

TCC sets aside space for planned Dale Mabry Air Field Museum in Tallahassee

[Byron Dobson](#), Tallahassee Democrat Published 7:30 p.m. ET Jan. 24, 2020



Chuck Wells, chair of Tallahassee's Dale Mabry Air Field Museum, Inc. board, stands next to sign designating area where the planned museum will be built on the campus of Tallahassee Community College. (Photo: Byron Dobson/Tallahassee Democrat)

Chuck Wells stood inside a barren quad of property on the southwest edge of Tallahassee Community College's campus.

"We're standing in roughly the top of the northwest runway," Wells said, as he glanced westward. "If I went over there and dug up some of the asphalt, (you'd discover) it was part of the taxiway that led to the runway."

Wells was referring to the former site of the Dale Mabry Army Air Field during WWII, established Jan. 24, 1941. TCC's Appleyard Drive campus is situated on the former army airfield.

Behind Wells, facing Progress Drive on TCC's campus, was a small billboard: "Future Home Tallahassee's Dale Mabry Air Field Museum."

Tallahassee Community College President Jim Murdaugh – a promoter of community in the college's name – has agreed to designate these three acres of land off Progress Drive as the home site for the museum.

Wells chairs Tallahassee's Dale Mabry Army Air Field Museum Inc.'s board, a nonprofit organization that plans to establish a museum complex on the property by 2024.

"We are establishing a mutually beneficial relationship focused on a shared desire to preserve history, honor military men and women, inspire young people and future generations to build awareness and provide civic opportunities related to the Airbase," Murdaugh said.

The nine-member museum board includes a mix of people with a strong affinity for the military, aviation and preserving local history.



An image of planes used in training at Dale Mabry Army Air Field established in Tallahassee on Jan. 24, 1941. (Photo: Florida Memory Collection)

Dale Mabry Air Field existed 1941-45. It was built by the Army Air Corps, the aviation arm of the Army that became the U.S. Air Force in 1948.

Dale Mabry Field was in southwest Tallahassee, in an area now occupied by the Mabry Manor and Seminole Manor residential neighborhoods. Mabry was a Tallahassee native and pilot who served in World War I.

The base adopted the name and used the runways of the existing Tallahassee airport, located near today's James Messer recreation complex and Tallahassee Community College.

The air field “was the catalyst for the transformation Tallahassee experienced in the growth period following WWII,” said Wells’s wife, Lorraine Wells, director of public relations for the non-profit. “Many Tallahasseeans are unaware of its cultural, historical and socio-economic relevance and influence. This is something we need to change.”

At its peak, the base employed 800 civilians and 4,300 permanent military personnel.

It “was a major airfield training over 8,000 fighter pilots to include, the French, Chinese, British and our very own Tuskegee Airmen, black pilots who broke the color barrier in the Army Air Corps,” Chuck Wells said. “The first Florida A&M University student accepted in the Army Air Corps, Lt. James Polkinghorne, went on to become a pilot with this storied group.”



TCC first recognized its shared heritage with Tallahassee's Dale Mabry Army Air Field by dedicating a historic marker on Oct. 17, 2001. Pictured is Alice Smith-Ragsdale, secretary to Colonel Jacob Wuest, the first base commander. (Photo: Tallahassee Community College)

Chuck Wells, a research administrator at Florida State University, is a walking encyclopedia on the airfield, but is quick to add that each board member brings expertise and a sense of passion in getting the museum established.

The Dale Mabry Army Air Field had a strong impact on Tallahassee that continues to this day: Chuck Wells notes it occupied 1,720 acres in Tallahassee's southwest quadrant, which is larger than FSU's main and southwest campuses combined.

The site of the future museum site on top of the northwest runway extended to what is now Messer Field at the other end.

Appleyard Drive was essentially the north-south runway. The Sheriff's Office now sits on what was the east-west runway, which ran parallel to Leonard Gray Way.

Tallahassee Fire Station No. 4 at Appleyard and Pensacola sits on the former site of the control tower. The Rose Printing site is where the flight line was located.

Sabal Palm Elementary School's official name is Sabal Palm Elementary at Dale Mabry Field and the school's mascot is the Patriots.



Sabal Palm unveiled its new mascot during an hour-long ceremony at the school on Wednesday, November 13, 2013. They changed from the Eagles to the Patriots in honor of the history of the neighborhood and surrounding reserve bases. The school will also dedicated the playing field as Dale Mabry Field since it is built on one of the old air strips. Local veteran groups , the Patriot Guard Riders and local school board members were also be in attendance. *(Photo: Mike Ewen/Democrat)*

“That was where the base school was,” Wells said. “Base personnel had children and the children needed a school.”

The airfield had its own hospital and when it was decommissioned, it became the first site for Tallahassee Memorial Hospital.

It is this history and so much more that can be made available by establishing the museum, Wells said.

Now, with a permanent site thanks to the TCC partnership, the still young organization can begin concerted efforts to raise funds to relocate two historic airbase buildings still in existence.

Until now, the organization has received mostly small donations to help save these buildings.



The board of Tallahassee's Dale Mabry Army Air Field would like to acquire this building on Hull Drive owned by Florida State University for its new museum location at Tallahassee Community College. *(Photo: Special to the Democrat)*

“When the base was built, we were in a period of mobilization,” Wells said. “They had 90 days to erect the base. Most of the buildings were made of wood.

"They were so well built that when the base closed, they were surplus. People bought the buildings and relocated them."

Two have caught the attention of the board, with the goal of working out an agreement to move them to the TCC property where they will be an integral part of what Wells describes as a "museum complex."

One is owned by Leon County Schools and sits on the property at Heritage Trails Community School. The second is owned by Florida State University on Hull Drive, near the College of Education building.



The board of Tallahassee's Dale Mabry Army Air Field Museum would like to acquire this building, formerly located at Dale Mabry Field from Leon County Schools as part of its new museum. The building. *(Photo: Special to the Democrat)*

Hull Drive is named after Cordell Hull, who served as Secretary of State during WWII.

"Initially, it will be those two buildings," Wells said of the museum site. "The two buildings themselves would be displayed and filled with displays representative of the 1940s, so people could go back to learn what it was like in World War II."

Other plans include a Memorial Garden in recognition of the 200 service personnel who lost their lives during training drills or other incidents in Tallahassee.

Also, a “victory garden” would recall the days when people in the United States had community gardens to grow food so that agricultural products could be reserved for servicemen and servicewomen in training or deployed overseas.



This marker is located on Tallahassee Community College's campus at the corner of Appleyard Drive and West Pensacola Street. (Photo: Tallahassee Community College)

Critical to the board is the involvement of TCC students: “The sky is the limit in our potential for engaging students at Tallahassee Community College,” Wells said.

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The team behind the museum

Members of the Dale Mabry Army Air Field Museum, Inc. board are:

Oscar Brannon, retired U. S. Army National Guard Sergeant First Class

Tommy Bowermeister, retired Air Force fighter pilot and son of a WWII pilot

Dr. A.J. Brickler, Tallahassee physician and expert on the Tuskegee Airmen

Paul Gunter, historian and member of the National Council on Public History

Harold Knowles, local attorney

Al Latimer, economic development executive from Orlando

Chuck Wells, a research administrator at Florida State University

Lorraine Wells, program administrator, CareerSource Florida

Debra Westerman, historian, with museum experience

For more information, visit <http://www.dmaaf.org/>