

History of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge



The following information is based on and partially extracted, with permission of the author, from this history of McIntosh County, Georgia:

Sullivan, Buddy. 1990. *Early Days on the Georgia Tidewater*. Published by the McIntosh County Commission, County Courthouse, Darien, GA 31305.

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Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge comprises 2,762 acres of land on the north end of the very large hammock called Harris Neck in the salt marsh of eastern McIntosh County, Georgia. The South Newport River flows past the Refuge on the north and northeast, and the Barbour River passes on the east-southeast. Harris Neck Creek runs immediately west and southwest.

The first claimants for land in the Harris Neck-South Newport region petitioned for their tracts in the 1740s. One of the earliest grantees on what is now known as Harris Neck was Stephen Dickerson who claimed 200 acres on the south end. That grant is dated 1757, but his claim was generally recognized at least as early as 1750. Grants to two major landholders in that year identify those tracts as located on Dickerson's Neck, which was the name for the hammock for approximately the next 25 years.

The name Harris Neck originated with William Thomas Harris who inherited the land known as Bethany Plantation on the South Newport River from his father William Harris (350 acres) and from his step-father Daniel Demetre (750 acres). That land is today part of Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. William Thomas Harris served in the Revolution as a captain, then as a colonel, and was the first Speaker of the House in the Georgia legislature after the Revolution. The first known reference to the hammock as Harris Neck is in the *Georgia Gazette* of October 11, 1775.

William Thomas Harris, Jr., appears gradually to have sold much of his family's acreage in the region. The 1825 tax records, while listing Harris, credit him with no taxable land.

During the eighteenth century the principal endeavors of the plantations on the South Newport River were cultivating rice and raising livestock. There was some timbering during the winters, but there is no evidence that there were sawmills in the area at that time. Toward the end of the century raising cotton gradually came into prominence.

An item of particular interest is that one of the first cultivations of Sea Island Cotton in the U.S. began on the south end of Harris Neck in 1787 on Julianton Plantation belonging to Francis Levett, Sr. James Spalding of St. Simons Island also planted this variety of cotton in the winter of 1786-87, essentially the same time, so clear precedence for either man is not established.

By 1792 there was enough activity in the Harris Neck region to warrant construction of a road that began at Julianton Plantation on the south end and extended north past Bethany Plantation, then west through Eagle Neck along the South Newport River to join the Stage Road at South Newport Bridge. This road is still in use today.

From 1800 to 1820 growing rice and cotton, raising cattle, and timbering were important on Harris Neck. Sloops carrying cotton from Darien to Savannah stopped here frequently.

By 1820 there were enough white children on the Neck to require a school. A branch of the McIntosh County Academy was established, probably meeting in a church rather than a dedicated building. Between 1820 and 1860 both a Presbyterian and a Baptist church were present.

In 1841 one of the trustees listed for the South Newport Baptist Church was Thomas K. Gould of Harris Neck. In the 1820s and 1830s the Goulds owned several tracts of land on the upper end of the Neck, on the lower portion of the present wildlife refuge, that were originally owned by the Harris and Demetre families. Maps from that period show today's Barbour River Landing as Gould's Landing and the nearby cemetery as Gould's Cemetery.

By 1816 the land at the northernmost end of Harris Neck was owned by Jonathan Thomas and called Peru Plantation. Its 2,400 acres covered a large portion of present-day Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge and included the former Demetre-Harris property, west of and adjacent to the Gould holdings. Between then and 1860 rice was replaced almost completely by cotton as a cultivated crop.

The Civil War thoroughly disrupted the social and economic patterns of the pre-war period, but actual hostilities did not affect the Harris Neck region. Damage done by the war consisted primarily of economic upheaval. Fields, dikes, and irrigation ditches fell into disrepair, and then became irreparable during Reconstruction. Crops could not be planted, cultivated, or harvested without labor. Neither labor nor capital for repairs could be obtained with any facility by the financially-strapped local planters. Between 1845 and 1870 the population of McIntosh County fell by about one thousand people to 1,196 whites and 3,288 blacks. Very few blacks owned land.

During the 1870s and 1880s economic and social patterns gradually changed. A community of black private land owners began to evolve in the area of the present Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. The Thomas family sub-divided parts of the former Peru plantation into small tracts which they gradually sold to individuals, many of whom were former slaves or their descendants.

In 1875 McIntosh County officials established a black school at Harris Neck. Its location today is not known. Dunham's store in the vicinity of Gould's Landing also served as a post office, primarily for the large black population.

Regular postal service began on Harris Neck in 1891 at a location called "Bahama." In 1896 it was re-named "Lacey." Postal route maps of the time show both at the same location at the upper end of the Neck on the east side near Gould's Landing on the Barbour River.

In the late 1880s Pierre Lorillard (tobacco) bought a 30-acre oak grove on the old Peru plantation at the north end of Harris Neck on the South Newport River. Two women associated with him,

Eleanor Van Brunt Clapp and Lily Allien (later Mrs. Barnes, still later Mrs. Livingston), also acquired property in that area at the same time. The Lorillard-Livingston house was particularly lavish, complete with outdoor fountains and pools, overlooking the South Newport River near Thomas Landing on what is now Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge. There were also on these properties several out-buildings, including stables.

Pierre Lorillard's influence at Harris Neck was brief. A little over a decade after establishing himself there he was dead. Miss Clapp's house burned in 1894, but she lived at Harris Neck until her death in 1937. The Lorillard-Livingston house survived well into the 20th century, but today everything is gone, leaving only a few remnants of landscape structures.

Through the first third of the 20th century the principal occupations at and around Harris Neck were small farming and gardening, livestocking, seafood (particularly the commercial harvest of oysters), lumbering, pulpwooding, and turpentineing. By the early 1940s some 171 separate tracts of privately owned land existed on the area of the present-day Refuge. Most were small, less than one acre, but some individuals owned enough property to conduct fairly extensive farming.

With the outbreak of World War II substantial military activity expanded in McIntosh County, especially on Harris Neck. In the 1930s the Civil Aeronautics Authority had established there a small, lighted, intermediate landing field, primarily for emergency use, within the present Wildlife Refuge near Goulds Landing. With good approaches from every direction, it was a logical site for an airfield. On July 6, 1942, the U.S. government filed condemnation proceedings for 1,200 acres of privately-owned land around the small airfield for the construction of a large air base. Subsequently some 2,687 acres became involved. In a few months the community of Harris Neck ceased to exist.

By the end of the war there were 11 prefabricated buildings in the area of the expanded concrete runways, plus several earthen ammunition bunkers a short distance away. The buildings were used as barracks, warehouses, machine and repair shops, latrine, and a non-commissioned officers club. The old Livingston house at Thomas Landing served as an officers club.

Harris Neck Army Air Base was an integral part of the submarine air reconnaissance off the Atlantic coast and a fighter-bomber group training operation. It was on active status from December 11, 1943, until the end of 1944.



On October 25, 1946, the U.S. War Assets Administration assumed accountability for 2, 687 acres at Harris Neck, and then subsequently passed the tract into the possession of McIntosh County with the understanding that the county would use it as an airport. However, the county had little use for an airport in such a remote location and so far from the county seat at Darien.

In July, 1949, the *McIntosh County News* reported extensive damage to and theft from all facilities, including the Livingston house, on the former air base. Warrants were issued for the arrests of several persons, but politics prevailed and nothing came of that. In 1951 the county sheriff leased the Lorillard-Livingston mansion to operate as an exclusive club. In the meantime the rest of the facilities of the former air base were looted. Local people reported this, but the Federal government took no action until the late 1950s, when the County Commission was informed that the lease to the sheriff was illegal. Three members (a majority) revoked the lease. The other two commissioners, staunch supporters of the sheriff, were later charged with fraudulently disposing of some of the materials stolen from the air base, but charges were dropped by the judge, who was a political ally of the sheriff.

Because of the serious mismanagement of the property the Federal government reclaimed it. In 1962 it was turned over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to manage as a National Wildlife Refuge.