

Testimony of Rev. Robert H Thorpe – Harris Neck Land Trust

**Rev. Robert H. Thorpe
Former Board Chairman of the
Harris Neck Land Trust and
Harris Neck Elder
Testimony on Oversight Hearing on the Harris Neck
National Wildlife Refuge before the
Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs
of the Committee on Natural Resources
of the U.S. House of Representatives**

I was born on Harris Neck April 3rd 1931 in this house, where I was raised by my grandparents, Robert and Amelia Dawley. In 1942 the Federal government sent surveyors in to Harris Neck to survey our land without any notice or questions, and about a week after they sent in a government representative from Washington, DC whose name was Mr. Banks. Mr. Banks came to our house, and my grandfather went out and spoke with him and I went along. Mr. Banks said he represented the Federal government and that the government needed our property for an army airbase, and that we would have to move out in a few days. Then my grandfather asked him, “If you take our property are we going to get it back?” And Mr. Banks said, “Yes, when the government is finished with it they will return it back to you. My grandfather asked him, “If we have to move where should we go?” He said: “I don’t know anything about that. All I know is you have to move in a few days, and if you don’t move your house and everything will be destroyed – pushed down or burned.” So, my grandfather asked him if we were going to get any help for moving. He said, “No, you’ll have to move on your own.”

So, my grandfather took his crowbar and hammer and went to the front door first and started taking the facing off the door. And piece by piece he tried to save all the lumber on the house, because he had no money to buy materials to build another house at that time or to move. At that time our crops were just maturing, and we had to leave all that behind us. And that was part of our living. Corn, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, all our fruit and nut trees. All that was left behind and destroyed.

We were offered a piece of land a couple of miles away by Mr. Irvin Davis of McIntosh County. We had to purchase this land, which was in Eagle Neck, from Mr. Davis. It was an acre and a half, much less than what we had on Harris Neck. We planted a small garden, which again was nothing like what we had on Harris Neck. After the war ended, the same Irvin Davis came out to our church, First African Baptist – which we had taken down on Harris Neck and rebuilt on Eagle Neck – with his lawyer who spoke for him. He told us that the government is not using the land anymore now, but they’re not going to return it back to us right yet. He asked us if we would agree to let Mr. Davis use the land as a cow pasture for his cows. We said, “Yes, Mr. Davis is welcome to use the land.” It was years later that we found out that the Federal government had given the land to McIntosh County. We never knew anything about any proceedings that had taken place between the Federal government and the county about this.

Testimony of Rev. Robert Thorpe – Harris Neck – page2

Then again, years after that, we found out that the Federal government had taken the land back from the county and again, without our knowledge or any word from the government or anyone else, it gave the land, this time, to Fish and Wildlife.

Justice for us from Harris Neck can only come from the return of our land. However, we have offered Fish and Wildlife to be partners with us in the new Harris Neck community. We would like them to continue doing their job of monitoring the ponds and protecting wildlife, which we will be setting aside and protecting in our plans. But we feel it is only just that our land be returned to us.