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THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON SUBURBAN
SANITARY COMMISSION

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The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission's Office Building
on Ralston Avenue in Hyattsville



Water Tower in Hyattsville Bought by the Commission when They
Bought the System in 1918

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE WASHINGTON SUBURBAN
SANITARY COMMISSION

Fifteen years ago quite a number of populous communities had grown up, and more were forming all the time about the stream and electric railroads which radiated out from the District of Columbia into Maryland. As these communities grew larger in number as well as in size, they had the many problems facing them that all suburban communities have to solve sooner or later in order to survive. Of these many problems thus confronting these suburban people the greatest and the one most difficult to accomplish was that of obtaining a proper water supply and sewerage system.

Some of these communities had some sort of a water and sewerage system, but the majority of these systems were found to be unsatisfactory due to improper construction or the over-taxing of these small plants as the demands for their usage grew with the increasing population.

Upon later investigation it was found that nearly one-half of the public systems in what is now the Washington Suburban Sanitary District delivered water which was unsafe for human beings to use or that it had such a taste as to render it nearly impossible for drinking purposes. The methods of sewerage disposals were fastly alarming the people as to the offensive and dangerous conditions then existing.

As early as 1910 the plea for the correction of the admittedly bad sanitary methods of sewerage disposals and the unsatisfactory water conditions began to take on a definite form. During this year public meetings were held in the different localities and many suggestions made as to how these unsanitary and unsatisfactory conditions could be remedied.

The people in the District of Columbia became concerned at the same time when it was discovered that Little Falls Branch, Rock Creek and the Anacostia River were becoming polluted due to dumping of untreated sewerage into them by the neighboring communities in Prince George's and Montgomery Counties.

Gentlemen from both of these counties met in 1911 with members of the Maryland State Board of Health and Mr. Asa E. Philips, who was at that time superintendent of sewers in Washington, at the office of Mr. Ralston a member of the committee which was later appointed in 1912. At this meeting it was decided that the communities should appeal to the General Assembly of Maryland for the solution of this great problem of how to obtain proper sanitary conditions for the Maryland suburbs and thus stop the growing pollution of the Washington streams.

It was largely due to this meeting that there was introduced and passed in the General Assembly of 1912 a resolution authorizing the Governor of Maryland to appoint a commission from the counties of Prince George's and Mont-

gomery to investigate and report upon the sewerage conditions in the assigned territory. This commission was to be known as the Prince George's and Montgomery Counties Sewerage Commission. The Governor appointed the following gentlemen:

William T. S. Curtis

T. Howard Duckett

Dr. J. Dudley Morgon

Dr. John L. Lewis

John I. Cassidy

J. Dawson Williams

Oliver S. Metzgerott

Jackson H. Ralston

J. Enos Ray Jr.

Dr. Charles A. Fox

Louis L. Dent

Dr. William H. Welch

Dr. M. Langton Price

In June of 1912 these gentlemen met in Mr. Ralston's office and elected Mr. William T. S. Curtis to serve as Chairman.

As is the case in the appointment of many commissions this commission was supplied with no funds. The duties of this commission were such that they could not fulfill their purposes without the aid of a trained engineer and some assistants. This condition of affairs place the gentlemen in an embarrassing predicament, and it was the State Department of Health who offered them their Engineering Force with their Chief Engineer Mr. Morse, who had had much experience in sewerage work in both New York City and Baltimore.

Mr. Morse worked on the scientific solutions to the problems facing him while the commission made investigations

of existing conditions and held meetings for the discussion of the subject.

On Feb. 4, 1914 the commission presented to the Governor its recommendations and conclusions of its investigations. with a bill all ready drawn up in the form for passage by the General Assembly. Governor Goldsborough sent a letter of thanks to the commission on Feb. 6, 1914 relieving them of their positions and expressing the hope that they would give the bill their attention during its time of passage thru the Assembly. There were at least two public hearing on the bill at Annapolis during the time it was before the Assembly, but like many other bills it was lost in the confusion of the closing days of the 1914 Session of the Assembly and failed to pass.

Several of the gentlemen of this old commission were not disheartened by the failure of the bill to pass and were instrumental in getting another bill introduced in the General Assembly of 1916. This bill contained many of the points in the old bill which failed to pass and also included that some provision be made to better the water supply which was at that time becoming a problem of increasing importance.

The newly introduced bill had a very stormy career and finally emerged in the form which can be found in chapter 313 of the Acts of 1916. In Chapter 313 of the Acts of 1916 it created the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission which was to consist of three men. This Act designed what territory



Filtration Plant in Hyattsville Built in 1922



One of the Methods by which Water was obtained before
the time of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission

was to be included in the Washington Suburban Sanitary District over which the Commission was to function. One of these men was to be appointed by the Governor, one by the County Commissioners of Prince George's County and the remaining member by the County Commissioners of Montgomery County. Very shortly after this act of 1916 became a law Mr. J. William Bogley of Friendship Heights, Montgomery County was appointed by the Governor; the County Commissioners of Prince George's County appointed Mr. T. Howard Duckett of Bladensburg; and Mr. William T.S. Curtis of Chevy Chase was appointed by the County Commissioners of Montgomery County.

The Washington Suburban Sanitary District over which the Commission presided had as its so-called inner boundary the District of Columbia boundary line. The outer boundary line reached beyond Glen Echo, Alto Vista, Garrett Park, Wheaton, Burnt Mills, Beltsville, Lanham, and Capital Heights. This area covered 95 square miles, 54 of which was in Prince George's County and 41 in Montgomery County. The area of the District of Columbia is less than three-fourths the area included in the Sanitary District.

No time was lost by these men in organizing, as their first meeting was held in June 1916 at which Mr. Curtis was selected as chairman and to also act as Treasurer, while Mr. Bogley was to have the position of secretary.

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission has been deeply indebted to the Maryland State Board of Health ever since their very beginning. As soon as the Commission became organized the resident office of the State Board of Health at Hyattsville was used as the Commission's office.

This Commission was furnished with some funds which was more than the old Sewerage Commission of 1912 was. But with the small amount of money at its disposal the employment of a private chief engineer and a capable staff, although the most important item for consideration, was yet impossible. Here at this stage of the early work of the Commission the Health Department again came to their aid by offering to again loan their Chief Engineer, Mr. Morse, his assistant engineer, Mr. Hall, who were both so familiar with this work as they had worked up the plans of 1914, and as much of their staff as was necessary, on a financial basis that was satisfactory to the Health Board and yet within the means of the Commission.

Many meetings were soon held for discussion with officials and public organizations in order to get the viewpoints of all who would be concerned in this great work of improving the water and sewerage systems in the Washington Suburban Sanitary District. The members of the Commission made a complete physical survey of the District and personally investigated every municipal and privately owned water and sewerage system within the territory. It

was during this period of investigation that Mr. J. William Bogley died, but his brother Mr, Emory H. Bogley was appointed to fill this vacant place.

When the Commission began its investigations some startling facts were disclosed. For instance, only about 25% of the population which was then approximately 32,000 or about 8,000 people were served by a water and sewerage system. While today the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission furnishes water and sewerage service to about 40% of the population of about 50,000 or a total of approximately 20,000 people.

The investigations of 1917 showed that there then existed only 53 miles of water mains and 60 miles of sewers. Of the seventeen public water systems then existing, not one was adequate throughout for proper protection as measured by modern requirements. Nine had pipes so small that no fire hydrants could be connected to them, while the remaining eight were of little use due to the low pressure carried in the mains. In fact, in most of these town, the only good derived from the fire hydrants was that they offered an excuse for having an annual carnival known as the Firemen's Carnival, for the purpose of buying uniforms and fire engines, both of which proved to be of little use when called into action.

Using the United States Treasury Department standard with regard to the number of bacteria alon allowed in a certain amount of water, 47 out of 85 samples of drinking water taken from private wells scattered thru out the

District, failed to come up to the requirements. As private wells constituted the main source of drinking water for the people, this one test showed that the majority of them were drinking water which was not fit for drinking purposes. Of the seventeen public water supply systems only seven supplied water which came up to all the requirements that the Commission subjected it to.

From the very beginning of its existence, the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission had planned on obtaining water from the District of Columbia Reservoir by hooking up their water lines to the District's mains at certain points on the Maryland-District boundary line. They had planned on running lines out from Rhode Island Avenue, Anacostia Road in Kenilworth, Georgia Avenue, and a point between Wisconsin and Connecticut Avenues.

It was also planned that the sewers in the Sanitary District should be connected with the Washington sewers at certain convenient points. This would stop the dumping of sewerage into streams which flowed thru the District of Columbia.

The Commission was further encouraged in this plan by the passage of bill in 1917 by the United States Congress giving the Commissioners of Washington the authority to allow the Sanitary Commission to receive water from the District's mains upon certain agreements between the District Commissioners and the Sanitary Commissioners.

On January 21, 1918 the Washington Suburban Sanitary



Sewerage Line Leading to the North West Branch of
the Anacostia River



Water Tower in Mount Rainer Built by the
Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission

Commission submitted its report to the General Assembly of Maryland. This report gave the results of its investigations, the preliminary designs for water and sewerage systems for the Sanitary District, the methods under which these systems might be constructed, maintained and operated and it also included a bill all ready drawn up in form for the Assembly to pass upon and thus enact it into a law. This report contained many pages of detail telling the methods of operation, cost of purchasing old systems, conditions of these old systems, and how to construct and operate a new system. This Report also contain seventeen detailed maps prepared by Mr. Morse and his staff of engineers.

The 1918 Session of the Legislature passed an act which differed only very slightly from the one present by the Commission in its report. The substance of the act was that it authorized the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission, consisting of the three gentlemen previously named, to be a body incorporated to operate and construct a water and sewerage system which would serve the people of the Washington Suburban Sanitary District.

As soon as the Commission was given the power by the passage of the bill in 1918 which made the Washingt Suburban Sanitary Commission a corporate body, it purchased the public water and sewerage systems in its district with the once exception of the water system of Glen Echo, which desired to furnish its own water. The water and sewerage systems were bought from the different towns and real estate companies who, in some cases had built thair own plants in order

The construction of new service lines and plants was not started until during the month of September in 1919. Up to this time, of the total of sixty engineers, assistants, draftsmen, and laborers, only ten had been used for real construction work. The work of these ten men was the replacing of old worn out pipes with new ones when necessary, and to see that the present system was kept in proper operating conditions, making repairs when needed.

The remaining fifty men were used to locate and map the lines of the purchased plants as well as draw up the plans for the new work as planned by the Commission. The task of locating the existing lines was no small job as most of them had been laid by contractors who had kept no record of their definite locations and their locations were plotted only after much hard and painstaking work.

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission was fortunate in getting Mr. Robert Morse as their Chief Engineer and Mr. Hall as Assistant Chief Engineer in 1918. Mr. Morse is a man well versed in Sanitary Engineering as he had previously been Assistant Sanitary Engineer in the Metropolitan Sewerage Commission of New York, 1910-12, as well as Chief Engineer in full charge of supervision over water supply and sewerage systems in Maryland, for the Maryland State Department of Health, since 1912. Mr. Hall had been Mr. Morse's Assistant Engineer in the Health Department, and was also familiar with the work in the

Sanitary District as he had worked with Mr. Morse in their previous reports to the General Assembly.

In order to pay for the costs of operation, construction, and service, the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission uses three methods; - first, taxation; second, special assessments; and third, the rates based upon service. The whole district bears the burden of the construction costs of the trunk line, which is something the entire district will eventually use. The cost of the installation of the lateral lines is paid by the property owners upon whose property it abuts. The user pays a service charge for the installation of meters and service, and a definite rate for the exact amount of water he uses.

The present location of the offices of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission is in Hyattsville on Ralston Avenue in their new building built in 1923. The offices were formerly in a wooden building on the Washington Baltimore Boulevard in Hyattsville.

The Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission is a corporate body created for the purpose of furnishing the people in the Washington Suburban Sanitary District with an adequate and sanitary water and sewerage service. The Commission is not a profit making body and if any profit is made during any one year, this profit is taken to help pay for the operating cost of the next coming year. The Public Service Commission of Maryland goes over their books but has not power to change their rates for service as it has

in the case of street railroads and other utility corporations which are permitted to make a fair profit on their investment.

In conclusion it can be said that the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission is a municipality, chartered by the State, to serve the people within its district with both a sanitary and an adequate water and sewerage system. And there is no doubt but to it should go some of the credit for developing the territory within its borders into such towns and communities as to be a credit to the State of Maryland as well as to our National Capital.

The information for this thesis was obtained from the following sources:

1. Report submitted to the General Assembly of Maryland by the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission on January 21, 1918.

2. Personal interview with Mr. Robert Morse, Chief Engineer of the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.

3. Personal interview with Mr. Harry R. Hall, Assistant and Chief Engineer of Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission.

4. Article in August 1924 issue of "Washington Suburbs"; a magazine; by Mr. Robert Morse entitled "The Washington Suburban Sanitary District, What It Is and Why It Exists".