

Grout EXPECTATIONS

A NEW ENGLAND CONTRACTOR HAS TURNED AN EARLY ADOPTION OF GROUTING TECHNOLOGY INTO A SUCCESSFUL CORE BUSINESS THAT CONTINUES TO PERFORM AS THE COMPANY EXPANDS
BY PETER KENTER

The New England Pipe Cleaning Company (NEPCCO) of Watertown, Conn., is a full-service contractor with a talent for taking on large-scale municipal grouting contracts using a fleet of customized grout vans.

The company has also found a niche by offering specialized lateral grouting and cured-in-place (CIPP) shortliner pipe rehabilitation services as it expands geographically into new markets.

NEPCCO was founded in 1935, primarily as an equipment sales company. In 1955, twin hurricanes spawned massive Connecticut River flooding that saw the company refocus its energies.

profile

NEW ENGLAND PIPE CLEANING COMPANY, WATERTOWN, CONN.

GENERAL MANAGER:	Mike Poplawski
FOUNDED:	1935
EMPLOYEES:	40
SPECIALTIES:	Chemical grout sealing, sewer system evaluation, CCTV inspection, manhole rehabilitation, pipe lining, root treatment
SERVICE AREA:	New England states, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania
AFFILIATIONS:	NAASSCO, Infiltration Control Grouting Association, WEF, New England Water Environment Association, others
WEBSITE:	www.eheitkamp.com/pipe01.html



Crew leader Charlie Roberts (left) and technician Jason Mahler of the New England Pipe Cleaning Company introduce Logiball equipment into the mainline through a manhole. (Photography and video by Steve Laschever)

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Above: Inside the grout truck, crew leader Charlie Roberts operates Logiball, CUES and Aries equipment, testing and sealing individual laterals. Right: Technician Jason Mahler lubricates the service bladder for the Logiball lateral sealing equipment.



“A lot of communities here had their collection systems silted up and looked to us to help get them back into operation,” says general manager Mike Poplawski. “One of the few things you could do at that time was clean the pipes. We got our taste of pipe cleaning then and developed the business along that line.

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The company’s traditional market area includes Connecticut and the New England states, but it also does work in New Jersey and parts of New York.

Heitkamp Inc. bought the company in 1992, but NEPCCO kept its identity because of the goodwill associated with the name. Four years later, Heitkamp purchased TRB Specialty Rehabilitation of Gambrills, Md., which also maintained its identity.

Heitkamp, since purchased by the Sekisui Group, concentrates on cement mortar, epoxy, and polyurethane lining of potable waterlines. TRB and NEPCCO form Heitkamp’s Water Environment Division (WED).

FULL SERVICE

Today, NEPCCO provides a full range of maintenance, investigation and rehabilitation services for wastewater and stormwater systems, largely to

municipalities, engineering firms and contractors. Private clients, which make up about 10 percent of contracts, include companies in the beverage, aircraft and lumber industries.

To stay well connected in its industry and keep abreast of technology, NEPCCO maintains membership in a long list of associations, including:

- American Society of Civil Engineers
- American Water Works Association
- ASTM F36
- National Association of Sewer Service Companies
- Infiltration Control Grouting Association
- National Utility Contractors Association
- Water Environment Federation
- New England Water Environment Association

NEPCCO’s specialty services include pipeline grouting, sewer system evaluation surveys, I&I analysis, cleaning, CCTV inspection, and manhole and pipe rehabilitation.

“Our line rehab services are mostly trenchless,” says project engineer Jonathan Regan. “We’re currently using a cured-in-place Magnaline shortliner process (Williams Testing) that employs a standard system of woven fiberglass impregnated with steam-cured resin.”

The point repair is delivered in 4-foot prepackaged kits, but the segments can be linked in lengths of up to about 12 feet without sacrificing cost effectiveness. “It’s proved to be a good option for municipalities who don’t want to invest a large amount of resources into major relining programs, or get involved in excavating for point repairs and the associated social costs of digging,” says Regan.

“It has proven to be a sweet spot for us, because typically the manhole-to-manhole lining companies don’t do shortlining. However, we’re often asked to do the cleaning and preparatory work on their projects before pipe lining begins.”

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WATCH THEM IN ACTION

To learn more about New England Pipe Cleaning Company view the video at www.cleaner.com.



Crew leader Charlie Roberts (foreground) sets the Logiball roller while technician Jason Mahler monitors the status from behind.

GROWTH IN GROUTING

A key component of the business is grouting manholes, pipelines and lateral/main connections. That work accounts for about 60 percent of the company's business. The company found ready customers for its mainline grouting service in the late 1960s. The lateral sealing business began to gain popularity through the mid-1980s, and then accelerated through the 1990s.

Poplawski notes that the company continues to ramp up its lateral and manhole grouting operations. "Many municipalities have already addressed the

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Jonathan Regan

most severe problem areas by dealing with obvious mainline joint leaks," he says. "As the industry evolved, people became more aware that the laterals were also I&I contributors."

Today, NEPCCO fields more than 10 customized trucks fully devoted to grouting. The units are either custom-built by NEPCCO or standard inspection vans offered by CUES or Aries Industries, which are then modified in-house.

"Our preferred layout is different and designed to what we feel is most efficient and workable for our field crews," says Joe Perotti, director of operations for the Water Environment Division. "For instance we might put the genset in a

SEALING THE DEAL

The New England Pipe Cleaning Company makes extensive use of education, including conference presentations and lunchbox talks, to reach out to its customer base.

The company takes part in Grout Boot Camp education seminars; intensive sessions of up to three days, organized by the Infiltration Control Grouting Association, a division of the National Association of Sewer Service Companies (NASSCO). Grout Boot Camps are primarily initiated by suppliers, which have included Aries Industries, Logiball, and Avanti International.

The company's successful series of lunchbox talks is designed to educate current and potential clients about new issues and technological developments. "Many of the lunch guests are engineers who are also the municipal contract administrators who write specifications," says Jonathan Regan, a NEPCCO project engineer. "We essentially help them to become aware of all of the tools that are available to them to meet current needs."

At the lunches, NEPCCO engineers discuss technology with their peers directly. A recent seminar conducted on the premises of project engineering company AECOM featured presentations by parent company Heitkamp, addressing water issues, and by NEPCCO, on the rehabilitation side.

"We lure them in with food," jokes Regan. "But they leave with a lot more than a good meal. They have all of our tools in their grasp."

different location that makes it easier for us to remove and replace.

"We also wire our trucks slightly differently to separate electronic components. If an electronic problem occurred, we used to take out half of the electronic components along with the prime culprit. Now if we experience a problem, we often only have to contend with one of the components."

The vans are all outfitted with grouting equipment supplied by Logiball. "They make one of the most reliable products on the market," says Ken Assard, NEPCCO assistant operations director. "Their packer systems are durable and made of stainless steel. You never blow one of the packer sleeves when you try to seal a cracked pipe in the mainlines. They also have an isolated pressure sensor instead of having it incorporated into the line. That reduces the chance of over-pumping or gelling a transducer."

The units have a smaller profile that is easy to take through lines. The design also eliminates the H block that can get caught on joints. "If we're going through a 6-inch line with a half-inch offset, it gives us a little more operating room," says Regan. The company has traditionally used Avanti chemical grouts.

BIG MUNICIPAL CONTRACTS

Recently, NEPCCO has been heavily invested in projects for the Metropolitan District (MDC), a nonprofit organization that manages the Hartford region's sewer and water systems, including the cities of Bloomfield, East Hartford, Hartford, Newington, Rocky Hill, West Hartford, Wethersfield and Windsor.

NEPCCO has had MDC as a client for more than 35 years, performing services from CCTV inspections and sewer cleaning to shortline repairs and grouting. MDC is under a consent decree from the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection to upgrade its sanitary sewer system at costs estimated at \$1 billion over a 15-year period that began about five years ago.

"The consent decree has generated a considerable number of grouting and inspection contracts, with occasional dig repairs, and we've been involved in

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The New England Pipe Cleaning crew includes (from left) technician Jason Mahler, general manager Michael Poplawski and crew leader Charlie Roberts. They are shown with Logiball lateral sealing equipment.

some way with each of them,” says Assard, who is project manager for much of the MDC work.

NEPCCO bids for the MDC contracts either as general contractor or as a subcontractor providing specialized services. The company has worked with a slate of lining contractors that includes Insituform, Reynolds Inliner, and Allstate Power-Vac, who acted as prime contractors.

“We recognize employees as our most important asset. One of our people, Tom Hampp, has just entered his 40th year with the company. He started as a laborer and is now a project supervisor.”

Mike Poplawski

NEPCCO broke its own record for a lateral grouting contract in 2008 with an MDC project that involved sealing more than 2,000 laterals in West Hartford and Newington. On that job, the firm worked as a subcontractor to Insituform, which was lining more than 200,000 feet of sewer. The contract, from January 2009 through July 2010, employed as many as three full-time crews.

“We topped that with the next contract, which involved more than 3,000 laterals,” says Poplawski. “Although we could seal as far as 20 feet up the laterals, we typically go in six feet. Case studies have shown that most of the I&I is caught at the mainline connection and perhaps to the first two joints, so this 6-foot treatment eliminates upwards of 95 percent of the problem.”

Insituform was the general contractor on that contract as well, lining about 170,000 feet of pipe. Work began in February 2010 and employed as many as five full grouting crews to meet a tough March 2011 deadline.

Large grouting contracts typically span several seasons, and this one stretched through the worst Connecticut winter in recent memory. “It was bitterly cold, subzero weather,” says Poplawski. “The lines are warm enough for the grouting chemicals, but the guys were exposed to the elements a lot of the time.

“There was so much snow that at times we couldn’t get the trucks into the street or find the manholes. Even after we located the manholes, we often had to be creative in our setups as the town was running out of places to put the snow that was removed.”

EMPLOYEE RETENTION

With work this tough, employee retention is important. Many employees have been with NEPCCO for more than 20 years, some moving between the three company brands. “We recognize employees as our most important asset,” says Poplawski.

“One of our people, Tom Hampp, has just entered his 40th year with the company. He started as a laborer and is now a project supervisor. We try to keep morale up and offer a challenging environment. If we get into lateral work, for example, that not only represents a new direction for the company, but a new career path for workers and offers more room for advancement.”

The company uses a range of approaches to generate sales leads, including its website, a trade show presence, targeted advertising in trade journals, and educational seminars. In the past, sales were handled by a number of NEPCCO employees.

“Most of the staff is cross-trained and wears nine different hats,” says Poplawski. “We can handle a project from A to Z, from the bid right down to collecting receivables, and we just fit in sales along the way.”

This year, Heitkamp has established a dedicated sales team that promotes all company products and services across the divisions. While concentrating on sales, NEPCCO has tried to counterbalance the economic downturn by enlarging its range of operation, expanding to the entire state of New York and across most of Pennsylvania. Frequently, NEPCCO joins with TRB to support projects that in the past have ranged as far away as Puerto Rico, Ohio and New Mexico.

Poplawski observes, “As communities experience budget shortfalls, we’re seizing every opportunity to expand the territory or product line to help generate work for ourselves.”

more info

AECOM
213/593-8000
www.aecom.com

Allstate Power-Vac
800/876-9699
www.aspvac.com

Aries Industries, Inc.
800/234-7205
www.ariesindustries.com
(See ad page 57)

Avanti International
800/877-2570
www.avantigrout.com
(See ad page 29)

CUES, Inc.
800/327-7791
www.cuesinc.com
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Insituform Technologies, Inc.
800/234-2992
www.insituform.com

Logiball, Inc.
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Reynolds Inliner, LLC
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