

Little Known History of Sand Point Naval Air Station Landmark District

By Lynn Ferguson

In September, the City Council proclaimed Sand Point Naval Air Station as Seattle's eighth historic district.

Sand Point looks like a lovely mixed-use park for playing soccer or birding - but what history is so important here that it's worth saving?



Full build out of Sand Point Naval Air Station with planes on tarmac



Landing of 1st Around the World Flight, September 28, 1924 Sand Point Airfield, Seattle Washington

Seattle's first airport and the site of the first flight around the world.

The Sand Point peninsula played a crucial role in the nation's aviation history. In 1917, near the end of WWI, a group of Army airmen came to Seattle to sell Liberty Bonds. Because Seattle had no airport, they had to land on Jefferson Golf Course – an embarrassment for Seattle and King County leaders.

At the time, the Sand Point peninsula was a picnic and fishing site. The county began buying up land here and opened Sand Point Airfield in 1920. Planes could land on water or on land, so the Sand Point peninsula was an ideal spot.

Civilians like Bill Boeing used Sand Point to test and fly new airplane models that were barged in from his plant on the Duwamish. The Army and the Navy Air Corps used the field for training.

To publicize the importance of the young airplane industry, the U.S. government planned a landmark around-the-world flight, with planes for the first time crossing both oceans. This milestone is now recognized as the second most

important event in aviation history, second only to the Wright Brothers' first flight. A fifteen foot monument commemorating the flight is now at the park entrance.

Sand Point was chosen as the starting and ending point of this journey. Four courageous pilots and their mechanics in open cockpit Douglas World Cruiser biplanes with no radios or parachutes took off in April, 1924, on Boeing-made pontoons from Sand Point's Northshore heading toward Alaska then across the Pacific Ocean. The whole world followed the flight via newspapers and radio. The pilots landed on the Sand Point tarmac 175 days later. A crowd of 50,000 cheered, and witnessed a 21-gun salute. These pilots and Seattle claimed their place in aviation history.

Headquarters of the 13th Naval District on the front lines of the war in the Pacific.

Early on that fateful Sunday morning December 7, 1941, Sand Point received word of a surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, another Naval Air Station. The commander ordered all windows at the base blacked out, and a machine gunner was placed on every roof. Some of the highest clerestory windows in Building 2 are still blackened.

There were only two other Naval Air Stations on the west coast, near San Francisco and San Diego California. The first six months of this war were very scary for Seattleites. Japanese submarines lurked offshore. Islands off Alaska were invaded.

Along with the Bremerton shipyard and the Boeing airplane factory, Sand Point Naval Air Station and Fort Lewis provided protection for the Northwest Coast. Their combined efforts helped turn the tide of the war.

The buildings over 50 years old within the historic district remind us of this rich military and aviation history.

This first new district in over 20 years now comes under the city historic preservation laws and public process. When renovated, its historic buildings qualify for federal tax credits worth millions of dollars. In return, guidelines are followed to preserve the building exteriors and grounds.

Most of the lovely Art Deco and Art Moderne style administration buildings, Colonial Revival housing, and stately, spacious hangars were built with WPA funds before 1941. They are the legacy of the 15,000 aviators who trained here and the missions they flew.

As development and reuse goes forward, it is important to remember our history and the men and women who served our country and lived, trained and worked at Sand Point.

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