In 1980, Harborplace and the National Aquarium opened, securing Baltimore’s place as a center of tourism and a model for waterfront redevelopment around the world. Baltimore was one of the last major cities on the east coast to construct a proper sewer system. The City’s inability to install sanitary sewers until 1915 tarnished the appeal of what was an otherwise successful city. Several commissions throughout the nineteenth century formulated plans for a sewer system for Baltimore, but were unsuccessful because of economic conditions and fighting between political parties.

Lacking a sewer system, Baltimore relied primarily on privy vaults (cesspools) for waste disposal until the early twentieth century. Privy vaults are holes ranging anywhere from 3 to 75 feet deep, though most were usually quite shallow. Baltimore’s sandy soil was ideal for privy vaults, making the method the most economically viable form of waste disposal. It was estimated that in 1880, with a population of 350 thousand, over 80,000 privy vaults were in use in the City.

The Great Fire of 1904 proved to be the final factor in the construction of a sewer system in Baltimore. A new spirit among the residents arose from the ashes of Baltimore and there was a drive to rebuild and improve the city. On April 7, 1904, the Sewage Enabling Act passed in the Maryland legislature. It provided ten million dollars for a new sewer system in Baltimore. Construction began in 1907 and the sewage treatment plant was operational in 1915. Public health improved, as did the image of the City. Today, the Back River and Patapsco wastewater treatment plants serve 1.6 million people and treat up to 250 million gallons of sewage per day.

Because Baltimore took so long to construct a sewer system, the streams and storm drains were required to act as sewers, dumping human and industrial waste, as well as stormwater, into the Harbor. However, with the construction of a sewage system separate from the storm drain system, the City managed to avoid the problems caused by combined sewer systems, problems that are currently plaguing other modern cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC.

Even still, Baltimore’s aging sewage and water treatment systems are faced with many challenges. Broken pipes and blockages cause sewage to leak and spill into the City’s storm drain system and streams resulting in high bacteria levels in the Harbor. To repair these issues, Baltimore City and County signed Consent Decrees with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Justice, requiring the rehabilitation of the sewage system by 2016 in the City and 2019 in the County.