

*Henry Woodhouse*

Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center



Owing to its proximity to the Nation’s capital city, Fairfax County has been, and continues to be, a popular venue for events and business ventures. The Court’s Archives contain glimpses of such past episodes, and this month’s *Found in the Archives* explores the Depression-era enterprises of Henry Woodhouse, who first appears in our Land Records in 1928, with his ambitions to create “the world’s largest airport” with the purchase of 166 acres along Hybla

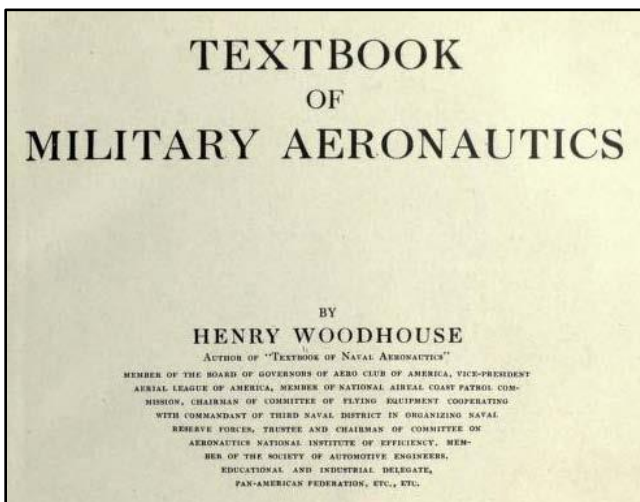
Valley in Alexandria, known as ‘The Smith Tract’.



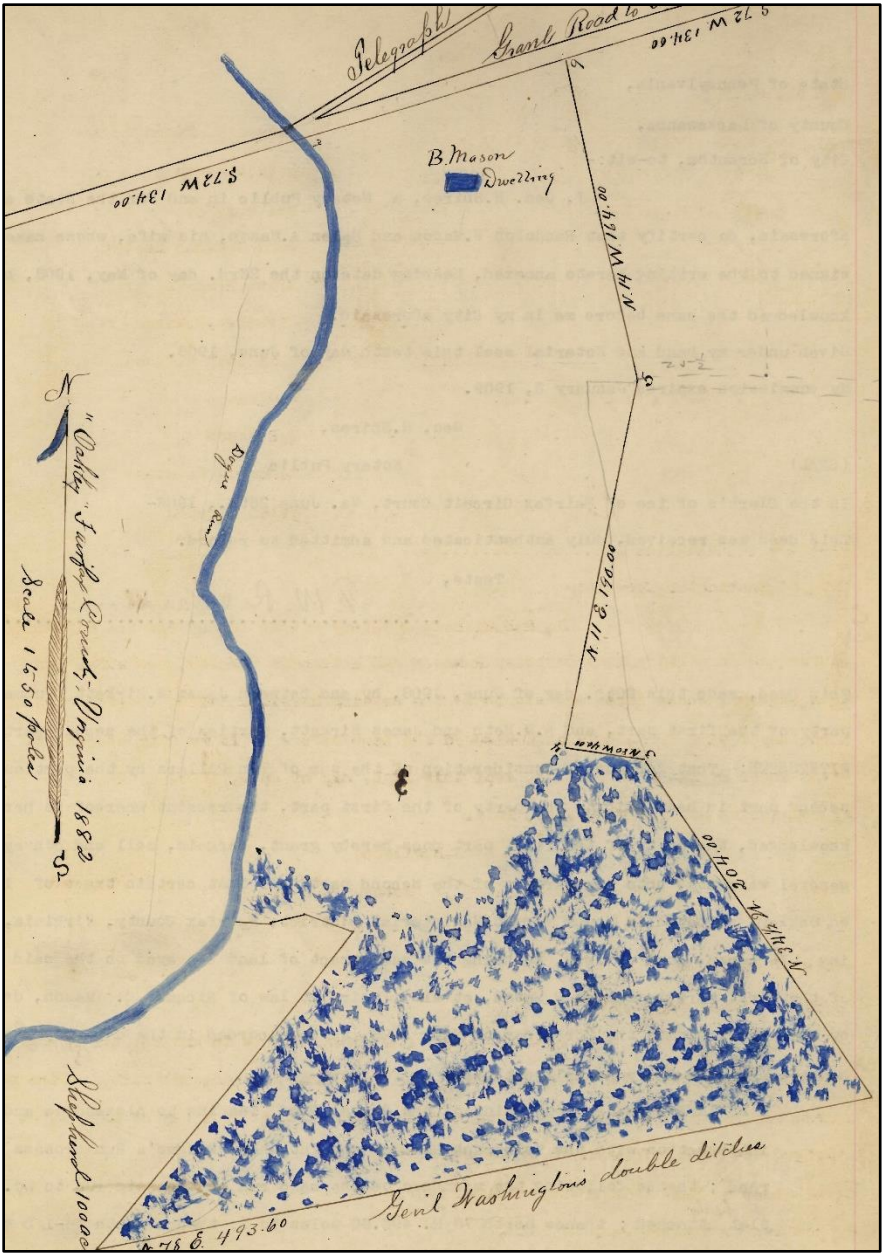
[Henry Woodhouse, Atlanta Constitution, July 27th, 1919, Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons](#)

But who was Henry Woodhouse? A resident of New York City, this financier considered himself an aviation expert. In the 1910s, he wrote many articles and several books on the subject, and his opinions were often quoted in other air-related publications. Details from Woodhouse’s second book, *The Textbook of Military Aeronautics*, can be seen below. In 1920, the New York Evening Times ran an exposé on Woodhouse, revealing him as Italian, originally named ‘Henry (néé Mario) Casalegno’, and reporting that he had been convicted of manslaughter in 1904.

Nonetheless, this did not seem to overly-damage his reputation in the field of air travel.



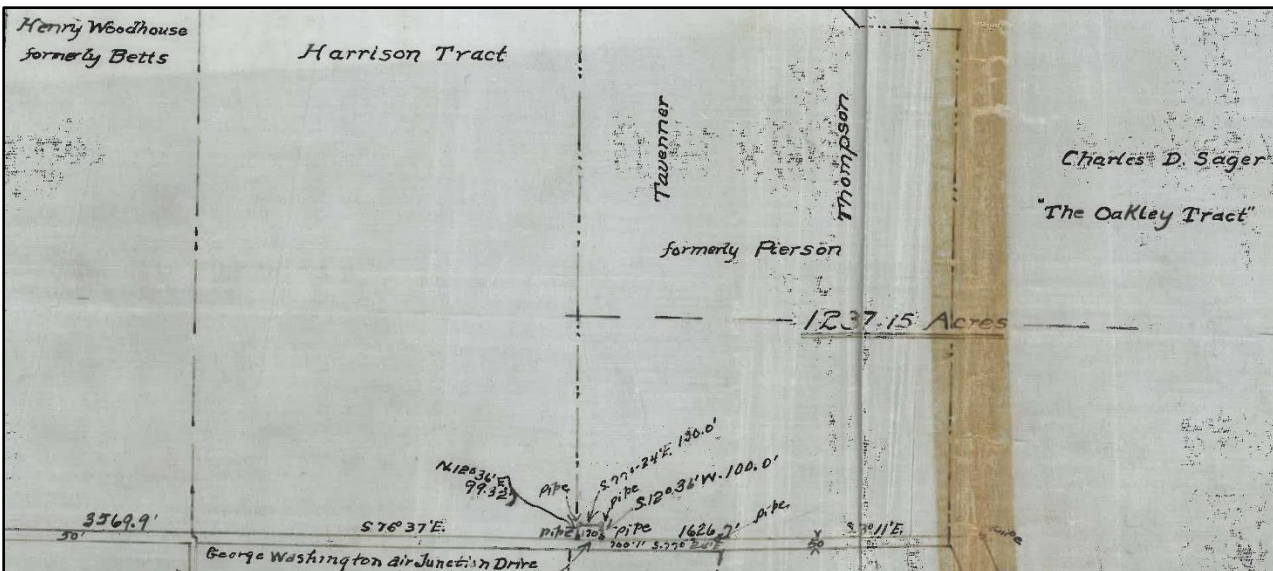
[Excerpts from \*Textbook of Military Aeronautics\*, Henry Woodhouse, 1918, Century Co., Courtesy of University of California Libraries](#)



*Fairfax Deed Book Z-6, p. 513, Survey of Oakley, 1882*

In June 1929, Woodhouse increased his property holdings in Fairfax County by purchasing over 1,200 acres adjacent to his original Smith Tract. Part of this land, bought from the Sagar family, had been a Mason family farm called 'Oakley.' The farm bordered land once owned by George Washington, and his 'double ditches' can be seen on the 1882 plat, at left.

The other tracts purchased at this time had been part of the Huntley Estate, Thomson F. Mason's home. The land was sold by Albert Harrison, the Thompsons, and Carl Tavenner, and can be seen on the plat below.



*Fairfax Deed Book M-10, p. 350A, Survey of Woodhouse Lands by Joseph Berry, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1929*





*George Washington Air Junction, Henry Woodhouse 2<sup>nd</sup> from Right, 1929/ 1930, by a Government Photographer, Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons*

Woodhouse named his prospective airport 'George Washington Air Junction', in honor of the First President's supposed attendance at the first American 'manned' balloon flight. He planned for it to be large enough to host both airplanes and airships. An article published in the Free Lance-Star, Fredericksburg, quoted Woodhouse as saying "There is not an airport in the world that can boast of runways of more than three thousand feet in length, so that the Washington Air Junction is the

only place where the world's largest and heaviest airliner under construction, can take-off and land without danger."



*Henry Woodhouse Presenting Washington Papers to the Clerk of the House of Representatives, January 23rd, 1929, Courtesy of the Library of Congress*

January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1929, was a busy day for Woodhouse. In addition to beginning the survey for the runways of his new airport, he presented a trunkful of 'newly discovered' papers purported to be from Betty Washington (George Washington's sister) to the Clerk of the House of Representatives. Woodhouse was an avid collector of 'Washingtoniana and other Americana, [including]...notable memorabilia of George Washington and members of his family and most of the Presidents of the United States'.

the world's largest aeronautic, scientific and historic center, under the distinguishing name of George Washington Air Junction, which comprised (a) the Thousand Acres Airport, the world's largest airport, (b) the Washington Airship Terminal, for airships, (c) an Aerostatic Park, for balloons and other aircraft of the lighter-than-air craft, (d) a Glider Park, for demonstrations of soaring craft and flying without power, (e) a Scientific Center for scientific and experimental purposes, (f) an Historic Park, where would be assembled and exhibited the large collection of historic records owned by complainant and would be held historic and patriotic commemorations, and spent large sums of money in said plans.

*Henry Woodhouse vs. First National Bank of Alexandria, Bill of Complaint, May 28th, 1936*

Woodhouse had a grand vision to combine his twin passions of aviation and history, within the George Washington Air Junction. The survey for the runways had begun with the ceremonial planting of surveyors' stakes by Wilson Selden Washington, a descendant of John Augustine Washington (George

Washington's brother). According to Woodhouse's Bill of Complaint from a later lawsuit with one of his creditors, First National Bank, the Washington Air Junction was billed as 'the world's largest aeronautic, scientific and historic center.' Woodhouse declared that the East-West runway would be 7,500 feet long, and the North-South runway would be 3,000 feet long. The George Washington Air Junction was dedicated in February 1929, and was in use as an airstrip by that May. America's first major crash in the stock market occurred just 8 months later, in October of 1929, on what became known as 'Black Thursday'.

1. To establish and operate the Historic Celebrations Park a rectangular tract of land 2000 X 600 feet in size, constituting the major part of the southern half of the tract of 68.796 acres designated as the "Albert R. Harrison Tract" on the survey of the George Washington Air Junction made by Joseph Berry, C. E. January 30th, 1930, which said section shall be bounded

*Fairfax Deed Book C-11, p. 190, January 22nd, 1932*


In January 1932, perhaps in an effort to encourage business at the Junction, the Board of Supervisors issued a Resolution exempting

the 'Trans-Atlantic Zeppelin Service' from county taxes for five years, on the condition that they 'locate an American Terminal at Hybla Valley'. Later that same month, Woodhouse entered into a contract with George W. Tolk, for Tolk to build and run an 'Historic Celebrations Park' on the Harrison Tract portion of the Junction. Part of this agreement, recorded in Fairfax County Deed Book C-11, can be seen in the extract above.

One of Tolk's agreed responsibilities was to construct a replica of a schoolhouse that George Washington had once attended. He was also to erect a museum space to display various items of Washingtoniana and Americana, including a piece of Mary Washington's dress (George Washington's mother), on loan from Woodhouse. Furthermore, Tolk, as Director of Historic



Celebrations Park, was expected to host events for the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Washington's birth, devised and arranged by Woodhouse. The agreement contained twenty multiple-part clauses of like content.



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1732 1932

Come to the replica of

## George Washington's Schoolhouse

A permanent shrine erected as a tribute to his boyhood memory—containing newly discovered school-day records in Washington's own handwriting.

**Always open to the public from 9:00 A.M. to 6:30 P.M.**

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*Come to the following Ceremonies and Memorials at the George Washington School-house*

**Sat., April 23 at 3 P.M.**—Dedication of the School-house by Edwin Markham—Bicentennial Poet with combined tributes to William Shakespeare and Edwin Markham whose birthday it is.

**Sun., April 24 at 3 P.M.**—Memorial to Washington's Father, Capt. Augustine Washington.

**Sat., April 30 at 3 P.M.**—Costume sketch of episodes in Washington's Childhood Days in a spectacular pageant.

**Sun., May 1 at 3 P.M.**—Memorial to the pioneers of Washington's Childhood who lived in the then wilderness, which included the present Capitol of the United States.

**Sat., May 7 at 3 P.M.**—"When Washington went to School"—A pageant written by Mrs. Alice Hunt Bartlett, Chairman of the National Arts Committee for the Celebration of Washington's 200th Birthday.

**Sun., May 8 at 3 P.M.**—(Mother's Day) Memorial to Mary Washington, the mother of George Washington with newly discovered records of Mary Washington's religious influence upon her son.

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Presented under the auspices of

**NATIONAL ARTS COMMITTEE** for the celebration of **WASHINGTON'S 200th BIRTHDAY**

**AT THE GEORGE WASHINGTON AIR JUNCTION**

on 2000 acres of historic ancestral lands of George Washington and George Mason  
**on U. S. Route No. 1 Highway—2 miles South of Alexandria or a mile South of Penn Daw Hotel**

Phone : Alexandria 2360

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George W. Tolk — Director of Historic Celebrations Park

Tolk erected the schoolhouse, but neglected most of his other contractual responsibilities. Tolk also refused to allow Woodhouse to hold the Washington birthday bicentennial activities, outlined in the attached promotional flyer, at the Historic Celebrations Park. Woodhouse contended that Tolk's dereliction of contract duty, coupled with Albert H. Harrison's failure to completely vacate the land Harrison had sold him for the Park, prevented 'the holding of historic celebrations before and during the two hundredth anniversary of Washington's birthday.'

In this same deposition,

*Albert Harrison vs. Henry Woodhouse et al, Defendant's Exhibit #6*

Woodhouse was adamant that Tolk had never returned the historical documents and artifacts, which Woodhouse had loaned to him.

The failure of Woodhouse's Bicentennial Celebrations marked a downward spiral in his efforts to fulfill his plans. In order to finance the construction of the Junction's support buildings,

increase the airport's land holdings, and pay his many trustees, he had already started to remortgage his properties, making Promissory Notes to himself, on the money he received from his new trustees.

These events coincided with what is generally acknowledged as the worst year of the American Great Depression. Throughout the year, massive numbers of unemployed people had converged on the Capital, asking Washington bureaucrats for help. By December 1932, Woodhouse realized that he could not service all of his debts by shuffling money from one trustee to another. According to The Evening Star (a D. C. newspaper), he offered the U.S. Senate use of his lands as a 'permanent camp for the unemployed.'

Woodhouse's many creditors were also feeling the economic pinch of the Great Depression and, starting in 1933, they began legal proceedings against him. Woodhouse lost two parcels of land through two separate suits.

2. The defendant further says that complainant was fully apprised before he became holder of said notes of the following -

(a) That said notes were not negotiable because the title of the persons who held said notes was defective and tainted with fraud, said persons having obtained defendant's signature to said notes by fraudulent representations.

*Albert Harrison vs. Henry Woodhouse et al, Answer & Crossbill, March 1936*

In 1935, Albert H. Harrison mounted a suit against Woodhouse to seek foreclosure on several more parcels of land, including 69 acres of the Harrison Tract. This was

the land earmarked by Woodhouse for the Historic Celebrations Park. Harrison claimed that Woodhouse had taken out seven additional Promissory Notes, in addition to the original Deed of Trust (mortgage) recorded on the land. It took Woodhouse four months to answer the Complaint. As can be seen in his Answer and Cross-Bill above, Woodhouse argued that the Promissory Notes were not legally binding, the trustees 'having obtained defendant's signature to said notes by fraudulent representations'.

(d) That complainant well knew that defendant bought said land for use as an Historic Park, and he promised and agreed, as a consideration for the purchase of said land at said price of \$200. per acre, to cooperate with and assist the defendant Woodhouse in such activities and undertakings from which defendant Woodhouse would have established a large profitable business and derived large income and profits.

*Albert Harrison vs. Henry Woodhouse et al, Answer & Crossbill, March 1936*

According to Woodhouse, Harrison's actions and lack of cooperation had led to a huge loss in future earnings, as he would have 'derived large income and profits' from the historical activities.

The Court found for Harrison. Woodhouse appealed the Court's decision in May 1937, and tried to mount a proposal for Congress to buy or lease the Washington Air Junction for a 'Capital and Airship Terminal.....to restore Washington Air Junction as a national asset'. Unfortunately, the Hindenburg Disaster, a catastrophic accident in New Jersey in which the inbound German zeppelin Hindenburg became a fireball, had happened less than three weeks before his proposal, and it came to nothing.

By the end of 1937, Woodhouse had lost all of his airport land. Over time, a significant proportion of his collection of Washingtoniana was proven to be forged. The remaining portion of the airstrip land was taken by the United States Government and used for a Naval Research Laboratory. In 1975, the land was deeded to the Fairfax County Park Authority, and it is now Huntley Meadows Park: <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley-meadows>.

*For more information on these and other records held at the Fairfax Circuit Court Historic Records Center, please call 703-246-4168 or email [CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov](mailto:CCRHistoricRecords@fairfaxcounty.gov).*

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<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/circuit/historic-records-center>