

Significance of Naming GIS Innovation Corridor

By

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Introduction

On July 13, 2020, GatewayGIS in collaboration with several community partners proposed to name a portion of the Midtown, JeffVanderLou and St. Louis Place neighborhoods: **Captain Wendell O. Pruitt GIS Innovation Corridor**. This naming would be in honor of an important African American St. Louis native, Sumner High School graduate, World War II Fighter Pilot and Tuskegee Airman, Captain Wendell O. Pruitt (1920-1945).

St. Louis is still very divided along race lines relatedly; north St. Louis has been poverty-stricken for far too long. With building a new facility for the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and the work of GatewayGIS, it is the perfect time to designate a corridor that will instill neighborhood pride, while also celebrating the ideals related to geospatial technologies and STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) education and career development.

What time will be better than the present?

Imagine: From where Saint Louis University is located on Grand Boulevard, going north from there to the Herbert Hoover Boys and Girls Clubs on Grand near Natural Bridge Avenue, then eastward along Natural Bridge Avenue to Jefferson Avenue and south to Dr. Martin Luther King Drive in north St. Louis, this could be the boundaries for the first GIS Innovation Corridor to be named in honor of Captain Wendell O. Pruitt.



Photo taken from blackpast.org

Increasingly as media depicts how COVID-19 reveals the truth about inequities in health care of African Americans and social justice initiatives that face unrelenting blindness within the judicial system nationwide, African Americans seem to tackle insurmountable obstacles daily. Perhaps, by recognizing Captain Wendell O. Pruitt as a local African American hero, commemoration of him can be a symbol of hope and healing for many Black St. Louisans.

Biography

Wendell Oliver Pruitt was born on June 20, 1920 to Elijah and Melanie Pruitt in St. Louis, Missouri. Pruitt grew up in the Ville neighborhood and graduated from Sumner High School. After graduation, he attended Stowe Teachers College, now known as Harris-Stowe State University, briefly before transferring to Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri where he was pledged to the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Pruitt developed an interest in aviation, and it was at the Jefferson City Airport that he obtained his private pilot license, while attending school. Upon his graduation in 1941, he was accepted into the U.S. Army Air Corps Flying School at Tuskegee, Alabama.

As a Black pilot, Pruitt carved out an impressive career in the face of segregation and limited opportunities for advancement. Pruitt's military career started after training in 1942. Pruitt was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant and was assigned to the 302nd squadron, which was designated as the 332nd Fighter Group, an all-African American squadron that was formed by order of President Franklin Roosevelt. This is where he befriended Lt. Col. Lee A. Archer Jr and formed "Gruesome Twosome". These two men are thought to be the most successful pair of Tuskegee pilots in terms of air victories in the 332nd Fighter Group.

Pruitt flew the P-47 Thunderbolt and then the P-51 Mustang. He flew over 70 missions overseas and his air victories earned him the rank of captain, as well as several awards and honors, including the Air Medal with six Oak Leaf Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. St. Louis proclaimed December 12, 1944 as Captain Wendell O. Pruitt Day in celebration of all he had accomplished.

For a time before his death, Pruitt returned to Tuskegee to train newly recruited pilots. On April 15, 1945, Wendell Pruitt and one of his students were killed in flight training. It is believed that the student froze but that it was too late for Pruitt to regain control of the plane. He was buried at Saint Peters Cemetery in Normandy, St. Louis County, Missouri in Plot: Section 29, Lot 192.

In 1952, the Pruitt-Igoe Housing Project was partially named after him, the other commemoration for a local white politician. Originally segregated, the Wendell O. Pruitt apartments first welcomed only African American residents, and the William L. Igoe apartments was reserved for white residents. As in many cities, the utopian ideas of public housing suffered from racial segregation and the concentration of poverty. In 1972, however, crime and infestation led to the demolition of the complex. The designation of this corridor would restore the city's commitment to honoring a heroic Black St. Louisan. While at the same time, it will demonstrate a commitment to advance geoscience and geospatial technologies as part of STEAM education and career development for residents of the area.

Bridging the Divide

GatewayGIS offers a community-building support system for under-resourced, underrepresented preschool to 12th grade STEAM education, career development, and entrepreneurship inclusive of geoscience and geospatial technologies workforce development projects. With the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency moving into north Saint Louis, it becomes possible to reimagine what this innovation corridor can do for the community, as well as what the community can do for the corridor. North Saint Louis has been an area of concentrated poverty for many years and in this time of contested monuments and names, it is an important time to celebrate the contributions of African American St. Louisans.

Wendell O. Pruitt is someone who broke through racial barriers in both the military and the sciences, and was devoted to his family, community, and country. Wendell O. Pruitt's connections to the Ville and Sumner High School make him a natural role model for young Black citizens, inspiring them to achieve their goals. Pruitt's legacy as an aviator is embedded in the integration of STEAM and GIS (Geographic Information Systems), two things that are soon to become important to the area of north St. Louis.

Captain Wendell O. Pruitt GIS Innovation Corridor reflects the values and contributions of the residents of north St. Louis and neighborhoods at large. Likewise, it would give the district a name of which they could feel proud. Although St. Louis is divided still on many issues, Gateway GIS urges the Board of Aldermen to commemorate Captain Wendell O. Pruitt through the naming of the corridor and as a bridge for what divides the city.

Further Reading

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