

Peter O. Knight Airport

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One of the largest public building projects on Davis Islands, perhaps second only to Tampa Municipal Hospital, was the construction of the “Downtown Airport” in the 1930s. Though first proposed in 1930, construction did not begin until June 1934. City leaders decided on a name for the airport shortly after the start of construction – Peter O. Knight Airport. The honor was appropriate, given Knight’s efforts to bring the Boston-based engineering firm of Stone & Webster in to invest in Davis Islands at the close of the Florida Land Boom. The project, one of many funded by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), sat on a vast tract of unused land on the southeastern end of the Islands.

The airport opened in early 1937, but it saw little use during its first year. According to the Hillsborough County WPA office’s year-end report for 1937, revenues at Peter O. Knight airport totaled \$195 and were derived mostly from hanger rentals. In contrast, Drew Field, Tampa’s other airport, brought in \$2,131. To boost revenues, city leaders planned a \$500,000 expansion to the small airport. The project would begin “as soon as the WPA is ready,” according to Tampa mayor R.E.L. Chancey. The expansion would include dredging more land for a longer runway and closing off one of the Islands’ original canals which cut through the western edge of the airport.

The airport’s design fit the aviation concepts of the day. The layout featured runways, a seaplane basin (seaplanes carried a considerable number of passengers during this early era of commercial aviation) and an administration building. The original terminal building, clad in Florida limestone, would not age well, but at the time was considered a site to behold. City officials named the building *The Tony Jannus Administration Building*, in recognition of the

pilot of the world's first scheduled commercial airline flight (which took place January 1, 1914 from St. Petersburg to Tampa). The 1939 book, *Florida: A Guide to the Southernmost State*, hailed the newly opened complex as an “outstanding structure,”

faced with key limestone blocks and ornamented with coping bands of glazed black tile. The sawed surfaces of the limestone blocks, quarried on the Florida Keys, reveal cross-sections of shellfish, sea plants, and coral formations. An open balcony extends entirely around the second story of the building. The third story is formed by an octagonal, glassed-in observatory, above which a glass and metal lantern, designed to represent the lamp room of a lighthouse, supports an aerial beacon.

The guide book points out that “the rotunda walls are decorated with seven murals by George Hill of St. Petersburg.” Hill, a noted WPA artist, painted seven scenes relating to the history of aviation, including two of Jannus, one titled “Tony Jannus in Russia” and the other “History’s First Scheduled Airline Passenger Arrives in Tampa.”

The future of Peter O. Knight Airport was in doubt at the beginning of World War II. The Army Air Corps had taken over two of Tampa’s municipal airports, Drew and Henderson Fields. Peter O. Knight, then, became the only airfield in Tampa available for civil aviation. This did not protect the field from closing “for the duration,” which was seen as a method of securing the area and reducing the number of airplanes appearing in local skies. The Tampa Aero Club mounted a campaign to save the airport, which proved successful. Passenger and private planes continued to use Peter O. Knight Airport throughout the war.

As pro-airport advocates correctly predicted, Peter O. Knight gained importance due to its role as the only public airport available and its close proximity to downtown, but its deficiencies also began to show. It seemed apparent, as early as 1943, to some of the area's aviation boosters that the Islands' airport was too small for larger passenger planes that required long runways, rather than water, on which to land. People such as Roslyn Burritt, who championed the saving of Peter O. Knight Airport, now wanted Henderson Field, near Temple Terrace in northern Hillsborough County, as the county's international airport when the war ended.

Neither Peter O. Knight Airport nor Henderson Field became Tampa's international airport. Drew Field, in existence since the 1920s and expanded by the Army Air Corps during the war, became Tampa International Airport in 1947. Peter O. Knight currently serves small, private planes and helicopters, plus the occasional airship. Remnants of Henderson Field's asphalt runways are barely visible amid an industrial park, brewery and the tourist meccas of Busch Gardens and Adventure Island.

Peter O. Knight Airport continues today in its role of serving the private aviation traffic of the City of Tampa. The original limestone administration building was demolished in the 1960s and replaced by a less imaginative concrete block and aluminum building. The seaplane basin, previously an asset for the airport, is now filled with sailboats, reflecting the ever-evolving landscape and history of Davis Islands.