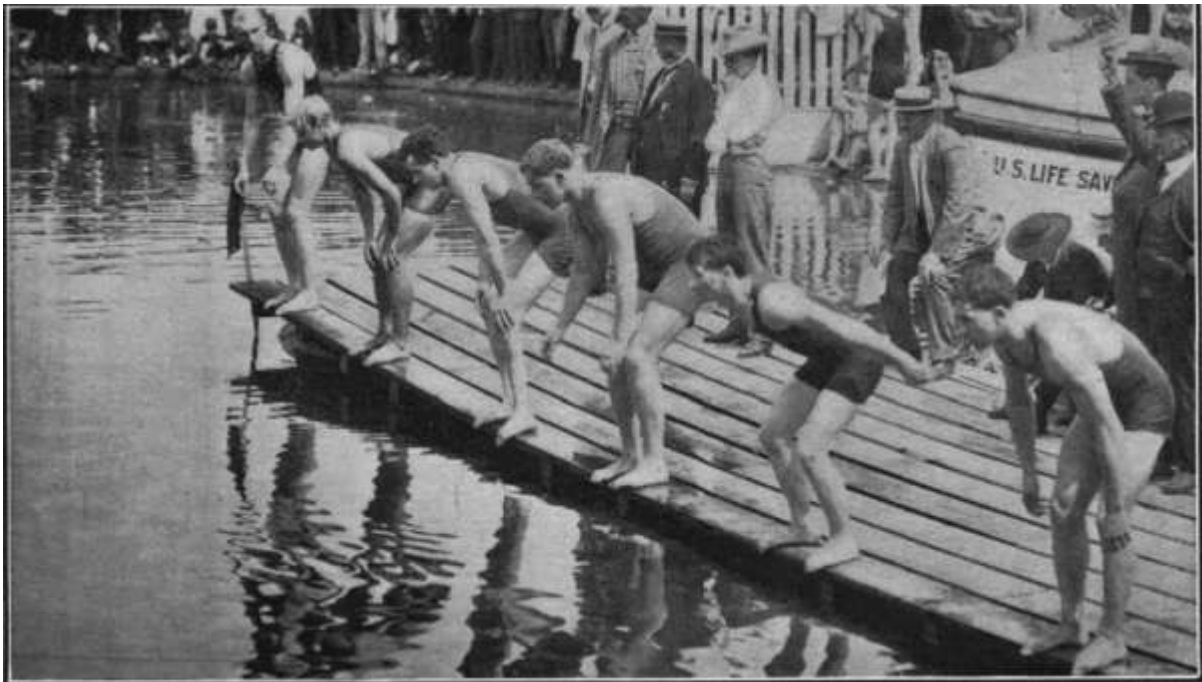


A Pleasant Dip? The Aquatic Venue for the 1904 Olympics

Those who watched the events in the Aquatic Centre in the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics ought to be reminded that facilities for Olympic events have not always been quite so impressive. The aquatic events in the 1896 Games were held in the sea off Piraeus (the seaport for Athens) and those in the 1900 Games in the Seine in Paris; but arguably worse in their own way were the events of 1904.

The Swimming, Water Polo and Diving events of the 1904 Games were held in “The United States Life Saving Exhibition Lake”, an artificial lake in the area allocated to the World’s Fair (also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) in Forest Park, St. Louis, Missouri. Indeed the whole 1904 Games was merely a sideshow for the Fair (as the 1900 Games had been).



**START OF 100-YARD DASH, OLYMPIC SWIMMING CHAMPIONSHIPS.
Won by Zoltan deHolomay, of Buda-Pesth.**

(the caption above is the one given in the official Games Report)

The shortest races, the 50 yards (yes, yards) Freestyle and the 100 yards Freestyle and Backstroke, were swum as straight-line races from the starting pontoon to a finishing rope: there were no lane ropes used. For the longer races, the competitors touched the rope or pontoon at the respective end of the course and turned round: there was no wall from which to push off. Present-day swimmers who scoff at the times recorded in these Olympics should also be aware that the front-crawl stroke was in its early stages of development, the backstroke used was more like an inverted breaststroke, and that the competitors' costumes must have caused far more drag than the present-day equivalents.

The most unfortunate aspect of the aquatic facility was that the water was unfiltered and unpurified, and with minimal water circulation over the months before the competitions it soon became stagnant. The lake almost certainly received runoff fluids from nearby fields holding stock intended for the nearby Palace of Agriculture exhibition building: several competitors became ill during the meeting, and over the next year, four American Water Polo players (who would have spent much more time in that water than the average swimmer or diver) died of typhoid. Coincidence, or what?