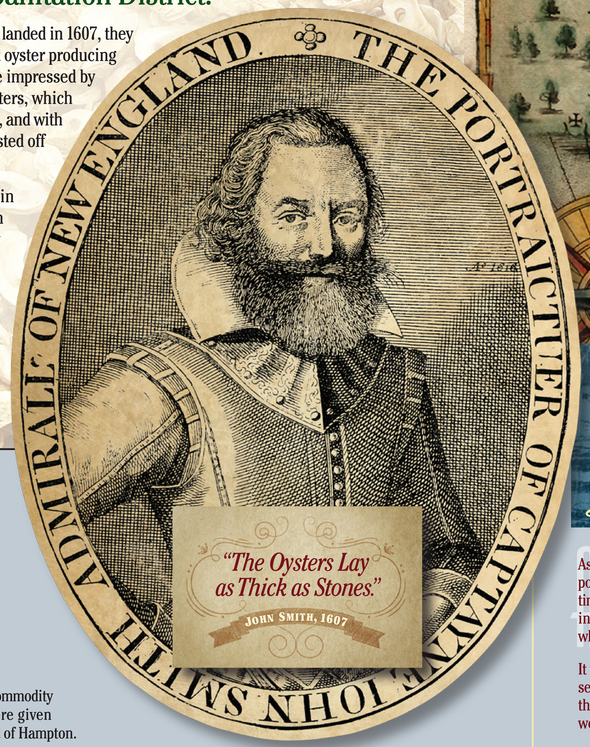
Oysters
Provide the Clue

1607 – 1940

Oysters were central in the establishment of the Hampton Roads Sanitation District.

After John Smith and company landed in 1607, they discovered perhaps the largest oyster producing waters in the world. They were impressed by the volume and size of the oysters, which measured as large as 13 inches, and with how easily they could be harvested off shallow reefs.

Oysters became a commodity in the early 19th century, but when production suffered in the early 1920s as a result of increasing water pollution, people began to take notice.



"The Oysters Lay as Thick as Stones."
JOHN SMITH, 1607

1607

John Smith landed at Cape Henry. Jamestown is established.

1821 Oysters became a growing commodity when several schooner owners were given permission to "transfer oysters" out of Hampton.

1881 J. S. Darling and Son, which would become one of the largest oyster producers in the world, was founded in Hampton.

During oyster season, J. S. Darling and Son employed more than 250 people with a "fleet of 25 to thirty canoes," and processed around 200,000 bushels a year.

A Serious *Problem*

As the Hampton Roads population increased, pollution became a problem. The practice at the time was to release untreated raw sewage directly into the rivers surrounding Hampton Roads, where it would presumably disperse and dilute.

It was estimated that 25 million gallons of raw sewage was pouring into local waters daily. By the mid-1920s, over 10,000 acres of oyster beds were condemned.

Local medical groups were concerned about possible typhoid and cholera outbreaks. Parents were alarmed about their children swimming "near the mouths of sewers." There was growing anxiety that property values near waterfront communities on local rivers and the bay beaches could be impacted.

In response, a series of commissions and reports were released studying the problem. All concluded that pollution caused by raw sewage discharged into local waters was bad and getting worse.

"The Pollution Question is Grave"
– THE SPRATELY COMMISSION, 1927

"In addition to the injury to the seafood industry, it is the sense of this commission that the continued pollution of the said tidal waters constitute a menace to public health, and will seriously affect the future of the bathing resorts and watering places in this area."
– THE CALROW REPORT, 1934

1934

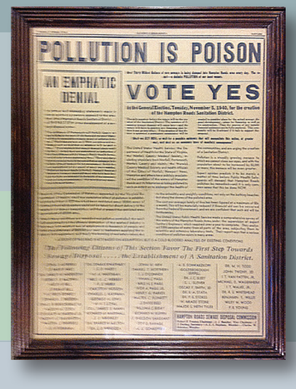
A 1934 report by the U.S. Public Health Service offered "a complete scientific, bacteriological study and report of the cause, extent and effect of sewage pollution in the Hampton Roads area," and proposed "one sanitary district be formed" to include six sewage disposal plants: three in Norfolk, two in Portsmouth and one in Newport News.

A War of Ads & Editorials

For the most part, editorial opinion across the various Hampton Roads newspapers was supportive for creating a sanitation district. The exception was the *Portsmouth Star*. As each referendum approached, competing ads and editorials presented both sides of the argument.

"This sewage disposal proposition seems to be indeed a many-headed cobra, already once smashed under heel, but now again rising to strike. It begins to look as though we shall have to get out the old crotched stick to scotch it again."
– ***PORTSMOUTH STAR* EDITORIAL** *DECEMBER 10, 1939*

"The problem created by sewage pollution is a general problem and its solution depends upon the cooperation of all the communities which contribute to the creation of the problem."
– ***THE NORFOLK LEDGER-DISPATCH* EDITORIAL** *DECEMBER 13, 1939*



The Hampton Roads Sewage Disposal Commission is Created

On the heels of these reports, the General Assembly established the Hampton Roads Sewage Disposal Commission (HRSDC) on March 27, 1934. Its mission was to act as a liaison between the local communities and the Governor and to educate the public on the extent and effect of pollution and how to eliminate it.

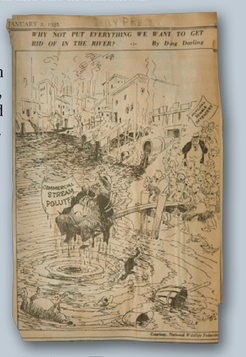
Through Chairman Robert B. Preston's tireless leadership, HRSDC spent six years working to establish the Hampton Roads Sanitation District. They advocated strongly that a coordinated, region-wide effort would be the only effective way to deal with water pollution impacting rivers and the bay.

There were plenty of setbacks along the way, including struggles for funding, dogged opposition and a failed referendum.

NOVEMBER 19, 1937

Members of the Hampton Roads Sewage Disposal Commission drafted a final report of its work and recommendations for a law to provide for sewage disposal plants to rid the waters of Hampton Roads of pollution. They are shown here at work. Left to right in the picture are R. B. Preston, chairman of the commission; J. J. Baecher, vice chairman; J. S. Darling, secretary; and J. M. Overton and A. E. S. Stephens. *Virginian-Pilot Photo by Charles S. Borjes.*

1937 HRSDC hired Greeley and Hansen of Chicago, a sanitary engineering firm that was establishing sewage disposal plants nationally. They recommended to HRSDC that a sanitation district be created to consist of eight plants: three in Norfolk, two in Portsmouth, one in Newport News, one in Suffolk and one in Smithfield.



1938 The first referendum seeking to establish the Hampton Roads Sanitation District was held on November 8th and failed by 744 votes, out of 21,000 votes cast. Preston and the HRSDC did not give up, though. They continued their education campaign about "the evils" of water pollution, and worked to craft new legislation for a referendum vote.

1940 On November 5th, in an "unusually large turnout" due to the presidential election, the referendum to create the Hampton Roads Sanitation District was approved. As in 1938, Portsmouth, South Norfolk and Norfolk County voted against it. This time more than 37,000 participated, and it won by nearly 4,000 votes, offering as one editorial put it, a "fairer test of public opinion."