

## Riverside Field / Columbia Air Center / Croom Field, Croom, MD

38.754, -76.705 (East of Andrews AFB, MD)



An undated (believed to be 1942) U.S. Navy aerial view looking southwest at Riverside Field (courtesy of Brian Rehwinkel), “annotated to show the airfield boundaries.”

A [1938 aerial photo](#) of this property did not yet show any recognizable trace of an airfield, just farmland. In 1941 aviation history was made when Riverside Field, the first black owned & operated airfield licensed in America, opened on this site. The property, a 450 acre potato field, was leased by The Cloud Club, a group of black pilots from Washington, for \$50 / month from Rebecca Fisher.

John Greene, a pioneer in black aviation, was instrumental in developing the airfield. According to the book "[Maryland Aloft](#)" by Preston, Lanman, and Breilhan, "Riverside Field opened in February 1941."

The *Washington Afro-American* newspaper wrote August 16, 1941, "... (Croom is) the only field solely operated by a colored staff."

According to the book "[Maryland Aloft](#)" by Preston, Lanman, and Breilhan, "In August [1941], an air show there drew 800 spectators, about 150 of whom went aloft for rides."

During this same general period, students from the Civilian Pilot Training Program at Howard University did their flight training at the field."

With the advent of WW2, civilian flying was restricted & many private airfields were utilized by the military to train pilots. Wartime restrictions halted private flying at Riverside.

According to Brian Rehwinkel, "The Navy first attempted to lease the field in late 1941 or early 1942", to support flight training at nearby NAS Anacostia.

However, Brian Rehwinkel reported, "The Navy's use of the field was complicated because the owner of the field could not sell the property to the Navy."

According to Navy records, she held a 'life estate' for the property, and upon her death, the land would revert to her late husband's heirs.

The airfield was situated on a 470 acre farm & the Navy wanted to lease the 120 acres for the existing airfield, as well as an additional acres to expand the field for training."

Brian continued, "Of course, the challenge was that the 120 acres for the airfield was already being leased by the Cloud Club, Inc."

The members of this club were leasing the field (according to Navy documents) for \$50 / month.

The Navy did not want to pay much for the lease of this field & apparently was not willing to sub-lease from the Cloud Club because they did not think the lease rate offered by the Club was reasonable.

However, the Cloud Club claimed they had invested, at least, \$12,000 in improvements to the field.”

The Cloud Club's Secretary sent a 2/4/42 letter (courtesy of Brian Renhwinkel) to the Navy, which was marked “Defendant’s Exhibit #6” evidently because the letter was an exhibit in the drawn-out legal proceedings for this field.

The earliest depiction which has been located of Riverside Field was an undated (believed to be 1942) U.S. Navy aerial view looking southwest (courtesy of Brian Renhwinkel), “annotated to show the airfield boundaries.”

It depicted the field as having 6 unpaved runways, with a few small buildings along the west side.



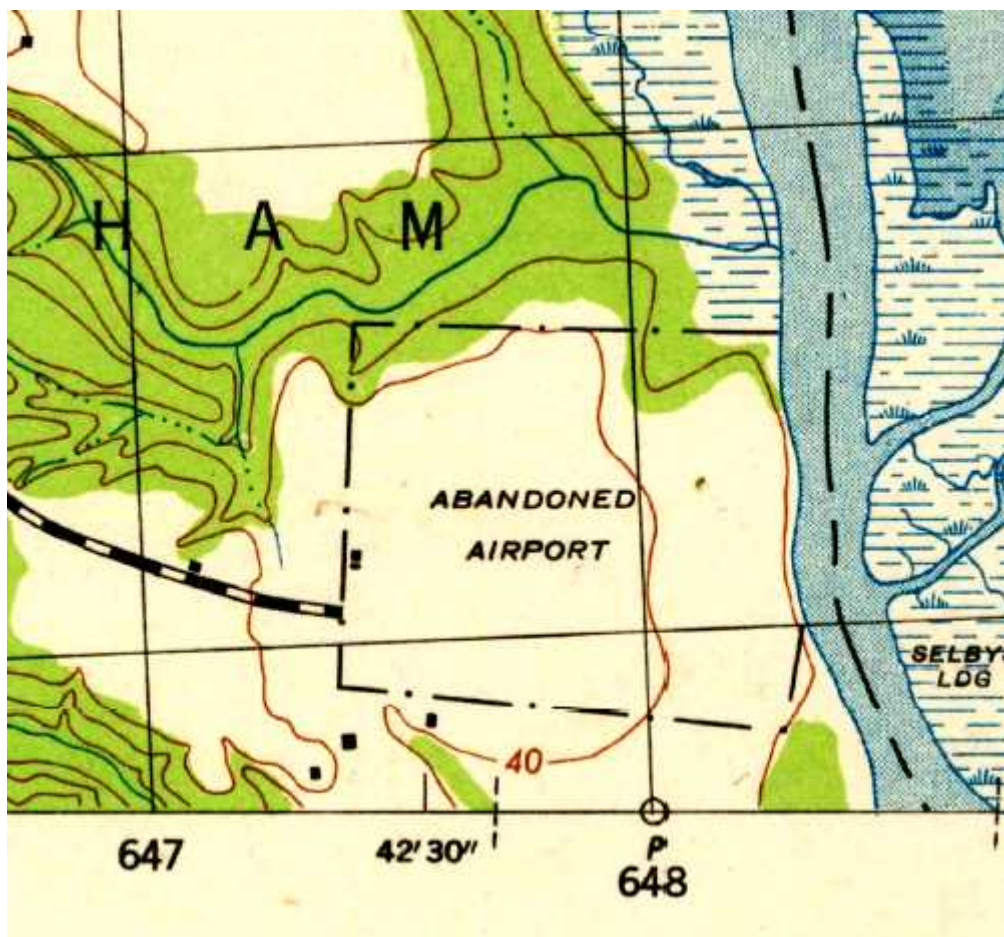
An undated (believed to be 1942) U.S. Navy aerial view looking southwest at Riverside Field (courtesy of Brian Renhwinkel), showing a single hangar, a small office building, and a truck, but no aircraft.

Brian Rehwinkel observed, “At this time, according to Navy records, the buildings consisted of a 45’ x 40’ wooden hangar and a small building that was divided into 2 rooms – a locker room & a radio room.”

Strangely, no airfield at all was depicted at Croom on the 1942 or 1944 Washington Sectional Charts (courtesy of Mike Keefe).

The Navy's usage of Riverside Field ended in 1944.

According to Brian Rehwinkel, “I don’t think the legal proceedings were completed until 1944.”

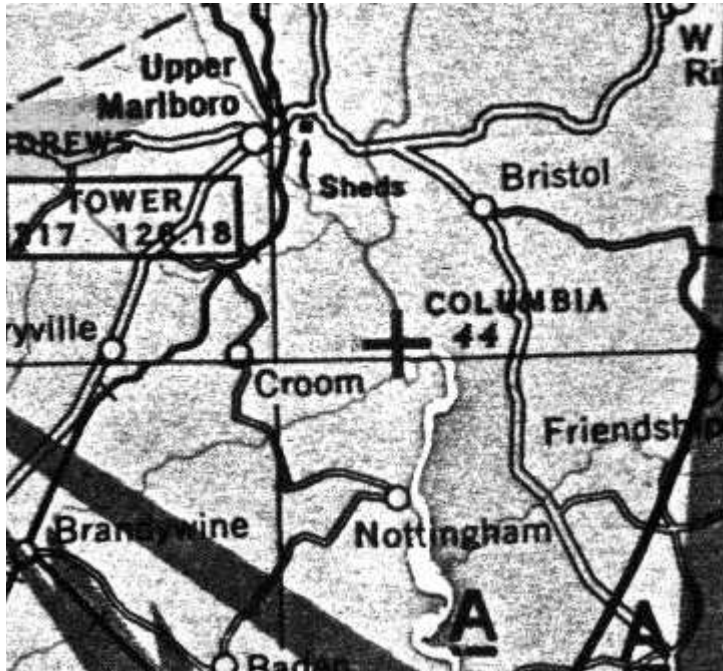


The earliest map depiction which has been located of Riverside Field was on the 1944 USGS topo map.

It depicted a rectangular property outline, with one small buildings on the west side.

Ironically, it was already labeled as “Abandoned Airport”.

After the war, John Greene reopened the airfield as "Columbia Air Center".



It was depicted as "Columbia" on the 1945 Washington Sectional Chart (courtesy of John Voss).

It continued to be depicted as "Columbia" on the and the 1946 Washington Sectional Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe).



An undated (presumably post-WW2) photo of members of the Cloud Club at Columbia Air Center in front of a surplus Vultee BT-13.



“Columbia Air Center”, as depicted on the 1946 USGS topo map.

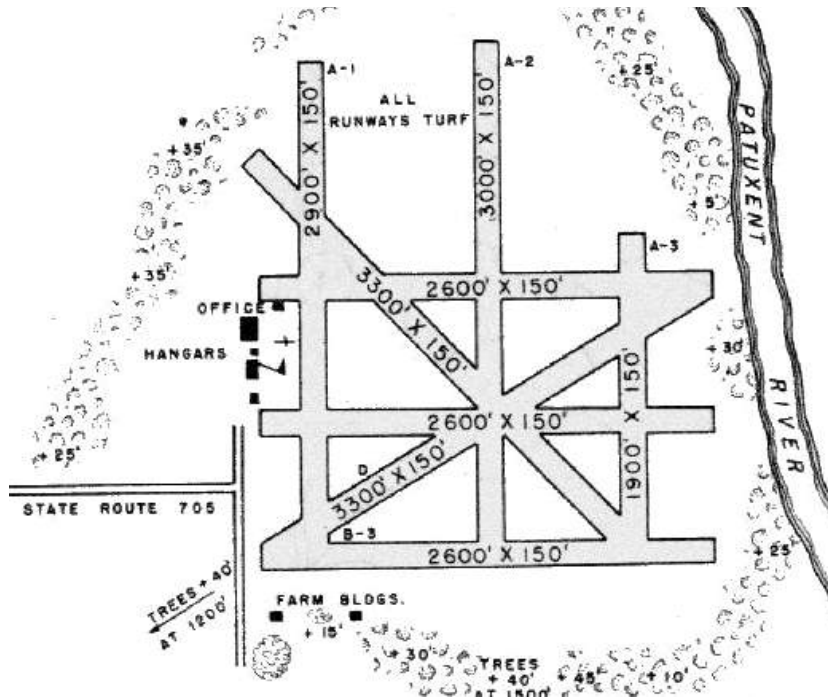
According to the book ["Maryland Aloft"](#), in 1946, the airfield consisted of 130 usable acres with 7 marked runways.

The airport had one 100' x 60' hangar, one 40' square hangar, and a 20' square office building.

The management's fleet included a Fairchild PT-19 trainer, Piper J3L, Aeronca Champion, and Aeronca L3.

Columbia Air Center offered a flying school, charter services, and facilities for major & minor repairs. The first black Civil Air Patrol squadron in the Washington DC area, called the Columbia Squadron, was formed here.

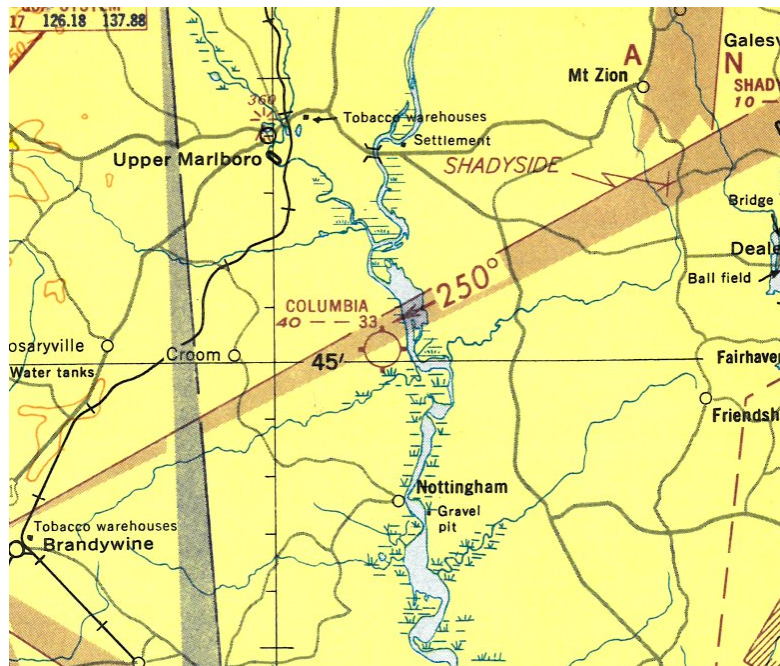
The "Columbia" airfield was described on the 1949 Washington Sectional Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe) as having a 3,300' unpaved runway.



It was listed as "Columbia Air Center" in the 1950 MD Airport Directory (courtesy of Stephen Mahaley).

At the time, the field boasted a total of no less than 8 runways, all grass, of which the longest was a 3,300' north/south strip.

The airport office building & 2 hangars were situated west of the runways.

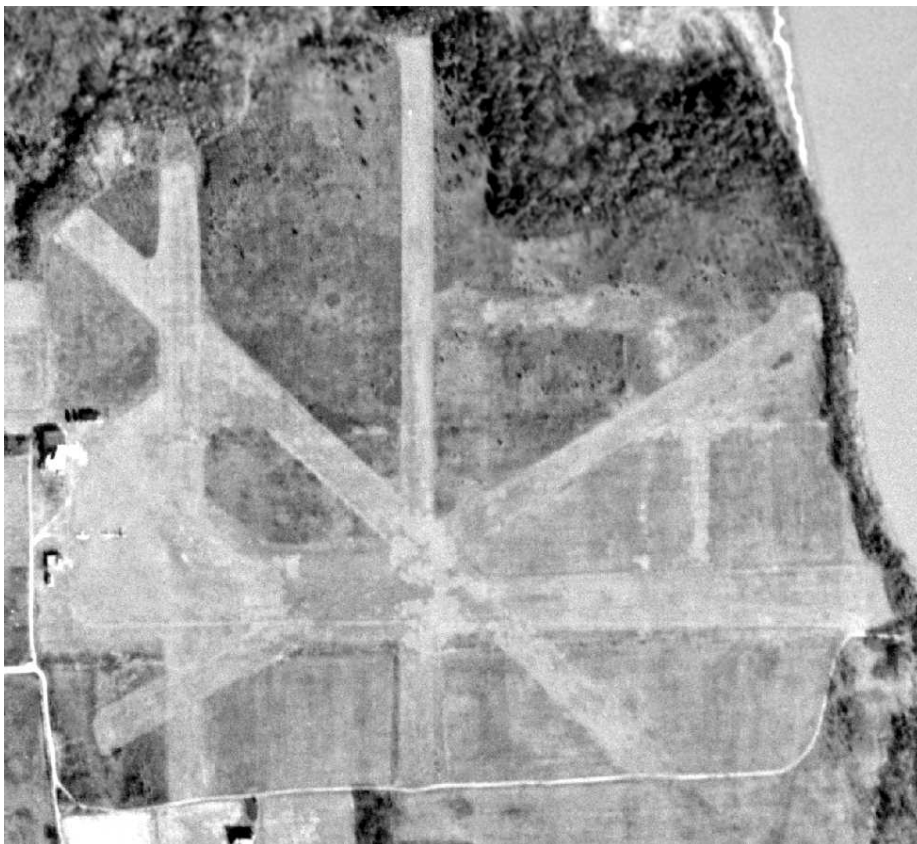


The January 1951 Washington Local Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of Tim Zukas) depicted Columbia Air Center as having a 3,300' unpaved runway.

Columbia Air Center was described on the 1951 Washington Sectional Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe) as having five runways, with the longest being a 2,600' unpaved strip.



[Undated photo of a hangar at Columbia Air Center.](#)



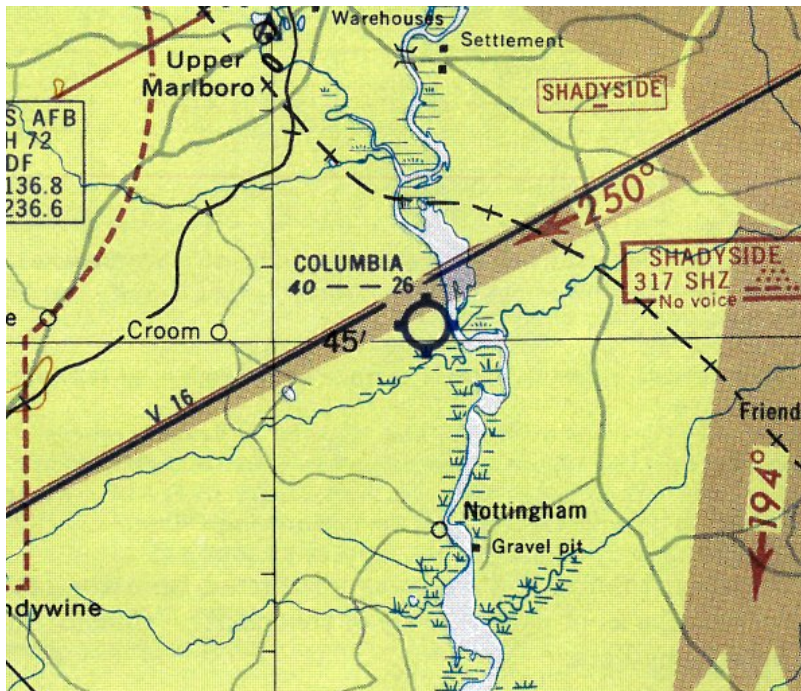
The only dated photo that has been located showing aircraft on the field at Columbia Air Center was a 12/17/53 USGS aerial view (courtesy of Brian Rehwinkel).

Brian observed, "This photo shows the original 2 structures (the small hangar & building) as well as what looks like the larger hangar.

You can also see what appears to be 3 aircraft on the field east of one of the hangars."

After John Greene's retirement, the airport was managed by Charles Wren & Herbert Jones, whose firm was named "W & J Flying Service".

The "Capital Flying Club" also was based here, promoting such activities as skydiving & parachute jumping.



The July 1956 Washington Local Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of Tim Zukas) depicted Columbia Air Center as having a 2,600' unpaved runway.

The flying service at Columbia Air Center operated until 1956, when the Fisher family refused to renew the lease.

However, Columbia Air Center was still depicted as an active airfield on the 1957 Washington Sectional Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe), and described as having five runways, with the longest being a 2,600' turf strip. Columbia Air Center was closed to all air traffic in 1958.

In 1959, the property became the first acquisition of the Patuxent River Watershed Park.

Columbia Air Center was no longer depicted on the 1961 Washington Local Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe).

However, this airfield may have briefly reopened at some point between 1961-63, as a "Croom" Field was depicted at the same location on the 1963 Washington Local Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe).

It was described as having 2 runways, with the longest being a 3,200' turf runway.

Croom Field evidently lasted only one year, as nothing was depicted at the site on the 1964 Washington Local Aeronautical Chart (courtesy of Mike Keefe).



[A 1965 aerial photo](#) of Croom Field showed a large open grass area.

A horsetrack was situated on the northwest side of the property.

Traces of the former airport buildings on the west side of the field were evident, but it is not certain if they were still standing at that point.

There was no sign of any based aircraft.

Dana Shifflett observed, “runways... I see traces of something extending upper right to lower left, or at least to center.

I remember flying over that field with Dad in the mid-1960s & him pointing out traces of it in soil color & vegetation.”



The 1969 USGS topo map still depicted Croom Airport, even though it had evidently already been closed for several years.



The 1979 USGS topo map still depicted the site as a “Landing Field”, with 2 small buildings along the west side of the field.

The 1983 MD Aeronautical Chart no longer depicted the field at all (not even as an abandoned airfield).



A 1993 USGS aerial view looking north at the site of Croom Field showed a somewhat smaller cleared area compared to the 1965 photo.

However, an airport circle marking was visible in the center of the field, which was not visible on the 1965 photo.

A circa 2000 aerial view of Riverside Field showed that the cleared area was the only trace remaining of the airfield.



A circa 2000 photo of a historic sign about Columbia Air Center which is displayed at the College Park Aviation Museum.

The 2002 book ["Maryland Aloft"](#) reported that a fuel pump remained at the site of Columbia Air Center.



A 2007 photo by Michael Regen of the wreck of an unidentified light single-engine aircraft

found in the woods only a few hundred feet northwest of the northwest corner of Croom Field.

Micheal reported, "September 2007 the Civil Air Patrol Maryland Wing had a SAREX (Search & Rescue Exercise)

in the area that was Croom Airport & surrounding Jug Bay.

None of us at the time knew that this area had previously been an airport.

I was leading a ground team searching for a practice ELT

and ran across this aircraft frame in the woods at 38.767, -76.71.

You can probably guess at the shock & surprise when I radioed back to mission base that we had found a wrecked aircraft

since no one knew of either this plane's existence or the fact that it had once been an airport.

I could not identify the old aircraft tube frame. Pieces of it were scattered around the site.

It had wooden wing spars with the bolted ends still in the upper tube frame but badly deteriorated.

There was no trace of wings other than the spar ends and the tubular struts so the wing may have been all wood & long since deteriorated.

It was obviously a fabric-covered high wing aircraft.”

Stanley Braisted reported in 2009, “My son had also found the airframe [pictured above].

The throttle quadrant & frame positively identify it as a J-3 Cub.

Engine & wings & internals are missing, so we theorize that it landed short, and they cannibalized & recovered everything useful, but left the airframe, which was pretty badly bent up & likely not worth the trouble.

Elsewhere in the woods is another large & heavy high-wing center section box similar to a DH Beaver,

but I have yet to find anything diagnostic to ID it.”

However, Harvey Cash reported, "A J-3 never had welded diagonal braces extending outward from the fuselage, and never had a 3-piece windscreen.

From the photo, the physical size of the frame seems too large to be a J-3 sized aircraft.

Most likely the aircraft is a Stinson Junior.

The photo clearly still shows the 3 segments of retaining trim still on the cowl of the wreckage."



An April 2011 photo by Greg Wright of the “Columbia Air Center Monument”.

Greg reported, “The State Park that the former field is located on has put up a formal type of memorial for the field.”



A 2016 aerial view looking north at the site of Croom Field showed that the airfield are remained clear, with the recent historical monument on the west side.

Croom Field is located along "Croom Airport Road", on the western shore of the Patuxent River.

See also:

<http://www.geocities.com/cd19/croom.html>

<http://www.tc-solutions.com/croom/airport/airport.htm>