

COLUMBIA AIR CENTER AIRPORT

BORN OF NECESSITY, FACILITATED BLACK AVIATION

COLUMBIA AIR CENTER AIRPORT WAS LOCATED ABOUT THIRTY-TWO MILES SOUTHEAST OF WASHINGTON, D.C.,¹ AND ABOUT SEVEN MILES SOUTHEAST OF UPPER MARLBORO, MARYLAND. THE AIRPORT WAS ESTABLISHED BY THE CLOUD CLUB, INC., A GROUP OF BLACK PILOTS WHO INCORPORATED IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ON MAY 1, 1940.² AS OF MAY 18, 1940, THE CLUB MEMBERS WERE HAROLD SMITH, PRESIDENT; ROLAND BRAWNER, VICE PRESIDENT; JOHN PINKETT, TREASURER; ALVIN BARNES, ANDREW MARTIN, DAVID PETER AND CHARLES WARE.³ ALTHOUGH FIRST KNOWN AS "RIVERSIDE FIELD," THE AIRPORT OPERATED MAINLY AS THE "COLUMBIA AIR CENTER" AND EXISTED FROM ABOUT 1941 UNTIL 1958 WITH ONLY A BRIEF INTERRUPTION DURING WORLD WAR II. IN ITS FINAL YEARS THE FIELD WAS REFERRED TO AS "COLUMBIA AIRPORT." DURING EACH PERIOD THE FIELD UNDERWENT VARIOUS IMPROVEMENTS AND CHANGES AND WAS UTILIZED FOR OTHER ACTIVITIES IN ADDITION TO FLYING.

THE CLOUD CLUB CONDUCTED FLYING ACTIVITIES FROM BEACON FIELD, A WHITE-OPERATED SITE IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA. EARLY IN 1941, THE CLUB'S ALLEGED INFRACTION OF FIELD RULES CAUSED FRICTION BETWEEN THE TWO FLYING GROUPS. REPORTEDLY, RACIAL TENSION INCREASED AND THE CLUB'S SUBSEQUENT ILL-TREATMENT AT BEACON FIELD BECAME INTOLERABLE. THE BLACK PILOTS DECIDED TO EITHER OPERATE OUT OF ANOTHER AIRPORT OR TO ESTABLISH THEIR OWN. THE CLOUD CLUB CHOSE THE LATTER AND THE MEMBERS SEARCHED THE MARYLAND AND VIRGINIA COUNTRYSIDES BY AIRPLANE AND AUTOMOBILE FOR A SUITABLE FIELD LOCATION. ULTIMATELY, THEY LOCATED A 450 ACRE SITE NEAR CROOME, MARYLAND, ON THE WEST BANK OF THE PATUXENT RIVER IN PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY.⁴

THE CLUB NEGOTIATED WITH THE PROPERTY OWNER, LEASED THE LAND FOR \$50 PER MONTH AND BEGAN THE TASK OF TRANSFORMING THE AREA FROM A POTATO FIELD INTO AN AIRPORT. THE AREA WAS CLEARED, AND TRUCKS WITH ATTACHED DRAGGING APPARATUS WERE USED TO LEVEL THE AREA AND TO CONSTRUCT A LANDING STRIP. PROBABLY EARLY IN 1941, "RIVERSIDE FIELD" BECAME OPERATIONAL WITH ONE EAST-WEST TURF RUNWAY.⁵

THE FIRST OFFICE FACILITY AT RIVERSIDE WAS THE TRAILER OF JOHN W. GREENE, JR. WHO RELOCATED WITH THE CLOUD CLUB FROM BEACON FIELD.⁶ GREENE, WITH THE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE OF DR. C. M. GILL, WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN BUILDING FACILITIES ON THE PROPERTY. SUBSEQUENTLY, THE CLUB ERECTED AN OFFICE STRUCTURE AND A HANGAR. ON OCTOBER 1, 1941, THE CLUB AGREED TO ALLOW GREENE TO BUILD A SECOND HANGAR OF NOT MORE THAN 60' X 60' ON " . . . THE RIVERSIDE AIRPORT, AT CROOME,

MARYLAND, ALONG THE LINE OF THE HANGAR ALREADY ERECTED."⁷ THE CLUB SECURED THE SERVICES OF FLIGHT INSTRUCTORS, AMONG WHOM WERE JOHN GREENE, JR., CHARLES M. ASHE, J. FERDELL AND JOHN W. TAYLOR. NUMEROUS STUDENTS TRAINED AT RIVERSIDE AND MANY PILOTS USED THE FIELD ON A REGULAR BASIS. THE CLUB OWNED AIRPLANES OR RENTED OTHERS FOR INSTRUCTIONAL USE. SOME OF THE AIRCRAFT TYPES WERE: LUSCOMBE, VULTEE (BT-13), PIPER CUB (J3), AND AERONCA.⁸

RIVERSIDE FIELD WAS WELL-MAINTAINED AND SAFELY OPERATED. IN A 1941 NEWSPAPER ARTICLE THE FIELD IS REFERRED TO AS " . . . ONE OF THE FINEST AIRFIELDS IN THE NATION, BEING DUPLICATED IN THE NEW AIRPORT AT TUSKEGEE. IT IS THE ONLY FIELD . . . OPERATED SOLELY BY A COLORED STAFF." THE FOLLOWING DAY, UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF CHARLES M. ASHE, AIRPORT MANAGER, AN AIR SHOW WAS HELD AT RIVERSIDE. THE PROGRAM INCLUDED PRECISION MANEUVERS, PARACHUTE JUMPS, ACROBATIC FLYING, "DEATH DEFYING STUNTS" AND PASSENGER RIDES. THIS EVENT WAS NOTED AS ONE OF THE "FIRST OF ITS KIND," SINCE ALL OF THE PARTICIPATING PILOTS WERE BLACK.⁹ ON OCTOBER 15, 1941, JOHN GREENE, JR. WAS NAMED AIRPORT MANAGER.¹⁰ ABOUT THAT TIME THE FLIGHT PORTION OF THE HOWARD UNIVERSITY CIVILIAN PILOTS' TRAINING PROGRAM (CPT) TOOK PLACE AT THE AIRPORT. WITH THE ADVENT OF WORLD WAR II, HOWEVER, CIVILIAN FLYING WAS RESTRICTED AND THE GOVERNMENT UTILIZED MANY PRIVATE AIRFIELDS TO TRAIN MILITARY PILOTS. SUCH WAS THE CASE WITH RIVERSIDE FIELD THAT WAS OCCUPIED BY THE U. S. NAVY FROM 1941-1944.

APPARENTLY SOMETIME IN 1944, JOHN GREENE AND DR. GILL RECEIVED INFORMATION THAT THE FIELD WOULD SOON BE RETURNED TO CIVILIAN CONTROL. ON DECEMBER 14, 1944, GREENE SUBMITTED SCALE DRAWINGS OF THE PROPOSED FIELD PLAN " . . . OF THE AIRPORT TO BE KNOWN AS COLUMBIA AIR CENTER AT CROOME, MARYLAND . . ."¹¹ ON DECEMBER 18, GREENE WAS GIVEN TEMPORARY AUTHORITY TO OPERATE THE FIELD AS A DESIGNATED LANDING AREA, AND ON FEBRUARY 14, 1945, HE RECEIVED FULL AUTHORITY FOR CIVIL AIRCRAFT OPERATIONS.¹² THE NEW NAME "COLUMBIA AIR CENTER," CHOSEN BY JOHN GREENE AND DR. GILL, HAD SPECIAL MEANING TO BOTH MEN. IN ADDITION TO A FULLY-EQUIPPED AND OPERATING AIRPORT, THEY ENVISIONED A RECREATIONAL CENTER WITH DANCE HALL, HORSEBACK RIDING, BOATING AND OTHER ACTIVITIES. BEFORE ANY OF THIS COULD BE CONSIDERED, HOWEVER, AVIATION CONCERNS REMAINED FOREMOST.

SEVERAL IMPROVEMENTS WERE MADE TO THE AIRPORT DURING THE TIME THE NAVY PILOTS TRAINED THERE. SEVEN ADDITIONAL TURF RUNWAYS WERE OPENED AND A 121' X 60' PIER WAS BUILT SOUTH OF THE FIELD ON THE PATUXENT RIVER. HOWEVER, THE NAVY DID NOT BUILD ADDITIONAL HANGARS SINCE THEY STORED THEIR AIRCRAFT ELSEWHERE.¹³ THUS, THE INITIAL TASK WAS TO EVALUATE AND MAKE APPROPRIATE USE OF THE RECENTLY ACTIVE RUNWAYS, ESTABLISH FLIGHT AND GROUND CONTROL REGULATIONS, CONSTRUCT ADDITIONAL BUILDINGS AND TO ESTABLISH AERONAUTICAL PROGRAMS. GREENE, A FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR, AIRCRAFT AND ENGINE MECHANIC, AND A TEACHER IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC SCHOOL

SYSTEM, WAS WELL-QUALIFIED FOR THIS ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGE. BY THE END OF 1945, COLUMBIA AIR CENTER OPERATED THREE TURF STRIPS WITH TWO AVAILABLE HANGARS.¹⁴ AS OF NOVEMBER 8, 1946, THE AIRPORT HAD A HANGAR, 110' X 60', WITH A CONCRETE FLOOR, WASHROOM AND TOILET FACILITIES, AND A SHOP, 20' X 60', WITH A WELDING OUTFIT, AIR COMPRESSOR, HAND TOOLS, VACUUM CHAMBER AND HYDRAULIC AND OTHER TESTING EQUIPMENT. THERE WAS A HEATED 20' CLASSROOM WITH BENCH SEATS, AN ADEQUATE SUPPLY OF ENGINES, INSTRUMENTS AND AIRPLANES FOR STUDY, AND AMPLE CHARTS ON NAVIGATION AND BOOKS ON METEOROLOGY.¹⁵ IN 1946, COLUMBIA AIR CENTER ALSO BECAME A DEALER FOR AERONCA AIRCRAFT AND WAS APPOINTED A REPRESENTATIVE FOR SEVERAL OTHER AIR FIRMS AND FOR CONTINENTAL ENGINES.¹⁶ IN 1949, FIVE TURF RUNWAYS (NONE UNDER 2800') WERE IN USE; AND, FROM 1954-1956, SUCH SERVICES AS STORAGE, MAJOR REPAIRS, GAS, CHARTER SERVICE, SALES, REST ROOMS AND A LUNCH ROOM WERE ADDED. JOHN GREENE AND DR. GILL PURCHASED SURPLUS AIRCRAFT FROM THE MILITARY. THESE AND SEVERAL PRIVATELY OWNED PLANES WERE USED IN THE CENTER'S VARIOUS TRAINING PROGRAMS. AN ACCOUNT OF AIRCRAFT TYPES ON DECEMBER 1, 1945, LISTS THE FOLLOWING IN USE: AERONCA (L-58 AND 058-B), TAYLORCRAFT (CD0-65), PIPER (J2 AND J3L), FAIRCHILD (M62-A) AND LUSCOMBE. LATER, A BOEING (PT-17) WAS ADDED AND, IN 1953, GREENE PURCHASED A STINSON AIRPLANE.¹⁷

JOHN GREENE, JR. CAN BE PERSONALLY CREDITED WITH INITIATING A NUMBER OF PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO PROMOTE YOUTH INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION IN AVIATION. GREENE DEVELOPED A COMPLETE PROGRAM IN AVIATION SUBJECTS AND, AT ONE TIME IN 1946, HAD SIXTY STUDENTS (ABOUT HALF OF WHOM WERE WHITE) ENROLLED IN CLASSES RANGING FROM PRIMARY AND SECONDARY TRAINING TO CROSS-COUNTRY AND INSTRUMENT FLYING.¹⁸ HE ACQUIRED FIVE LINK C-3 TRAINERS (FLIGHT SIMULATORS). HE UTILIZED TWO OF THESE AT THE AIRPORT, ONE AT ARMSTRONG HIGH SCHOOL, ONE AT PHELPS VOCATIONAL SCHOOL (BOTH IN WASHINGTON, D.C.) AND ONE IN THE LIVING ROOM OF HIS OWN HOME. HE FORMED THE FIRST BLACK CIVIL AIR PATROL (CAP), THE COLUMBIA SQUADRON, IN WASHINGTON, D.C. THIS SQUADRON WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN FORMING THE SYPHAX AND WESTERN CAP SQUADRONS.

IN 1954, AFTER OPERATING COLUMBIA AIR CENTER AIRPORT CONTINUOUSLY FOR THIRTEEN YEARS, JOHN GREENE, JR. RETIRED AS MANAGER. HE WAS SUCCEEDED BY SHIRLEY KING, INTERIM MANGER. IMMEDIATELY THEREAFTER, CHARLES E. WREN AND HERBERT H. JONES, JR. OPERATED THE FIELD UNDER THE NAME OF THE "W AND J FLYING SERVICE." SUBSEQUENTLY, WREN ASSUMED CONTROL AND, IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ALBERT L. YOUNG AND WILLIAM L. TAYLOR, OPERATED THE FIELD AS THE "CAPITAL FLYING CLUB," FORMED TO STIMULATE AND PROMOTE INTEREST IN AVIATION.¹⁹ CHARLES WREN ALSO JOINED WITH WILLIAM L. TAYLOR AND CHARLES H. DABNEY AS "THE SPORTSMEN" TO PROMOTE SUCH ACTIVITIES AS SKYDIVING, PICNICS, AND DANCES THAT WERE HELD IN A HANGAR. MOTORCYCLE RACES WERE RUN ON A ONE-THIRD MILE TRACK THAT HAD BEEN

LAI D OUT IN THE NORTHWEST CORNER OF THE FIELD.²⁰ ACTIVITIES AT THE AIRPORT GRADUALLY DECREASED, AND PUBLISHED SOURCES REPORT THAT BY 1958 THE FIELD WAS "CLOSED TO ALL TRAFFIC." THE SITE THAT WAS ONCE COLUMBIA AIR CENTER IS NOW OWNED BY THE MARYLAND NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION.

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