

THE VIRGINIA SECTION'S FIRST FIFTY YEARS

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Presented before the History of Chemistry Division, ACS, Atlantic City, New Jersey, September 14, 1965.

No native Virginian—and as soon as I open my mouth you know I was not born in Boston—can approach an historical subject without beginning at Jamestown, the site of the first permanent English settlement in the New World. And it is fitting that a story of chemistry in Virginia should begin at Jamestown, for what transpired there in the first few years made a lasting imprint on the development of the science in the State.

Within a comparatively short period after the initial landing at Jamestown his Majesty's Council of Virginia wrote to the Corporation of Plymouth—"The staple and certain commodities we have are soap-ashes, pitch, tar, dyes of sundry sorts and rich values, timber for all uses—making of glass and iron, and no improbable hope of richer mines" (1). In 1607 these items constituted the raw materials for a chemical industry. But chemical industry was not to be the main effort of these first Virginians.

The glass house—which many of you have seen in reconstructed Jamestown—represented the first industry of the colony. It was wrecked by disloyal workmen perhaps in the young colony's first labor dispute. Unfriendly Indians in 1622 destroyed the promising iron-works at Falling Creek: the band of salt-boilers dispersed and the salt-works fell into disrepair.

Records of the Virginia Company of London dated 1620 declare "it is become very apparent that the applying so altogether the planting of tobacco and the neglect of other more solid commodities have not only redounded to the great disgrace of the country and the detriment of the colony but does also in point of profit greatly deceive those which had trusted to it" (2). The Governor was instructed to reform this error and to return to the making of iron, pitch, tar, soap-ashes, pot-ashes, and salt. But the directions were in vain. Tobacco was king in Virginia and the area developed as an agricultural rather than as an industrial community.

Virginia colonists were planters and the history of the efforts to induce them to undertake industrial and manufacturing arts is a record of repeated failure for almost three centuries. Consequently, at the turn of the present century when the American Chemical Society was busily expanding its membership, agricultural chemists dominated the scene in Virginia. Chemists from the State Department of Agriculture, the Virginia-Carolina Chemical Corporation, Tobacco By-Products Corporation, and Froehling and Robertson met with professors from Randolph-Macon College and the Richmond College in the State office of Dr. E. W. Magruder in January 1907, 300 years after the landing at Jamestown, to discuss the foundation of a Virginia Chemists' Club. They decided it would not be feasible to form a Section of the ACS because there were too many chemists who were not able to pay the \$.8.00 ACS dues. Incidentally, these dues included the *JACS* and *Chemical Abstracts*.

Accordingly, on January 25, 1907, at 8 p.m. in the Corporation Court room of the State Capitol, the Virginia Chemists' Club was organized. I quote from the minutes of this meeting.

"Between 40 and 50 attended. The number was quite a surprise to all present, as we had no idea there were so many chemists in Richmond." After some discussion the dues were set at \$1.50. It is significant that one Club member presented the group with a subscription to *The Journal of the American Chemical Society*.

The Virginia Chemists' Club was the forerunner of the Virginia Section of the ACS. In January 1909 the Club petitioned the ACS Council to accept the organization as the Virginia Section, provided that "practically all the State of Virginia be given as the Section's territory." Some eleven months later—after what must have been many deliberations—Dr. Charles Parsons, ACS Secretary, notified the Club that the Council declined to give the territory for which the application had been made. Had the Council accepted this first petition we would have celebrated our fiftieth anniversary six years ago with another author for this paper.

During the course of its history the Virginia Chemists' Club published two volumes of *Proceedings* and thus established precedent for *The Bulletin* of the Virginia Section which began publication in 1923. The Club also initiated the traditional, friendly, social hours which have ever since been a part of the Virginia section meetings.

On February 12, 1915, a second petition to establish a local ACS section in the State of Virginia was signed by nine members and presented to the ACS Council. This time the Council approved the petition and a Charter was issued to the Virginia Section on April 9, 1915. This Charter, signed by President C. H. Herty and Secretary Charles L. Parsons, listed 31 charter members. The first Section Chairman was Mr. J. Bernard Robb, of the State Department of Agriculture, who passed away just two weeks ago.

The original Charter included all territory in the State of Virginia except what was then Alexandria County. Today there is no Alexandria County but in its place, Arlington County and the City Alexandria, just south of the Potomac River from Washington. D. C.

Since 1915 the Virginia Section has twice released territory to established new ACS sections. In 1931 twelve counties in Southwest Virginia were released to form the Virginia Blue Ridge Section; and in 1944 thirteen counties and the city areas around Norfolk were released to form the Hampton Roads Section.

The Virginia Section was, and remains today, a rather large geographical area. In October 1936 the Section petitioned the ACS Council to contract its territory to include only those areas of the State which lie within 75 miles of the City of Richmond. This was granted by the Council and chemists in thirteen Virginia counties, primarily in the Shenandoah Valley, were left without a mother section. Some 75 members in that area classed themselves as orphans and yelled loudly for readmission or for a special series of monthly programs in their area. The result—six months later, in April 1937, the thirteen counties were readmitted to the Virginia Section and Council's former action was rescinded. They have lived happily ever after as members of the Section.

In 1915 the new Virginia Section was the 49th ACS section. Its 31 charter members represented 0.4% of the 7,417 total ACS members. Today it is one of 165 ACS sections and its over 800 members represent 0.8% of the more than 100,000 ACS members. The Virginia Section's area is still large; approximately a 200-mile square in central Virginia. Ten to twelve meetings have been the average over the years; five in Richmond and the others from Waynesboro on the west to Williamsburg on the east, and from Fredericksburg on

the north to Hopewell on the south. This covers much of the nation's Historyland and the result is many friendly social occasions coupled with good technical meetings. A highlight of the Virginia Section's early years was its participation as host to the April 1927 national meeting of the American Chemical Society. The meeting was held in Richmond and the minutes state, "was so efficiently handled that a net balance of \$1,900 resulted." It is interesting to note that \$1,000 of this money was invested by the Section in (6% bonds which matured in 1937. This money was reinvested and was the nest egg on which the finances of the present Section grew. Much of the remaining profit from this national meeting was given to the American Chemical Society Endowment Fund.

The Virginia Section has been host to three other meetings of national importance. The American Association for the Advancement of Science met in Richmond in December 1938. The Seventh National Organic Symposium was sponsored by the Section in Richmond in December 1937 and the Southeastern Regional ACS meeting met in Richmond in November 1959. The Section has so far been unsuccessful in obtaining one of the new, national, winter meetings of the ACS for Richmond.

In May 1924 the Virginia Section inaugurated an annual meeting with the newly formed Virginia Academy of Science. For some years the May Section meeting served as the Chemistry Section of the Virginia Academy. Today the Academy maintains its own Chemistry Section but the Virginia Section of the ACS continues to cooperate in the two-day annual May meeting for the presentation of original research results reported from Virginia laboratories. The Virginia Section has been active in the field of chemical education for almost all of its fifty years. In February 1924 a Prize Essay Contest in Chemistry for high school students of the State was begun and "aroused an interest in chemistry among laymen that would have been difficult to develop by any other method."

The recognition of the importance of chemical education has grown into the Virginia Section Awards. Each year at the June meeting of the Section a scroll and an appropriately inscribed gift are awarded to a chemist, member of the Section, for distinguished service to the profession of chemistry. This award originated in 1947 through the gift of Mrs. Bruce B. McConnell of Richmond in memory of her husband, Henry K. McConnell, Vice President of the Tobacco By-Products and Chemical Corporation and Section Chairman in 1925. A second annual award is made each June to an outstanding high school science teacher in the State. This award consists of a scroll and a monetary stipend made possible by a gift from Dr. Lauren B. Hitchcock, Section Chairman in 1933.

Members of the Virginia Section were active in many scientific projects in support of government activities during both World War I and World War II. One of the more unusual undertakings of the Section followed World War I. The Section adopted and supported from voluntary contributions the orphan son of a French scientist. Frequent letters from the boy were read at Section meetings.

During World War II the Section adopted a resolution offering advice and assistance to the Richmond Office of Civilian Defense and members were rapidly organized for work in gas detection, gas and fire defense, decontamination, and training of the civilian population. Two interesting incidents occurred in connection with war-time rationing. At the May 1942 Charlottesville business meeting, the entertainment committee was charged with the responsibility of providing transportation for the coming year. Unfortunately there is no record of how this was accomplished during gasoline rationing.

In February 1945 Dr. J. C. Forbes of the Medical College of Virginia spoke to the Section on "Proteins in Nutrition." The minutes point out that Dr. Forbes followed his prepared address by showing a colored motion picture on the proper cooking of meats, "which in its exposition of steaks and roasts in that year of the Ration reduced his audience to a state of nostalgia and salivation."

Of special interest during the year immediately following the War was the establishment by the Section of a limited-type employment clearing house, available without cost to all Virginia chemists, chemical engineers, and legitimate employers. While the Section has continued to maintain a committee on employment, the clearing house has not been active since the establishment by the National Office of the regional employment files.

Most Virginia Section meetings are lively but the real barn-burner took place in March 1930. It was a joint meeting with the Hampton Roads Chemists Club—now the Hampton Roads Section of the ACS—to be held in the chemistry building at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg. An unscheduled feature of the meeting was the burning of the college's chemistry laboratory. The fire started just as the chemists were arriving for the meeting. Braxton Valentine, Secretary, wrote however, "It is not believed that the Virginia chemists set fire to it. It was first thought to be an extra demonstration of welcome on the part of our hosts, but this was proven to be false also."

Public relations for the profession and the science of chemistry have long been important activities of the Virginia Section. The impetus and inspiration for this came from the late Dr. Sidney S. Negus, professor at the Medical College of Virginia, chairman of the Section in 1927, and head of the news service of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. "Chemical Education by Radio," a series of programs furthering interest in chemistry was initiated in 1930. The first was broadcast from WRVA in Richmond each Friday evening on scientific current events by Dr. Negus. A second series was broadcast by WDBJ in Roanoke during the same year.

The Section continued its interest in radio and now supplies "Men and Molecules" to stations throughout the State. In recent years the Section has had a very ambitious television program. Chemical demonstrations, quix. contests for high school students, research activities of Virginia industrial and academic laboratories, have been presented live and on film and tape. Two filmed 1964 shows were so successful that they won a third place award in the United Press International Contest for Special Feature Programs and a Bronze Award in the Fourth International Film and TV Festival of New York.

Over the years the Section has undertaken many activities aimed at assistance to the State and to the people of Virginia. As early as 1931 a Section committee was instructed "to coordinate activities in chemical matters pertaining to the State as a whole." In the same year a committee was appointed to cooperate with State and local agencies in industrial development. In 1933 the Section offered its services to the State Board of Education in connection with the proposed conference on teaching chemistry in high school. This is a continuing problem in which the Section is still engaged today.

According to the minutes of the 151st meeting in 1934, "there was considerable discussion about the proposed State Liquor Control Bill. It was moved and seconded that a fact finding Committee on Alcohol be appointed to study the proposed Slate Liquor Law." Efforts to find a report of this committee have failed. We do not know what facts they found.

In December 1936 the Section attacked a problem which is still with us in 1965. It went on record as wishing to cooperate fully with State interests having responsibility for stream pollution problems. In 1939 by resolution, the Section recommended to the Virginia State Chamber of Commerce that scientific research be represented in selection of new members of the Chamber's Board of Directors.

It would seem as if the 1930's were years of political activity for the Virginia Section—and not too often successful activity. The forties brought promises of better things as a life-long member of the Section, Lloyd C. Bird, was elected to his first term in 1944 as State Senator from the district just south and east of Richmond. Senator Bird continues to serve in the Legislature and is very active in the Section.

As we look back over these highlights of early Virginia Section meetings, our current meetings seem rather dull. Perhaps in our local section activities we are prone today—as we are in many walks of life—to look to Washington for our ideas and for too much of our thinking. It is a pity, for my predecessors were 48 men and one lady of action. In its first fifty years the Virginia Section has had only 49 chairmen, one having served two years. When I take over the gavel in January I shall be the 50th chairman. I join this group with honor, humility, and a great feeling of being a part of an organization which has had fifty wonderful years. I trust I can make it 51.

¹ Alexander Brown, "The Genesis of the United States," Houghton Mifflin and Co. (1890), p. 238.

² Susan M. Kingsbury, "The Records of the Virginia Company of London," Washington Printing Office (1906), Vol. III, p. 279.

The author is grateful for the assistance of the "History of the Virginia Section" which was published serially over a period of years in the Section's publication, *The Bulletin*; for the help of the Local Sections Office of the National Office of the American Chemical Society; and for the chapters on Chemistry in "The James River Basin, Past, Present and Future," The Virginia Academy of Science, Richmond, Virginia (1950).