

Birdneck Launch Site Dedication

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History by Lillie Gilbert

Welcome to the Birdneck Non-Motorized Launch Site. I'd like to give you a brief history of this area. "Neck" as related to a land mass is defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary as "a narrow stretch of land." The land upon which we are standing today is part of the Birdneck peninsula. The word "neck" derives from a similar sounding English word used before the 12th century, the Old English *hnecca* and Middle English *nekke*. The British settlers here in Virginia Beach named quite a few necks of land.

How Birdneck got its name we may never know but it is suggested in a 2003 article from the *Virginian Pilot* that the name derived from the shape of the land which looks like a bird. This is questionable because if you look at a map that's a bit of a stretch unless only the point of land now known as Birdneck Point is considered...part of that does resemble the head of a bird. A more plausible answer may be that the neck of land supported a large bird population or one or more rookeries. If you have driven down Laskin Road at dusk you probably noticed all of the white egrets sitting in the various trees at this southern end of the Birdneck peninsula. However, a third explanation in local legend tells the story of a man named Crane.

One of the oldest homes on Birdneck Point, now the Samuel home, was built in the late 1920s when Birdneck Point was in transition from farmland to a summer colony. Richard T. Crane, heir to a plumbing supply fortune and owner of the colonial era Westover Plantation on the James River, saw potential for vacation homes on the peninsula just to the west of the then tiny resort town of Virginia Beach. Legend credits him with giving Birdneck its name in 1925. (April 17, 2005 in Flavor/Gracious Living section, *Virginian Pilot*, Ann Wright) It is interesting to note that the Westover Plantation was named by William Byrd. It is Mr. Crane who donated land for a golf course that is today's Cavalier Golf and Yacht Club. The golf course opened in 1927 followed by the first club house in 1930 on the waterfront of Birdneck Point. An article about a 45 foot yacht drawing 33 feet in the 1934 *New York Times* (Sunday, July 15, 1934) calls the water in front of the

clubhouse, Bird Neck Creek, although that name is not in use today. This deep draft yacht traveled from New York to Birdneck Point and successfully navigated the first Lesner Bridge which was a drawbridge built in 1928 and the bays of the Lynnhaven to Birdneck Point's piers. Interestingly, these piers were used for trap shooting more than boating. It wasn't until after World War II that the piers were converted to boating docks and the name changed to Cavalier Yacht and Country Club. (*Princess Anne County and Virginia Beach, A Pictorial History*, Stephen Mansfield, 1989)

Birdneck was drawn but not named on a colonial map dated 1690. Among the earliest colonial residents of the Birdneck peninsula were members of the John Ackiss family who settled and farmed in the 1700s. John Ackiss was a member of the House of Burgesses for Princess Anne County and a colonel in the local Militia. A descendant, John Ackiss II, gave 30 acres of the farmland to a slave named Smallwood Ackiss. The Smallwood Ackiss descendents owned their land until the 1900s and may have been the ones who sold to Mr. Crane. There is a small graveyard on the grounds of the Cavalier Golf Course where Smallwood Ackiss and his wife Charlotte Cornick Ackiss are buried. Part of the dogwoods, wild azaleas and fruit trees from the Ackiss property are still a visible part of the community on the former farm land in Birdneck. ("Spotlight on Birdneck Point," *Virginian Pilot*, June 29, 2003)

It is also interesting to note that all of the street names on the Birdneck Peninsula are named for birds: tananger, killdeer, kingfisher, wren, kittiwake, cardinal, curlew, plover, oriole, starling, mockingbird, and others. Whatever the source of the name, "Birdneck," even today we can observe many varieties of water-related birds and others nearby.

The waterway you are seeing at this launch site is part of Great Neck Creek, the headwaters for Linkhorn Bay. Surveys from 1918 trace the marshlands associated with this creek almost to the marshes of Rudee Inlet, although I have never found a map that connected them. The name "Birdneck" was selected for this paddlers' launch site because it is a recognizable locale due to its proximity to Birdneck Road. We are in the neighborhood known as Birdneck Acres. The closest street across the water is Hawks Nest Way. The waterway on the east side of Birdneck is Little Neck Creek even though the land area we know

today as Little Neck is miles away. From where we are, one can paddle south to the uppermost part of Great Neck Creek through a very healthy salt marsh or north into the nearby coves of Linkhorn Bay. Once in Linkhorn Bay, take a look at the 16 windowed cantilevered house that once belonged to tennis great, Martina Navratilova. Paddling east into Little Neck Creek the paddler can take out at a couple of waterfront restaurants on Laskin Road. If paddling farther north, the paddler can take out at First Landing State Park or go into Broad Bay, Long Creek, or the other branches and creeks of the Lynnhaven watershed.

Welcome again to this historic day in the historic Birdneck area of Virginia Beach, VA. We hope that paddlers will have a great day on the water! Many thanks to the City of Virginia Beach and in particular the Parks and Recreation Department for making this all possible. An environmental grant from Patagonia will allow us to put a permanent informational sign at this launch site. Thank you also to Lynnhaven River Now for sponsoring the Stewardship and Access Committee who is in attendance today and who collaborated with the city to begin the process to make this our city's newest launch site. Thank you, friends of our waterways, for attending!