

## **A Narrative History of the Fish Ponds of the King and Queen State Fish Hatchery**

L. W. Tyus was the first hatchery superintendent according to an Oct. 29, 1939 article from the Richmond Times-Dispatch or News Leader. When Tyus became head cannot be determined, but his tenure lasted until his retirement in 1942. In 1942, Carl P. Ramsey became the second superintendent according to his wife, Elizabeth Ramsey. Information from the Personnel Office indicates that Ramsey retired on June 1, 1979 and Fielding Tanner became superintendent on the same day. After 15 years, Fielding retired on June 30, 1994. For eight months and five days, the hatchery was without a superintendent until the appointment of Chris Dahlem on March 6, 1995. Chris is still there.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the fish hatchery is that there have been only four superintendents at King and Queen Fish Hatchery from 1939 to 2002. . The average span of each superintendent is 15.75 years, with Ramsey having the longest tenure of 37 years and Tyus probably the shortest with seven.

The following information is based upon written newspaper articles from the Richmond Times-Dispatch and the Richmond News Leader between March 11, 1936 and Nov. 13, 1960.

In the **March 11, 1936** article, it states that the Game and Inland Fisheries Commission “is studying sites for the establishment near Richmond of a fish hatchery to serve the Tidewater section.” On **April 15, 1936**, the article begins “Selection of a site for an Eastern Virginia fish hatchery near Stevensville, in King and Queen County, was announced yesterday by Carl H. Nolting, chairman of the State Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries. The property, consisting of several ponds owned by Clyde and Porter Vaughan of Stevensville, as well as adjacent tracts of land and water-supply rights, has been inspected at all seasons during a two year period.” The Vaughans owned “several ponds” according to this article. This statement would indicate that the search began in 1934, soon after President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced his “New Deal” during a radio talk on March 12, 1933.<sup>1</sup>

The article continues “Mr. Nolting, in company with Assistant State Attorney-General Edwin H. Gibson, G. W. Buller, superintendent of fish propagation for the commission, and L. W. Tyus, fiscal secretary, will visit the site tomorrow to complete legal negotiations and sign transfer of titles on the properties to the State.” The transfer of property began on May 25, 1936 with a total of 87.65 acres from 8 separate deeds. By the end of 1936, four more property transfers occurred. The total amount was 117.32 acres. On March 15, 1939, 2.67 acres were returned to the Vaughans from GIF. There were two more land transfers. The transfers happened on Feb. 18, 1942 (2.44 acres) and on Sept. 1, 1950 (1.63 acres). The total acreage of the King and Queen Fish Hatchery would be 118.72 acres as of Sept. 1, 1950.

The deed dated June 30, 1936, between H. C. Vaughan and Gillette Vaughan, and C. P. Vaughan and Bessie Vaughan to the Commonwealth of Virginia reveals some interesting

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<sup>1</sup>The Record of America, James Truslow Adams and Charles Garrett VanNest, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1938. 941 pages.

points. The third paragraph refers to a pond known as “Walker and Coleman’s Pond.” This indicates that the pond existed. In the fifth paragraph, it states, “The right to raise the level of water in the said ‘Walker and Coleman’s Pond’ to a point, as marked by the concrete monument hereinafter described as ‘Marker number two’, 7 feet above its normal present level.” Thus, if the water level were going seven feet higher than its current level, the earthen dam would need to be built higher.

In the sixth paragraph of the above deed, it states, “The right to build and maintain a dam adequate to raise the level of water on the pond known as the ‘Spring Branch Pond’ to the normal level of said pond as it was before the flood of September, 1935.” So, Spring Branch Pond Dam needed repairing and an increase in height as well.

The seventh paragraph talks of Ice House Pond and its existence- “...to build and maintain a dam adequate to impound water in the bed of what was known as the ‘Old Ice House Pond,’ adjoining the upper end of ‘Walker and Coleman’s Pond’, sufficient to raise the level of said ‘Old Ice House Pond’ to a point 14 feet above the bed of said pond.”

On **June 10, 1938**, the title of an article reads, “Eastern Fish Hatchery Nearing Completion.” The article talks of hatching large-mouthed bass, bream, crappie and eventually pike in 1939. “The State owns 93.92 acres near Stevensville, and is building there three big storage lakes to furnish an undetermined number of breeding ponds. Twelve breeding ponds and one of the storage lakes already are complete, and G. W. Buller, State Superintendent of Fish Propagation said he didn’t know how many more would be built on the 3,800 feet of stream-side lowgrounds that is included in the property.” After reading the article, it *appears* that the raising of the existing Walker-Coleman Pond Dam was completed at the same time as the 12 breeding ponds. Those ponds would be the rectangular ponds 60x200 feet with a depth of two to four feet and were the result of a WPA (Work Projects Administration) project in 1936 or 1937. There were a total of four projects, one per year between 1936 and 1939.

Mr. Willie Braxton, 85, of Stevensville, stated the fish ponds were created by a scoop and a team of mules. As a young man, Mr. Braxton worked at the hatchery and lived nearby. Mr. Braxton said that the men worked on the construction of the dam first and he can recall that three or four men worked together as a team. One man would fill the three-foot wide scoop, one man would drive the mules and one man would empty the scoop. Mr. Braxton estimated that building the dam took 8 to 10 months work. Ten mules were used in moving dirt and after a day’s work, they were stabled and fed. Mr. Braxton said that there were more than ten men but less than twenty. He could not recall exactly where the barn was. “After the dam was built, and filled with water, then a pipe was opened and the water flowed into the new pond,” said Mr. Braxton.

The June 10, 1938 article was a bit prophetic, “Like a road,” said M. D. Hart, executive secretary of Game Commission, “a fish hatchery is never finished.” The article continues and indicates “At Stevensville, the work is going ahead under the direction of Mr. Buller and under the supervision of A. R. Hutton, of Marion, superintendent of construction.”

In the **Oct. 29, 1939** article, "The first large mouth bass, popularly known as chub, were taken from the King and Queen hatchery of the Virginia Commission of Inland Fisheries last Wednesday." This statement points to the operational capability of the fish hatchery after three years of construction. What is even more interesting, is how fish were separated and housed temporarily for shipping purposes. "The waters of the lowest ponds were passed through a sluice in which there was a heavy gate about five feet wide, closed by well-fitted boards. L. W. Tyus, in charge of the hatchery, removed these boards one by one. Two men stood at the end of the sluice holding nets through which the water had to pass. When the pond was about nine-tenths empty only one small bass, about four inches long, had been caught. A dozen perhaps, varying in size from two to three inches, passed over when the gate was two boards high. Mr. Tyus then pried up the next to the last board with a pick axe, and held it about two inches high so the water rushed through the small opening. Occasionally he would lift the board, the water would rush through in a torrent."

"When he did this, dozens of the bass that had come down with the slower current, began to fight their way back into the pond. From four to eight inches in length, they would spring 18 inches into the air, and would cover as much as four feet in their fight against the current. Many, however, would be swept over the last board, be caught in the nets, and put into the waiting tubs of water."

"As soon as two of three tubs had their allotted number of fish, there were carried up the valley to a sluice between two ponds that are almost on the same level. This is protected at each end by fine wire netting. The tubs and the fish in them were emptied into this small sluice where they will be safe for a few days, and can easily be dipped up for shipment to the ponds and streams which they are destined to restock."

The article states further "There are now 17 ponds in use with about three other in preparation. The bottom of one of these is now being cleaned under a WPA project." In 16 months and 19 days, 5 new ponds became operational with three more in progress judging from the June 10, 1938 article to the July 29, 1939 article.

On **Feb. 2, 1942**, A.R. Hutton drew a "Map of the Holding Ponds." Ponds No. 1-23 exist, but Pond No. 24 does not. The site of Pond No. 24 is a proposed hatching house. In this map, Pond No. 20 appears larger than its current size because only 6 concrete *Daphnia* ponds are drawn on the map. It appears that Pond No. 20 lost some of its size when the second set of raceways was proposed in September 1946. Between Pond No. 19 and the *Daphnia* ponds, there were no buildings-only a long underground pipe. A small office existed north of Pond No. 5 and about midway between the ends of the pond. Spring Branch Dam existed as shown on the map.

"Fish Hatcheries at Marion, Stevensville Being Enlarged to Supply State Rodman" is the title of the **March 29, 1942** newspaper account. Mr. Buller states, "The plants (at Stevensville and Marion) could not have been built without the aid of the WPA." The author continues, "With spring in the air down at Stevensville, the WPA is completing its

fourth project with the construction of an 18-foot access road, 2,700 feet long from Route 14 to the property line of the hatchery.”

“The Stevensville plant, which Mr. Buller describes as having started from scratch, is located on the site of the old Walker-Coleman mill. The commission originally constructed two storage ponds utilizing the existing mill pond. Then the WPA moved in with its first project in 1936, with subsequent projects being set up in 1937, 1938, and 1939. The later project is now about 90 per cent completed.”

“There are 32 propagating ponds in the plant, 10 large ponds from two to four acres and ranging in depth from two to four feet; 12 small breeding ponds 60x200 feet, and 10 concrete *Daphnia* ponds 10x100 feet with a three-foot pond level. In addition to constructing these *Daphnia* ponds, the WPA relocated the Market Swamp stream, filled in the stream bed, graded and hand-worked five ponds and cleared and grubbed 30 acres on the property.” (Note: There are 11 *Daphnia* ponds in existence.)

In the spring of 1942, Mrs. Elizabeth Ramsey, 84, stated that she and her husband, Carl P. Ramsey, moved to the Stevensville Fish Hatchery from the Montebello hatchery. This was a promotion for Carl P. Ramsey as he was hired on March 1, 1937 as a “Mechanic-Truck Driver.”<sup>2</sup> The Ramseys lived in the old wood frame house (old vacant manager’s residence) on the hill above the hatchery until 1971. “We lived in this house until the fall of 1971, when the brick house was completed (current manager’s residence). In 1983, we moved to our home on the Mattaponi River.”

As there were no roads, the closest place to obtain groceries was in Tappahannock. If it rained, it was not possible to get to Tappahannock. The Ramseys took the “back way” to get onto Route 14 because it was shorter, the same road that Mr. Braxton spoke of. The roads were originally dirt, then gravel, and eventually paved.

The house had electricity but no water. With a spring above the house, the Ramseys would carry their drinking water from the spring to the house. Later, Mrs. Ramsey indicated that Mr. Buller had told them to stop drinking the spring water so bottled water was used for drinking. Summer baths were obtained by jumping in the concrete *Daphnia* ponds.

In 1942, the mules were gone but the barn and barnyard were below and west of the house where a storage shed presently exists. The cold storage building was where the food was prepared and most of the marine fish used was Whiting.

Mrs. Ramsey’s daughter was born in 1940 and grew up around the hatchery. The youngster found shark’s teeth, and shells in the nearby streams as she played around the hatchery. When asked whether or not her daughter ever found miniballs or Civil War artifacts, Mrs. Ramsey said, “No, she found some arrowheads and an axe.”

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<sup>2</sup> Records from the Office of Personnel, Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

A pile of logs existed on the hill just below their home. Wood was used for heat in the woodstove, but the log pile was not maintained because of the possibility of copperheads. When asked if she ever saw a moccasin snake, Mrs. Ramsey said, "No." (One of the 1939 news articles had indicated the presence of this snake, but the brown water snake can be mistaken for this species.) Mrs. Ramsey also indicated that at a later time, she and her husband were visiting her parents in Front Royal, they heard about an electric stove for cooking. Mrs. Ramsey indicated that her husband went to see the stove and bought one. They brought it back to Stevensville from Front Royal.

During the war (World War II), the Ramseys operated the fish hatchery almost single handedly because "all the men had gone off to war." She would paddle the boat while Mr. Ramsey dipped the nets to catch the fish. Later, Mr. Ramsey would hire high school boys to help him and eventually, two additional assistants were hired.

When asked about how the fish were shipped to various locations, Mrs. Ramsey stated that "the fish were sent in buckets" of approximately 5 gallons. "The lid went down on the inside four inches and there were holes for air. It was aluminum in color." The buckets were placed in a truck and then the fish were taken nonstop to their specified location. At a later date, a square wooden tank on a truck was used with two (and possibly four) sections on it. The tanks were the width of the truck bed. Shipping of fry and fingerlings occurred "off and on all year." At that time, large-mouthed bass, bream and crappie were raised.

The **March 19, 1950** news account speaks of "These fish trucks have cylindrical tanks into which oxygen from the air is continuously added by pumping the water up into the atmosphere and spraying it back into the tanks. There is a standby, in case a pumping system should fail, it is seldom that a single fish is lost in transit, although some of them have to be hauled great distances."

According to this article, the marine fish (used for food) were "kept in frozen condition and ground up in mechanized meat-choppers to the needed sizes-chunks for the big fish, and tiny particles for the little ones. About 45 tons of marine fish are used annually at this hatchery, but this unvaried diet would not supply all the necessary vitamins were it not for occasional feeding of ground-up liver and other meats."

"There is a third form of food, no less important than interesting. This is daphnia, a plump aquatic insect raised by the millions and fed to the very small fish. Daphnia have a life span of only 10 days. They start reproducing within three days. To a clean concrete pool a few simple ingredients are added. A handful of daphnia brood stock is thrown in and in a few days attendants dip up daphnia by the basketful and feed them to the growing fish."

In a conversation interview with Mr. Earl Wakeman on April 18, 2002, it was learned that Mr. Wakeman "came out of the Service" and began work at the King and Queen Fish Hatchery in 1953. He worked there for six years. Mr. Wakeman is currently retired but works part-time at the Front Royal Hatchery.

“We raised large-mouthed bass, crappie and bluegill. That was when we were shipping to state controlled and private ponds. The private ponds would be owned by doctors and the like,” said Mr. Wakeman. “We shipped fish in the fall beginning in November or December and go until March. We’d transport small and large fish to the lakes. Small fish would be 2 to 4 inches and large bass would be 6 to 12 inches long or sometimes 7 to 8 inches long.” Due to the cannibalistic nature of large-mouthed bass, it was wondered whether the big ones would eat the smaller ones. Mr. Wakeman’s response was “No, not when you’re transporting them. It would be a mixture of sizes that were transported to lakes.”

When asked what the fish were fed, Mr. Wakeman replied, “The (marine) fish would come from Monmouth Beach (Haven) in New Jersey. Bunkers and whiting mostly. We’d ground up the fish for different-sized fish. We’d get pork liver out of the packing plants in Richmond. We’d use the coarse grinder for the larger fish. And we’d use the fine grinder for the really small fish, 3 to 4 inches, and we would walk around all day spooning out food to the fish.”

In another 1950 news article, the title states “Two Ponds Being Built For Breeding of Fish.” The account continues, “Construction has started on two 14-acre ponds at the Stevensville fish hatchery in King and Queen County. This is part of extensive plans to increase the output of largemouth bass, bream and crappie, officials of the Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries said yesterday.” It was indicated that the new ponds would be used mainly for adult brood stocks for which room has long been needed. These two ponds, Ponds No. 25 and 26-the Indian Mound Ponds, are not involved in the current proposed renovation. Luck Construction Company of Richmond was awarded the contract to build these two ponds.

In a **March 31, 1953** article, Carl P. Ramsey indicates that he did not move to the hatchery until 1943. In this 1953 account, there are other errors so the reliability should be questioned. There is some discrepancy as to exactly when the Ramseys moved to King and Queen Fish Hatchery. Mrs. Ramsey remembers that the road to Route 14 was not complete and the March 29, 1942 news article indicates that “the road was another WPA project near completion.”

By 1955, Ramsey had several workers assisting him according to the Sept. 29, 1955 news account. Ramsey said, “These fish are shipped to the public water east of the Blue Ridge Mountains in tank trunks so equipped that the fish can live for at least 24 hours.”

The **Nov. 13, 1960** article indicates, “In the summer months, Ramsey will feed 3,200 pounds of food per day to 300,000 fish, while that amount will feed the entire stock for most of the mid-winter season. The food is scrap marine fish which Ramsey grinds up in 16-ton batches in an over-sized hamburger machine. Ramsey or an assistant throws it to the fish with a large spoon.”

The same article also stated, "On the day before a shipment the workmen at the hatchery sweep a seine along through the concrete ponds until they have the number of fish that they plan to ship. The fish are placed in small tanks and early the next morning they are dipped from the tanks to the tank wagon. When the wagon reaches the designated stream, local game officers meet it and help the driver transfer the fish to the open waters."

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