The Columbia Air Center: The First Black Owned and Operated Airport in Maryland
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During a time when they had limited opportunities, and people told them no, a group of aviators overcame adversity and rose above social barriers to soar through the skies. Through their hard work and perseverance, they built a place of inclusivity and education, allowing for aviators and students of different races and sexes to share their talent.

In 1940, a group of Black aviators formed the Cloud Club. The club first flew at Alexandria Airways in Hybla Valley in Virginia, before moving to Beacon Field in Alexandria, Virginia.[1] At Beacon Field, the club purchased their own aircraft, a 1939 Piper coup, and accumulated 250 flight hours.[2] However, the Cloud Club did not stay at the White-owned airport for long. Shortly after their arrival, other aviators

Cloud Club Members
Photo: Abandoned and Little-Known Airfields

began accusing the club of violating airfield rules.[3] The Cloud Club faced racism and ill-treatment.[4] Because of the ongoing concerns, Beacon Field's management decided not to allow the Cloud Club to continue operating at the airport.

As a result, the club left Alexandria with the task of finding a new meeting location. However, rather than finding a new airfield, they decided to establish their own airport "out of necessity."[5] Opportunities for Black aviators were "almost non-existent," so the Cloud Club decided to create their own opportunity.[6] The club found a 450-acre potato field along the west bank of the Patuxent River in Croom, Maryland, 20 miles from Washington, DC.[7] The Cloud Club leased the land from Rebecca Fisher and paid $50 ($945 2022) per month.[8] In Croom, they created the "first licensed African American-owned and operated airport in Maryland," and possibly the first Black-owned airport in the United States.[9] John Greene served as airport manager. Originally called Riverside Field, the airport had "four impressive runways, totaling 3.5 miles, an office, a

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[1] "Enthusiasm For Flying Gives Birth To One of Country's Most Novel Air Organizations; Maryland's Cloud Club," *The Pittsburg Courier*, February 22, 1941, https://www.newspapers.com/image/40858671/.

[2] "Enthusiasm For Flying Gives Birth To One of Country's Most Novel Air Organizations; Maryland's Cloud Club,"

[3] Clayton Davis, "Columbia Air Center, Croom, Maryland," Wayback Machine, accessed January 7, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20091027081746/http://geocities.com/cd19/croom.html.

[4] "History: MNCPPC, MD," History | MNCPPC, MD (Prince George's County, MD), accessed January 5, 2022, https://www.pgparks.com/3182/History.

[5] Zieminski, "County's First Black-Owned Airport Becomes Training Ground." *The Gazette*, February 7, 2008, https://web.archive.org/web/20090108063412/http://www.gazette.net/stories/020708/prinnew170059_32361.shtml.

[6] Zieminski, "County's First Black-Owned Airport Becomes Training Ground."

[7] "History: MNCPPC, MD."

[8] "Turning a Historic Airport into a Bright New Future for Prince George's County, Maryland," *Turning a Historic Airport into a Bright New Future for Prince George's County, Maryland* (The Society for the Preservation of Black Aviation History, Inc., n.d.).

[9] "History: MNCPPC, MD."

John Greene
Photo: Smithsonian Institution

machine shop, a hangar, and three planes."[10] The first flight from the new airport took off on February 22, 1941.[11] Even though the club was in its infancy, it managed to overcome racism and establish an inclusive airport.

The airport provided a training ground for aspiring aviators of any race. Riverside Field provided flight lessons, a ground school, and mechanic instruction, and the flight school.[12] In 1946, approximately one half of the aviation students were White.[13] It is unknown if the school allowed female students, but one of the original members of the Cloud Club was a woman, so it is possible that the school also trained female pilots.[14] While the school recreational flying, some students went on to have careers in aviation. Fred Pitcher learned how to fly and received his civilian pilot's license at Riverside Field before becoming the first Black pilot for Western Airlines.[15] Mel Cooper also learned to fly at Riverside Field before becoming an airplane mechanic, and later an FAA aviation safety inspector.[16] The flight school broke down social racial barriers. The fact that during the 1940s, Black flight instructors taught White students how to fly is amazing. This proved instrumental in helping to diversify the aviation population.

Riverside Field also hosted airshows and served as a recreation area for the local population. The Cloud Club held its first airshow at the airport in August of 1941 and had an audience of over 800. The show featured "parachute jumping, acrobatic and precision flying, and airplane rides."[17] But what made the show so unique for its time was that all the pilots and performers were Black, highlighting the diversity in aviation.[18]

Shortly after Riverside Field opened, the U.S. entered WWII in December of 1941. As a result, the Navy took over the airport for training exercises, which halted all civilian general aviation activities at the field. The Navy expanded the airport, adding seven turf runways and building a 121-foot pier on the Patuxent River.[19] The Navy returned the airport to the Cloud Club in 1944.

After the war, John Greene reopened the airport for general aviation under a new name, the Columbia Air Center, and continued to expand.[20] By 1946, the airport had seven marked runways, two hangars, a classroom, and an office building. The airport also had a small fleet of aircraft to charter out to pilots, sold aircraft and fuel, allowed pilots to base their planes, and had

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[10] "Enthusiasm For Flying Gives Birth To One of Country's Most Novel Air Organizations; Maryland's Cloud Club."
[11] Davis, "Columbia Air Center, Croom, Maryland."
[12] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[13] Zieminski, "County's First Black-Owned Airport Becomes Training Ground."
[14] "Enthusiasm For Flying Gives Birth To One of Country's Most Novel Air Organizations; Maryland's Cloud Club."
[15] Zieminski, "County's First Black-Owned Airport Becomes Training Ground."
[16] Davis, "Columbia Air Center, Croom, Maryland."
[17] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[18] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[19] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[20] "History: MNCPPC, MD."

a repair shop.[21] The airport continued to be the site of accomplishments, such as the formation of the Columbia Squadron, the first Black Civil Air Patrol squadron in the Washington, DC, area.[22] Greene partnered with youth programs and schools to provide pilot and aviation maintenance instruction for young adults.[23] Under his management, Columbia Air Center became one of the busiest airports in Prince George's County.[24] However, during the 1950s, activity began to decrease at Columbia Air Center, a common trend happening at other general aviation airports. Greene retired in 1954, and in 1956, Columbia Air Center closed after the landlord decided not to renew the lease.[25]

Even though the airport has been closed for over 60 years, it has played an important part in Prince George's County and aviation history. In 1959, three years after its closure, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission bought the land and created the first part of the Patuxent River Watershed Park.[26] It is possible that the airfield briefly reopened as Croom Field around 1963, but it closed the following year.[27] Yet, even after the airport's closure, some maps continued to depict the park as a landing field until the 1980s.[28] Today, the land the airfield once operated on is the Patuxent River Park. Within the park, there is the Columbia Air Center Outdoor Exhibit Area, recognizing the historical importance of the park. The College Park Aviation Museum, 25 miles from Croom, also has an exhibit dedicated to the Cloud Club. These modern efforts to preserve the airport's legacy show how the airport played an important part in aviation history.

Columbia Air Center Monument at Patuxent River Park
Photo: The Historical Marker Database

The greatest effort to preserve the airport comes from the work to rebuild and reopen the Columbia Air Center in Croom, Maryland. Both The Society for the Preservation of Black Aviation History, Inc., and The Historic Columbia Air Center Airport/Museum, Inc., have tried to reopen the historic airport and open a museum dedicated to the airport's legacy. The goal is "to build at no cost to the local, county, state or Federal government a historically and educationally significant environmentally friendly state-of-the-art general aviation airport."[29] Reopening Columbia Air Center would preserve the legacy of the airport, increase STEM educational opportunities for K-12 students, and improve economic opportunities by creating jobs and bringing in new businesses.[30] The Columbia Air Center provided social and economic benefits to Prince George's County during the 1940s and 1950s. Many believe the airport can

[21] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[22] Freeman, "Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields: Maryland, Southern Prince George's County Area."
[23] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[24] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[25] "History: MNCPPC, MD."
[26] Zieminski, "County's First Black-Owned Airport Becomes Training Ground."
[27] Freeman, "Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields: Maryland, Southern Prince George's County Area."
[28] Freeman, "Abandoned & Little-Known Airfields: Maryland, Southern Prince George's County Area."
[29] "The Historic Columbia Air Center Airport/Museum Inc.," The Historical Columbia Air Center Airport/Museum Inc. Maryland, NY Wayne Tonkins, accessed January 12, 2022, https://www.thcacam.com/.
[30] "The Historic Columbia Air Center Airport/Museum Inc."

still provide such benefits in the 21st century. The Cloud Club did not view themselves as trailblazers in aviation history, but the efforts to preserve and revive the airport proves otherwise.

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