

A Gadget Guy

by Kendra Strubhart, Heritage Interpreter

In 1919, 60-year-old Francis Stuyvesant Peabody stepped down as president of Peabody Coal, but he was far from the stereotypical technophobic retiree, especially when it came to the construction of Mayslake Hall, which started that same year. Research shows he was quite enthusiastic about technology, hiring Marshall & Fox to design the mansion (the architectural firm was known for using the latest design innovations on hotels and upscale apartment buildings) and purchasing several modern gadgets to enhance his country estate.



Central Vacuum System

On the second floor of Mayslake Hall, curious round metal flaps near the base of the walls cover inlets that were once part of a central vacuum system original to the house. Servants walked from room to room carrying a hose, which plugged into the inlets, and the dirt and debris traveled through tubes in the walls to a collection container. A large power unit in the basement provided the suction.

The first central vacuum system came on the market in the late 19th century. It was a ducted machine with copper tubes that connected to hand-operated bellows, which created suction, but it was expensive and did not work well.

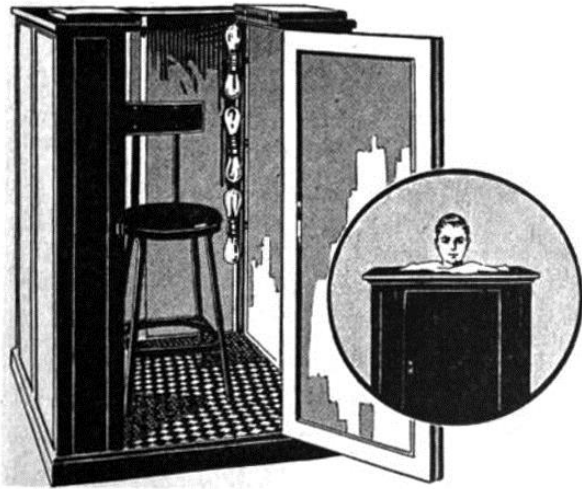
Peabody's system was likely powered by an

electric turbine. We do not know the brand, but one of the most widely advertised from that era was manufactured by the Spencer Turbine Cleaner Company, whose exhibit at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition touted a system that "solved the cleaning problem in home and skyscraper alike." The promotion of a turbine cleaner at a world's fair illustrates how innovative the system at Mayslake Hall truly was.

Servant Call System

On the north wall of the servants' corridor is a small glass-covered cutout. Through the glass you can see the remains of a low-voltage wiring system with each wire labeled with the name of a different room: a switchboard. The wires are now disconnected, but when Peabody resided at Mayslake Hall they played a critical role in the servant call system.

We know little about the system, but small call buttons were once peppered throughout the house. Typical systems from the era utilized call buttons like these that, when pressed, sent an electrical current to a switchboard, which triggered a bell to alert staff. It would have activated a mechanical signal, too, to indicate the room. There was also a phone located next to this switchboard, allowing the servant to make phone calls if necessary. Based on early architectural drawings of the house, we believe switchboards were also located in the servants' sitting room, the kitchen, the butler's pantry, the head housekeeper's room, and possibly the chauffeur's quarters in the gatehouse. We hope to discover more as the restoration of the mansion continues.



Electric Light Bath

In the basement of Mayslake Hall rests the skeletal remains of a Turkish bathroom. In Peabody's day, this luxurious space was equipped with everything an aging but active outdoorsman would need to relax. Three tiled closets housed a shower, steam room and dry sauna, and a 78-by-30-inch porcelain slab served as an ideal massage table. But tucked away behind a pillar was a true elite fixture of the time: a white enamel electric light cabinet bath.

Electric light baths were invented in 1891 by Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, the brother of corn flake pioneer William Kellogg. Dr. Kellogg was the chief medical officer of the Battle Creek Sanitarium, a health resort based on holistic health principles advocated by the Seventh-day Adventist

Church. According to Kellogg, bathing in electric light could heal or cure an abundance of conditions, including obesity, rheumatism, eczema, lupus, lumbago, and venereal and syphilitic effusions. In 1910 he wrote that the therapy had cured England's King Edward of gout.

According to Kellogg, patients like Peabody would not need to use an electric light bath for long before seeing the benefits. Kellogg recommended just three to six minutes for most conditions but advised 15 to 30 minutes for those suffering from obesity, rheumatism, gout or diabetes. However, Kellogg cautioned patients to use ice bags or cool compresses to keep their hearts cool during sessions because intense heat was "depressing, especially for the heart." (We hope Peabody followed these guidelines and that the bath didn't contribute to his fatal heart attack in 1922.)

At Mayslake Hall, Peabody had a place where he could retire from the mining world, but with its cutting-edge devices, the estate clearly showed he had no interest in retiring from the modern one.