

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS

By

Carol Ramsey

A backward glance at Arlington's public works history reveals some quaint historical stories.

For example, Arlington attorney H. Bruce Green remembers how Arlington came by its first street lights. His father, Harry K. Green, Arlington County Commissioner of Revenue 1920-51, raffled off a sofa pillow to purchase five kerosene street lamps.

"This was around 1910, and I was only a boy of six or so, but I remember it happening," recalls Green. "My father embroidered a pillow with a motto about 'letting there be light' for a raffle. I don't know what became of the pillow, but I remember the street lamps."

The kerosene lamps were installed as street lights on Chestnut and Walnut streets, now named North Barton and North Cleveland streets. The residents assumed the tasks of trimming the wicks and filling and lighting the lamps.

Today Arlington has 10,226 street lights--and a wealth of other public works facilities and services managed by the Department of Public Works under the direction of Henry S. Hulme, Jr. Public Works is the county's largest department, providing services including refuse collection; street design, construction and maintenance; snow and ice control; utilities services; maintenance of the county's 740 vehicles; traffic engineering; water and sewer services; and resource recycling programs.

But all the services share a modest common origin during Arlington's rapid transition from rural to metropolitan character in only half a century. Public Works faced pioneering challenges, especially from 1940 to 1950 when Arlington County was reputed to be the fastest-growing county in the U.S., with its population more than doubling from 57,040 to 135,449. By 1960 the population reached 163,401.

In the early 1900s Arlington was a study in rural and urban contrasts. The first bus service was begun in 1921, but the mules that drew county vehicles still were housed in barns adjacent to the Court House. Residents disposed of refuse as best they could, only the main roads were paved, horses were a common form of transportation, and Arlington was rustic with farms, dairies, orchards, open meadows, forests and streams.

The first "hard surface" road was built in 1909, extending from Barton Street to Ft. Myer Drive on what is now Wilson Boulevard. By 1930 with a population of 26,000, Arlington boasted forty-two miles of hard-surfaced roads--materials used included cinders and crushed oyster shells--and 130 miles of unpaved roads. Today Public Works maintains 376 miles of paved roads.

The 1930s were a decade of progress. The county water system that opened in 1926 had expanded to sixty-one miles of water mains with 3,650 connections, which meant decreasing dependence on well water. In 1930 Arlington became a sanitary district with twenty-six miles of sewer lines, so pit privies and septic tanks

started being relegated to the past. Today there are 434 miles of water mains and 33,250 water customers, and 449 miles of sewer lines with 34,403 connections. The development of these two systems attracted large volumes of new residents to Arlington.

Public works development continued to keep pace with changing times after 1932 when the new County Manager form of government was adopted as the first of its type in the nation. An early milestone came in 1934 with the adoption of a uniform street naming system eliminating duplicated street names, retaining historic names for major thoroughfares, and prescribing a pattern for naming future streets.

In 1933 a \$2.5 million bond issue financed construction of the first sewage treatment plant, which went into operation in 1937.

In 1930 Arlington had one traffic light and 12,008 registered vehicles; by 1980 it had 181 traffic lights and electrical devices and a 99,043 vehicle registration total. In 1937 Arlington County hired Virginia's first traffic engineer.

Before 1928, Arlington had no sidewalks, but by 1943 there were 111 miles of sidewalks; today there are 410 miles of sidewalks. By 1930 there were 1,037 street lights producing 441,800 lumens compared to 1980's 99,445,500 lumens. In 1930 the average street light was 426 lumens; in 1980 it was 9,725 lumens.

Two major public works accomplishments in 1941 were the adoption of the first master plans for transportation and the storm sewer network. The storm sewer system improved the quality of life for residents who had been subjected to periodic flooding and property erosion problems. The transportation plan provided for upgrading of streets and adaptation to the burgeoning traffic load.

A new public works service began in 1942 when the county bought its first trucks and hired crews to collect refuse. Refuse was hauled to a dump, and garbage was sold to hog farmers in Fairfax County. By 1949 crews were collecting 22,600 tons of trash and 9,100 tons of garbage; in 1980 more than 100,000 tons of refuse were collected. In 1951 a new refuse incinerator went into operation, but was phased out in 1973 with new air pollution control standards. The landfill (buried refuse) method was adopted in 1973.

In 1947 the first parking meters--236 of them---were installed in Clarendon and Rosslyn; by 1980 there were 1,789 parking meters. The emergency snow plan was adopted in 1961.

In 1950, foreshadowing recycling programs that would become new public works services in the 1970s, the county bought its first leaf vacuum machine to collect leaves. Previously men had used pitchforks to toss leaves into trucks. In 1961, 631 loads of leaves were vacuumed; in 1980, sixteen vacuum trucks collected 57,901 cubic yards of leaves for distribution as mulch. New recycling service added in the 1970s were the waste newspaper, used motor oil, and old concrete resource recovery programs.

In July 1977, Arlington's first Metrorail subway service began, offering the first public rail transportation since the dismantling of the trolley car network in the 1930s. Another mode of transportation was recognized in 1974 when Arlington County incorporated a Master Bikeway Plan in its Master Plan for Transportation. By 1980, forty-eight miles of the planned eighty-mile bikeway system were completed.

Through the years, public works services were provided through various departments and divisions as times changed and services were modernized to keep pace with new developments.

The Arlington County Department Of Public Works as it exists today was created in August 1977 by consolidation of the Transportation and Utilities departments with the Equipment Division of the Property Management Department.