

Department of Public Works

History

Introduction

The Department of Public Works was established as a department under the newly formed County Manager System of government for Henrico County in 1934. It inherited the local road system that had previously been overseen by the County Road Supervisors and included such facilities as the historic Three Notched Road (now called Three Chopt Road) which had originally been a Native American trail from the Falls of the James to the west over the mountains to the Valley of Virginia. It has grown from an initial 99 employees, which made it the 2nd largest department behind the school system in number of employees, to its current status of 257.

History

Due to the wisdom of the citizens and the leadership of the County of Henrico in the early 1930's, the Department of Public Works has as its mainstay, the ownership, operation and maintenance of the third largest system of highways in the Commonwealth of Virginia. By virtue of the "Byrd Act" of 1932, county voters were given the opportunity to decide whether the local road system would be taken over from the County Roads Supervisor by the State Highway Department and be part of the State's Secondary System or remain with the county to be a local road system. Henrico County voters, via a referendum, decided the latter. Originally four counties took that option, but due to one of them changing to a city charter, and the other voting to return to the state system, only Arlington and Henrico fall under this act. Today, only the Virginia Department of Transportation and the City of Virginia Beach have a more extensive system in miles and lane miles of highways than the County of Henrico. Incorporated in the Byrd Act was the mechanism by which the County receives state and federal gas tax revenues which fund the operation of the Department of Public Works.

Officially, the Department of Public Works was initiated in 1934 under the guidance of the first Director Tazewell Ellett. Mr. Ellett was the selection of the first County Manager who also took office in 1934. The Directors of the Department of Public Works for the past 77 years, with their terms of service, are as follows:

Tazewell Ellett	1934-1956
Allan Dotson	1960-1976
Philip T. Rutledge, Jr.	1977-1986
Virgil R. Hazelett	1986-1989
Robert K. Pinkerton	1990-1994
Robert C. Thompson	1995-2006
Edward L. Priestas	2006-2009
Timothy Foster	2009-2012
Steven J. Yob	2012 - Present

The Department can lay claim to be a training ground for the County Manager in that Dotson, Rutledge and Pinkerton all served as Deputy County Managers and that Virgil R. Hazelett was a former County Manger.

1934 was indeed a very special year for the Department of Public Works. Quoting from the County Manager's First Annual Report, the functions of the Department were: "The construction and maintenance of county roads, bridges, water and sewer systems, fire stations, public buildings, the maintenance of equipment, and the administration of building and zoning ordinances."

The road system, such that it was, had been inherited from the County Road Supervisors by the Byrd Act of 1932. This system, which originally correlated to the Commonwealth's Secondary Road System in other counties, amounted to 384.74 linear miles of roadways. The remainder of the roadways in the county was in the State Primary System which amounted to 113.69 linear miles. Thus, over 75% of all roads in Henrico County fell under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Works.

One of the major functions of the Department was to "hard surface" many of the previously gravel roadways. With the increasing numbers of automobiles, the desire to reduce the dust from the dirt/gravel roadways and to reduce the possibility of getting mired in the roadway during a rainstorm, hard surfacing was the method of choice to improve the road conditions. As a result, the County initiated a significant "surface treatment" program of improvement. Surface treatment was basically "tar and gravel" but gave a hard surface that was far superior to the old gravel roadways which rain could turn into an almost impassable quagmire. From July 1, 1934 until June 30, 1935, 45.04 miles of road were surface treated. Many of these original improvements have a very familiar ring to them: Westham Road, Woodman Road, Charles City Road, and River Road to name just four of the 65 roads that were improved. The longest single improvement was on River Road for a distance of 3.9 miles.

The Department even was responsible for the gravel plant located off of Millers Lane in the eastern part of the county which most definitely kept road repair and improvement costs down. Between March and June of 1935, it produced 12,557 tons of washed gravel at the price of 45¢ per ton.

Since maintenance of county equipment, which was estimated to be worth approximately \$150,000, was also part of DPW's responsibilities, a new 70' X 60' fireproof garage and repair shop was constructed for \$8,309.68. Noteworthy was the fact that it also included an area for blacksmithing. Here it may be noted that until about 1946, the county did have some mules that were part of the DPW maintenance force.

Another function of the DPW dealt with the issuance of various building permits. During FY35, DPW issued 154 building permits for new construction valued at \$548,543 and 25 permits for alterations to existing structures which was valued at \$18,547.

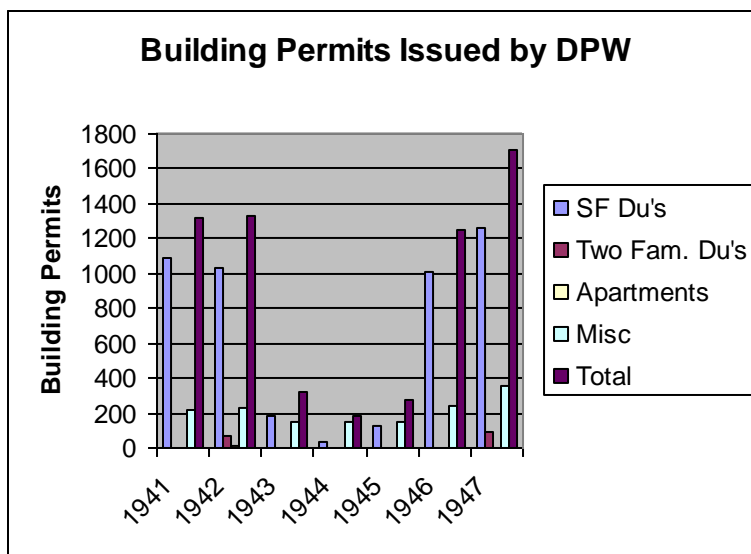
Even the Westhampton Fire Department was under the DPW. It was noted that there were 66 responses to fires and that in cooperation with the League of Virginia Municipalities, a Red Cross first aid course was held for the firemen. At this time, most of the firemen were volunteers.

Lastly, the DPW was responsible for construction of two Sanitary Districts. One of these was located in what is now the City of Richmond, just off of Cary Street Road and the other was located in the Sandston Area of the county. The original purpose of these districts was to provide water and sewer on an earlier schedule than if the normal processes were used. Due to that, landowners were assessed a fee which was used to offset the costs incurred.

In 1935, the entire complement of the Department of Public Works stood at 99. There were 2 engineers (one of whom was the Director, Mr. Tazewell Ellett), 78 road employees, 14 water and sewer, 3 fire and 2 buildings. Total expenditure for these positions was \$195,184.

The early DPW employees were not immune to the forces of nature. It was noted that the county experienced a major flood on September 5, 1935 when 7.63 inches of rain fell in a 17 hour period. There were also 4 heavy snowfalls and 2 sleet storms that winter when the road crews cleared snow, and sanded steep hills and sharp curves. It was also fortuitous for the county in 1936, that the Civilian Conservation Corps provided 180 unskilled laborers, tools and some materials for drainage and surface treating of roads that would not have been accomplished had it not been for them. Regrettably, from the county's perspective, the number of laborers was reduced to 30 in the last quarter of 1936 which slowed road progress.

The impact of World War II on the County and the Department of Public Works cannot be overestimated. Material as well as the labor force was severely limited. Not only that, but the impact could also be seen in the numbers of building permits issued by the Department.



While the early years of the war showed continued economic vitality in the building industry, 1943-1945 displays the toll that it was taking. However, as seen in the chart, as soon as the war ended, the vitality that had once been the County had returned, with the Department of Public Works issuing more permits in 1947 than it had in any of the previous 6 years.

While physical records of the early years are severely limited, it is known that in June of 1946, there were 474 total employees of the County, of which 310 were assigned to the school system. Of the remaining 164, 85 were employed in the Department of Public Works. Of those 85, one was Mr. Elvin Cosby who, at the age of 18, had started working for the County on April 23 of that year. No other department within the County can claim anyone within their organization as having the longevity of Mr. Cosby, who is a Maintenance Supervisor at the East End Depot.



Elvin Cosby, Maintenance Supervisor
Department of Public Works

When asked about the early days of Public Works, he responded with very kind words about Directors Ellett and Dotson. Mr. Ellett “came around and shook their hands and asked if he could help. He was great.” Back then, if they did not think something was right, they “would come out and recheck the survey.” Mr. Dotson would “go to bat for people”. They were always friendly and concerned about their employees. He also noted that at about the time he came on to the job, the mules were let go. He has seen many changes in the Department and much of that has to do with the equipment. About the only real equipment they had for hard surfacing a road was a “tar stripper” which, pulled by a tractor, lay down the tar on the road surface to be covered up with gravel. The early graders were just that, graders. They had no motor to drive them along, so there had to be a tractor to pull them. And hydraulics, there was none of that. The blades had to be set by hand. Concerning the innovations that he saw early in his career, he mentioned that Henrico was the first to use what he referred to as “covered wagons”. This was a box with a tent covering it that was placed in the body of the truck so that the men could be protected, at least from the rain as they were moved around

the County. There were usually about “8 – 10 men in a crew” and for the most part they used shovels and picks. Fortunately, DPW also had a “blacksmith” who “kept the picks sharp.” To Mr. Cosby, the most important event during his career occurred in the 1960’s when the first Blacks were promoted to positions of authority in the Department. He mentioned that “William Burrell was the first Black Foreman.” When asked how long he intended to stay with the County, he responded with a grin on his face that went from ear to ear “Till the Lord calls me.” Men and women the likes of Mr. Elvin Cosby have and remain the mainstay of this Department.