

# Maryland Historical Trust

## Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties Form

Inventory No. PG 82B-038

### 1. Name of Property (indicate preferred name)

historic Columbia Air Center  
other Croom Airport, Riverside Field

### 2. Location

street and number Patuxent River Park, 16000 Croom Airport Road ☐ not for publication  
city, town Croom ☒ vicinity  
county Prince George's County

### 3. Owner of Property (give names and mailing addresses of all owners)

name Maryland-National Capitol Park and Planning Commission  
street and number 6600 Kenilworth Avenue telephone  
city, town Riverdale state MD zip code 20737

### 4. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Prince George's County Courthouse liber 2608 folio 371  
city, town Upper Marlboro tax map 129 tax parcel 9 tax ID number 0259226

### 5. Primary Location of Additional Data

- ☐ Contributing Resource in National Register District  
☐ Contributing Resource in Local Historic District  
☐ Determined Eligible for the National Register/Maryland Register  
☐ Determined Ineligible for the National Register/Maryland Register  
☐ Recorded by HABS/HAER  
☐ Historic Structure Report or Research Report at MHT  
☒ Other: MNCPPC African-American Heritage Survey, 1996

### 6. Classification

| Category                                 | Ownership                                  | Current Function                                | Resource Count   |
|--|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> district        | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> agriculture | Contributing   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> building(s)     | <input type="checkbox"/> private           | <input type="checkbox"/> commerce/trade         | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> recreation/culture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> structure       | <input type="checkbox"/> both              | <input type="checkbox"/> defense                | <input type="checkbox"/> religion                      |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> site |  | <input type="checkbox"/> domestic               | <input type="checkbox"/> social                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> object          |  | <input type="checkbox"/> education              | <input type="checkbox"/> transportation                |
|  |  | <input type="checkbox"/> funerary               | <input type="checkbox"/> work in progress              |
|  |  | <input type="checkbox"/> government             | <input type="checkbox"/> unknown                       |
|  |  | <input type="checkbox"/> health care            | <input type="checkbox"/> vacant/not in use             |
|  |  | <input type="checkbox"/> industry               | <input type="checkbox"/> other:                        |
|  |  |   |  |

Contributing 1  
Noncontributing 1  
Total 2

Number of Contributing Resources previously listed in the Inventory

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## 7. Description

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### Condition

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> excellent | <input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> good      | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ruins |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fair      | <input type="checkbox"/> altered          |

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Prepare both a one paragraph summary and a comprehensive description of the resource and its various elements as it exists today.

### SUMMARY

The Columbia Air Center is located south of Upper Marlboro at the terminus of Croom Airport Road (State Route 709), within the Patuxent River Park. Croom Airport Road is located to the southwest of the historic location of the airfield; today an access road runs along the western boundary. Trees historically surrounded the site to the northeast, northwest, south, and southeast; the area is still heavily wooded. The Patuxent River runs along the east side of the field.

### DESCRIPTION

When the Columbia Air Center was started in 1940, John W. Greene, Jr. constructed an office building and small hangar and purchased a large steel hangar as well. These buildings stood on the western end of the runways. There was also a snack bar and tie downs for planes based there. At the height of its operations, there were eight runways that could accommodate up to 150 arrivals and departures a day. The site of the former Columbia Air Center is currently used for agricultural purposes, serving as a corn field in the summer. None of the buildings that once stood on the site are still standing; however, there is one gas pump on the site. The site of the Columbia Air Center is now within the Patuxent River Park along the Critical Areas Driving Tour. Interpretive signage tells the story of the historic airport and provides a map of the airfield when it was in use.

The airfield retains very low integrity for association, design, location, feeling, setting, workmanship and materials, as the site is now a cornfield. Some feeling remains as the site is situated in a rural park.

## 8. Significance

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| Period  | Areas of Significance                       | Check and justify below  |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699            | <input type="checkbox"/> agriculture        | <input type="checkbox"/> economics                               | <input type="checkbox"/> health/medicine        | <input type="checkbox"/> performing arts                        |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799            | <input type="checkbox"/> archeology         | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> education                    | <input type="checkbox"/> industry               | <input type="checkbox"/> philosophy                             |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899            | <input type="checkbox"/> architecture       | <input type="checkbox"/> engineering                             | <input type="checkbox"/> invention              | <input type="checkbox"/> politics/government                    |  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1999 | <input type="checkbox"/> art                | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment/<br>recreation | <input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> religion                               |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2000-                | <input type="checkbox"/> commerce           | <input type="checkbox"/> ethnic heritage                         | <input type="checkbox"/> law                    | <input type="checkbox"/> science                                |  |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> communications     | <input type="checkbox"/> exploration/<br>settlement              | <input type="checkbox"/> literature             | <input type="checkbox"/> social history                         |  |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> community planning |  | <input type="checkbox"/> maritime history       | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> transportation              |  |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> conservation       |  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> military    | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: <u>local history</u> |  |

| Specific dates     | 1941-1958 | Architect/Builder |
|--------------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Construction dates | n/a       |                   |

Evaluation for:

☐ National Register

☐ Maryland Register

☒ not evaluated

Prepare a one-paragraph summary statement of significance addressing applicable criteria, followed by a narrative discussion of the history of the resource and its context. (For compliance projects, complete evaluation on a DOE Form – see manual.)

### SUMMARY

The Columbia Air Center opened in 1941 under the leadership of John W. Greene, Jr. and Dr. C.M. Gill and served as the first and only African-American-owned and operated airport in Prince George's county for nearly two decades. John W. Greene, Jr. was instrumental in the foundation of the center. Greene discovered a love of flight long before he moved to the Washington, DC area. He grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee and went to the Hampton Institute in Virginia to study mechanical engineering in 1920.<sup>1</sup> In 1922, Greene finished school in Virginia and moved to Boston.<sup>2</sup> That same year he began flying lessons under Walter Greene, a white pilot from Quincy, Massachusetts of no relation. By 1929 Greene earned his private pilot license and a limited commercial transport license. In 1933 he was the second African-American man in the United States to earn his commercial pilot license and in 1936 he became a certified engineer and airplane mechanic.<sup>3</sup> By 1940, Greene received certification to teach aviation mechanics in Washington, DC and Boston and was a member of the Caterpillar and Harvard flying clubs. The same year he moved to Washington, DC to teach aviation mechanics at Phelps Vocational High School and started The "Cloud Club" with other local African-American aviators out of Beacon Airfield in Virginia.<sup>4</sup> Within the year, the Cloud Club relocated to Prince George's County due to increasing tensions white pilots in at the airfield in Virginia. The white pilots and the airfield owner accused the African-American pilots of committing infractions against their rules, which the Cloud Club took as a sign they were not welcomed there.<sup>5</sup> The Cloud Club members believed this same type of behavior could happen at any white-owned airfield, thus they needed to find a place of their own.

In 1941, John W. Greene, Jr. and the other Cloud Club leaders found a potato farm along the Patuxent River, south of Upper Marlboro in Prince George's County. They leased the property from Mrs. Rebecca Fisher and quickly leveled a runway, built an office and a hangar at what they called "Riverside Field." John W. Greene, Jr. was named the airport manager.<sup>6</sup> With the onset of World War II, civilian flight was restricted and Riverside Field was used by the U.S. Navy to train pilots from 1941-1944.<sup>7</sup> In 1944, when the airfield returned to civilian control, Greene and his partner, Dr. Gill, created and submitted their future plans for the airfield and by 1945 the Columbia Air Center, as it was renamed, was a "Designated Landing Area" and had received full authority for civil aircraft operations. By 1946, the Columbia Air Center had expanded its services with eight runways, an additional large hangar, a snack bar and tie downs for planes based at the field.<sup>8</sup> The Columbia Air Center offered charter flights and lessons as well, since it was certified as a "Primary Flying School." In 1949, the airport had four hangars where planes could be stored and repaired; the airport also sold

<sup>1</sup> Pearl, *Prince George's County African-American Heritage Survey*, MNCPPC, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Pearl, *Prince George's County African-American Heritage Survey*, MNCPPC, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

<sup>4</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

<sup>5</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

<sup>6</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

<sup>7</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

<sup>8</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

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parts as an authorized dealer for several companies.<sup>9</sup> In 1950, the Columbia Air Center was the busiest airport in Prince George's County, with the ability to accommodate up to 150 flights in and out each day.

The Columbia Air Center and its leader, Greene, saw the busy airport as more than a place for arrivals and departures; Greene was an advocate for youth education and was dedicated to teaching young people to fly. With this in mind, the Columbia Air Center offered a variety of lessons in aviation-related fields, including navigation, meteorology, civil air regulation, theory of flight, parachuting, aircraft instruments, engines, and plane servicing.<sup>10</sup> In 1946 the center had twenty-five students and owned four aircraft. The Columbia Squadron, the first African-American civil air patrol, formed at the Columbia Air Center at the same time.<sup>11</sup> Under Greene's leadership the Columbia Air Center ran successfully as an airfield and a school. In 1956 Greene retired from his position at the Columbia Air Center, but he continued to advocate aviation education for young people for the rest of his life.

Following Greene, Charles E. Wren and Herbert H. Jones, Jr. operated the field as the "W and J Flying Service." They later formed a partnership with William L. Taylor and Albert L. Young and called the field the "Capitol Flying Club." Additional oral history was obtained from Herbert Jones from Oral Historian Charlotte King.<sup>12</sup> The Columbia Air Center stayed open for operation under these new names until 1958 when the Fisher Family decided not to renew their land lease to the club due to increasing problems with vandalism.<sup>13</sup> The next year, the land was given to the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and was incorporated into the Patuxent River Park. Today little remains of the airfield except for interpretive signage along the Park's "Critical Areas Driving Tour." More interpretive signage, a wind sock, benches, and a gateway with the Cloud Club logo are in the initially planning stages in an effort to celebrate the success of Greene and the Columbia Air Center, as well as its contributions to African-American aviation. These improvements will help to remind visitors that what is now a cornfield once played a critical role in African-American aviation in the region.

### STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Columbia Air Center near Croom played a significant role in the aviation history of Prince George's County, the state of Maryland, and the country as a whole. As the only African-American-owned airfield on the eastern seaboard in the 1940's and 1950's, the Columbia Air Center provided opportunities for African-American aviators for area pilots to log flying hours, for commercial flights to come and go, and for young people interesting in aviation to learn the necessary skills. The airfield served as a home for the U.S. Navy during World War II and continued to train airmen for civil defense following the War. Under the leadership of John W. Greene, Jr., the airfield became a hub for African-American pilots and aviation enthusiasts in the greater Washington DC area in a time of racial prejudice and segregation.

The Columbia Air Center is significant for its character, interest and value as a part of the development and heritage of the County, State and Nation. It is significant for its identification with aviator John Greene and the Cloud Club, and it is significant because it exemplifies the economic, social, political, and historic heritage of the County and its communities.

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<sup>9</sup> Floyd, *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*.

<sup>10</sup> Pearl, *Prince George's County African-American Heritage Survey, MNCPPC, 1996*.

<sup>11</sup> Pearl, *Prince George's County African-American Heritage Survey, MNCPPC, 1996*.

<sup>12</sup> Jones, Herbert, personal communication with Charlotte King, August 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Pearl, *Prince George's County African-American Heritage Survey, MNCPPC, 1996*.

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#### Chain of Title

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Deed<br>WWW 3321/572<br>May 12, 1966     | Edwin Lynch, Trustee for Vernon M. Lynch, Sons, to The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission   |
| Deed<br>WWW 2608/371<br>October 14, 1961 | Louis J. Carusillo and Anna T. Carusillo, Daniel W. Weggeland and Marjorie J. Weggeland, Eugene B. Casey and Betty B. Casey to Edwin Lynch, Trustee for Vernon M. Lynch, Sons   |
| Deed<br>2185/160<br>January 25, 1958     | Thomas H. Fisher and Mabel K. Fisher, James A. Fisher and Annie M. Fisher, Robert B. Fisher and Lula Fisher, Addie M. Merritt, John L. Fisher and Emma Fisher, Carroll Spedden and Arline Spedden, Doris F. Roberts and Vernon L. Roberts, Elsie F. Word, Katherine M. Nicholson, Eloise M. Boyd and Earle V. Boyd (all devisees under the will of John L. Fisher, deceased, husband of Rebecca Fisher) to Louis J. Carusillo and Anna T. Carusillo, Daniel W. Weggeland Marjorie J. Weggeland, Eugene B. Casey and Betty B. Casey (Essex Lodge, Chew Folly, and Half Pone) |
| Lease<br>WWW 2374/92<br>March 15, 1957   | Rebecca Fisher to Charles E. Wren, Albert L. Young, and William Taylor, agents for the Capital Flying Club  |
| Deed<br>102/133<br>January 15, 1915      | William C. Lowdon to John L. Fisher (Half Pone)   |
| Deed<br>102/131<br>January 15, 1915      | Robert R. Lowdon, et. ux to John L. Fisher (Essex Lodge, Chew Folly)  |
| Deed<br>97/213<br>November 26, 1913      | Kathleen N. Lowdon to Robert R. Lowdon (Essex Lodge, Chew Folly)  |
| Deed<br>60/528<br>December 14, 1910      | Annie Werner and John Werner to William C. Lowdon (Half Pone)   |

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## 9. Major Bibliographical References

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Floyd, Bianca. *Records & Recollections! Early Black History in Prince George's County, MD*. Upper Marlboro: Maryland-National Capitol Park and Planning Commission, 1989.

Floyd, Bianca. "The First Black-Owned Airport on the Eastern Seaboard was Built in Croom in the 1940s: Columbia Air Center." Article for the Maryland Hawk, May 30- June 5, 1985.

Ives, Patricia, and Sluby, Paul E.. "Columbia Air Center: Born of Necessity, Facilitated Black Aviation," 1999.

Pearl, Susan G.. *Prince George's County African-American Heritage Survey, 1996*. Upper Marlboro: Maryland-National Capitol Park and Planning Commission, 1996.

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## 10. Geographical Data

|                               |                |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| Acreage of surveyed property  | <u>470</u>     |
| Acreage of historical setting | <u>470</u>     |
| Quadrangle name               | <u>Bristol</u> |

Quadrangle scale: 1: 24,000

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### Verbal boundary description and justification

The Columbia Air Center is located south of Upper Marlboro at the eastern terminus of Croom Airport Road (State Route 709), in the Patuxent River Park. Croom Airport Road is located to the southwest of the historic location of the airfield; today an access road runs along the western boundary. Trees historically surrounded the 470 acre site to the northeast, northwest, south, and southeast; the area is still heavily wooded. The Patuxent River runs along the east side of the field. The former airfield is now contained within the Patuxent River Park, at the east end and is used for agricultural purposes.

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## 11. Form Prepared by

|                 |  |           |              |
|-----------------|--|-----------|--------------|
| name/title      | Stacy Patterson, Architectural Historian         |           |              |
| organization    | The Ottery Group for M-NCPPC Planning Department | date      | 2/20/09      |
| street & number | 1810 August Drive                                | telephone | 301-562-1975 |
| city or town    | Silver Spring                                    | state     | MD           |

The Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties was officially created by an Act of the Maryland Legislature to be found in the Annotated Code of Maryland, Article 41, Section 181 KA, 1974 supplement.

The survey and inventory are being prepared for information and record purposes only and do not constitute any infringement of individual property rights.

return to: Maryland Historical Trust  
Maryland Department of Planning  
100 Community Place  
Crownsville, MD 21032-2023  
410-514-7600

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#### CAPSULE SUMMARY

PG 82B-038

Columbia Air Center

16000 Croom Airport Road, Patuxent River Park

Croom Vicinity, Prince George's County, Maryland

c. 1940

Public

The Columbia Air Center near Croom played a significant role in the aviation history of Prince George's County, the state of Maryland, and the country as a whole. As the only African-American-owned airfield on the eastern seaboard in the 1940's and 1950's, the Columbia Air Center provided opportunities for African-American aviators for area pilots to log flying hours, for commercial flights to come and go, and for young people interesting in aviation to learn the necessary skills. The airfield served as a home for the U.S. Navy during World War II and continued to train airmen for civil defense following the War. Under the leadership of John W. Greene, Jr., the airfield became a hub for African-American pilots and aviation enthusiasts in the greater Washington DC area in a time of racial prejudice and segregation.

The Columbia Air Center is located south of Upper Marlboro at the terminus of Croom Airport Road (State Route 709), within the Patuxent River Park. Croom Airport Road is located to the southwest of the historic location of the airfield. The Patuxent River runs along the east side of the field. When the Columbia Air Center was started in 1940, John W. Greene, Jr. constructed an office building and small hangar and purchased a large steel hangar as well. These buildings stood on the western end of the runways. There was also a snack bar and tie downs for planes based there. At the height of its operations, there were eight runways that could accommodate up to 150 arrivals and departures a day. The site of the former Columbia Air Center is currently used for agricultural purposes, serving as a corn field in the summer. None of the buildings that once stood on the site are still standing; however, there is one gas pump on the site. The site of the Columbia Air Center is now within the Patuxent River Park along the Critical Areas Driving Tour. Interpretive signage tells the story of the historic airport and provides a map of the airfield when it was in use.