to describe people who install and maintain water supply and waste systems. Many Roman cities used lead pipe in their plumbing system. The Latin word for lead is plumbum, and a person who worked with lead was called a plumberius. Over the centuries, this ancient word has come down to us as a word we know very well: plumber.

New Professional Organization

By the late 19th century, plumbing technology and practices were recognizably modern. Manufacturers and wholesale dealers of new plumbing devices sold them over the counter as separate components. They ignored the fact that these components would have to be combined and installed into a properly designed plumbing system in order to work. Dealers claimed

no responsibility for the proper installation of plumbing systems. The results were predictable: people suffered from shoddy and unsafe plumbing systems that sometimes made sanitary condition worse instead of better. Plumbers were usually blamed - unfairly - when things went wrong. Plumbers had the knowledge and ability to install safe and efficient plumbing system, but the manufacturers and dealers completely dominated the trade.

In 1883, a group of master plumbers united to take action and address the situation. These plumbers believed that proper public sanitation could be insured only if a single person - the contractor - was responsible for acquiring plumbing materials and using them to build effective, safe, and complete sanitary systems. Plumbing in the Twentieth Century Sanitation, along with medical science, continues to be largely responsible for the maintenance of public health.

In the United States, great progress in the development of the plumbing methods and technologies has been made since 1910. The reliability of traditional piping materials such as copper and cast iron has been dramatically improved. New plastic compounds called thermoplastic and thermosets have been developed. The physical properties of these plastics make them ideal for use in sanitary systems. Polyvinyl chloride (PVC), developed in the 1930s, was the first plastic used in cold water systems. Manufacturers have also improved plumbing fixtures, which are devices that receive water from a water supply line. Common fixtures include sinks, faucets, shower stalls, and toilets.