An Era of *Growth*

1950s

The HRSD building on Plume Street in Norfolk, completed in 1958, housed administrative functions and a pump station.

As the 1950s opened, much had been achieved since HRSD's founding a mere decade ago. There were three operating sewage disposal plants, 68 miles of trunk lines and 32 pumping stations serving 60,000 customers with revenue of approximately $1.5 million. By fall 1950, it was estimated that 95 percent of sewage was passing through the three HRSD plants.

HRSD's jurisdiction now covered 1,160 square miles and included Newport News, Hampton and Warwick County on the Peninsula; the City of Norfolk; Nansemond and Isle of Wight counties; the Western Branch and Deep Creek districts of Norfolk County; and the Kempsville and Lynnhaven districts of Princess Anne County.

After a decade of pioneering the development of wastewater treatment in Hampton Roads, HRSD in the 1950s settled into the day-to-day business routines of billing, collections, system maintenance, expansion and running a customer-oriented business.

The Lamberts Point Plant, placed in operation in 1948, was upgraded in 1958 with the addition of pre-chlorination facilities.

The Army Base Plant was designed to treat up to 11 million gallons per day.

The Virginia Supreme Court Rules

Most customers paid an average of about $1.80 every three months, which was 40-45 precent of their water bill. In late 1949, Arthur O. Smith of Buckroe refused to pay his HRSD bill because he said HRSD by law was supposed to clean up the water pollution…and pollution still existed.

In October 1950, Judge Frank A. Kearney of Elizabeth City County ruled that Mr. Smith did not have to pay his $30.11 anti-pollution bill because indeed, pollution had not been eradicated as the law required. He declared a breach of contract, which meant that HRSD did not have legal standing to collect its bills.

On appeal, the Virginia Supreme Court on Jan. 21, 1952 upheld HRSD's right to collect funds "even though the system of pollution correction is only partly effective." It threw out the decision by Judge Kearney and ordered Smith to pay the $30.11 with interest.

The Battle to Close Outfalls

Closing all remaining raw sewage outfalls remained a challenge. Over half had been closed since the early 1940s, but there were still 200 to go.

HRSD set a goal to complete them all by the end of the decade, replaced by tie-ins to the sewer system or, as a last resort, by septic tanks. Septic tanks were problematic and controversial, and efforts were made to discourage their use.

As more public outfalls were closed, HRSD entered into a regulatory and enforcement phase of its mission in an effort to close the remaining private outfalls in the area. But there was no easy or inexpensive solution to connect all homes with the HRSD system.

Several Commission members appointed in the 1940s continued to serve in the 1950s. Pictured below, left to right, are: J. C. Biggins of Newport News (replaced in 1950 by J. Clyde Morris); J. S. Darling of Hampton; E. T. Gresham of Norfolk; G. A. Treakle of Norfolk County; and, at extreme right, Robert M. Hughes, Jr., of Norfolk. On Mr. Hughes' right is Reid W. Diggs, general manager, and Miss Mary E. Taylor, secretary.

"…residential areas are cropping up like mushrooms overnight."
– *Times-Herald* Editorial, August 15, 1959

February 1951 The Patrick Henry Plant was acquired from the U.S. Government.

July 1952 Warwick County became the City of Warwick. Elizabeth City County merged with Hampton.

July, 1958 The City of Warwick became part of Newport News

A New Master Plan: Rapid Growth and Expensive Expansion

Meanwhile, an epic postwar baby boom and increasing local concentrations of defense industry personnel during the height of the Cold War made it a challenge for HRSD and localities to keep up with new development. Princess Anne County alone had plans to build 10,000 new homes, with thousands more on the Peninsula. The current, relatively low bonding limit of $10 million was not enough for HRSD to meet the area's expanding needs.

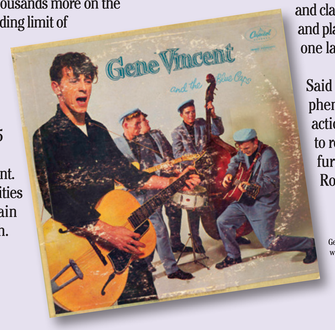
With unprecedented population growth stretching from Princess Anne County to Newport News, HRSD in 1955 commissioned a new master plan to determine patterns for future development. Meanwhile, separately and together, localities worked with HRSD to build and maintain lines in an effort to keep up with growth.

"The vital but often taken for granted problem of sewage disposal has had unifying effect on the sometimes at odds communities of the Hampton Roads area."
– *The Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch* Editorial
October 16, 1956

By 1957, over 50 million gallons of raw sewage was being treated daily. But it was also clear that 20 years after passage of the act that created the Hampton Roads Sanitation District, its mandate needed to be amended and broadened to help it keep up with local growth.

Behind the scenes, they worked with Del. Lewis A. McMurran, Jr. of Newport News to craft a bill for the 1960 General Assembly that would provide much-needed flexibility to HRSD financing, one that would remove the $10 million bonding limit, "enlarge and clarify" the powers of the commission and place HRSD under the jurisdiction of one law rather than several.

Said McMurran, "As a result of the phenomenal growth of this area, this action is needed. Unless action is taken to remedy this need, it might affect the further growth of the entire Hampton Roads area."



Gene Vincent was a Norfolk resident who helped pioneer Rock and Roll.