



# LESSONS IN PERSEVERANCE

*The history of WK Dickson 1929-2021*



## FORWARD

*Businesses are about many things. 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 and surveying 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 clients we serve. It is because we have persevered through good times and bad. Since 1929, the spirit, pride, 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 will carry on.*

*I was proud to stand at the helm of this outstanding company for three decades. I am also comforted by the knowledge that WK Dickson will continue to celebrate its long history of innovation and industry leadership. May all who follow me do so in the fine tradition of service to others, just as Colonel Dickson did so many years ago.*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David L. Peeler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "David" being more prominent.

David L. Peeler, PE  
President & Chief Executive Officer  
1984 – 2020



# A DREAM & DETERMINATION



*Uptown Charlotte 1929*

It 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 mains and 160 miles of water mains. Then, in October 1929, the stock 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, William Kenneth Dickson, opened a small office in Charlotte and established a civil-engineering firm.

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

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 value 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



**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.*

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., listed as a “civil and sanitary” engineering firm.

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 moving to Arkansas.”

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.



*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 always 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 are stored at the Charlotte headquarters where a history exhibit is planned.



*This 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 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.

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 president and CEO from 1984 through 2020, Dickson developed close relationships with his clients and

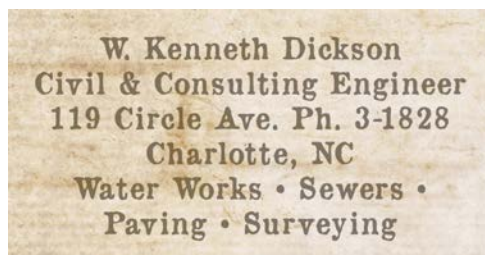


treated them as friends. “His clients just thought the world of him,” Peeler said. “If one of these small towns needed something done, he would do it and worry about getting paid later. Over time he developed a reputation among the small municipalities as the guy to go to.”

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, “Sir, your survey is wrong. You’re putting the line in the wrong place.”

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 small strip of property was worth, and wrote him a check on the spot. Stories like these continued throughout his career, and his client-centered approach is part of the firm’s mission statement today.

The firm somehow survived the economic privations of the Depression and 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:



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 prepare supplies for the D-Day invasion of 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*

## TOOLS OF THE TRADE



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

*This Keuffel & Esser Polyphase Duplex Slide Rule was made in New York. Dickson would have used this tool when he attended The Citadel.*



### INK & POWDER (Circa 1939)

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



### CONTOUR FINDER (Circa 1943)

*Manufactured by Abrams Aerial Survey Co., this simple tool assisted surveyors with their jobs in the 1940's.*



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

*These are the diaries and date minders of Colonel Dickson. Through them, we learn that Dickson was an organized man with a very tight schedule.*



### MECHANICAL ADDING MACHINE (Circa 1950)

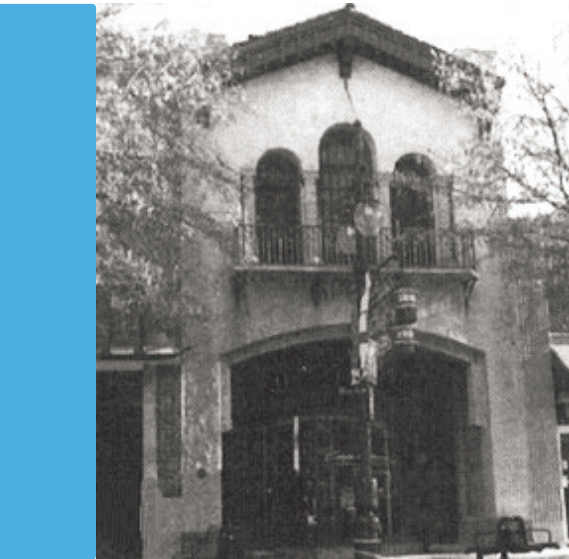
*Used by WK Dickson accountants before modern calculators. It was probably used for bookkeeping and other accounting functions. Monroe Calculating Machine Co. opened in 1912 and became a pioneer of electromechanical calculators.*





A black and white aerial photograph of a suburban neighborhood with rows of small, single-story houses. A large blue semi-transparent banner is overlaid across the center of the image. The banner contains the text 'A NEW DIRECTION' in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Below the banner, a large moving truck is visible, with its rear door open and a ramp extended. The truck is labeled 'PAN AMERICAN VAN AND STORAGE' and 'There's a Stand in Your Neighborhood ACROSS the STREET'. Other moving trucks are visible in the background, including one labeled 'McCallson VAN & STORAGE CO.' and another labeled 'BEKINS VAN & STORAGE CO.'. People are seen standing around the trucks and houses, suggesting a busy moving day.

# A NEW DIRECTION



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

Germany 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.



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 the now familiar 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 departed 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.

## POST WAR PROJECTS



*TROY, NC – Ten-acre Oxidation Pond for treatment of sewage. This plant began operation in the late 1950s. According to marketing material of the time, "...the lagoon has been free of odors and has provided treatment for 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.*

The 1950s were also a period of growth and stability for W.K. Dickson & Co. although the firm remained 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. 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 weeks," 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 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.

One of Colonel Dickson’s most significant 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 said. “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 the water supply and recreational activities for the Cleveland County area. W.K. Dickson & Co. also provided services for waste-treatment plants, water-treatment facilities and storage tanks.

“The Colonel’s love for his clients and their communities was the biggest selling tool he had,” said 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. “We could ask for no better relationship,” said David Asbill, Biscoe’s former superintendent of public utilities. “WK Dickson handled 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.”

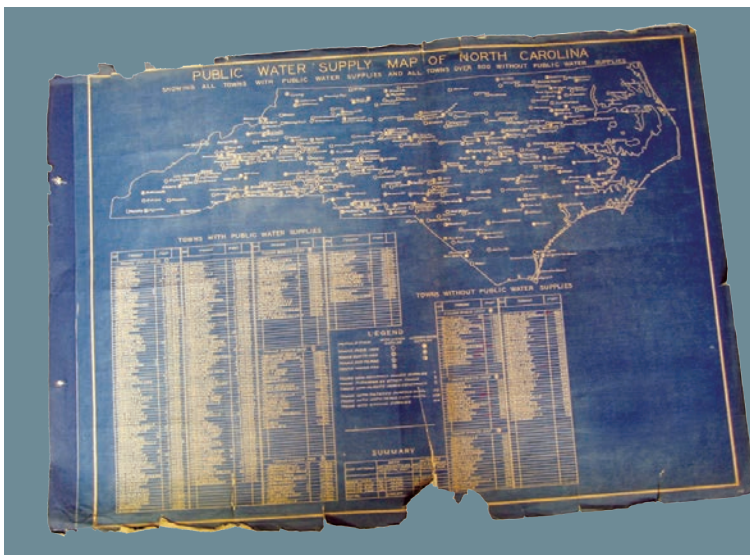
The firm’s reputation continued to grow through the ‘50s when Marion Hair, a highly respected engineer, joined the firm as vice president.

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 leader 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.

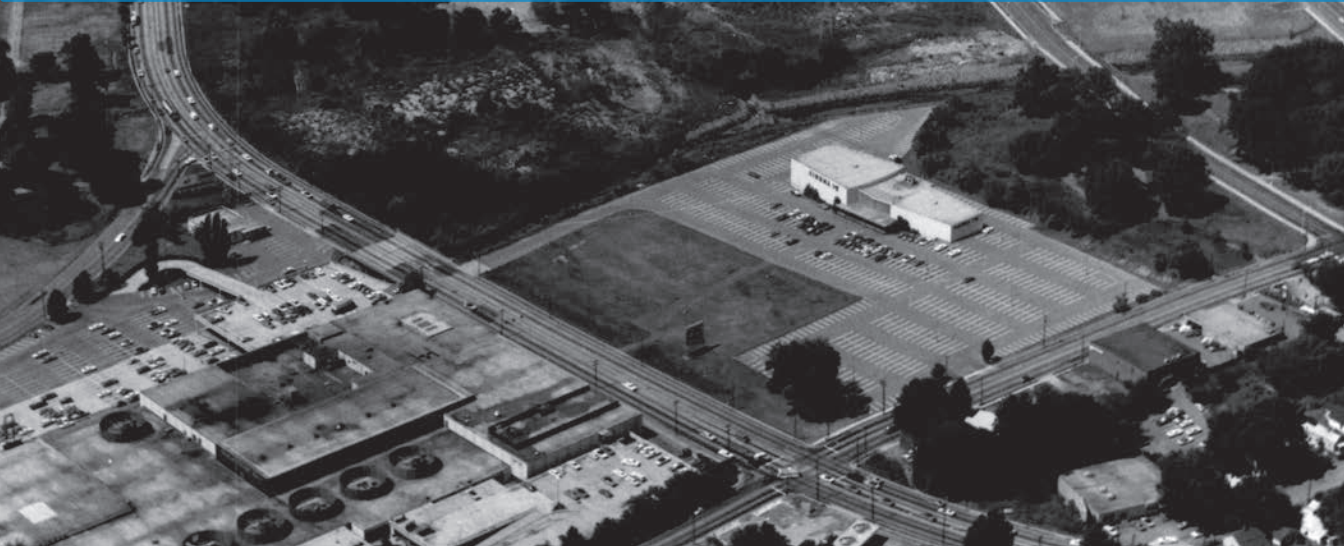


*Location map of North Carolina's water supply in 1935. Found deep in the recesses of the company storage facility, decades before GIS technology, Colonel Dickson used this drawing as a reference for many of his projects early in his career.*



An aerial photograph of a city skyline, likely Los Angeles, with a prominent blue semi-transparent overlay across the middle. The skyline includes several tall skyscrapers, and the surrounding area shows a mix of urban development and greenery. The text "YEARS OF RAPID CHANGE" is centered in white on the blue overlay.

# YEARS OF RAPID CHANGE







*Photo of Colonel Dickson 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 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 protesters 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 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.

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."



**RALPH "BUCK" JOHNSON**

*Buck Johnson's tenure as president of WK Dickson 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 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.*

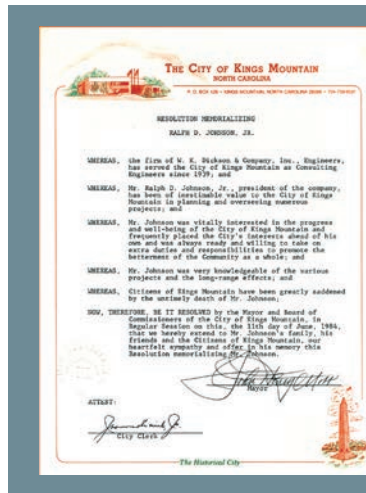
Charlotte and the surrounding region began a period of booming growth during the 1970s and W.K. Dickson & Co. – still concentrating on water and sewer projects for the area’s smaller towns and cities – continued to flourish. Employee count reached as high as 20 during this period, but after the economic 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.

Col. 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.

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.*





**A NEW ERA BEGINS**



*Charlotte-Douglas Airport in the late 1970s became much more than a regional facility when Piedmont Airlines made it their main hub of operations. David Peeler managed the design of many of the airfield surfaces that are still in use today.*

Republicans 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 centers.



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 was 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, 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.”



**DAVID L. PEELER**

*David Peeler is an avid collector of antique vehicles and an accomplished pilot. For many years, his pride and joy was 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. The name “Stearman” is so widely known that it has become the generic name for almost all currently flown biplanes. It was truly a classic and Peeler says he would come from a hard day at the office and fly it for hours just enjoying the thrill of the open cockpit experience. On occasion he would take employees on a flight and give them an unforgettable experience.*

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, 'Okay. 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."

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 Street and an office in the back corner of a little building in Sylva, NC 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. 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 so 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, who started out as a water resources engineer, and went on to become the company's executive vice president and chief operating officer during Peeler's tenure.

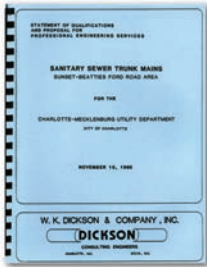
David Pond grew up on a peanut farm in southeastern Virginia and graduated from North Carolina State University in 1979 with a B.S. in Civil Engineering with a concentration on water and wastewater. Pond joined the engineering firm of C.E. Maguire in Richmond, Virginia and was one of five people who opened an office for the firm in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Among the notable projects he worked on early in his career 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 new leadership and was expanding its staff. Pond arranged an interview with Peeler and the two men clicked immediately.

## WHAT MAKES A BRAND?

### THE IMAGE

*Perception plays an essential 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 stands out. 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 advent of low-cost color printing in the early 2000s made it possible to be as creative as the imagination would allow.*



1985



1990



2000



2005



2019

### THE IDENTITY

*A recognizable 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 modernization below illustrates the changes made to the firm's identity during the Peeler era.*



1985



2000



1990



Current

“I came down to Charlotte, dropped my wife off downtown at the corner of 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 were similar and Peeler and I really hit it off,” Pond continues. “We decided I would oversee 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 Peeler and I working as much as 80 to 90 hours most weeks. 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.

“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 definitive 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 were small projects in the \$5,000 to \$10,000 fee range,” Peeler explains. “For the most part, these were minor water line extensions,



small roads, projects like that. Now, most of the work is in the low- to mid-six-figure range and we're doing everything from large treatment plant projects, major water and sewer lines, big airport projects and private site design."

Pond points to two projects that helped the new ownership move the company forward. "One was a job we won; the other was one we lost," he explains.

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 pursue some of the city's larger 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.



*Former office in 1988, located at the corner of East Tremont Street and Cleveland Avenue*

"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 immediately." The firm then won a second project from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Utilities only six months later and staff size 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 proposals for a new water plant and we felt we were in the running to win the job," Pond recalls. "But a big national firm from Kansas City came in and took it away from us." Tim Lowder, who was Concord's assistant city manager at the time, explained although he was in favor of the WK Dickson proposal, the selection 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 name recognition.”

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 Regional Airport. “I had worked 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 potential airport clients 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 the 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,” said 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 continued. “The reason we hired them was, one, they really wanted the job, and, two, they were really enthusiastic and we could tell they were passionate about 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.'

"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 a win-win situation for everybody involved."

WK Dickson has since developed long-term relationships with a number of major airports and general aviation facilities throughout the southeast. Since 1986, WK Dickson has been steadily growing its list of airport clients and it includes the likes of Charlotte-Douglas, Columbia Metro, Greenville-Spartanburg, Piedmont-Triad, Raleigh-Durham, and dozens of general aviation airports across five states.



#### 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.*

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 said 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 land development, stormwater design, landscape architecture, and watershed sciences.

Peeler feels another reason for the WK Dickson's growth was a willingness to invest in technology. "When I came here we were still designing at drafting tables with slide rules and our advanced 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 in the early 80's and the way we operate today. From an IBM Selectric typewriter we've gone to a completely integrated cloud-based network where all our offices are connected."

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. "Our goal in the early 2000s became to have all files on a server cluster so each office could share with the others." All the offices were tied together in one big wide area network and information became readily available through broadband pipelines."

"Back in 2000, it was a big deal that people could log in from home, on the road and go mostly wireless, which gave project managers nearly the same access in the field as



they had in their office,” he continues. Nugent describes the virtual-office concept as an attempt “...to tear down the walls of the office.” The advances in technology in the early parts of the new millennium also allowed clients to see project plans digitally and in real-time, an innovation that greatly accelerated project completion.

That technology naturally led to advances in the firm’s geospatial solutions. WK Dickson had also been a leader in the modern field of Geomatics – including GIS and Land Surveying. “Geomatics became a part of everything we did and had a major impact on the firm as a whole,” Peeler notes. “For example, with data-driven GIS, the firm’s municipal clients were 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 people who helped us meet our goals.”

As WK Dickson grew, additional disciplines were added to the services provided for clients, and the growth of talent meant opening up new office locations to better serve clients.

“Much of our growth since 1984 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, land development, stormwater management, landscape architecture and other vital infrastructure areas as the years progressed.

WK Dickson’s phenomenal growth in the 1990s and early 2000s was the result of providing highly professional services while maintaining close personal relationships with clients. The firm was particularly proud of the fact that 90% of its business came from previous clients, many of whom had relied on WK Dickson for nearly a century.



# FROM GROWTH TO RECESSION



*In the early to mid-2000s, WK Dickson did a lot of award winning-parks and recreation projects, like Peachtree Ridge Park in Georgia. The recession virtually dried up most of our clients' ability to spend for green spaces. As a result WK Dickson was forced to stop doing landscape architecture services for many years.*

From 2008-2010, the U.S. experienced the Great Recession. It was considered the most severe economic and financial meltdown since the Great Depression. The unemployment rate hit 10 percent, the highest level, in October 2009. In South Carolina, the household median income peaked in 2007 at \$51,273, then declined for five years during and after the Great Recession, to \$46,162 in 2012. In 2008, voters elected Barack Obama as the 44th U.S. president. In the same year, "No Country for Old Men" won best picture. The 2008 Olympics opened in Beijing, China, with a ceremony featuring 14,000 performers, and the greater Charlotte metropolitan area had a population of 1,145,000.

In 2006 and 2007, projects flowed into the firm, and the staff had grown to as many as 230 employees. The firm had also expanded to 14 regional offices, including two in Florida. Around the same time, leaders also participated in their first strategic planning session using an outside consultant as a moderator. Scott Whalen, former Raleigh Regional Manager, and current Chief Operating Officer notes, “The business model of the past probably wasn’t the right business model to take us into the future as we continued to expand and grow at a rapid pace. We needed to find a way of doing things that was uniquely WK Dickson.”

As part of the planning process, the company’s approach transformed from a lot of smaller franchised offices into a unified, one-firm model where everyone pooled resources to serve a broader base of clients. That way, WK Dickson could offer clients the highest and best value services, while still delivering personal service.

As the Great Recession took hold in 2008, Dickson’s prosperity would soon change. David Peeler recalls, “We had a track record of growing and didn’t know life was going to change so significantly in such a short amount of time. You plan for scenarios like this, but I’m not sure anyone could foresee the level of change we experienced.” Suddenly, WK Dickson’s extensive backlog began to dry up and there wasn’t enough work to keep everyone busy. Leaders realized they would have to look at different strategies to protect the firm’s future.

The challenging economic situation forced leaders to make a tough decision. It was time to start winding down land surveying services, one of the firm’s founding practices offered by Col. Dickson since 1929. Peeler said, “What do you do with dozens of survey crews when there’s no construction work to be done?”

As a result, over the course of a few years, WK Dickson began to decrease the need for land surveying and right-size other services at the same time. By the time the recession began to wane in 2010, the firm had decreased the workforce to approximately 120 employees. Three offices had also been consolidated and closed. Leaders considered these moves difficult but necessary decisions.



Chris Nugent, Chief Financial Officer, said, “We did what we had to do to take care of the whole company for the long-term. Those decisions are always very difficult.”

David Pond agrees that dismissing about 100 people was tough. The move bothered him, but he told the remaining employees that the cuts were necessary in order to stay in business. During the toughest months, Pond and Peeler took significant pay cuts to save resources for others.

The Great Recession caused management to take a close look at WK Dickson’s core services, and to focus on what the firm did best. As a result, resources were poured into water, wastewater, stormwater, and aviation services. The “core four” were responsible for ninety percent of the firm’s revenue for almost a decade after the recession, with the remaining revenue coming from occasional land development and landscape architecture work.

Nugent says, “We worked smarter and came out of the recession with more discipline and business focus. We focused on what we had always done best.”

Because of the planning efforts, the firm’s leaders started placing a greater emphasis on efficient operations and optimizing technology. This focus continues to fuel WK Dickson’s growth and success today.

Angie Mettlen, Vice President and Director of Strategic Funding & Regulatory Issues, notes that the 2008-2010 time-frame was tough for all engineering firms because of the impact of the Great Recession. “Dickson did a great job with diversification in different markets,” she says. “The commercial and land development side of our business basically went away, but we were still pretty strong in the other essential infrastructure markets.”

With Angie’s funding expertise, WK Dickson would help clients procure grants through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The legislation pushed stimulus funding for infrastructure projects into the economy. This funding service became one of the firm’s differentiators in the marketplace.



# RECOVERY & REFLECTION





*Charlotte's skyline changed dramatically with the opening of the Duke Energy Center in 2010. This 786-foot tall skyscraper achieved LEED Platinum status by including water-saving plumbing devices, a water storage system that will treat rainwater to be used for cooling tower make-up water, and a green roof.*

The U.S. unemployment rate increased to a peak of 10.6 percent in January 2010. Then the country experienced years of economic expansion and an improved labor market. Beginning in 2015, full employment begins to return. In 2016, Donald Trump, media personality and businessman is elected the 45th president of the United States. In 2018, every primary economic driver showed strong demographic growth in the southeastern United States. Taylor Swift won the 2019 Grammy album of the year with Fearless. *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens becomes a best seller, and WK Dickson wins the Grand Conceptor, the state of North Carolina's highest engineering achievement award.



A diversity of services helped WK Dickson emerge from the economic downturn. David Peeler recalls that this diversity, “gave us the ability to rebound and grow faster as we came out of the recession.”

Strategic planning helped position the firm for growth as economic indicators improved. Governmental funding helped finance water and wastewater projects. The firm’s aviation side focused on increasing services to commercial airports through multi-year general engineering contracts.

Over the years, WK Dickson has demonstrated its ability to quickly adjust its mix of services to keep up with demand in hot markets. Col. Dickson focused on general water, sewer and surveying services, and the company added aviation services into the mix when David Peeler acquired the firm.

Ron Jewett, vice president and facility asset manager at the Raleigh-Durham International Airport (RDU), appreciates that WK Dickson can provide a variety of services. Thirty years after first bringing an aviation specialty to the firm, WK Dickson began working with RDU for the first time. Through multiple on-call agreements over the years, services included planning, design, and construction administration of a variety of airfield projects. Team members also worked on road projects adjacent to the airport and a water distribution map.

“When you get a consultant that knows aviation and understands your airport and its infrastructure, you’ve got the best of both worlds,” Jewett said. Jewett praises the efforts of WK Dickson. “They understand our priorities very clearly. You don’t have to explain anything to them twice. They understand us, and they’re genuinely caring people.” Each airport is different, Jewett said. “We’re very heavy on customer service and maintaining operations with as little disruption as possible.”

Darwin Simpson, retired director of the Spartanburg Downtown Memorial Airport, also values WK Dickson’s diverse skills. During his nine years with the airport, he continually worked with the firm. The company provided design for both aviation and environmental projects. Simpson also valued the firm’s funding expertise. “I knew that they had a lot of credibility in the industry,” he says.



As the economy continued to stabilize, firm leaders began to realize that the business of engineering needed to become more agile and efficient. After decades of larger staff numbers operating under older business models, WK Dickson began to look inward and make changes that would propel the firm forward to unprecedented levels of prosperity.

In the fall of 2011, WK Dickson embarked on another, more inwardly focused, five-year strategic planning process. Instead of planning solely around financial metrics and geographic markets, the firm prioritized the client experience, employee engagement, unique benefits, and work-life balance as improvements necessary to take WK Dickson to the next level.

Kraig Kern, Vice President and Director of Marketing recalls, “The planning sessions of the past would always focus on numbers as a benchmark for success, but in 2011 we tried something more outside of our comfort zone. We knew if we took care of our clients and our people better than anyone else, the numbers would take care of themselves.”

As the firm deployed the plan, spanning the years 2012 - 2016, something remarkable began to happen. “Instead of the constant peaks and valleys of profitability, WK Dickson began to see consistent, higher profits year after year,” Kern said.

The business plan put forth during those years proved to be the catalyst for growth and prosperity the firm had been lacking. Despite large staff numbers and office locations before the recession, profitability had been inconsistent. As a result of both the recession and the subsequent planning efforts, WK Dickson began to see they could do much more with less.

“We had grown too big for our own good,” Pond said. “The positive we took from the recession was the ability to tighten our belts, modernize our systems, and learn to do things more efficiently. We became much smarter in our business operations and were able to set the stage for the years to come.”

One of the initiatives from the 2012 - 2016 plan was focusing on the client experience. For the first time, WK Dickson became more intentional in measuring client satisfaction. Instead of the typical end of year client surveys, the firm deployed a feedback tool

designed to gather feedback at various stages of a project. WK Dickson would send an average of 100 surveys per year designed to measure the firm's project management processes. This proactive approach to feedback and follow-up became a differentiator for WK Dickson and resulted in several national client service awards.

Taking care of employees was always something WK Dickson was good at. But during this time the firm also made it the most important strategic focus. The ideas of talent development and employee engagement took center stage as a strategic planning item.

WK Dickson believes in ongoing training for its employees. Scott Whalen, gained a lot of experience while working for the firm, having moved up through the ranks to become one of the firm's executive leaders. "Every time I wanted to take on something new, the company always supported me," he says. "We put a premium on making sure our team members are better prepared for their jobs than anyone else."

As a result, comprehensive employee feedback began to be measured more consistently starting in 2015 and WK Dickson was awarded a "Best Place To Work For" award in the civil engineering category for six straight years. Kern remarked, "We learned a ton from those surveys. The employees were our best source of information for what we were doing right and what we were doing wrong. It was important that we engaged them and demonstrated to everyone we were listening and taking action."



#### MAJOR ENGINEERING AWARD

*Late 2019 also saw the firm win the coveted ACEC Grand Conceptor Award, given to a single company each year for a project demonstrating engineering excellence. This was the first time WK Dickson had ever received this honor. It was for the Raw Water project near Boone, NC. It is not only the largest public infrastructure project that the town has ever completed, but the infiltration gallery is the first and only one of its kind in east of the Mississippi. The project also included the expansion of the town's existing water treatment plant, construction of a new raw water intake and booster pumping station, and construction of 12 miles of water lines.*

## CLIENT EXPERIENCE SPOTLIGHT: RECOVERING FROM HURRICANE FLORENCE

*When disaster strikes, WK Dickson is ready to step in and do what's needed. The firm's team proved its worth after Hurricane Florence made landfall on Sept. 14, 2018, dumping nearly 30 inches of rain over Onslow County, North Carolina.*

*During the storm, floodwaters at the Onslow Northwest Regional Water Reclamation Facility reached a height of three to four feet in the facility's electrical distribution and control building and an equipment building. The ferocious storm caused more than \$5 million worth of damage.*

*Immediately after the storm, WK Dickson went to work to help get the plant up and running. One of the firm's project managers arrived at the flooded facility. He slept on a cot in one of the few dry offices for four days and helped direct the ongoing recovery efforts.*

*The firm and Onslow County Water and Sewer Authority (ONWASA) analyzed immediate needs. Despite logistical challenges, they needed to get 28 replacement motors and drives to help restore the plant.*

*Another member of the WK Dickson team drove all night, through flooded highways to deliver the vital components to the facility. For his efforts, he received two mattresses on his cot so he could get some well-deserved rest.*

*The recovery operation "was like building an airplane while you're flying it," says Jeff Hudson, CEO of ONWASA.*

*In the week following the storm, WK Dickson's wastewater operations staff and others remained at the facility 24 hours a day to restart a rudimentary treatment process and begin recovery efforts. Only 12 days after being submerged by four feet of floodwaters, the plant was able to meet state-mandated permit limits and restart operations. After the initial repairs, the authority hired WK Dickson to restructure and renovate the plant. Hudson notes, "WK Dickson has engineered solutions that will help us mitigate any future flood damage."*

*WK Dickson received an Engineering Excellence Grand Award from the American Council of Engineering Companies of North Carolina for its work on the Northwest Plant Disaster, Recovery, and Resilience Project for ONWASA.*



As the end of the strategic planning period lay ahead, David Peeler reflected on his long career with the company and knew it was time to start implementing an ownership transition plan.

“When I was questioned about my retirement goals at a strategic visioning session in 2012, I emphasized that I favored an internal leadership transition, rather than selling to another company,” Peeler recalls. In the years ahead, the firm implemented the transition plan through a phased approach.

The plan called for Peeler to officially retire in 2020 and this transition began with him stepping down as President but retaining the CEO role through 2020. Meanwhile, David Pond took on the presidential duties and transitioned his COO role to Scott Whalen over the course of the next two years.

David Pond officially became the firm’s fourth president on January 1, 2019, and at the same time, Scott Whalen became the Executive Vice President & Chief Operating Officer.

The legacy of Colonel Dickson continues through the leaders who followed him. In Col. Dickson’s final years of retirement, David Peeler listened to the business founder’s stories about running a successful consulting business. Peeler shared them with employees. He emphasized that Dickson placed a high value on professionalism and treating clients fairly.

According to Peeler, Col. Dickson was all about doing the right thing, whether it’s for your employees or your clients. Chris Nugent credits Peeler for keeping Col. Dickson’s legacy alive in the firm through his storytelling about the founder. As the years went by, “Our ‘Colonel’ became David Peeler,” Nugent says.

For decades, Peeler and Pond, worked together to grow the company. “While we were different personalities, we were very much a good working team,” Peeler notes.

Just like Col. Dickson, Peeler and Pond kept the business going through its peaks and valleys, weathering 80-hour work weeks, geographic expansion, and the Great Recession of 2008-2010. But no one could have predicted a world-changing event on the horizon.



## MOVING ON UP

### IMPRESSIVE FOOTPRINT

*By the end of 2019, WK Dickson had established new footholds in several new strategic locations. In all, the firm had eleven full-service offices in four southeastern states as 2020 dawned.*



### NEW HEADQUARTERS

*Thanks to several years of sustained success, WK Dickson was able to look at upgrading office spaces as one of the essential employee benefits. One of the priorities became moving into a proper corporate headquarters. Although the building at 616 Colonnade Drive had served the firm well from the 1990s through the mid-2000s, firm leaders knew it was time to upgrade. Not only was it good for existing staff, but a modern space would prove to be an excellent recruiting asset as well. So, after a year of construction, WK Dickson's Corporate and Charlotte offices moved to The Refinery building on West Morehead in October 2019.*







# FACING A PANDEMIC & THE FUTURE





*Scenes of medical masks, protests, and long unemployment lines were harsh realities as the 2020s began. WK Dickson and the rest of the world had to learn to quickly adapt to the “new normal.”*

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic causes a public health and economic crisis throughout the world. In April 2020, the unemployment rate reached 14.8 percent. The U.S. death toll from COVID reached more than 500,000 by February 2021 and continued to rise. Rapidly developed vaccines reduce hospitalizations and deaths, but experts had to analyze mutating variants continually. As the shock of the pandemic began to wane, economic indicators pointed to solid growth in the southeastern U.S. President Trump was defeated in 2020 but asserted the election was fraudulent. Hundreds were arrested after the January 6, 2021 riot at the U.S. Capitol, the same day the Electoral College officially elected former Vice President Joe Biden as president. His running mate, Kamala Harris, became first female, first black and first Asian-American vice president. Toy Story 4 wins Best Animated Feature in 2020, and the pandemic delayed the Tokyo 2020 Summer Olympic Games to 2021.



In January 2020, David Pond visited each office to present the annual company business plan. Some of the presentation included plans for possible acquisitions, geographic expansion, and new service lines. Pond also spoke of the growing project backlog and historically high profits. With these profits the firm was poised to make investments in benefits, offices and technology. However, much of it changed in March of that year.

As the new year approached, news began to come from China of a dangerous and fast-spreading virus dubbed COVID-19. Much of the world kept an eye on the headlines, but most believed it was a problem for other countries. Traveling to conferences, visits to clients, and spring break vacations continued unabated. However, cases began to appear in the U.S. and within a few weeks hospitals were overwhelmed. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-19 outbreak a worldwide pandemic.

Like the rest of the country, WK Dickson faced challenges caused by the pandemic. With so many unknowns, firm leadership deferred to the CDC recommendations and on March 19, 2020 word was given to staff to vacate all offices and begin working from home until further notice.

The pandemic disrupted the workplace, but the firm continued providing essential services. Nearly a year before the work from home order, WK Dickson also began a large effort to upgrade equipment to be more mobile. This included providing high-powered laptops for everyone in the company, upgrading the company's internet bandwidth, and adopting video conferencing and collaborative technologies via Microsoft Teams. These pre-pandemic efforts proved to be extremely fortuitous, as nearly everyone in the firm was back on line and working from home in less than 18 hours.

In June 2020, Pond gave staff the option to begin returning to offices, with new stringent mask, distancing and sanitization protocols in place. Meanwhile, firm leadership kept a wary eye on virus surges as people gathered during holidays throughout the year.

“After several months of about half the staff returning to the office, we had to send everyone home again in December 2020 all the way through January 2021 because of a concern about a surge,” Pond recalls.

Throughout all of this, the firm focused on four priorities. First, Pond says he didn’t want employees to worry about losing their jobs. No one was laid off for the first six months of 2020 due to pandemic-related issues.

The second priority regarded employee safety. Classified by the government as essential workers, the firm could have asked employees to work on-site. Instead, employees continued to work from home for many months.

“We felt that the safety of our employees was our number one priority,” Pond notes.

The third priority focused on the firm’s financial strength. Management informed employees that they didn’t have to worry about getting a paycheck. The firm continued to be profitable and maintained a strong financial position.

Finally, WK Dickson focused on frequent communications with its workforce. Pond reports, “We went from weekly communication to daily communication, back to weekly, and then monthly. The intent was to be as transparent as we could about where the company was, but also to be positive. Despite all of the ambitious plans I rolled out in January, we were still doing just fine as a company.”

Another critical factor that benefited WK Dickson was its emphasis on keeping up with the current technology. In the early 1980s, the company was one of the first firms in



**DAVID L. POND**

*David Pond was born in south-eastern Virginia on a peanut farm near the small town of Wakefield. David credits his father, a farmer, and his mother, a school teacher, for where he is today. Two of his most significant life decisions involved his parents and their advice. The first occurred upon graduation from NC State when David had to choose between a career in civil engineering or coming back home and take over the farm.*

*The second happened when David considered joining Peeler at WK Dickson and moving his family further away from his aging parents. In both cases, he remembers his father saying, “I pursued my dream, and now it’s time for you to pursue your own. Look to the future, work harder than anyone else, and always do the right thing and you will be successful.”*

*Today David continues to chase his dream, whether it be growing WK Dickson, traveling with his family, or on the golf course where he’s still trying to break 80.*



Charlotte to use AutoCAD. Then it put computers on everyone's desks in the early-1990s. After record-setting years in 2017 and 2018, the firm began investing heavily in the latest trends in hardware, software, training, and operational efficiencies.

"Clients are no longer asking us where our employees are located," Scott Whalen says. "They say it doesn't matter anymore because subject matter experts can contribute from any WK Dickson office."

"We can bring in our experts from all over the company to demonstrate we have significant resources to assist the client," Pond agrees.

Many engineering firms use the same tools. But to achieve success, Chris Nugent believes it comes down to understanding the client's needs and then using the best methods, engineering, and software to deliver the solutions. "We made some pretty significant investments in providing training to people to get to the intelligence-part of the software," he says.

The silver lining of the pandemic was the rapid acceleration of distance learning and virtual technologies. WK Dickson planned to transition to 100% cloud-based computing eventually. After COVID-19 rolled in, the company moved significant amounts of technology off-site. That move ultimately provided better cybersecurity and gave staff the flexibility to access files from any location on the planet, using any connected device.

With the new cloud-based operating system, the company could easily share work across offices, improving its capabilities. The technology also allowed the firm to be more flexible in how it communicates and delivers projects.

"The ability to use rapid advancements in technology to work and collaborate remotely has profoundly changed our industry," Kraig Kern says.

WK Dickson was able to quickly introduce automated drones, virtual and augmented reality, live streaming, and other tools once thought of as science fiction to be part of everyday life at the firm.

Despite modernizing and working remotely, WK Dickson remains true to its roots - a regional firm with personal service. David Pond sees the regional firm concept as a differentiator and an advantage that clients appreciate. "Because of our size, our clients know they have a direct line of communication to our senior leadership. They most likely wouldn't have that access with mega-firms and publicly traded companies."

As a long-time client, Jay Nicholson, general manager of the Joint Municipal Water & Sewer Commission, Lexington, South Carolina, also sees benefits from WK Dickson's regional size. "It broadens the firm's expertise," he says. And with the popularity of video meetings, Nicholson believes it doesn't matter where the experts are located.

By the end of 2020, WK Dickson's service ratio was 42% water and wastewater; 22% aviation; 14% watershed services; 11% land development; 11% energy. In the years ahead, Pond predicts that the aviation, stormwater, and energy shares will continue to increase.

To handle the increased level of services, WK Dickson is considering future acquisitions and opening new offices, with potential locations in Florida, Tennessee, and Alabama in the years ahead.

Because of strong growth in the Southeast, Whalen points out the increasing demand for new subdivisions and homes. That shift translates into the need for more sewer and water lines, roads, and other infrastructure which require professional services.

With a growing interest in sustainable design, building owners also want projects that are resilient and will withstand increasing natural disasters and tidal elevations.

As the Southeast booms and WK Dickson experiences growth in its service areas, the biggest challenge will continue to be finding great team members. "Hiring is our biggest challenge," says David Pond. "We want the best."

The company also seeks a diverse staff. In 2020, for example, a majority of the hires were women, minority, or military veterans. At the same time, nearly 25 percent of

the leadership were women or minorities. One of the firm's key initiatives in its most recent strategic plan was to emphasize the development a more diverse and inclusive workforce.

Angie Mettlen echoes the remarks of other leaders at WK Dickson. "I really feel like we are a family, and the values that Col. Dickson instilled at the company have carried through today," she says. When considering prospective employees, Mettlen emphasizes, "We want folks who are looking to build a career with us and become part of our family and our culture."

Pond says WK Dickson will continue to diversify services as well. The firm is considering coastal engineering and offering related services that could include modeling for rising sea levels and beach renourishment. The firm's natural gas market are also expected to increase to meet a growing demand.

Two other critical areas of need are funding and regulatory compliance. Now, the firm asks clients, "If you had the money, what could we do for you?" As governmental monies become more available through renewed infrastructure investment, the firm will continue to provide information on maximizing funding opportunities, Pond explains.

Col. Dickson paved the way for the firm's award-winning reputation in the marketplace. He was followed by leaders Buck Johnson, David Peeler, and David Pond. Now WK Dickson is preparing for its 100th anniversary in 2029. The firm will build upon current successes and explore exciting new markets and opportunities to benefit clients, partners, and employees.

The legacy set by Col. Dickson remains strong as the firm heads into the future. In 1929, the company began with a single person and an ambitious dream. Today, WK Dickson is a regional powerhouse for infrastructure consulting - highly regarded in the industry.

To be continued...

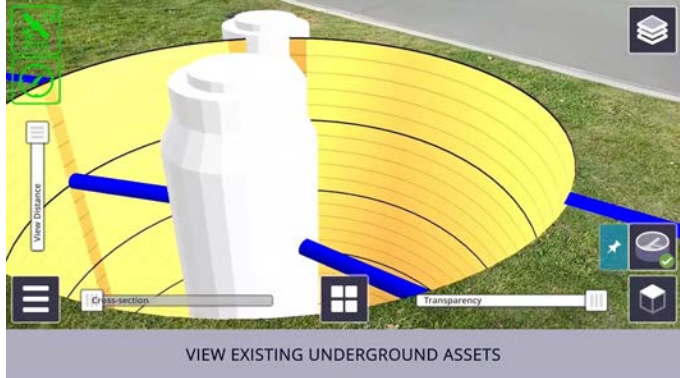
## PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE



### VIRTUAL REALITY

*The use of wireless VR headsets became commonplace as the ability to explore 3D models and rendered locations made the planning process more efficient.*

*Project teams could walk through virtual environments, like the one on page 42, and make design decisions before construction started.*



### AUGMENTED REALITY

*Unlike virtual reality, augmented reality technology allows us to explore objects in the real environment while in the field. The ability to see manholes and underground utilities, for example, has been a gamechanger in the industry.*



### DRONES/UNMANNED AIRCRAFT

*The use of drones began to grow in popularity by the mid-2010s. As optics and flight automation software improved, they became as ubiquitous for every firm as smart phones and laptops.*



### SERVICES IN THE CLOUD

*After decades of paper archives and local server hardware, WK Dickson had moved all of its files and many software applications to the AWS cloud by 2021. Coupled with high-speed and reliable internet bandwidth, cloud computing allowed employees to work anywhere at any time. “Remote work” became one of the most common terms of 2021.*

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