

THE BEGINNING OF ARLINGTON COUNTY'S PUBLIC WATER SUPPLY

By

RUTH P. ROSE

November 3, 1927, was a day for great celebration in Arlington County, for that was the day on which the public water supply was turned on. The event was celebrated with a long parade, a barbecue, a jousting tournament, fireworks, and a dance in the bus barn in Lyon Village. The citizens who had worked to bring public water to the county had particular reason to rejoice – they had seen their hopes fulfilled.

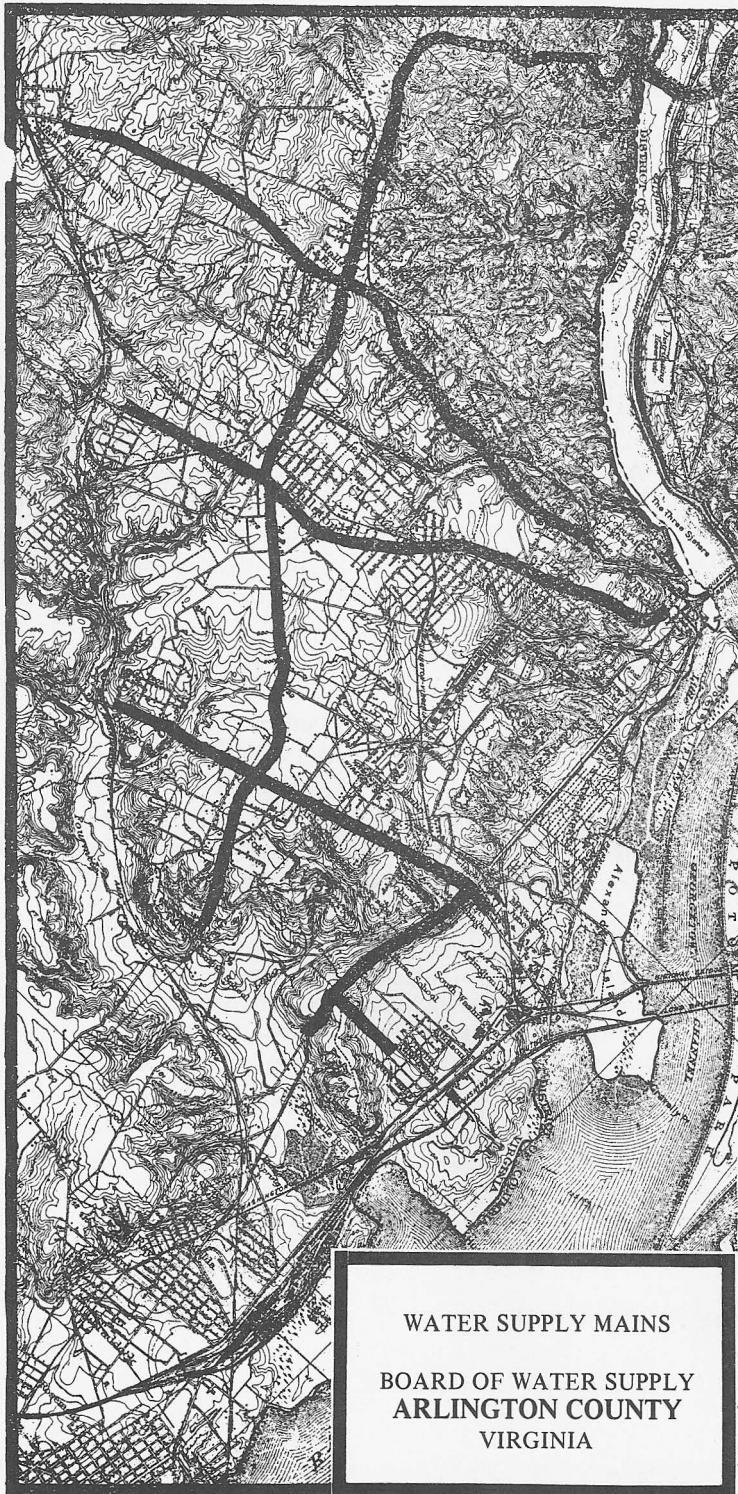
In order for Arlington County to obtain a public water supply, the state of Virginia would have to authorize issuance of revenue bonds which would pay for installation of the supply mains. The General Assembly passed the necessary legislation in its 1922 and 1926 sessions. Because the water would come from the District of Columbia reservoir, which was operated by the Army Corps of Engineers, congressional approval was necessary. In 1926 the Sixty-ninth Congress of the United States authorized the sale of water to Arlington County.¹

The final steps in obtaining the water supply were up to the citizens of the county. The Board of Water Supply was organized with William J. Ingram as chairman. E. C. Turnburke and Edward Duncan were the other two members of the board and Asa E. Phillips was consulting engineer. On May 20, 1926, the Water Board announced the plans for the water system throughout the county. The supply mains would follow the main highways, with lateral distribution upon demand. The main supply lines would run as follows:

- a) Delacarla Pumping Station via Chain Bridge to site of Fort Ethan Allen;
- b) Glebe Road from Fort Ethan Allen via Walker's Chapel to Hall's Hill;
- c) Lee Highway from Hall's Hill to corporation line of East Falls Church;
- d) Glebe Road from Hall's Hill to Wilson Boulevard at Ballston;
- e) Lee Highway from Hall's Hill to Cherrydale and thence to Park Lane;
- f) Wilson Boulevard from Ballston to Bon Air;
- g) Wilson Boulevard from Ballston to Clarendon;
- h) Wilson Boulevard from Clarendon to Rosslyn;
- i) Glebe Road from Ballston to Columbia Pike at Arlington;
- j) Columbia Pike from Arlington to Barcroft;
- k) Glebe Road from Columbia Pike to Nauck and Green Valley;
- l) Columbia Pike from Arlington to East Arlington;
- m) Mount Vernon Boulevard from East Arlington to Four Mile Run;
- n) Frazier Avenue from Mount Vernon Boulevard to Virginia Highlands and Aurora Hills.

In case the Jefferson District voted for the water supply in the upcoming election of June 15, a provision was made to extend a main along Mount Vernon Avenue from Four Mile Run to Hume Avenue.

¹ Rose, C. B., Jr. *Arlington County, Virginia: A History* (Arlington Historical Society, 1976)



WATER SUPPLY MAINS

**BOARD OF WATER SUPPLY
ARLINGTON COUNTY
VIRGINIA**

The size of the mains would be generally 12 inches in diameter, but would vary from 8 to 24 inches. The immediately available supply was estimated to be: for the Washington District, 2,500 dwellings; for the Arlington District, 3,500 dwellings; and for the Jefferson District, 1,500 dwellings.

The estimate for installation was \$600,000 or \$80 for each of the 7,500 dwellings. The estimated annual rate for water users would be \$27, to be reduced as the number of users increased. The number of users necessary to make the system self-supporting would be 1,500; 500 in the Washington District, 700 in the Arlington District, and 300 in the Jefferson District.

The Water Board would furnish water meters for all house connections, and fire hydrants would be installed along all the lines of the supply mains in accordance with the Standards of the National Fire Underwriters Association, at the expense of the county.

As the Water Board made plans for installation of the water mains, the county's citizen associations were organizing to obtain the required number of signatures on water applications before the June 15 election. Miss F. L. Taylor, writing in the *Alexandria Gazette* of May 14, 1926, described the "mobilization of the army of citizens who are to fight for government water in Arlington County." A committee appointed by the Arlington County Civic Federation met with the president and district chairmen of the Organized Women Voters at the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Rogers at Lacey. The two groups joined together to form a Central Committee with Arthur Orr as chairman. Miss Taylor was named secretary. The "army" officers were as follows:

The General Staff

Lieutenant General William J. Ingram, Chief of Staff, President of the Water Board

Lieutenant General E. C. Turnburke

Lieutenant General Edward Duncan

Lieutenant General Asa Phillips, Engineer Corps

Grand Generalissimo for Arlington County

Senator Frank L. Ball

Amazon Corps, Field Marshall for Arlington County,

Mrs. Catherine M. Rogers

Quartermaster General Fletcher Kemp

Lieutenant Generals

For Washington District, Charles F. Kincheloe

For Arlington District, J. Cloyd Byars

For Jefferson District, Mrs. Claude S. Semones

The lieutenant generals would serve directly under the grand generalissimo. The chairman of each local committee securing signatures would bear the rank of colonel and would serve under the lieutenant general for his district. Members

of the local committees would be captains and would serve directly under their colonel. The colonels were as follows:

Washington District

Washington District Improvement League, Major E. W. Cushing, first;
Ruby Lee Minar, later
Cherrydale Citizens' Association, J. R. McCormick
Chain Bridge Heights, Mrs. Lena Poore
Cherrydale Fire Department, R. E. Jansen
Dominion Heights, Thomas Hendrick
Leeway, J. M. Heinbuch
Thrifton, Mr. Spillman
East Falls Church, Luttrell and Hodgson

Jefferson District

Aurora Hills Civic League, Roy Miller
Hume School Civic League, Mrs. Clarence Ahalt
Potomac Civic League, Mrs. R. A. Roseberry
Potomac Fire Department, Walter U. Varney
Virginia Highlands Citizens' Association, A. D. Davis
Virginia Highlands Ladies Auxiliary, Mrs. L. H. Williams
Jefferson District Fire Department, A. G. Skidmore
Braddock Citizens' Association, Mr. Sinclair
Jefferson District Woman's Club, Miss F. L. Taylor

Mt. Ida, Braddock, Lloyd and Cottage Park were suppose to be represented, but apparently were not.

Arlington District

Arlington Citizens' Association, Dr. J. C. Corbett
Ashton Heights Citizens' Association, Mrs. R. L. Eacho
Aurora Heights Citizens' Association, W. J. Ingram, first; W. K. Marshall, later
Ballston Citizens' Association, Major E. W. R. Ewing or Thomas J. Crack
Barcroft, Colonel J. G. Pepper
Bon Air Citizens' Association, F. Freeland Chew
Bon Air Utilities, W. D. Mabry
Clarendon Citizens' Association, S. R. Campbell
Clarendon Fire Department, L. C. McNemar
Clarendon Women's Civic Club, Mrs. S. B. Detwiler
Fort Myer Heights Citizens' Association, Thomas E. Gilbert
Glebeewood Citizens' Association, L. H. Martin
Highland Park Citizens' Association, James R. Williams
Lyon Park Citizens' Association, C. K. Lewis
Park Lane Citizens' Association, J. A. C. Fought

Penrose Association, J. R. Virts, first; Samuel B. Carl, later
Veitch Summit Association, P. W. Luckett
Lyon Village, Monroe H. Stockett

The Jefferson Street Improvement League, under J. W. Watson, may have also been in the Arlington District.

The officers were to meet once a week beginning on Thursday, May 20, at 6:00 P.M. in the cafeteria of Washington-Lee High School in Ballston in order to follow the progress of the campaign.

Miss Taylor concluded her article in the *Gazette* with a statement about the importance of the water supply to Arlington County. "Never in recent years," she stated, "have the people been so aroused as everybody feels that the whole future of the county depends on securing this water supply. . . . The slogan given out by Mr. Orr is, 'Eat, drink and sleep water.' "

Participating organizations immediately began making plans to carry out their campaign. The Washington District Improvement Association, for example, met at the Washington Golf and Country Club where the members heard Admiral Presley M. Rixey, Asa E. Phillips, William J. Ingram, Harry C. Saffell, Walter T. Weaver, Mrs. Ruby Lee Minar, and A. G. Rice. A committee was appointed to assist in getting out a full vote on election day.

In a statement encouraging the obtaining of signatures on application blanks, Phillips noted:

There is no thickly-settled community in the county which need be without water, but after the water bonds are voted and the Water Board comes to the task of locating the mains, it is not likely the Board would feel justified in providing mains for communities which have failed to indicate their intention to become water users in sufficient number to justify the cost.

There is another important consideration; once a man has signed an application for water, he feels definitely committed to the proposition and is practically certain to vote for it.

On May 14, 1926, Central Committee Chairman Orr sent a letter of appointment to the chairmen of the local committees instructing them to begin work at once to coordinate the task of securing signatures to water application blanks and to avoid duplication. Senator Ball, the grand generalissimo of the organization, sent a letter to each colonel giving instructions for the first supper meeting at Washington-Lee High School.

The domestic science department of the school provided a supper of soup, meat, potatoes, a vegetable, coffee, and dessert at a cost of sixty-five cents per person. Returns from the workers were kept on tally sheets, some of which have survived. Seventy-five workers attended the first meeting and reported a total of 515 applications.

Senator Ball sent out a letter to the colonels on May 24, asking for at least two hundred workers to be present at the second meeting on May 27. "A full attendance at the meeting is as important to the success of our efforts as the actual work of obtaining signatures," he said. He urged all workers to come.

The tally sheet for the May 27 meeting showed a county total of 945 applications. At the third meeting the tally sheet showed a disappointing total of 1,292.

On the back of Orr's copy, someone wrote, "There are hundreds of people in some of these communities who are willing to sign and do not for the reason that some of these committees have not yet done any real work."

Some of the communities in Arlington already had water supplies. Among them was the Bon Air community, whose water system had been in operation as early as 1923. Costing two dollars per month per household, the Bon Air water system would be completely paid for by July, 1928. However, the Bon Air Utilities Association, Inc., issued a statement on June 1, 1926, supporting a public water system for the county.

Not all of the citizens of the county were as cooperative. In a letter of June 4, 1926, to the colonels, Generalissimo Ball made reference to a "ward politician from Chicago, who recently has moved into the County," who was heading a movement to defeat the water bonds at the polls." He apparently referred to Robert M. Buck, a former alderman of the Chicago City Council who lived on West Erie Street, according to a note found in the files of the Central Committee. Buch and James E. Chinn of Lyon Village had written an open letter to Phillips questioning the soundness of the plan for the water supply. The letter was addressed to Phillips on the day of the second meeting of the Central Committee at Washington-Lee High School. The letter asked the following four questions:

1. What will be security offered purchasers of the bonds to make them salable?
2. Of the \$27 a year you say will be charged consumers for water that will cost the county approximately \$3, how much will be for actual water service . . . and how much will be for construction?
3. Is it true that you have threatened "to fix it" so that any one of the three magisterial districts of the county failing to support the bond issue at the election June 15, will "never be able to get any water"?
4. What is the real basis of your compensation and how much will it net you, after your present \$25 a day rate ends?

The letter elaborated on the above questions, then ended, "We have other questions to ask you, Mr. Phillips, after you have answered these."²

On June 1, a meeting of the Arlington County Civic Federation was held at the county courthouse where county officials answered questions of citizens concerning the water supply.

Phillips was confined to his home with a cold, but he was interviewed by a reporter from the *Evening Star*. He said that the county would underwrite the entire bond issue, the cost of which had been raised from \$600,000 to \$750,000 in order to provide for contingencies. Each magisterial district would vote separately and would have no effect on the other districts. The time limit for the bonds was thirty-four years, with interest reduced every five years as bonds were retired. At a frontage rate of one dollar per foot and around three dollars for tapping a main, no consumer would be assessed more than \$100.

² *Washington Post*, May 30, 1926.

Phillips stated that he had never threatened "to fix it" so that a magisterial district not supporting the bond issue would be unable to obtain water in the future. As to Phillips' salary, the *Star* quoted from the minutes of the meeting of the Board of Supervisors of Arlington County on April 16, 1926, where the salary of \$25 per day had been determined. Phillips had drawn up the bill, H. R. 4505, which Congressman R. Walton Moore had introduced in Congress and had appeared before the House and Senate committees and before the War Department to testify in favor of the bill. Ingram, chairman of the Water Board, stated that the minimum compensation fixed by consulting engineers was \$100 per day, but Phillips was accepting only \$25 because of his interest in bringing a water supply system to Arlington, the county of his birth.³

At the fourth meeting of the Central Committee at Washington-Lee High School on June 10, the goal of 2,000 applications was reached. A grand total of 2,072 signatures had been obtained. The water bond issue of \$750,000 would go on the ballot on the following Tuesday. The *Evening Star* of June 11, 1926, reported the final tally as follows:

Arlington District

Arlington	91
Ashton Heights	75
Aurora Heights	53
Ballston	121
Barcroft	24
Bon Air, Veitch	100
Clarendon	464
Fort Myer Heights	57
GlebeWood	6
Lyon Park	184
Lyon Village	43
Park Lane	40
Penrose	19
Nauck	27

Washington District

Cherrydale	162
Chain Bridge Heights	18
Dominion Heights	19
Leeway	94
Washington District Improvement League	65
Mackey Hill	9
East Falls Church	38

³ *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.) June 1, 1926.

Jefferson District

Aurora Hills	81
Hume School	4
Potomac	8
Virginia Highlands	85
Jefferson District Woman's Club	124
Jefferson District Fire Department	18

At the final meeting of the Central Committee on June 10 the citizens cheered as they heard the total announced. Then they sang "The Fight is On," and listened to speeches of praise for those who had led the campaign to bring water to the county. Senator Ball praised Congressman Moore for his role in securing congressional approval. Moore praised the citizens of the county for discarding pettiness and eliminating community lines in consideration of one thing only, "water for Arlington County." He estimated that the cost of the water supply had been cut in half by using the federal water system instead of establishing a county supply.

The applications for water were placed in a large market basket and presented to Chairman Ingram by Arthur Orr. Ingram urged the citizens present to get out the vote on the coming Tuesday in order to pass the water bond referendum.

One of the speakers, Charles R. Taylor, president emeritus of the Clarendon Citizens' Association, lauded the efforts of Harry C. Saffell, chairman of the Arlington County Water Supply Commission, which had started the movement for a modern water supply. Saffell was given a rising vote of thanks.

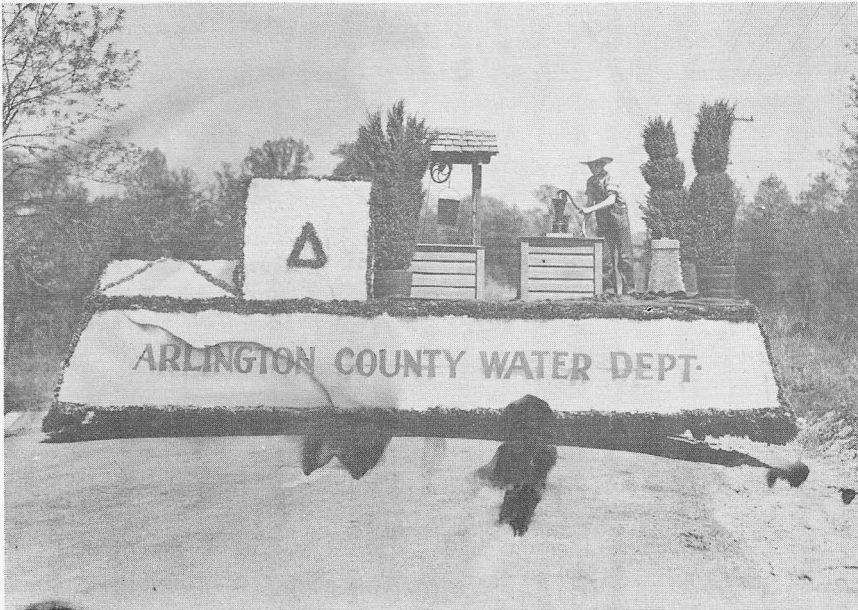
Other speakers at the meeting were Dr. P. M. Chichester, county health officer; Cherrydale Volunteer Fire Department president, Robert E. Jansen; Mrs. Minar; and Walter U. Varney. Miss Mary Bibb sang a solo, accompanied by Mrs. W. W. Snyder at the piano, and the Old Dominion Band played for the gathering.⁴

On June 14, 1926, Orr listed his expenses at Truman Ward's for printed matter used in the campaign for water bonds. One of the expenses was \$1.75 for two hundred copies of a song. The total amount spent was \$28.00.

The voters of Arlington County turned out in record numbers on June 15, and passed the water bonds by a vote of 2,594 to 275. Each district supported the bonds by an overwhelming number of votes. One county resident, E. W. Hodges of Ballston, voted for the first time in his eighty-three years. With completion of the water plan Arlington County was destined to become the first county in the United States to have its own water supply.⁵

⁴ *Evening Star*, June 11, 1926.

⁵ *Evening Star*, June 16, 1926.



The float which celebrated the opening of Arlington County water lines.

During the coming year the water mains were laid in Arlington County according to plan, and on November 3, 1927, the water supply was turned on. It was a day of great celebration. The day's activities began with a parade which started at the Peace Monument in Washington and passed down Pennsylvania Avenue, across Highway Bridge into Arlington County, where it wound its way through Virginia Highlands, Potomac, Arlington, Ashton Heights, Lyon Park, Clarendon, Ballston, and Cherrydale, ending at the Athletic Field in Lyon Village. The parade was led by county officials, including Ingram, Saffell, and Phillips, three of the men instrumental in acquiring the water supply.⁶

At the Athletic Field the Ballston Band played while crowds flocked around tables laden with barbecue until a storm broke and the celebrants were forced to seek shelter. Because of the rain, the speeches which had been planned for the afternoon had to be cancelled. The principal speakers were to have been Congressman Moore and John R. Saunders, Attorney General of Virginia. The rain, however, did not prevent the fireworks display from taking place at 7:00 P.M., as scheduled. C. C. Donaldson of the Cherrydale Fire Department, assisted by Jack Spater, fired off the display as citizens looked on from closed automobiles.

⁶ *Evening Star*, November 3, 1927.

The Washington-Maryland-Virginia Coach Company garage was the scene of a costume dance held after the fireworks display. At the beginning of the dance, General Chairman Walter U. Varney announced the prize winners in the parade, each of whom was awarded a silver loving cup. The winners were: school floats – James Monroe School, first; Woodrow Wilson, second; decorated fire chief's cars – Cherrydale, first; Potomac, second; commercial floats – Arlington County Master Plumbers Association, first; Arlington Dairy, second; civic association floats – Lyon Park Citizens' Association, first; Arlington County Civic Federation, second; decorated private automobiles – R. C. Ballenger, first; Thomas J. Cook, second; semi-public floats – Arlington County Public Health Department, first; Arlington County Chapter, American Red Cross, second.

The silver cups were given by the Arlington County Chamber of Commerce and H. Harris and Co. of Washington. Judges were Dr. Edward McCarthy, C. W. Fitch, and Judge Harry R. Thomas. For the occasion the garage had been decorated with colored lights, ribbons, and cut flowers.⁷

Earlier in the day a jousting tournament was held at the Athletic Field in Lyon Village. The tournament was won by A. D. Langley of Arlington, who was the winner in jousting tournaments all along the East Coast, becoming a national champion. Frank Ball, Jr., who was a child at the time, remembers holding Langley's horse on that historic day.

The most important event of the day was the actual turning on of the water, the culmination of the efforts of Arlington's citizens to bring an enduring system of water supply to the county.⁸

⁷ *Washington Post*, Nov. 4, 1927.

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, information in this article may be found in manuscripts in the archives of the Arlington Historical Society.