



# Lessons in Perseverance

*The history of WK Dickson & Co., Inc.*



## INTRODUCTION

**B**usinesses are about many things. But most of all they are about people and WK Dickson has had its share of great people walk our halls. It all started in 1929 when an ambitious young man took a chance and started a company during the worst economic depression in our nation's history. William Kenneth Dickson began with a single employee and a single-minded dedication to creating a client-focused example for engineering in the Carolinas.

From those humble beginnings to where we stand today is something to marvel. Not because of how large we have become or how many services we provide. It is because we have persevered through good times and bad. Since 1929, the spirit, pride, determination, commitment, passion and integrity of our employees have made this company great. These are all standards "The Colonel" lived by every day and through his legacy, we carry on.

I am proud to stand at the helm of this outstanding company as we continuously celebrate a long history of innovation and industry leadership. I also look forward to many more decades because I know the best is yet to come.



David L. Peeler, PE  
President and Chief Executive Officer

*I*t was the era they called the Roaring '20s, a time of flappers and prohibition, Al Capone and Babe Ruth. Radio was still in its infancy and silent movies had just begun to talk. Herbert Hoover was president, Albert Einstein announced his Theory of Relativity,

and a young daredevil named Charles Lindberg flew his flimsy, single-engine airplane all the way across the Atlantic. In New York City, the Empire State Building was under construction. The City of Charlotte had a population of 80,513 and boasted of its 15 miles of sewer lines and 160 miles of water lines. Then, in October 1929, the stock



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*Charlotte in the 1920's was a time of great social change characterized by apparent prosperity, new ideas, and personal freedom. Yet under the surface the economic boom of the era would be short-lived.*

market collapsed and one-fourth of the nation's workforce was soon unemployed. It was the beginning of the worst economic depression in U.S. history, a terrible period that would last more than a decade.

Despite the economic uncertainty of 1929, a 34-year-old engineer from South Carolina, W. K. Dickson, opened a small office in Charlotte and established a civil-engineering firm.

More than 75 years later, WK Dickson & Co., Inc. has become one of the most respected engineering and design consulting firms in the Southeast. The growth of WK Dickson & Co. from a small one-person practice to a highly respected, multi-disciplined, community infrastructure consulting firm is truly an American success story.

## ***A Dream and Determination***

William Kenneth Dickson was born in 1895 to William Patrick and Louanna Norris Dickson in the small town of Walhalla, South Carolina, near the South Carolina-Georgia border. He was the oldest of seven children including four brothers: Robert Malcom, Lionel, Winfred, and Bonneau; and two sisters: Dorothy and Agnes. Spending many years on a dairy farm near Seneca, South Carolina, they were a family of modest means. But his parents taught their son the values of a good education, hard work and perseverance.

Although he never graduated from high school, W. K. Dickson dreamed of attending The Citadel, Charleston's famed military school. In those days students could enter The Citadel even if they had not graduated from high school, provided they had a sponsor and could pass a rigorous entrance exam.

"Kenneth was the last one to finish the exam that day because he wanted to make sure to do it right," said his youngest brother Bonneau. Dickson did indeed pass the exam and entered The Citadel, graduating in 1917 with a Bachelor of Science degree and a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the U.S. Army. He along with his brother Robert served 18 months overseas with the infantry during World War I; W.K. left the service as a captain in 1919. Dickson then returned to school at the University of South Carolina in Columbia and earned a civil engineering degree in 1921.

The young engineer later married Bessie Chalmers of Charlotte, and by the late 1920s Dickson was living full time in Charlotte while working for Carolina Engineering Co., a "civil and sanitary" engineering firm.



**WILLIAM KENNETH  
DICKSON (1921)**

*World War I was a horrific conflict made worse by the knowledge that Dickson's younger brother Robert was also fighting in the trenches. On more than one occasion, while on the front lines, the Dickson brothers barely avoided becoming casualties themselves. During one particular battle W. K. nearly lost Robert when a 100-pound mortar shell landed just a few feet away and exploded; Robert escaped with only minor shrapnel wounds.*

*At the end of the war, W. K. returned home and continued to work on the family farm. Two years later, fulfilling a promise to his mother, he returned to school (pictured above) and worked toward his degree in civil engineering at the University of South Carolina in Columbia.*

Little is known about Dickson’s early career after college, but there is a story – perhaps apocryphal – that the owner of the engineering firm, weary of battling the sour economy, told Dickson, “I’ve had enough. If you want the business you can have it. I’m going to Arkansas.”

In any event, with some of the material assets left behind by his former employer, Dickson opened his own firm and the Charlotte City Directory for 1929 carries a listing for *W. Kenneth Dickson, Civil Engineer*. The office address was located at 414 East Boulevard.



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*Dickson originally opened for business at 414 East Boulevard in the Dilworth neighborhood south of Uptown. He later worked from his home at 119 Circle Avenue (above) from 1933 to at least 1940.*

It was a terrible time to start a business, and particularly an engineering firm that relied heavily on publicly funded projects. Municipal projects were cut back or delayed as the Depression deepened and there is no doubt Dickson struggled to find engineering work.

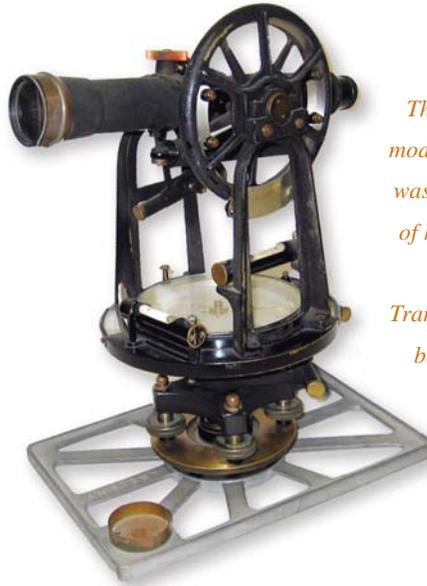
Nevertheless, the firm had prospered enough by 1931 to move its office to 119 Brevard Court in downtown Charlotte, a prestigious address at the time. But as times worsened, Dickson was forced to later move the office into his home at 119 Circle Avenue in the Myers Park area of Charlotte. City Directory records show that Dickson worked from his home from 1933 until at least 1940, when he was called back to active duty during World War II.

The young firm survived the Depression by doing water and sewer work for the many small towns surrounding Charlotte. Money was tight and Dickson often had to wait for his fee to be paid. It was during this period that longtime relationships were developed with such municipalities as the City of Monroe, Town of Biscoe, King’s Mountain and many others in the region.

To weather the Depression, Dickson also worked as a surveyor for Mecklenburg County from 1932 to 1933 and was listed as both an engineer and surveyor in the City Directory for several years thereafter.

Previously, Dickson had worked for the South Carolina Department of Transportation before moving to Charlotte but was laid off because of the state's worsening economic condition. In lieu of his final month's pay, the State of South Carolina allowed him to keep the transit and tripod with which he had worked. It is reported Dickson continued to use those implements for many years; those same tools now have a place of honor in the company's history exhibit at the Charlotte headquarters.

Dickson was proud of his ability as a surveyor and did most of the survey work himself, walking literally thousands of miles over his career locating sewer and water lines throughout western North Carolina. Once, while surveying a project that ran through a swamp, Dickson found himself mired to the hips in mud and had to be rescued with a rope.



*This circa 1919 'Engineers Transit' model 5060A made by Keuffel & Esser was used by Dickson at the beginning of his career when he worked for the South Carolina Department of Transportation. This item continued to be operated by firm surveyors for several decades thereafter.*

Dickson's reputation for professionalism and dependability served him well during the dark days of the Depression, and relationships were forged that continued for years. According to David Peeler, the firm's current president and CEO, Dickson developed close relationships with his clients and treated them as friends. "His clients just thought the world of him," Peeler says. "If one of these small towns needed something done he would do it and worry about getting paid later. Over time he developed a reputation among the small municipalities as *the* guy to go to."

Dickson's business philosophy is well illustrated by an incident that occurred when the firm was designing a sewer line for the town of Spencer, North Carolina. One day, as he was surveying a line through some residential backyards, one of the property owners approached him and declared, "...your survey is wrong. You're putting the line in the wrong place."

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE



**KEUFFEL & ESSER SLIDE RULE** (Circa 1908)

*This Keuffel & Esser Polyphase Duplex Slide Rule dates back to 1908 and was made in New York. Dickson would have used this model when he attended The Citadel.*



**CONTOUR FINDER** (Circa 1943)

*Manufactured by Abrams Aerial Survey Company, this contour finder assisted surveyors with their jobs in the 1940's. This very instrument may have been used on some of WK Dickson's early survey projects.*



**DIARIES & DATE BOOKS** (1960-1979)

*These are the actual diaries and date minders of Colonel Dickson. Before the days of handheld PDAs, these pocket-sized mini-calendars came in quite handy.*

*Through them, we learn that Dickson was an organized man with a very tight schedule.*



**INK & POWDER** (Circa 1939)

*This bottle of drawing ink and container of dusting powder were used by Dickson to produce early drawings back in the 1930s and 40s. The powder made it easier to use ink on the surface of the tracing cloth used for drawings.*



**MECHANICAL ADDING MACHINE** (Circa 1950)

*Used by WK Dickson accountants before modern calculators. It was probably used for bookkeeping and other accounting functions. Monroe Calculating Machine Co. opened in 1912 and became a pioneer of electromechanical calculators.*

Dickson checked his maps and saw immediately the line was, indeed, in the wrong place. Realizing his mistake, he pulled out his personal checkbook, asked the property owner what the strip of property was worth, and wrote him a check on the spot.

The firm somehow survived the economic privations of the Depression; by 1940, the economy had improved enough that Dickson placed an ad in the Buyer's Guide of the Charlotte City Directory. The small, business-card-sized ad read:

*W. Kenneth Dickson  
Civil & Consulting Engineer  
119 Circle Ave. Ph. 3-1828  
Charlotte, NC  
Water Works • Sewers • Paving • Surveying*

Dickson was still working from his home office, but from all indications, business was steadily improving. However, as war clouds gathered, Dickson was called back into the Army in 1940 and served as post quartermaster at Fort Bragg, NC, for three years before going overseas where he served two years in Europe with the rank of colonel. In fact, the company under his command in 1944 was instrumental in supplying thousands of troops as they prepared for the D-Day invasion of Normandy on June 6th, 1944. In all, Dickson served 33 years on active and reserve Army duty, and from World War II on he was known affectionately as “The Colonel.”

It is not clear how the firm survived while the Colonel was away during WWII. The company continued to be listed under “Engineers” during most of the war years and it is possible Dickson was able to assist some clients while serving at Fort Bragg. However, this would have been difficult, if not impossible, while he served overseas. Perhaps a colleague kept the business going during the war, but this is unclear.



*Quartermasters hit the beach on June 6th, 1944.*

*“Behind the success of the tactical invasion plan was a supply plan of great import and one which was carried out to the nth degree. The Quartermaster Corps, both at home and in the European theaters of operation, contributed to the success of the supply plan by providing Quartermaster items in sufficient quantities and in time to meet the needs of the invasion forces.”*

*- General George S. Patton*

**G**ermany and Japan surrendered in 1945, bringing World War II to a victorious end. Tens of thousands of American service men and women would soon return home, igniting a tremendous post-war economic boom and giving birth to the Baby Boom generation.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, the president whose “New Deal” helped lead the nation out of economic depression and to victory in the world war, died that year and was succeeded by his little-known vice president, Harry S. Truman.

Congress approved the Marshall Plan to rebuild war-ravaged Europe and Dr. Benjamin Spock published “Baby & Child

Care,” destined to become the baby-raising bible for baby boomers’ mothers. The year also brought a rare appearance

in the World Series by the Chicago Cubs, although they lost to the Detroit Tigers. It was the year Charlotte honored veterans

from Mecklenburg County by building a new park in their honor. They named it Freedom Park. Charlotte’s population was little more than 100,000 in 1945 but big changes were on the horizon.



Public Library of Charlotte & Mecklenburg County

*Seen in this photo from 1950, Dickson & Stillwell operated from an office above a Greek restaurant on South Tryon Street in Charlotte.*

### ***A New Direction***

The Colonel’s return from the war soon resulted in a new direction for the firm. In 1946, Col. Dickson acquired a partner, Howard Stillwell, and the company name was changed to Dickson & Stillwell, Inc. Dickson was listed as president, Stillwell was vice president and treasurer, and Robert Allison was secretary. The Dickson & Stillwell offices were located upstairs over a Greek restaurant at 404 South Tryon Street in the heart of downtown Charlotte.

Colonel Dickson bought out his new partner after a short period, although the firm continued to operate as Dickson & Stillwell until 1950 when it was changed to W.K. Dickson & Co. Howard Stillwell went on to become an engineer for J.N. Pease & Co. of Charlotte.

Officers of the firm after Stillwell left were Colonel Dickson, president; his wife, Bessie, vice president; and Lucy Fisher, secretary/treasurer. Elizabeth Strahan succeeded Fisher as secretary/treasurer in 1973. In addition to running the office, both Fisher and Strahan were stockholders in the firm.

Charlotte in the 1950s was a very different place than the Charlotte of today. The Downtown area remained the business and entertainment center for the entire region but a post-war boom was underway that would result in explosive suburban growth throughout the area. Independence Boulevard (US-74), the city's major new thoroughfare, opened in the '50s and the first section of Interstate 85 opened in 1958. The city's first suburban shopping center, Park Road Shopping Center, opened in 1956 and growth was soon spilling out into the surrounding countryside.

The 1950s were also a period of growth and stability for W.K. Dickson & Co. although the firm remained relatively small by today's standards with only a few employees. The firm's focus remained on its bread-and-butter projects – planning and engineering water and sewer projects for the region's many small towns.

The firm was reorganized with six active firm partners after Colonel Dickson bought out Stillwell. The Colonel retained 51% interest and divided the remainder among the other partners.

## EARLY PROJECTS



*TROY, NC – Ten-acre Oxidation Pond for treatment of domestic sewage. This plant began operation in the late 1950s. According to W.K. Dickson marketing material of the time, "...the lagoon has been free of odors and has provided treatment for the waste of a quality meeting the requirements of Health Authorities and provides an attractive habitation for ducks."*



*GEORGETOWN, SC – Excavation for sewage pumping station. Also begun in the 1950s, this site was one of five planned for the sewer system of the "Maryville Section" which was eventually annexed to the City of Georgetown in 1957. W.K. Dickson's project description made special mention of "...the use of the Well Point System to control ground water during construction."*

Although the firm's economic resources improved during this period, there were still times when the future was very much in doubt.

Charles Baker, an associate with the firm during the '50s, recalls one period when the company had practically no work at all for over a year. "Times were really tough and we all went without pay for months," Baker remembers. "When things got really bleak, the Colonel sent us all out on the road to drum up new business. Each of us was assigned a territory and mine was eastern North Carolina. I called on every little small town in the area and had to go all the way to Goldsboro before I found us a job. Goldsboro hired us to design some sewer lagoons."

Baker explains everybody got their back pay after business improved, but some had to mortgage their homes and even borrow money from relatives to survive during the tough period.

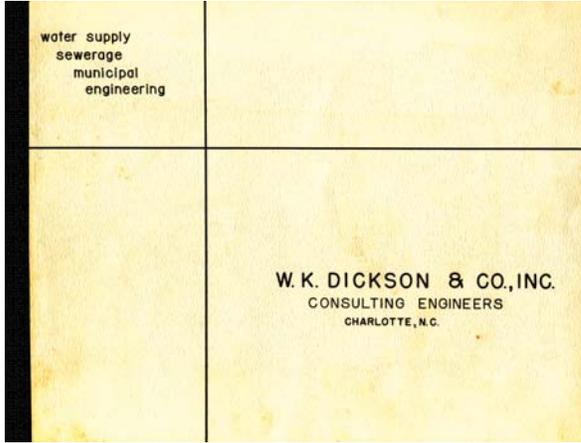
Despite the economic ups-and-downs, Colonel Dickson's reputation among his peers was growing during this era. A Charlotte Chamber of Commerce publication pointed out the Colonel's chief hobbies were hunting, fishing and bridge, then went on to say, "...regardless of the hour, he is always ready and willing to help someone, whether it be one of his clients with a municipal water problem or some friend. His kindly spirit makes him liked wherever he goes and he has been a real asset to the many North Carolina communities he has served so faithfully."

"Colonel Dickson was one of the first engineers to start serving the small municipalities in western North Carolina," recalls Charles "Tinker" Poteat, who first joined the firm in 1975.

"The Colonel was a tough old codger with a military mentality," Poteat notes, but he was a man of his word and highly respected by his small-town clients. W.K. Dickson & Co. established a relationship with the town of Sylva in the late 1940s, working with Tinker Poteat's grandfather, Roscoe Poteat, who was mayor at the time.

"The Colonel did mainly utility work for several western North Carolina towns, including Murphy, Andrews, Hayesville, Franklin, Waynesville and Sylva," says Poteat.

## EARLY MARKETING & PUBLIC RELATIONS



### FIRST BROCHURE

Much of Dickson's early work was obtained as a result of word-of-mouth referrals and old-fashioned cold calling. Beginning in the 1950s, the company recognized the need for handout materials and brochures. Pictured above is the first known to be used by W.K. Dickson & Co., Inc.



### Water treatment plant matches strides with industry

By LEE HERBERT  
and  
W. K. DICKSON

On July 26, 1955, Valdez, N. C. dedicated a new two m.g.d. water treatment plant. Because its waste mills empty mainly water, Valdez wants to attract new industries which will provide jobs for the town. Besides its health and working people, Valdez has another inducement for heavy industry—an unlimited supply of good water.

Valdez built a filtration plant in 1935 and later expanded it to its present capacity of one m.g.d. However, all of its waste mills are heavy ones of one half of the capacity of the original plant. With its new \$300,000 plant, Valdez can meet the needs of the waste mills as they are built. Valdez operates the original plant to meet the industrial requirements of its 1,000 residents.

Designed by W. K. Dickson and Co. Inc. and constructed by Frank A. Galusha Inc. of Charlotte, N. C., the new plant can be easily expanded to one m.g.d. capacity when new industry comes in and requires more water. It costs more water is needed, there is still no problem because the present plant can still accommodate a 1.2 m.g.d. increase plus. Also, the water supply is unlimited.

W. K. Dickson & Co. Inc. is a firm in the field of water supply and sewerage engineering and construction.

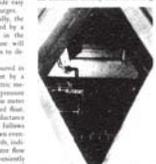
Raw water is pumped from Lake Johnston by the Catawba River Two Facilities Water Control Authority through a series of pumps down to 100 ft. General Electric pumps deliver water to the plant, each at the rate of 1,400 g.p.m.

The flow goes to 100 horizontal feet and 100 vertical feet from the pump house and connected to a 6 in. diameter main. It is then pumped to the new water pumps, which are controlled by a manually closed bar screen in the pump house. The pump house will accommodate additional pumps to increase flow to one m.g.d.

Raw water flow can be increased on the main intake pipe by a 10-inch valve and a 6-inch control valve. The differential pressure across the valve is applied to the assembly to produce a characteristic flow. This, through a float valve, indicates a rise in water level. A float valve follows the float position as the flow rate is regulated. Flow meter records indicate and regulate the raw water flow rate. This instrument is automatically mounted on the main inlet pipe.

The instrument is automatically mounted on the main inlet pipe. The instrument is automatically mounted on the main inlet pipe.

This pit is isolated by a Beckman amplifier and indicator mounted near the chemical feeders. It is also isolated and indicated by an Electromech pump-turbine mounted on the water inlet pipe when it adjusts the chemical feeders. The pit has the same data before line as the existing treated laboratory. Also, the data is fed by Omega dry brush type to record before being stored in the main house by feeding the chemicals directly into the mixing tank.



Also on the second floor there is a right angle through which the water can enter the tank. The water enters from the top and the water level is maintained by a Beckman flow rate meter which measures the pH of the raw water.

March 1956 • The MINERAL MONTH

### MAGAZINE ARTICLE

Colonel Dickson was generally known as a humble man who did not actively seek publicity for himself, but as the coauthor of this article, he also understood the need for the media when it was important to the advancement of the engineering profession.



### BID OPENING

Dickson was a hands-on type of consultant - always ready to serve the client during even the most mundane stages of a project. This clipping from 1964 also shows the only known photograph to exist that includes both W.K. Dickson (standing far right) and Ralph "Buck" Johnson (standing in center) together.



### DESIGN IN THE FIELD

Buck Johnson (at right) as he appeared in a 1962 issue of the Lincoln Times using the very same surveyor's transit the Colonel received while with the SCDOT. Johnson later became majority owner and president of W.K. Dickson in 1978.

One of Colonel Dickson's most important clients was the City of Kings Mountain, North Carolina. John Henry Moss, who served as mayor of Kings Mountain for 24 years, worked closely with the Colonel on a number of projects, both large and small.

"The Colonel was the most active engineer among the small cities of western North Carolina," Moss says. "He was very personable and reputable and he would design what he knew these small municipalities could afford."

Among the Colonel's many projects for Kings Mountain was Moss Lake, an impoundment with a 64-mile-long shoreline that provides both a water supply and recreational activities for the Cleveland County city. W.K. Dickson & Co. also provided services for waste-treatment plants, water-treatment facilities and holding tanks.



*Photo taken from a book titled "Men of Achievement in the Carolinas." The book was published in 1952 and contained biographies of some of North and South Carolina's most influential men of that time.*

"The Colonel's love for his clients and their communities was the biggest selling tool he had," says Moss. "He became an institution among the smaller communities in this area."

Another longtime client – the Town of Biscoe – is part of a relationship that dates back to the Colonel's time in the 1950s and continues today. "We could ask for no better relationship," says David Asbill, Biscoe's superintendent of public utilities. "WK Dickson handles all our engineering needs – water, sewer, anything that comes up. We've found the company is always willing to do whatever needs to be done. If you call them for help, you will get that help."

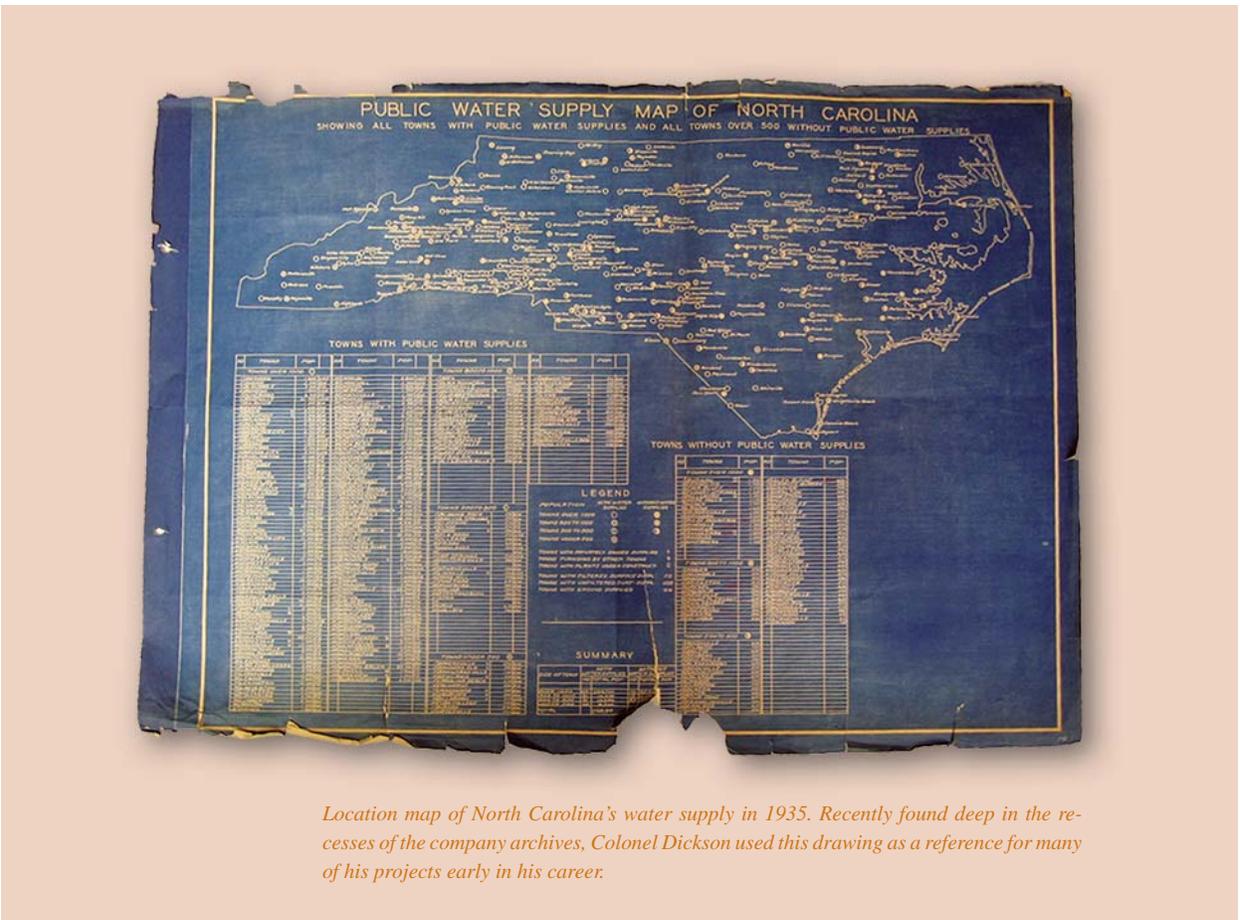
The firm's reputation continued to grow through the '50s when Marion Hair, a highly respected engineer, joined the firm as vice president.

The Colonel and Hair had much in common and the relationship was mutually beneficial. Both were graduates of The Citadel and veterans of World War II and the two shared a business philosophy that put the client's needs first. Hair was an officer of the firm for more than a decade; his knowledge and experience proved to be a tremendous asset for the company.

Former associate Charles Baker remembers Hair as “very straightforward, as you would expect a Citadel man to be. He became the senior man in the office and you could always depend on him.”

During this period, Colonel Dickson began to acquire a considerable amount of real estate from McDowell to Caldwell Streets in downtown Charlotte. The Colonel’s personal finances improved dramatically when this land was acquired for construction of Independence Boulevard and, later, for a massive urban-renewal project.

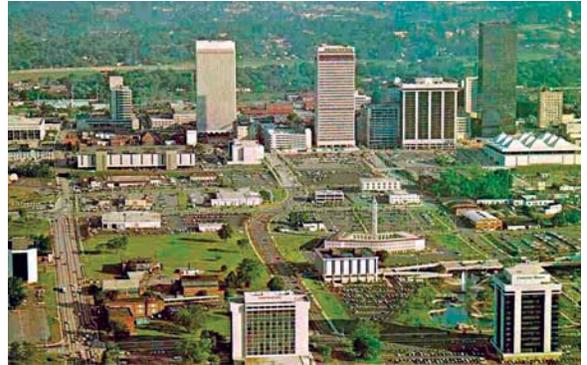
In 1968, W.K. Dickson & Co. moved its offices from downtown Charlotte to larger quarters at 1418 Elizabeth Avenue. A couple years later, in 1970, the firm moved again across the street to 1429 Elizabeth Avenue.



*Location map of North Carolina's water supply in 1935. Recently found deep in the recesses of the company archives, Colonel Dickson used this drawing as a reference for many of his projects early in his career.*

**T**he beginning of the 1970s saw the nation in turmoil, with an unpopular war in Vietnam and social unrest at home. It was the time of Kent State and Woodstock, civil-rights marches and draft card burnings. Spacecraft on the moon was becoming commonplace while anti-war

protestors demonstrated back on earth. The Beatles split when Paul McCartney left the band and Burt Bacharach won the Academy Award for the musical score of “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” In Charlotte, South Park Mall opened and downtown retail stores saw sales drop 25% within a year. Lake



*Charlotte's center city skyline has changed dramatically since this photograph was taken in 1970.*

Norman was still known as a quiet, uncrowded getaway for weekend fishing. The lake's residential boom would come later, after the completion of I-77 in 1975.

### ***Years of Transition***

As the decade of the 1970s dawned, Colonel Dickson was in his mid-70s and beginning to think about slowing down. His first wife, Bessie, had died and he was remarried to Helen Chandley Chalmers, whose late husband had been Bessie Dickson's brother. However, there were no children to carry on the family name.

Fortunately, a young man by the name of Ralph “Buck” Johnson had joined the firm a few years earlier and the Colonel had quickly become his mentor.

Johnson, a native of Samson, Alabama, began working for W.K. Dickson & Co. during summers while attending school at Clemson University. Johnson received a degree in civil engineering from Clemson in 1953 and, after a couple years in the military, he became a full-time employee.

“His entire career was spent with W.K. Dickson & Co.,” explains Johnson’s son, Joel. “He and the Colonel shared an office for several years and the Colonel became sort of a father figure for Dad.

Johnson became a partner in the firm in the early 1970s, then purchased majority interest in the firm and became president in 1978. The Colonel remained a consultant and kept an active interest in the firm until his death in 1986 at the age of 91.

“My father was a typical engineer,” recalls Joel Johnson. “He was honest and straightforward, just a good ol’ seat-of-the-pants engineer. He knew a little bit about every phase of engineering, but water and sewer were his strengths.”

Charlotte and the surrounding region began a period of booming growth during the 1970s and W.K. Dickson & Co. – still concentrating on water and sewer projects for the area’s smaller towns and cities – continued to flourish. Employment reached as high as 20 during this period, but after the economic slowdown in 1979 the staff was reduced substantially. Meanwhile, the firm had once again moved to new offices at 347 North Caswell Street.

Then W.K. Dickson & Co. faced a major crisis with the death of Buck Johnson in June 1984. Business had already been slowing for some time and Johnson’s death raised serious questions about the future existence of the firm – which had already survived for more than half a century.

Colonel Dickson was still a consultant to the firm he had founded but, at age 89, he had neither the energy nor inclination to provide a leadership role.



**RALPH ‘BUCK’ JOHNSON**

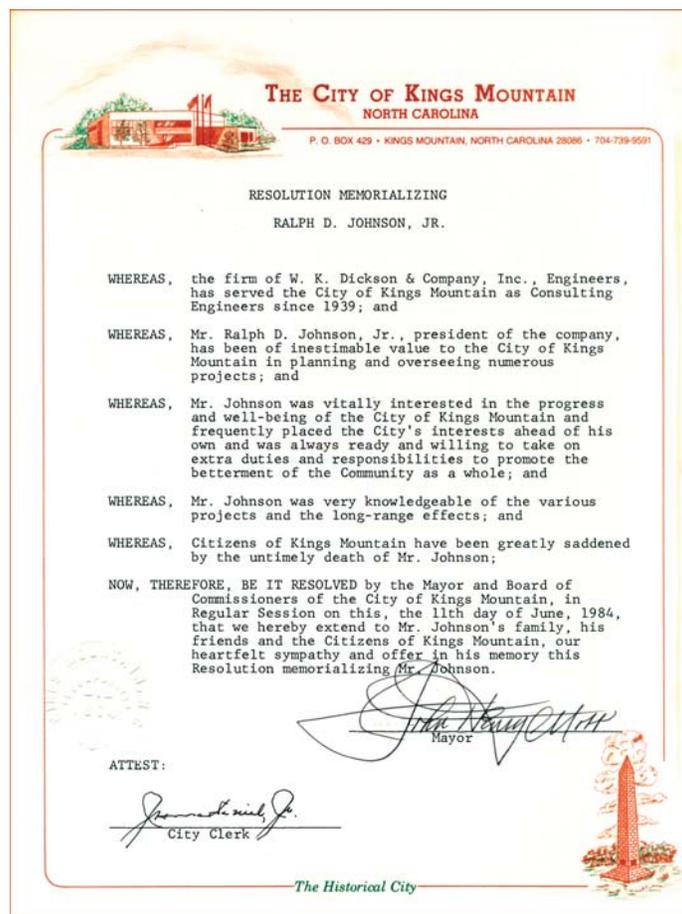
*Buck Johnson's tenure as president of W.K. Dickson & Co., Inc. was relatively short. But he quickly gained a reputation as a forward-thinker. His knowledge of engineering and his "big picture" view of projects always benefited his clients the most.*

*“Dad learned a lot from Colonel Dickson, especially his rapport with clients and his ability to deal with a wide range of individuals,” said Johnson's son, Joel. “Back then, the fee was important but it was secondary to getting the project done right. The Colonel felt it didn't matter as much if they made money, so long as the job was well done. The clients could see that and that's why they kept coming back.”*

*This disregard for making money sometimes resulted in unpleasant practical realities. Joel Johnson remembers one occasion when collections were slow and his father went nine months without pay. “I remember how happy my mother was when he brought home nine months' worth of pay in one check,” he says.*

Johnson's wife, Anna, took over day-to-day operation of the firm, which had dwindled to a minimal crew of only three. Because state law requires an engineering firm to have a licensed engineer on staff, she asked Marion Hair to come out of retirement and serve as resident engineer to help keep the struggling company afloat.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Johnson concluded her best option was to find a buyer for the company which her husband and Colonel Dickson had devoted their lives to building.



*Admiration and respect for Buck Johnson was clear as evidenced by this stirring tribute by one of the firm's oldest clients. On June 11, 1984, shortly after his death, a Resolution by the City of Kings Mountain, North Carolina, was declared to memorialize Mr. Johnson.*

**R**epublicans nominated Ronald Reagan and George Bush for a second term in 1984 and Democrats countered with a ticket of Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro. It was no contest. The Motion Picture Association reacted to complaints about gory scenes in “Indiana

Jones and the Temple of Doom” by establishing the PG14 rating, and the Supreme Court ruled it was OK to

use video recorders to tape TV shows for home viewing. In

sports, the Oakland Raiders defeated the Washington Redskins

in Super Bowl XVIII. Charlotte’s metro population passed the

one million mark for the first time. Only a few office towers lit

the nighttime sky but the city was beginning to emerge as a

Sunbelt dynamo and within a decade bank mergers would

transform Charlotte into one of the nation’s largest banking

center.



In 1980, the Carolina Theatre - one of Charlotte’s famous landmarks - mysteriously burned. Long thought to be haunted, no definitive cause for the fire was ever discovered.

## A New Era Begins

David Peeler was ready for a change in the summer of 1984. An experienced professional in airport planning and design, Peeler had worked nine years for a Charlotte firm that specialized in aviation engineering. Peeler, however, felt he had risen about as high as he could with his current employer and was looking for new opportunities. The problem was he and his family liked Charlotte and did not really want to relocate. At the same time, there were very few openings for airport engineers at other local firms.

Peeler is an avid newspaper reader – the type who devours each section, even the classifieds. His attention to the small type of the classified section one particularly fateful day provided an opportunity of which he had never dreamed.

“I was reading the classified section one day when I saw a small, very discreet advertisement about an engineering firm for sale,” Peeler remembers. “I had no idea what firm it might be but I called the broker, who introduced me to Mrs. Johnson.

“Buck Johnson had died the first of June and since there was no heir apparent Mrs. Johnson had decided to put the firm on the market,” Peeler continues. “We met several times and I looked at the office and what they were doing. My dilemma was W.K. Dickson & Co. was a water and sewer firm and here I was – an airport engineer.”

There was another complication. Peeler and his wife, Patty, had twins who were barely a year old and she was a stay-at-home mom. “There was never a worse time to try and buy a business,” Peeler explains. “There was the family situation at home, let alone I didn’t have anything to buy it with anyway.”

Peeler and Mrs. Johnson met several times. Despite the potential pitfalls, Peeler was intrigued by the firm’s possibilities. “The last time we met was at a little Chinese restaurant on Independence Boulevard,” Peeler remembers. “I explained to her straight up that I didn’t have much money but I did have an interest in keeping the firm alive and keeping the W.K. Dickson name going.”

“Mrs. Johnson was a very understanding woman and after hearing me out she said, ‘O.K. I’ll sell the company to you and take a personal note. You can pay me over the next few years.’ Basically, I put everything on the line and Patty watched the home fires while I started working 80-plus hours a week.”

Details of the purchase were finalized and Peeler took control of the firm on October 1, 1984.

David Peeler, a native of Miami, Florida, entered Purdue University’s School of Engineering in West Lafayette, Indiana in 1969. After his first year, he entered a university-sponsored co-op program that allowed him to work in the profession while attending school. Peeler’s internship position was with HNTB, a large engineering firm in Miami. “I did everything a young engineering intern would do, such as drawing, sorting through designs, going out in the field and working on construction projects,” Peeler recalls.

Peeler completed the program in 1974 with a Bachelors of Science degree in Civil Engineering. He then stayed on at Purdue for his Masters degree specializing in airport engineering, which he received in 1975.

“I was accepted into the doctoral program at Purdue but decided I needed to get out and work,” Peeler says. His family was originally from North Carolina and his parents had retired near the mountain town of Boone, so he turned his attention to finding a job in the Carolinas.

“When I worked for HNTB they were the Miami International Airport consultants and my entire co-op career was doing airport planning and design, so the first place I looked for a job was the Department of Transportation’s Aviation Division,” Peeler explains. “They pointed me to the firm of Talbert, Cox & Associates in Charlotte and I spent nine years there, from 1975 to 1984.”

### ***A Blueprint for Growth***

When Peeler acquired W.K. Dickson & Co. in 1984, the firm enjoyed a solid reputation for its sewer and water work for the region’s small towns and cities. However, business had declined in recent years and the staff, including Peeler, numbered only five.

“We had the office on North Caswell and an office in the back corner of a little office building in Sylva where Tinker Poteat provided services for several small mountain towns,” Peeler says. “Our business was nearly all water and sewer and I was an airport engineer so, starting in October 1984, I had to learn real fast how water and sewer systems worked.”

The new owner concluded he had to accomplish three things if the firm of W.K. Dickson & Co. was to survive. “One, we had to keep the existing clients and let them know we were not going to disappear.



**DAVID L. PEELER**

*David Peeler is an avid collector of antique vehicles and an accomplished pilot. His pride and joy is his impeccably restored Stearman Kaydet, one of the world’s most easily recognizable aircraft. The bright yellow biplane was chosen in 1934 as the U.S. Navy’s primary trainer. Its simple construction, rugged dependability and nimble handling made the Stearman much loved by those who flew and trained on it. It was the only American aircraft used during World War II that was completely standardized for both Army and Navy use. Sold by the thousands after World War II, the Stearman has had a long and full career as a trainer, crop duster and air show performer. The name “Stearman” is so widely known that it has become the generic name for almost all currently flown biplanes. It is truly a classic and Peeler says he would fly it for hours just enjoying the thrill of the open cockpit experience.*

Two, we had to recapture the clients who had left us. And, three, we needed to start building an airport practice. The firm was in ‘so-so’ shape and we were meeting our bills, but some clients had left us and we had a lot of work to do.”

Peeler’s expertise was in airport engineering and his plan was to grow the company by finding a niche in this field. At the same time, he needed someone to oversee the firm’s basic business of sewer and water projects. That person turned out to be David Pond, now the company’s executive vice president and chief operating officer.

David Pond grew up on a peanut farm in southeastern Virginia and graduated from North Carolina State University in 1979 with a B.S. in Civil Engineering with a concentration on water and wastewater. Pond joined the engineering firm of C.E. Maguire in Raleigh, North Carolina, and was one of five people who opened an office for the firm in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Among the notable projects he worked on was a massive water line from Virginia Beach to Lake Gaston.

In October 1985, Pond was searching for new opportunities when he heard W.K. Dickson & Co. was under aggressive new leadership and was expanding its staff. Pond arranged an interview with Peeler and the two men clicked immediately.

“I came down to Charlotte, dropped my wife off downtown at Trade and Tryon Streets and told her I’d see her in two hours,” Pond recalls. “I came back five hours later but she had a smile on her face and a real-estate book in her hand. We both were ready to move to Charlotte.

“Our business philosophies are similar and David and I really hit it off,” Pond continues. “We decided I would take care of the water and wastewater, the municipal part of the business, and he would concentrate on the aviation side.

“We set a goal to have 30 employees within 10 years and we hit that goal the first year,” says Pond. “But the first few years were tough with David and I working as much as a hundred hours a week. We had to go out during the day and recruit business, then come back to the office at night and deliver what we had promised.

## WHAT MAKES A BRAND?

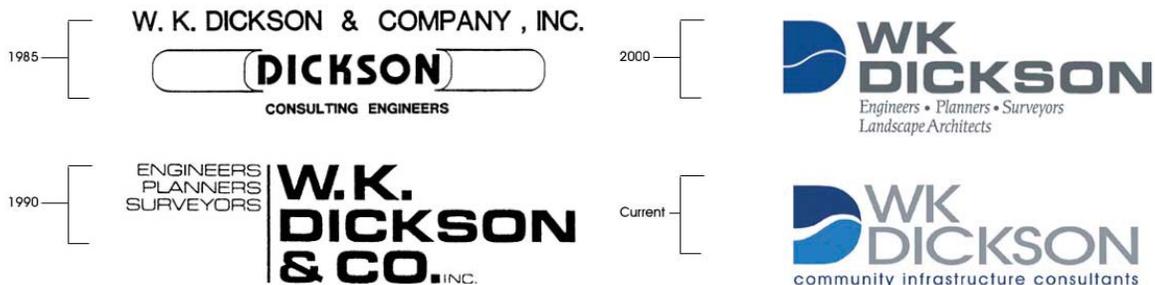
### THE IMAGE

Perception plays an important role in the firm's marketability. Many times the difference between winning and losing a project comes down to the client's 'first impressions' of your firm. Throughout the years, WK Dickson has enjoyed much success by creating an image that is first-rate. For instance, the graphics below illustrate the evolution of the typical proposal cover which is often the first thing a new client prospect sees from a company.



### THE IDENTITY

A great logo can make or break a business. The revision process is always unique and can never be taken lightly. A great logo is usually defined as "I know it when I see it." Ultimately, the WK Dickson logo makes the sale by speaking for the company when there is no representative present. It delivers the message to our clients that the company is stable, reputable, and dependable. The progression below illustrates the changes made to the firm's identity since 1985.



“Our revenue the first year was about \$180,000 and it was hard to support five employees on that, so I knew we had to find more work,” comments Peeler. “We went to the bank, showed them our business plan, and they were willing to keep a credit line going while we worked to increase our revenues.”

Both Peeler and Pond are goal-oriented individuals who set definite targets for the firm’s revenue and staffing each year. Under their direction, WK Dickson began to grow from a small, highly respected water and sewer engineering firm into a more diversified firm offering a wide range of services throughout North and South Carolina with occasional jaunts into Virginia, Georgia and Florida.

The growth also necessitated a move to a larger office space. In 1986, the firm moved to a rambling, two-story home in Dilworth that had been converted for office use. The office was at the intersection of Park and Cleveland Avenues. An additional overflow office was maintained in a converted house at Cleveland and Kingston Avenues as well. The company then moved a few blocks away in 1988 occupying a commercial building at Tremont and Cleveland Avenues.

“When I first came in, our bread-and-butter was small projects in the \$5,000 to \$10,000 fee size range,” Peeler explains. “For the most part, these were minor line extensions, water lines, small roads, projects like that. Now, most of our work figure range and we’re doing treatment plant projects, major airport projects and private site is in the low- to mid-six- everything from large water and sewer lines, big design.”

Pond points to two projects that move the company forward. “One was one we lost,” he explains.



*Former office space at 1924 Cleveland Avenue.*

helped the new ownership was a job we won; the other

Although WK Dickson & Co. had provided engineering services for dozens of municipalities in the region, the firm did very little work for the City of Charlotte and the new ownership felt it was time to go after some of the city’s big projects.

In the spring of 1986, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utility Department called for qualifications on a major sewer project; WK Dickson & Co. competed against 50 other firms and won the job.



*Sewer-line installation for Charlotte Mecklenburg Utilities.*

“That one job was like a kick-start for the company,” Pond declares. “The fees were the biggest we had ever received and allowed us to hire 15 new employees just like that.” The firm then won a second project from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities only six months later and employment jumped to 40 almost overnight. Although those projects gave the company a big boost, Pond feels the job the company lost might have been as beneficial in the long run as the Charlotte-Mecklenburg jobs it won.

“The City of Concord was accepting bids for a new water plant and we felt we were in the running to win the job,” Pond recalls. “But a big firm from Kansas City came in and took it away from us.” Tim Lowder, who was Concord’s assistant city manager at the time and is now in charge of WK Dickson’s Charlotte office, explained although he was in favor of the WK Dickson proposal, the search committee wanted to go with a firm with a national reputation.

“We knew we couldn’t compete with the big national firms at that time, but right then we vowed to position ourselves so we could go head-to-head with any firm in the country for the type of work we do,” says Pond. “We were determined to know and understand the regulations better than any other firm and started positioning our people so they could network and help us gain some name recognition.”



*WK Dickson has worked for Asheville Regional Airport since 1984.*

Meanwhile, Peeler was busy developing the firm’s new emphasis on airport planning and engineering. The new owner took over the company in October 1984; a month later he landed the company’s first airport contract with the Asheville Airport.

“I had done work for the Asheville Regional Airport in the past and the airport director wanted to give this young guy a start so he gave us a nice contract,” Peeler explains. “In the meantime, I was calling on other airport people I had worked with and letting them know we would love to have their business.”

The aviation business grew steadily. In 1990 an opportunity arose that put WK Dickson in the forefront among regional airport engineering firms.

The City of Concord, North Carolina, had decided to build a modern new regional airport in a big cornfield and cow pasture off I-85, not far from Lowe's Motor Speedway. They needed an engineering firm to provide the planning and design.

Lowder, still Concord's assistant city manager, recalls he was at an airport conference in Pinehurst, North Carolina, trying to learn what it took to build an airport when he first met Peeler. "We got to chatting and he told me his firm would really love to work on the project," says Lowder.

"We held interviews with several firms and decided to hire David and his team even though it was only a small firm at the time," Lowder continues. "The reason we hired them was, one, they really wanted the job, and, two, they were really enthusiastic and we could tell they loved what they did."

"The site had been picked, the funding was in place and the City of Concord believed in our small firm," Peeler notes. "Our challenge was to get the airport built in five years or less and, normally, that's nearly impossible. "We got into planning and designing the new airport from scratch but the plans kept growing and growing and we had to hustle to keep up. The design kept changing but we had a great relationship with the Concord City Council. Basically, they said 'just tell us what we need to do and how we need to operate the airport to make it a success.'

### **ANOTHER BIG BREAK**

*In the early days of the David Peeler era, the awarding of the design of Concord Regional Airport propelled the firm's aviation practice forward faster than any other assignment to date. As the project progressed and the need for additional areas or practice became evident, the first seeds were planted for what would eventually evolve into the "community infrastructure" concept in use today.*

*Concord Regional Airport is a reliever airport to Charlotte-Douglas International. It is a full-service, 24-hour, all-weather facility with a 5,500' by 100' runway, designed for 72,000-pound, dual-wheel aircraft loading. Nearly four million cubic yards of earth were moved in the initial construction.*



“So, in addition to being selected to design the airport we became part of the team that was guaranteeing the success of it. The project really put us on the map,” Peeler concludes. Four years later, after 29 months of construction and a cost of nearly \$24 million, the City of Concord had a new state-of-the-art airport. The first pilot to land at the new airport was David Peeler, with his wife in the co-pilot’s seat. “The Concord Regional Airport project gave us a big financial boost and put us out front in airport engineering,” Peeler says. “It was just a win-win situation for everybody involved.”

WK Dickson has developed long-term relationships with a number of major airports and general aviation facilities throughout the region. Since 1986, WK Dickson has been the contract engineer for the unique Donaldson Center in Greenville, South Carolina, an old military base that was converted to a general aviation facility within a major industrial park.

“WK Dickson has done about everything from paving to lighting to buildings, and we’ve been very pleased with their performance,” says Donaldson Center Airport Manager Peter Cevallos. “Since this is an old military base with existing infrastructure, it’s always a challenge as to whether to use the old existing infrastructure or build something new. The challenge for WK Dickson is to blend the old and new and be cost effective. Their creative solutions have been very good.

While Peeler built the aviation practice, Pond was busy expanding the firm’s traditional water and wastewater business. “I had an engineer in South Carolina tell me one day, ‘David, you’re not going to be happy until you’ve got every municipal client in the state tied up,’” he says with a smile.

In addition to retaining the firm’s longtime municipal clients, the business plan called for bringing in new clients and providing additional services such as private site development, stormwater design, landscape architecture, and watershed sciences.

Peeler feels another reason for the WK Dickson’s growth has been a willingness to invest in technology. “When I came here we were still designing at drafting tables with slide rules and our technology consisted of an IBM Selectric typewriter,” Peeler explains. “We made two very smart investments early on. One was a newly developed design software program called AutoCAD. It was intended mainly for designing buildings and was not being touted as something civil engineers could use, but we were on the front end

of the curve and now it's a mainstay of our profession. Secondly, we knew we had to buy software that would handle project management and accounting. We invested in a program by Harper and Shuman that is specifically tailored for architects and engineers and it turned out to be a great product. So, there's a tremendous contrast between the way we did business 20 years ago and the way we operate today. From an IBM Selectric typewriter we've gone to a completely integrated WAN where all our offices are connected in real-time. All our design drawings are transferred electronically through powerful servers."

Chris Nugent, WK Dickson's chief financial officer, helped to direct the evolution of WK Dickson from a hodgepodge of technology to the virtual offices of today. "In the mid '90s we had PCs but no servers and each office pretty much did its own thing," Nugent explains. "We had varying degrees of technology in different offices, so our goal became to have all files on a server cluster so each office could share with the others." All the branch offices are now tied together in one big Wide Area Network and information is readily available through broadband pipelines. "People can log in from home, on the road and most go totally wireless, which gives project managers nearly the same access in the field as they have in their office." Nugent describes the virtual-office concept as an attempt "...to tear down the walls of the office." The advances in technology also allow clients to see project plans digitally and in real-time, an innovation that greatly speeds project completion.

That technology naturally led to advances in the firm's geospatial solutions. WK Dickson has also been a leader in the modern field of Geomatics – including GIS, GPS and Land Surveying. "Geomatics have become a mainstay of everything we do and has a major impact on the firm as a whole," Peeler notes. For example, with data-driven GIS, the firm's municipal clients are now able to do such things as provide exact locations for all their utility inventories and feed that data instantly to maintenance workers and emergency responders.

The plans Peeler and Pond put into motion began to pay big dividends in the 1990s and the decade became one of tremendous growth for the firm. "We wanted to be aggressive and avoid bureaucracy," explains Pond. "We love what we do and have some great, great people who helped us meet our goals."

As WK Dickson grew, additional disciplines were added to the services provided for clients. Today the company offers services in a variety of practice areas in which a community's infrastructure is affected.

“Much of our growth has been through diversification,” Peeler explains. “A good example is our airport business. We started at zero in 1984 and within four or five years it was 50% of our business. We also diversified into surveying, private site development, stormwater management, landscape architecture and other vital infrastructure areas as the years progressed.

“If you look at all the practice areas we work in today, the four biggest groups would be water/wastewater, airports, site design and surveying. Each of those brings in about 20% of our business and the other 20% comes from the other areas.”

WK Dickson’s phenomenal growth the past few years is the result of providing highly professional services while maintaining close personal relationships with clients. The firm is particularly proud of the fact that 90% of its business comes from previous clients, many of whom have relied on WK Dickson for more than three-quarters of a century.

“Like the Colonel before us, we look at establishing long-term relationships with our clients,” says Peeler. “We don’t like to work on just a one-shot basis. We prefer instead to work as partners with our clients and find cost-effective solutions for their needs.” With a solid reputation for superior service to clients and more than 75 years of experience, WK Dickson can look forward to a future that will be even brighter.

“A few years from now we hope to employ at least 400 professionals and have 14 offices, double the number we have now,” predicts Peeler. “We’ll continue to focus on the Southeast with expansion into the neighboring states.”

“We’re at an awkward size right now,” adds Pond. “Although we compete with the best, we’re not a huge firm and we’re not a small firm, so we need to grow very aggressively. Within the next few years we hope to grow beyond that awkward size. That would make us one of the major players in the Southeastern U.S.”

“We’re going to stay with what we know and what we do well, but we need to grow to provide opportunities for both current and future employees,” says Peeler. David Pond adds, “We’ve got some great people and I’m excited about where we’ve been and where we’re going. We’ve always felt that the sky is the limit!”

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616 Colonnade Drive, Charlotte, North Carolina 28205.*

*Book design and research by Kraig C. Kern*

*Special thanks to:*

*Joe Goodpasture for additional historic research and writing  
and*

*Joel Johnson for letting us borrow his collection of newspaper articles and historic  
project photos found in the book  
and*

*Reverend Bonneau Dickson for his generous hospitality while helping us fill in some of  
the missing pieces about his brother Kenneth.*

#### **PHOTO CREDITS**

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