

The Delaware River Basin Advisory Committee (DRBAC) was established as the result of a 1955 agreement among the governors of the four basin states and the mayors of Philadelphia and New York City to unite in a drive to seek basinwide solutions to the water resource challenges of the Delaware Valley. As described in its third annual report, the DRBAC was “a temporary agency that will disband after the current survey of the water resources of the basin is completed and an appropriate course of action recommended to the governments involved.” Its work led to the drafting of the Delaware River Basin Compact and the DRBC’s creation in 1961. Shortly thereafter, the DRBAC terminated its activities in the spring of 1962.

Barbara Harley served as the administrative assistant to Walter Phillips, the DRBAC’s executive secretary. In 2009, Ms. Harley contacted the DRBC to offer some historical documents for the commission’s library. She also shared these very interesting, personal observations:

“In the beginning was Joe Clark, former mayor of Philadelphia and then Senator from Pennsylvania, a pioneering, creative, and strategic thinker among the leadership of Philadelphia. Also, there was Walter Phillips, another Philadelphia leader from a leading family who had been Mayor Clark’s right hand man in City Hall.

In the mid-50s, there grew a great concern about the conditions of the Delaware River and the assaults on its waters from storms, pollution, and population. Some astounding leaders from the various states actually were able to come together with the Corps of Engineers to fashion an organization to begin worrying about what the problems were and the solutions that might be possible: The Delaware River Basin Advisory Committee. Somehow, Walter and the others found two extraordinary young visionaries and dedicated socially conscious individuals who were years ahead of their time: W. Brinton Whitall and Blair Bower. They were both environmentalists and social stewards of the land well before those were fashionable. ‘Buzz’ Whitall and Blair Bower helped fashion the politically possible out of the visionary.

As a quiet, supportive administrative assistant to Walter Phillips, I had the amazing good fortune to watch governors, mayors, their economic development professionals, and staff members work with the DRBAC to hold meetings, present arguments that became a framework for consensus among the populations and decision makers throughout the region.

We all knew we were making history throughout this effort because no one and no group had been able to look at a major river basin before in this way and facilitate rational decisions along the river banks as happened in those late 50’s and early 60’s. Dr. Roscoe Martin of Syracuse produced a study that helped validate the planning of the DRBAC and gave the politicians useful arguments.

It was a heady time.”



Shown here sharing a laugh at DRBAC’s second “summit meeting” on Sept. 30, 1959 (from left to right) are Philadelphia Mayor Richardson Dilworth, New Jersey Gov. Robert Meyner, and Pennsylvania Gov. David Lawrence. It was at this meeting that the four governors and two mayors accepted a recommendation for a joint federal-state commission to be created by compact between the states and the federal government. They directed the DRBAC to draft the necessary legislation that would eventually lead to the DRBC’s creation.