

Robert A. Cairns

"Our water system will always be a source of pride to us, a monument to him and a source of envy on the part of other cities which have had the help of no such far-sighted man. He had the universal respect of all classes, races and parties."

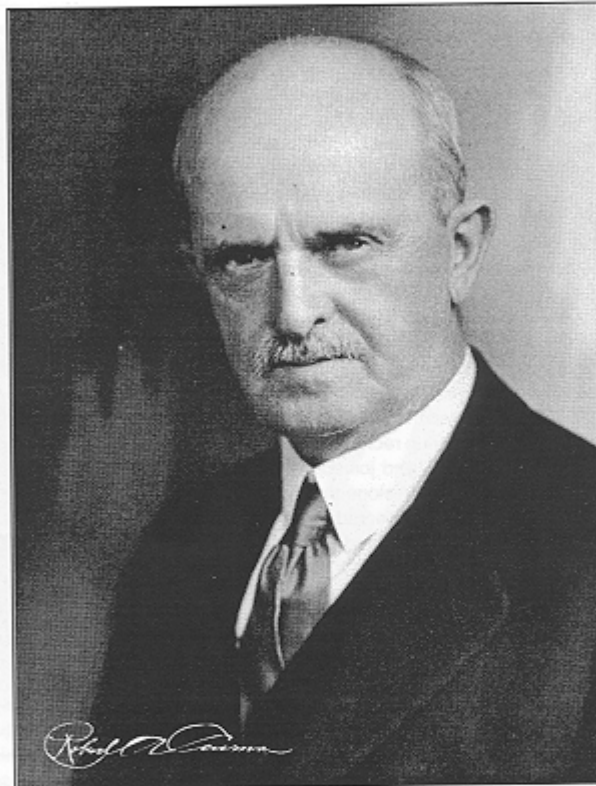
- Frederick S. Chase

Robert A. Cairns, City engineer of Waterbury for forty-seven years, was nationally recognized as one of the foremost men in his profession. He was born December 1, 1859 in the city to which he was to give a lifetime of conscientious service. His greatest achievement was the development of a waterworks system derived from reservoirs and tunnels built in the Litchfield hills under his supervision.

Mr. Cairns graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1885 and became City Engineer in Waterbury in 1890, a position he held until his death in 1937. In 1890 the City had a population of 33,000 and was just beginning to give serious consideration to its sewerage and water problems. It had only one and a half miles of paved streets, twenty-one miles of sewers and thirty-seven miles of water mains. Water was supplied from reservoirs at East Mountain and Cooke Street (later Fulton Park) and supplemented by pumping from the Mad River. During his years in office, the population had increased to nearly 100,000, there were over fifty miles of paved streets, one hundred miles of sewers and close to two hundred miles of water mains furnishing all of the City's water from the system Cairns had the vision, foresight and ability to provide for Waterbury. The Robert A. Cairns Reservoir, dedicated in 1968, was named in his honor.

In 1893 Cairns began work on the West Branch water system, which consisted of the Wigwam reservoir, the Morris reservoir and a proposed third reservoir intended to receive water brought through the seven mile tunnel from the Shepaug River. In 1920 the vast undertaking of building the Shepaug Tunnel began. Despite considerable political opposition, Cairns persevered in seeing the job through to completion in 1929 at a cost of \$2,600,000. Running under two ridges of hills and under Bantam Lake, the tunnel was an engineering feat that attracted the admiration of engineers from all over the country.

In addition to overseeing the development of the new water system, Cairns was responsible for streets, sewers and bridges. When the new railroad



station was being built in 1905, the adjacent area was badly in need of improvement. Under Cairns' guidance, Grand Street was widened and some undesirable streets were eliminated, making way for the development of Library Park. A bond issue for the project aroused considerable opposition, but with support from Henry S. Chase and other like-minded citizens, the beautification of the approach to the railroad station was carried out.

Following his death on November 22, 1937, Mayor Frank Hayes called him "a man of engineering genius, of human feelings, of great vision". The City's system of waterworks, bridges, street layouts, sewers, and parks stand as a lasting monument to Robert Cairns' ability as one of the foremost engineers of New England, and one of Waterbury's most visionary public servants.