

Lorton History - The Nike Site

Missiles helped deter the Soviets

By Irma Clifton

In the early 1950s I rode the school bus from my home on Ox Road down to Lorton School, which was located near where I-95 and Lorton Road come together today. All of the kids on our bus were fascinated by a big hole that was being dug along what is now known as Furnace Road. For months we watched as the hole grew bigger and deeper. It was located on prison property, and since they were always doing something, none of us questioned what it might turn out to be.

This was in a time before the county had task forces, listening groups and even many public hearings. Not to mention that this project was on federal property, being done by the Department of Defense for security reasons; this meant that the surrounding community knew little about what was going on.

Finally the day came when we all found out that the big hole was to house missiles for the defense of Washington, DC in the event of an attack from what was then known as the Soviet Union. We kids were already preparing for an air attack in school by having drills where we would get under our desk and cover our heads then wait for the all clear siren, so we were somewhat familiar with a kids-eye view of national security.

Over time the NIKE Missile site at Lorton grew to be a fixture in the community. It was one of thirteen that circled the city of Washington, three of which were located in Fairfax County. The name NIKE comes from the Greek goddess of victory. The sites were located around cities throughout the United States and were designed to protect against an air attack by the Soviet Union. The site at Lorton was selected because it was a short distance from Washington, and the Federal Government already owned the land. Situated on thirty acres, the Lorton site was a "double site" in that it had six rather than three magazines and twice the normal staff, according to Chris Bright, a scholar and author who has extensively researched and written about the Cold War era and NIKE Missile sites.

The Secretary of the Army dubbed the Lorton site the "National NIKE Site" and it became a show place for visiting foreign dignitaries as well as national and local politicians. For a period of time, local citizens were encouraged to visit, and Scout troops were frequently invited to tour the facility. The launch area could be seen from Furnace Road while the radar site was located just off Silverbrook Road.

By 1958 a new NIKE-Hercules missile had been developed and many were equipped to carry nuclear war heads. The Lorton site, which had formerly housed NIKE-Ajax missiles, was converted to provide for the new missiles. Only about one third of the sites nation-wide were chosen for conversion. To effect the conversion, gas detection systems were installed to detect leaks in the tritium gas detonation system and elevator motors and mechanisms that lifted the missiles to the surface had to be upgraded to accommodate the heavier missile. Not all NIKE-Hercules missiles carried nuclear warheads, but analysts later suggested that those at the Lorton site were indeed nuclear missiles.

In 1963, due to increasing operating costs of the new Hercules facilities, the Army passed control of the Lorton NIKE site to the Virginia National Guard with only a small number of Army personnel remaining at the location.

During the 1960s the country's defense strategy changed in response to the Soviet Union's decreased dependence on long-range bombers and increased supply of ICBMs. The United States shifted its focus to the construction of strategic nuclear weapons and in 1973, the Secretary of Defense decided to close the Lorton NIKE site. The radar towers were removed and the missile launch and storage shelters were secured by spot welding. By April of 1974 the NIKE missile site had ceased to be a defense facility.

Since the property had been under the control of the DC Department of Corrections prior to its use as a missile site, it reverted back to Corrections, who over the years used it as a training facility and in 1985 constructed a minimum security facility directly over the missile storage area. The county acquired the property in 2002 as part of a purchase agreement with General Service Administration. A more recent attempt to establish a Cold War museum at the launch location fell through.

The radar site remained in use by the Fairfax County Park Authority and a company providing security for the former prison property until early 2010 when it was demolished to make way for a new middle school.

For more information on NIKE missile sites visit the Nike Historical Society at nikemissile.org.



Missiles stand at alert at the Lorton NIKE missile site launch area on Furnace Road. Credit Vinton DC Public Library



Roadside marker recognizes Lorton NIKE missile site along Furnace Road as a historical site. Credit Irma Clifton



Guard house at entrance to the radar area of the Lorton NIKE missile site in Lorton. This structure was demolished in spring, 2010. Credit Irma Clifton