

Engineer's Dilemma: To Build or Not to Build? The Untold Story of Taggart Aston

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Where is the line between engineering and politics?

San Francisco's Water Supply

- Inadequate supply for expanding population
- Corruption in the Spring Valley Water Company
- 1906 Earthquake/Fire
- Public vs. Private control of water resources (pendulum)

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History of Hetch Hetchy Valley

- Located in Yosemite National Park, 15 miles Northwest of Yosemite Valley
- 1850: European settlers first arrive
- 1890's: San Francisco begins process to acquire Hetch Hetchy
- 1901: SF Mayor James Phelan applies for water rights on the Tuolumne River
- Aug 1913: Passage of the Raker Act

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Major Players

City of San Francisco



John Ripley Freeman,
Consulting Engineer
PC: ResearchGate



James Phelan,
SF Mayor
PC: FoundSF

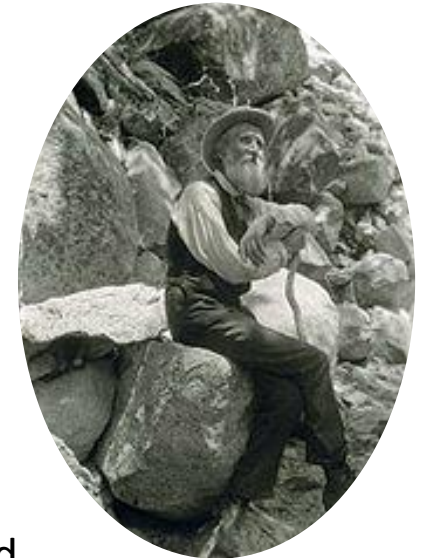


M.M. O'Shaughnessy, SF
City Engineer
PC: GoldenGateBridge.org

Sierra Club



Robert Underwood
Johnson, Secretary
PC: Sierra Club

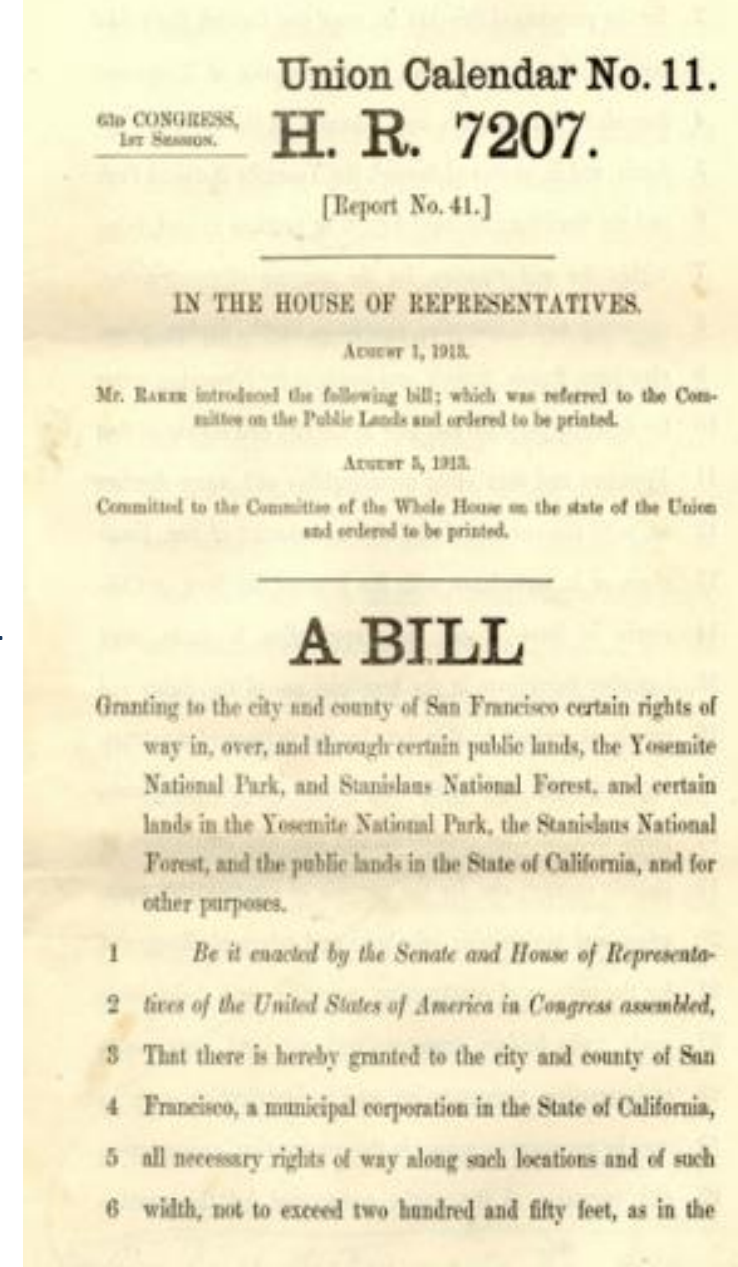


John Muir, Founder
PC: Sierra Club

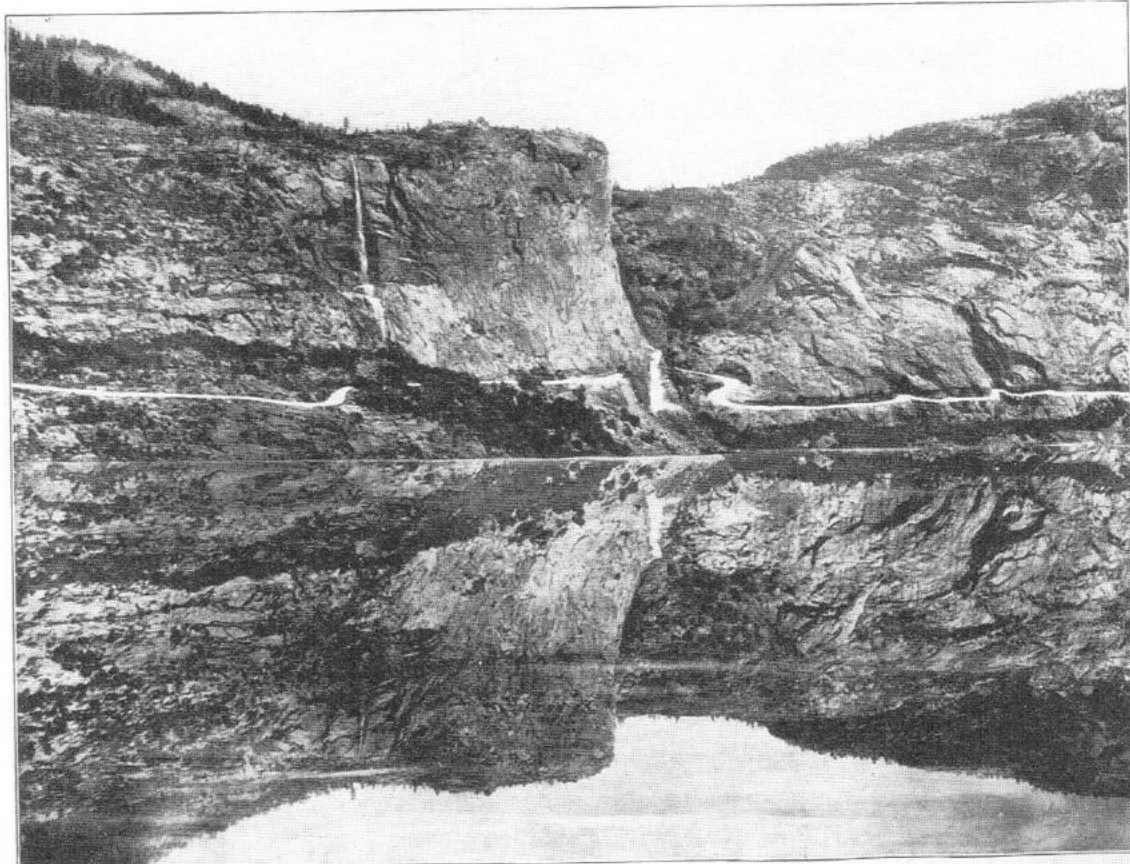
San Francisco's Plea for Hetch Hetchy

- SF needed Congressional approval to place a dam in Yosemite National Park.
- Freeman Report convinced Congress to dam Hetch Hetchy.
- Invincible argument for Tuolumne River
 - Eliminated 12+ water sources (e.g. Sacramento, Mokelumne, Feather, Eel, etc.).
 - Reservoir would enhance the natural beauty.
- Sierra Club main opposition to SF's claim to Hetch Hetchy.

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Freeman Report



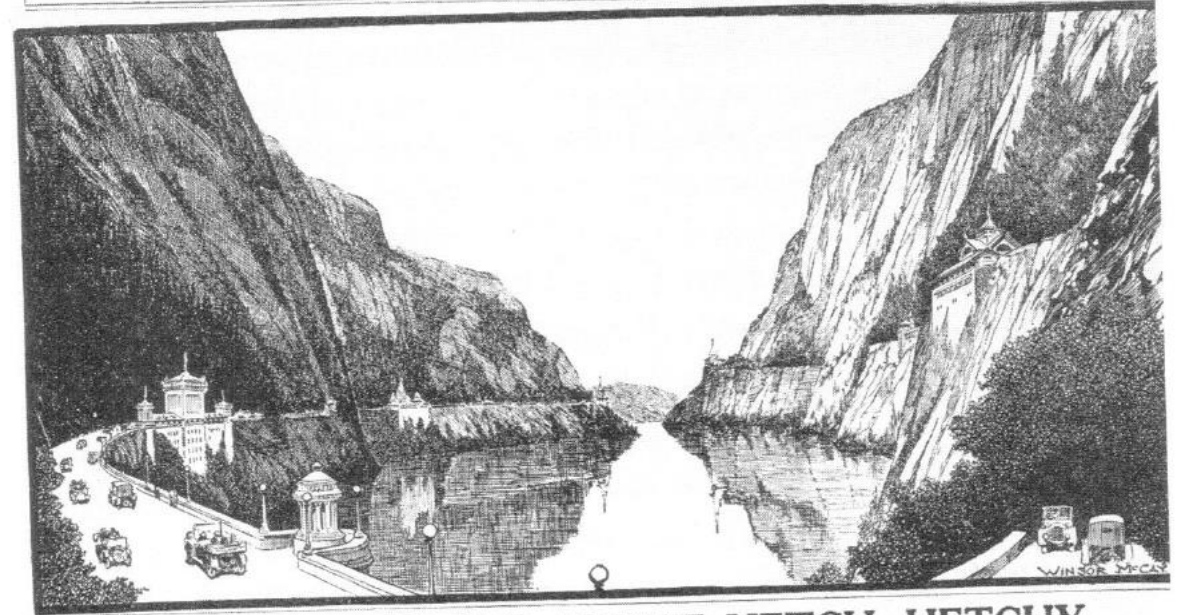
THE PROPOSED HETCH HETCHY RESERVOIR.

The depth of water would not lessen the apparent height of cliffs. On the contrary, the reflection would increase it. (Position of scenic road shown by white line.)

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Tuesday, December 2, 1913 Editorial Page San Francisco Examiner Tuesday, December 2, 1913

DOES THIS BEAUTIFUL LAKE RUIN THIS BEAUTIFUL VALLEY



THE REAL FACTS ABOUT HETCH HETCHY

Figure 9. A tourist's paradise. *San Francisco Examiner*, December 2, 1913, editorial page. From the reproduction in Taylor, *Hetch Hetchy*, opposite p. 126.

2

Important Findings

- Alleged suppression of an engineering report in support of Mokelumne River from U.S. government (Bartell Report)
- A new figure: Taggart Aston
- Aston's encounter with SF Engineering Department
- San Francisco Examiner vs. Aston, U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals

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C O P Y

San Francisco, July 8, 1913.

To the

Hon. Scott Ferris,
Chairman,
Public Lands Committee,
Washington, D.C.

My dear Sir:-

With reference to Mr. Eugene J. Sullivan's evidence your Committee on the 7th inst., I may state that his associate and myself endeavored to dissuade him from going to Washington knowing him to be a man with a grievance and liable to bring extraneous matter into his evidence. Upon his insisting to my clients, who had engaged me as a Consulting Engineer to look on the Mokelumne source and advise his company, consideration refused to permit me to appear before your Committee. We are in sympathy with his method of giving evidence, neither do we approve of his unnecessary abuse of individuals.

I may explain that I am not Mr. Sullivan's engineer as he has spoken of me, but engaged by others to advise his Committee. However, certain essential facts remain as outlined in my letter to you, dated June 24th.

I have advisedly called the Bartel-Manson's report a "suppressed report", and in explanation thereof, hereunder explain to you as to how I came to know of it. I sent in a note to Mr. O'Shaughnessy, the City Engineer of San Francisco, on the 15th, and left for Washington (early in June), asking him to permit me to obtain from his draughting department copies of reservoir plans of the Mokelumne River project and other data, as I had been engaged to prepare a report thereon. He sent his Clerk to the Chief Draughtsman, Mr. Jones; the latter told me that the plans were locked up and asked me to call again. I called several times with a like result and was thus led to suspect that the officials were endeavoring to avoid giving me access to the data. One June 15th, I telephoned and an Assistant replied that Mr. Jones and Mr. Bartel, who were in charge, were out of town several days, but asked me to call, which I did on the following day when I saw this assistant who was apparently unsophisticated and innocent as to any intrigue on the part of his superiors. I asked for access to the data desired. I asked for copies

Taggart Aston

-Consulting Engineer hired by Eugene J. Sullivan, owner of Sierra Blue Lakes Co.

-Sent a letter to Congress exposing an internal report in support of Mokelumne alternative.!

“Bartell Report”



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on Powell St.,
San Francisco - Oct./48. T.A.

“Its [Bartell Report] findings conceded the Mokelumne to have a Water Supply sufficient for the needs of San Francisco for the next 100 years, at least.”ⁱ

“Upon returning to my office some hours later my assistants informed me that the City Engineers department had sent an official to my office threatening to inform the police if the report was not returned forthwith, and stating it was a document which was not supposed to be seen, and that the Assistant who let me see it would get into serious trouble for so doing.”ⁱ

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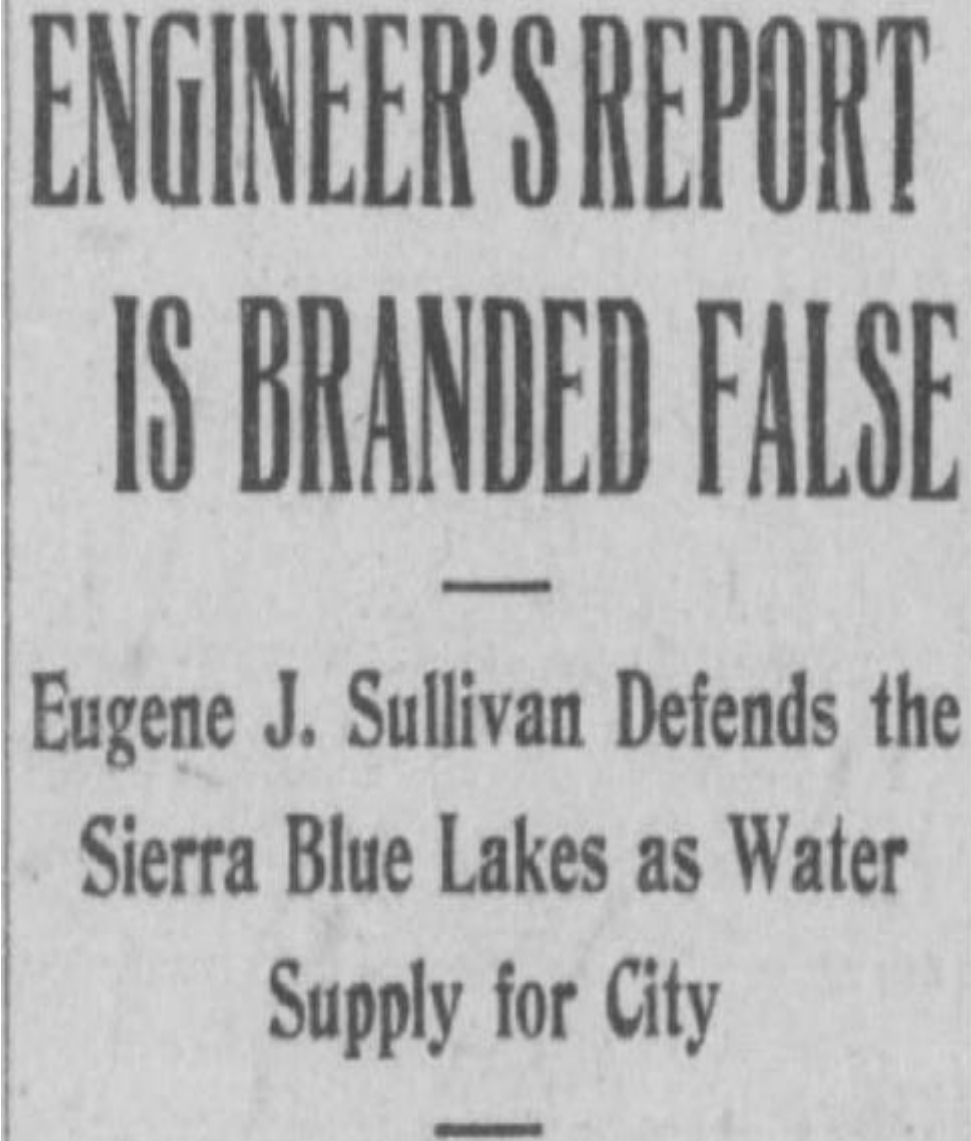
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How the “Silver Bullet” missed

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- Senate Public Lands Committee held a hearing in response to allegations.
- The Advisory Board of Army Engineers requested Bartell Report, but told by SF it did not exist.ⁱⁱ
- Eugene J. Sullivan’s testimony discredited during July 7th 1913 Senate Public Lands Committee.
- Aston’s second plea to Hon. Scott Ferris failed.
- August 1st 1913: Raker Act passes HOR
- December 2nd 1913: Passes Senate



ENGINEER'S REPORT
IS BRANDED FALSE

Eugene J. Sullivan Defends the
Sierra Blue Lakes as Water
Supply for City

San Francisco Examiner vs. Aston

- U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals caseⁱⁱⁱ
- Filed in 1915 by the plaintiff Taggart Aston against William Randolph Hearst, owner of the *San Francisco Examiner* newspaper, for “misleading, defamatory, libelous, unprivileged” claims written about him in a December 1913 special issue.
- Court ruled in favor of Aston

“Tool, sycophant or hireling of the said Eugene J. Sullivan, and, therefore, of “a thief” and “of a man who ought to be in the penitentiary” and that as such he would “stultify himself and prostitute his personal honor and professional reputation to do the servile bidding of such an employer without reference to truth and right” – Quotes from San Francisco Examinerⁱⁱⁱ

Political Clout of Engineers

- Mokelumne River was equivalent capacity, lower cost, less time^{iv}
 - Was Hetch Hetchy really the best alternative?
- Problematic intersection between politics and engineering where engineers acted as politicians.
- Engineers at this time wielded great political power.
 - Evident in popular culture: engineers were featured as leading men in best-selling novels and movies at the time.^v
- Ideology of nature serving multiple purposes managed by engineers.

Where is the line between engineering and politics?

Sources Used

1) Primary Source Documents

a) Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley

-O'Shaughnessy's, Robert Underwood Johnson's, Grunsky's, etc. Papers

b) Special Collections, UC Davis

c) Water Resources Archives, UC Riverside

d) Historical Newspaper Archives, ProQuest

e) Court Case Archives, Public Record

f) Family Records***

2) Secondary Sources

a) "The Battle over Hetch Hetchy: America's Most Controversial Dam and the Birth of Modern Environmentalism" by Robert Righter

b) "Dam!: Water, Power, Politics, and Preservation in Hetch Hetchy and Yosemite National Park" by John Simpson

c) "Engineering the Golden State: Technics, Politics, and Culture in Progressive Era California." Essay by Bruce Sinclair