PWJ 6/27/90 p. A12

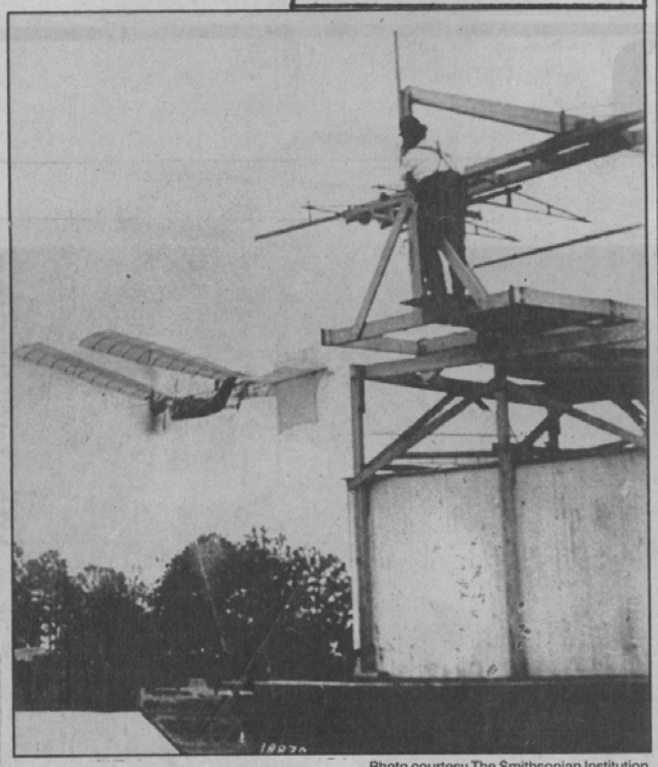

Photo courtesy The Smithsonian Institution

This photo, taken by Alexander Graham Bell, shows the Langley Aerodrome No. 5 on takeoff from a boat off Chopawamsic Island.

Stafford was site of forgotten flight

By JOSEPH CURL
Journal staff writer

Kitty Hawk gets the glory, but credit Stafford County with an assist.

Seven years before the Wright brothers flew the first manned airplane at the now-famous site in North Carolina, the first unmanned plane was launched in Stafford County.

Ironically, few people in Stafford know of Samuel Pierpont Langley's achievement, and even fewer seem to care.

"I didn't know they flew the first plane there," said Phillip Oestreich, who owns Chopawamsic Island, where Langley launched his plane.

"They ought to do something to mark it," he said.

The Stafford Historical Society has never made an effort to designate the island a historic landmark or mark Langley's triumph, said Joyce Sterne, the society's chairwoman.

"We should work to get it on the register [of historic places], but it takes a long time," she said. "Something should definitely be there."

The Board of Supervisors has not small houseboat down the Potomac River to the island in hopes of launching one of their planes.

Following his success in 1896, Langley began working non-stop on a manned plane. Construction of his Great Aerodrome, with 24-foot wings, was hampered by problems with the engine, which continued to be too weak.

On Dec. 8, 1903, with the engine complete and considered to be the world's most advanced, Langley and his team sailed down the Potomac to Widewater with the plane.

With scientist R.L. Reed at the controls and the propellers spinning, the Great Aerodrome raced down the track of the catapult, right into the river.

The plane was towed back to the Smithsonian for more work.

Nine days later, the Wright brothers soared into the history books when they launched the first manned plane at Kitty Hawk. Their flight lasted 12 seconds and covered 120 feet.

Langley had worked for 17 years and had come up nine days short. He died three years later, without another attempted flight.

and a Smithsonian institution theater after him.

The U.S. Postal Service lauded Langley's accomplishment by putting him on the 45-cent airmail stamp in 1988.

But no plaque or marker near the site of the historic flight notes Langley's achievement, and the island, with its three houses, is again up for sale.

Oestreich and co-owner Jo Knight want $800,000 for the island. Despite its being about 250 yards off the coast of the Quantico U.S. Marine Corps base airstrip, Chopawamsic is part of Stafford County.

Langley had chosen the 13-acre island because the winds were mild and flights could be made entirely over shallow water.

His feat in 1896 sent waves throughout the scientific community, silencing the doubters and inspiring the young scientists working toward manned flight.

"The fact that the great scientist, Professor Langley, believed in flying machines was one thing that encouraged us to begin our studies," wrote 29-year-old Wilbur Wright to another inventor.

"It was he that recommended to us [the readings that] started us in the right direction."

The 1896 flight of Aerodrome No. 5, as Langley dubbed it, was described by Alexander Graham Bell, who had taken the train to Quantico with Langley and wrote the press release describing the event:

"Under the impulse of its engines alone, it advanced against the wind, and while drifting little and slowly ascending, it described a curve of about 100 metres in diameter and having been driven its course for about a minute and a half at a height in the air which I estimate at 81 feet," it landed in the Potomac River, having flown 3,300 feet at a speed of about 25 miles per hour.

As secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, Langley had the single largest source of research money in America and many inventors on the staff from which to draw.

"His technical contributions weren't all that significant, but he gave a lot of credibility to the field," said Peter Jacobs, curator of early aviation at the Smithsonian.

In 1891, after working unsuccessfully with rubber-band-powered planes for five years, construction began on Aerodrome No. 0.

His rubber band planes had led him to alter the wings, changing from flat to a slightly arched design. The Wrights also would settle on an arched wing design for their planes.

Over the next five years, Langley and his team of inventors towed a