

History of the Brookley Complex

The origins of the Port City becoming one of the world's premier centers for aircraft design and assembly center on an area now known as Brookley and reach back 115 years. The property occupied by Brookley has played a central role in the lives of Mobilians for 130 years.

John Fowler (1890 – 1900)

Around 1890, a Mississippi born watch, clock, and sewing machine repairman named John Fowler came to Mobile. He was known not only for being a fine craftsman and occasional preacher, but also for spending all his spare time constructing a “flying machine” in a small shop behind his house. Experimenting with the newest technology and ideas, he took his first flight in a self-built manned glider from the beach of Mobile Bay in 1893. A twisted rubber band powered his propeller during this test flight. Even though he flew no more than 15 feet in the air, the public noticed his efforts and became curious about his future experiments.

Fowler built the second “flying machine” on Virginia Street near the Jewish cemetery in 1895. A new invention, the motorcycle, inspired him to use a pair of two-cylinder motorcycle engines to overcome natural torque generated by whirling propellers. Since there was not much known about propellers in those days, John Fowler had to design his own that would “bite into air, gather a big hunk, and pull or thrust air over wing sections to gain lift.” Despite his detailed preparations, Fowler's craft never flew, instead crashing as panicked onlookers looked on.

In the following years, Fowler moved his workshop closer to Monroe Park, near today's Brookley field, and secretly started working on his third “flying machine” in

History of the Brookley Complex

1899. He decided to leave the public uninformed and he used Park space behind the open-air theater for testing the “machine.” This time he used rope to tie the glider. Once the winds were strong enough and he was ready for soaring, he released the rope and sailed through the air. These test flights always caused a sensation among the public. Many Mobilians eagerly paid to watch John Fowler fly at what was Arlington Park.

Sometime around 1900, one of the Wright brothers visited John Fowler’s workshop and showed great interest in Fowler’s aircraft, particularly the wings and control surfaces. In late 1903, the Wright brothers from Ohio finally achieved with what Fowler had been dreaming of and working towards his whole life – powered flight. The Wright brother’s aircraft used Fowler’s wing design.

Monroe Park (1900 – 1930)

In the 1890s, Raphael Semmes Jr., son of the celebrated Confederate Naval Admiral Raphael Semmes of Mobile, moved from Memphis to Mobile to manage a new railway and streetcar system. One streetcar line ended near what was to become Monroe Park, a place for Mobilians to gather, relax, and enjoy their free time. Some wanted to name the park in honor of President James Monroe. Instead, it was named after Captain Monroe, a retired sea captain, who had built a house on the bay front before the park was formed. His house later became park’s first pavilion and theater building.

The park offered recreational activities for all ages. Children observed peacocks, monkeys, and deer in the park’s zoo. They rode carousels and roller coasters, ate popcorn and ice cream bought at nearby stands. Adults enjoyed international musicians and actors performing in the theatre, which later became a dance hall. The south side of

History of the Brookley Complex

the park was a popular place for family picnics and veteran's reunions where visitors could see the latest motion pictures. A baseball stadium drew thousands of fans to watch the games where the baseball greats of the day, including Babe Ruth, played. Children played and built sand castles while adults fished and gathered sought-after soft-shell crabs in Mobile Bay.

As the years went by, the face of the Monroe Park changed. The park held conventions, power boat races, and balloon ascensions. The park suffered significant damage from a series of hurricanes in the late 1920s and its recreational activities gradually faded away.

Pre-World War II – 1900 to 1930

Wrights brothers' achievement spurred development of aviation throughout the world, including at what was to become Brookley field. Charles Lindbergh, who completed the first transatlantic flight, landed at Brookley. So did Amelia Earhart, one of the greatest female aviators of all time, breaking many speed and altitude records and the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean.

O.E. (Osbert Edwin) Williams, a Michigan-born pilot, built aircraft and transported passengers. He owned an aviation school and aviation exhibition, sales, and manufacturing facilities. To be able to run his operations year round, he relocated to Mobile, Alabama in 1917 and opened a flight school and manufacturing facility. He supplied the US government with his Williams airplanes engines and lived in the Port City for the rest of his life. OE invented the first reliable air speed indicator, still in use today.

History of the Brookley Complex

In 1929, the City of Mobile bought farmland from Cecil Bates, a former Mobile Mayor, and gave Mobilians Bates Field, their first municipal airport and a part of today's Brookley Complex.

1930 – 1960

The military buildup prior to and during World War II caused US Army to expand across the country, including south. In 1938, the US Army Air Corps bought the Bates Field municipal airport and established the Brookley Army Air Field, re-named to Brookley Air Force Base in 1948. Bates Field relocated approximately 10 miles west and is known today as the Mobile Regional Airport.

The Army chose Brookley primarily because of its waterfront location and flying-suitable weather conditions. The Base served two purposes: a fighter overhaul and maintenance base, and an Air Material Command supplying the Air Force bases around the world. To fulfill its mission, the Army built hangars, large warehouses, its own cargo plane fleet, and took advantage of the existing Arlington Point dock. The dock's function was to allow ocean-going vessels to offload aircraft and transport them to the repair facilities within Brookley without using public roads. Repaired aircraft then flew back into service.

During the war, the Brookley Army Air Field became Mobile's largest employer, with about 17,000 skilled civilians capable of performing delicate work with fragile instruments and machinery. In 1944, the Army decided to take advantage of Brookley's large, skilled workforce for its top-secret "Ivory Soap" project to hasten victory in the Pacific. The project required 24 large vessels to be re-modeled into Aircraft Repair and

History of the Brookley Complex

Maintenance Units that had to be able to accommodate B-29 bombers, P-51s bombers' protectors, R-4B Sikorsky helicopters, and amphibious vehicles. The Air Force delivered all 24 vessels to Mobile, Alabama in spring 1944 to start remodeling. Some 5,000 men underwent a complex training process that prepared them to rebuild the vessels and operate them once on the water. By the end of the year, the vessels departed Mobile.

One of the keys to Allied victory in Europe was the Norden Bomb Sight, which enabled bomber squadrons to target Germany's war-making industry and infrastructure much more accurately. The military repaired and calibrated the bombsights at Brookley in a secret facility, still standing and in use today. After the war, Brookley continued to operate as an Air Material Command.

1960 – 1980

By the 1960s, Brookley base had nearly 13,000 employees. Rumors about closing Brookley Air Force Base started to surface in early 1960s. The Secretary of Defense announced its closure in 1964, widely believed to be President Lyndon Johnson's retaliation for Alabama voting for his opponent Barry Goldwater in the 1964 presidential elections. When Brookley closed officially in June 1969, nearly 10% of the local workforce lost their jobs. This was the largest base closure in history.

The Federal Government returned Brookley Field to the City of Mobile. The City created the Mobile Airport Authority in 1972 to advise the city on the management of Brookley. The city leased a large portion of Brookley to Teledyne Continental Motors to build its popular Continental piston aircraft engines. Teledyne build the engines that powered the Voyager on its record-breaking non-stop round-the-world flight in 1980.

History of the Brookley Complex

1980s

In 1982, an act of the Alabama Legislature formally created an independent Mobile Airport Authority to own and operate the Brookley Complex and Mobile Regional Airport, and having the authority to issue municipal bonds. The Authority's first project was to finance and build a new terminal building at Mobile Regional Airport in west Mobile.

The renamed Brookley Complex remained an important general aviation and industrial airport. In 1984, NASA wanted to display the revolutionary Space Shuttle at the New Orleans World's Fair. NASA needed a runway long enough to land a specially modified 747 carrying the Space Shuttle on its back. Once on land, the Shuttle was too big to transport by road or rail, so the runway had have immediate access to a deep-water port where the craft could be loaded onto a barge and carried to the World's Fair site. . Brookley's unique combination of long runway and deep-water port at Arlington Point made it the only facility able to handle the transfer.

Growth of Aerospace Industry

Once the new terminal building opened in 1986, the Airport Authority refocused it attention on Brookley. It was obvious that its unique mix of all modes of transportation - road, rail, water and air – made it a perfect site for aircraft manufacturing and repair. The Authority embarked on an aggressive campaign to recruit aviation and aerospace industry to Brookley. The first success in that effort was in 1989 when Singapore

History of the Brookley Complex

Technologies chose Brookley for their first North American venture – Mobile Aerospace Engineering, a large aircraft maintenance repair and overhaul facility. In 1992 Brookley was a finalist in the competition for a site to build McDonnell Douglas' MD-12, which was cancelled when demand for large aircraft waned and Boeing subsequently bought the company. McDonnell Douglas was going to build The MD-12 using a revolutionary manufacturing system. They were going to manufacture components at plants throughout the United States and ship the pieces by air, road, rail and very large items by water for final assembly in one location.

In 1993, Indonesian aircraft maker IPTN chose Brookley to build a production facility for twin-engine turbo-prop aircraft. Before production began, the country fell into political turmoil and the project was shelved.

Meanwhile MAE grew to become Mobile's largest private employer and spun off several small aerospace companies. Several former employees created Star Aviation, an aircraft telecommunications and engineering firm now with 125 employees.

In 2003, Boeing identified Brookley as a finalist in its search for a site to assemble the new 787, using the system pioneered for the MD-12. A \$3.2 billion incentive from Washington State combined with political and industrial scandals caused Boeing to cancel the competition and stay in the Seattle area.

In 2004, Boeing again chose Brookley as a finalist in a search for a site for a Vought/Alenia joint venture to assemble 787 fuselage sections. After several changes in the project's make-up, the Mobile Airport Authority withdrew from the competition.

In June 2005, EADS North America chose the Brookley Complex to build an assembly facility for the proposed KC-30 aerial refueling tanker aircraft for the U.S. Air Force, should they win the contract. Northrop Grumman became the prime contractor on

History of the Brookley Complex

the project and chose Brookley for its KC-30 facility as well. EADS-NA also selected Brookley to build an Airbus Engineering Center where engineers will help design the new Airbus A350 XWB aircraft.

For 115 years, Brookley has seen some of the greatest developments in aviation. From a rubber-band powered “flying machine” to the newest and most sophisticated military aircraft, the aerospace industry has found Brookley Field on Mobile Bay the perfect place to be.