

The Airports in Groveton (Part 1 of 2)

Groveton's growth and its history are directly related to its location between Mount Vernon and Alexandria.

Alexandria to Mount Vernon

One of the first significant events for the Groveton area was the electric trolley line from Washington and Alexandria to Mount Vernon, which opened in 1892. Eleven daily trips carried over 26,000 passengers in 1894, with the first northbound train stopping at 15 stations between Mount Vernon and Washington. The trolley would pick up fresh milk from the area's dairy farmers (the locals called it the "milk run") to take to Washington and Alexandria. The current traffic turnaround at Mount Vernon is the same loop that was used by the trolley cars.

Involvement in World War I

It was December 1917 (during World War I), when the War Department decided to build a home for the Army Corps of Engineers on the Belvoir Neck tract called Camp A.A. Humphreys (now called Fort Belvoir). Camp Humphreys trained tens of thousands of soldiers for service in Europe. The Army Corps of Engineers paved Route 1 from Camp A.A. Humphreys to Alexandria in 1918 to facilitate the transportation of heavy equipment used for the war.

With the successful use of airplanes in World War I, aviation would soon affect the Groveton community. About 1920, Hybla Valley was designated for aviation use when an aeronautical beacon was installed. The Reid family (mentioned in the July issue of the Groveton newsletter) owned the land and rented some of the land to Aubrey Burdette for the Burdette Flying Service to give flying lessons and rides.



HYBLA VALLEY AIRPORT (also known as ALEXANDRIA AIRPORT)

In 1929, W.F. P. Reid erected a wind-driven electric light and power plant at Groveton on his farm for experimental use by the Airway Division of the Department of Commerce to generate light for the beacons on the hill used for emergency landings along the airmail routes. The plans called for an 80-foot steel tower, with a 14-foot airplane type propeller (turbine) and generator

mounted at the top, along with a set of large storage batteries. While this was the first one of its kind ever erected in the east, they had been used in the west for light and power purposes on farms for the past 10 years.

About April 1932, with aviation now part of the military life, a license was granted for an airport to be built at Beacon Hill called “Beacon Field.”

Involvement in World War II

In 1939 with World War II on the horizon, the Hybla Valley Airport trained military pilots and was listed as Naval Air Facility Hybla Valley in the 1944 U.S. Army Navy Directory of Airfields. In 1940, a group of African-American pilots incorporated the “Cloud Club” in Washington D.C. They began flying at “Beacon Field” in their own airplane, a 1939 Piper Cub Coupe, but eventually moved their club to Croom Field in Maryland.



BEACON FIELD AIRPORT (“City View” home is in the foreground)

The 1942 Groveton had 2 airports (“Hybla Valley Airport” and “Beacon Field”), Jones Point Park in Alexandria was a shipyard, the Torpedo Factory Art Center was an active torpedo factory, and Fort Hunt conducted secret intelligence activities interrogating German POWs. An air raid beacon or aircraft tower was set up at the southeast corner of Collard Street and Valley View (now Ridge Drive) to warn the Groveton area of an air attack. The tower (or air raid beacon) was staffed by Groveton residents, e.g. Mrs. Dorothea Morris (Jeff McKay’s maternal grandmother), to identify and confirm by radio the planes going to and from the Groveton airports. Many Groveton residents were active members of the Army Air Forces Aircraft Warning Service as volunteers. The purpose of their service was to provide defensive alerts if the air raid alarm sounded and to watch out for air attacks from the enemy. Beacon Field, which was closed to commercial flying, was used by the military as a civilian pilot training program base and later for training the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP).