

National Aviation Policies and Change at Harris Neck, Georgia

“There is a peaceful atmosphere about the entire island; life flows along in a smoothly gliding stream; the people seem satisfied for the most part with a simple, uneventful scheme of existence.” (Drums and Shadows. 1940)

Shortly after the outbreak of World War II the U.S. War Department determined that a U.S. Army Air Force fighter-training-base should be constructed at Harris Neck, Georgia on a site perfectly suited for aeronautical purposes, security and provisioning, and for its location relative to other training bases. “With approaches from every direction it is a logical place for an airfield.” The decision impacted a Gullah community and a few local and northern whites – residents and/or landowners of peaceful and bucolic Harris Neck, an estuary island surrounded by Georgia coastal salt marsh. But the story of the Harris Neck airfield does not start with Pearl Harbor.

Both Charles Rippen and M. L. Shettle have written excellent histories of the now-cracked and crumbling WW II Army Air Force fighter-training base present within the boundaries of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. However, this base was not the first aviation facility on Harris Neck, nor was it the first airfield on Harris Neck used for military purposes.

The story of how Harris Neck was discovered for aviation began a decade earlier – with its roots in the 1926 enabling law: *Air Commerce Act* that extended the nation’s systems of lighted airways for airmail and passenger service, giving rise to the Richmond-Jacksonville Airway and many other airways across the United States.

According to the “Air Commerce Bulletin,” April 1930, published by the U.S. Dept. of Commerce, “Jacksonville-Richmond airway extension superintendents T. B. Bourne and John L. Rhodes are making a preliminary survey of this airway. Mr. Bourne is making an aerial reconnaissance of this line, preparatory for a ground survey.” Harris Neck was spotted from an airplane.

In 1931, the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) under the U.S. Dept. of Commerce signed a lease with Courtney Thorpe, and later with his brother E. M. Thorpe, for 93-acres upon which the Dept. of Commerce constructed a lighted, cross-shaped grass emergency runway for airmail and passenger service on the Richmond-Jacksonville Airway. The intermediate field, identified as “Site Eight” on the Airway, was book-ended by full service airfields in Savannah and Brunswick, each 30-40 miles distant with beacon towers in between at about ten-mile intervals. Harris Neck had its own 81 ft. high steel frame beacon tower mounted by a 1000 watt lamp rotating at the rate of six times per minute and could be seen by a pilot at altitude from either Brunswick or Savannah. Each of the four approaches were lighted by green-shaded lamps, tree clusters near runways were marked with red obstruction lights on poles,

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and even the windsock, hanging from the side of the tower, had a light inside. Prior to electrical power installation in 1939, the power source was a gasoline generator that ran all night, housed in a separate shed next to the beacon tower. A similar power shed still exists in nearby Valona – formerly “Site Seven”. The CAA airfield was located adjacent to the Barbour River ramp and dock area in the Refuge. Thus the federal government came to know all about Harris Neck a decade before Pearl Harbor. In 2014, the federal government, in various manifestations under different agencies, has had a continuous presence at Harris Neck for 83 years, including fourteen years of mismanagement by McIntosh County.

Much has been said about the traumatic removal of residents prior to construction of the second, larger and triangular fighter-training base. Indeed, the whole country seemed to be in commotion prior to and especially during the early years of the war. In 1939, 6,069 condemnation cases were filed with the Dept. of Justice. By 1942, the number of cases increased six-fold to 36,920 tracts of land acquired under eminent domain for the purposes of war facilities. American industry was rolling out a new airplane every five minutes.

Both the Dept. of Commerce and the Army Air Force had identical requirements for locating airfields “30-40 miles apart” which partly accounted for the attractiveness of Harris Neck to Army planners. The Army had additional considerations that had to be met such as a deep-water pier for provisioning the air base and for docking two deep-draft 42 ft. “crash boats” used for rescuing downed pilots in training accidents, which were not infrequent. Direct access to the sounds located at the ends of barrier islands Blackbeard and St Catherine’s was vital to quick rescue. The S. Newport River on the northern end of Harris Neck served perfectly for docking. A guard station on Harris Neck Road on the south side of the airfield tract, along with surrounding tidal marsh frontage secured the base. All other adjacent and nearby tracts possessed flaws that would have seriously compromised the security and utility of the Harris Neck training base.

The CAA intermediate Field, Site Eight, was secured on Dec. 7, 1941 by a detachment from Hunter Army Air base in Savannah – an indication that there was an Army contingency plan in place to secure outlying intermediate fields in the event of outbreak of hostilities. The Civil Air Patrol began coast reconnaissance flights from Site Eight as German U-Boats destroyed merchant ships plying coastal waters. Two such ships were sunk off St Simons Island in April 1942 with the loss of 22 crewmen. Also about that time, Site Eight was selected by the Army as a sub-base to Chatham field, closed to the public, and pressed into military service for military gunnery training until the new triangular field could be constructed and operational the following year. In September 1943 the new triangular fighter base was opened as an auxiliary base of Dale Mabry Field in Tallahassee and assigned to the Third Fighter Command.

Site Eight was then closed, the beacon tower dismantled and relocated to a new location near the S. Newport River. The northern end of Harris Neck was a flurry of

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demolition and construction activity for military preparations never seen before or since in northeast McIntosh County.

“Harris Neck reached its zenith in September 1944. Personnel were at peak levels: 130 officers and 400 enlisted.” (Rippen) In October 1944 all planes and personnel were evacuated to Waycross “in advance of a hurricane that struck two days later. Trees were blown down, roads blocked; the crash boat landing was damaged by high tides and heavy winds. November marked the final decline.” (Sullivan)

By the end of the war, questions persisted among former community members, descendants of whom still cling to an alleged verbal promise by a “Mr. Banks” that their land would be returned to them after the war was over. In 1942 and 1943 – the years that “Mr. Banks” would possibly have made the alleged promise - there was no provision in the law that allowed for the return of property to former owners. This raises the question, why did “Mr. Banks” promise something that was not legal at the time? The law changed in 1944 when the Surplus Property Act went into effect. The 1944 law expired Dec. 31, 1949.

On December 6, 1944, E. M. Thorpe, a county commissioner at the time and resident of nearby the Spring Cove tract, wrote a letter to the “War Surplus Property” office in Washington, D.C. offering to re-purchase 550 acres at Harris Neck acquired from him by the Army through eminent domain. Thorpe would certainly have reiterated the alleged promise to return his land after the war if he thought it added leverage to his repurchase offer. Why he did not do so is open for debate. Perhaps he was aware that verbal promises made by agents of the government are unenforceable. More likely, he simply had no knowledge of the alleged promise because it wasn’t made to him. His offer to re-purchase was declined by the Chief of the Surplus War Real Estate Division, citing the Surplus Property Act of 1944 and that land declared surplus “...is [first] to be extended to other government agencies. The second preference is to be extended to states, their political subdivisions and instrumentalities and to tax supported and non-profit institutions. After these two preferences have been extended...former owners will then be given a 90-day preference to re-purchase their former holdings.”

Later, the airfield was offered as required by law, and in 1948 McIntosh County Commissioners - inexplicably seeing potential for a county airport at remote and under-populated north McIntosh County - accepted management responsibilities for the aviation facility.

In October 1948, the airfield was turned over to the county. McIntosh County Commissioners asked the CAA to install lights at the Harris Neck Airport so the facility could be utilized as an intermediate field. In April 1949, McIntosh County Commissioners discussed a proposal to persuade the U.S. government to use Harris Neck airfield as the future site for the Guided Missile Range that was funded by Congress for \$75 million, signed into law by President Truman and subsequently

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constructed for \$200 million at Cape Canaveral, Florida. In 1954 until the late 50's, the U.S. Navy leased the airfield from the county for training and defense purposes.

In December of 1949, the Surplus Property Act of 1944 expired. After this date, surplus federal property would only be transferred laterally within the federal government.

Two other significant laws should be mentioned here: 1) The Uniform Relocation and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act was signed into law in 1970, after which time the federal government was obligated to assist those whose property was acquired under eminent domain; and, 2) the 1976 National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act restricting lands being transferred out of the Refuge System only through Congressional action.

In 1961 the Federal Aviation Agency (successor to CAA) re-asserted its title to the former Army airfield and in 1962, General Services Administration conveyed title to the U.S. Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife (now U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service). According to the 1985 GAO investigation, National Wildlife Refuges occupy 43,934 acres of land that were originally acquired through condemnation by the military.

In a 1985 *Darien News* story, US Congressman Lindsay Thomas declared that there was nothing else that could be done for the descendants of the Harris Neck community despite monumental efforts to reverse the eminent domain acquisitions: House subcommittee Hearing in 1979, Federal district court and Federal Appeals Court decisions against, five bills introduced in the US House and Senate – none survived committee review, with one bill receiving strongly negative review comments from the Dept. of Justice.

After a pause of twenty years, and coinciding with a steep ascent of property values in coastal Georgia, descendants of the Gullah community formed a new group in 2005 to re-visit the former unsuccessful attempts to obtain land for development in the Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge. US Fish and Wildlife Service is presently responding to the group under the terms of the laws and within present administrative policy.

-----*Compiled and written by Jim McMahon and Mark Yeager. October 2014*