

Water Pollution and Environmental Action  
In Rhode Island: 1935-1947

By Kenneth R. Dolbashian

Environmental Studies 196: (Thesis)

Dr. Allen

May 17, 1986

## INTRODUCTION

In 1947 the people of the state of Rhode Island passed, by an overwhelming margin, a referendum approving the issuing of bonds with which to finance the Blackstone Valley District Sewer Commission. This newly created commission represented a bold step in efforts to fight water pollution in Rhode Island. Prior to 1947 attempts to control water pollution, of both municipality and industry, were approached community by community. For example, the 1920 water pollution control statute in Rhode Island emphasized the need for each community to undertake necessary steps to eliminate water pollution within its boundaries. However, as the history you are about to read will show, this approach became increasingly less effective over time, until finally, in 1947, the people of the state of Rhode Island took action to remedy the situation.

Thus our story actually begins during the early years of the twentieth century. Chapter one will focus on the important economic, political and demographic characteristics of Rhode Island between 1910 and 1950. Politically, Rhode

Island went from one extreme to another. Up until 1935 Rhode Island state politics were dominated by the Republican party, whose strength emanated from the rural towns of the state. However, the "bloodless revolution" of 1935 changed Rhode Island politics dramatically, resulting in Democratic domination even till the present day.\*1 Combined with a highly urbanized market place and a number of densely populated cities, this unique political set-up was a major factor in the development of water pollution problems. The next chapter of the story concentrates on the years leading up to 1935, at which time politics in Rhode Island took a decidedly Democratic turn. Efforts to control water pollution in Rhode Island between 1910 and 1935 reflected the Federal Government's attitude toward pollution control. Initially, during the second decade of the twentieth century, the emphasis was on efficiency as conceived of by Progressive political thinking regarding natural resources. During the 1920's and on into the early 1930's, the main tenet of the Federal Government's conservation policy was the belief that state's rights were of paramount concern. However, during the years between 1935-1948 a major switch in the Federal Government's attitude toward pollution control occurred. This change, the result of the New Deal programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt, had important ramifications for the state of