

# **THE HISTORY OF THE ST. AUGUSTINE AIRPORT AUTHORITY AND AVIATION IN THE NATION'S OLDEST CITY**

## ***The Beginning - 1911***

As early as the 1890's, balloon flights and glider experiments were carried on in St. Augustine. Then, in 1911, local businessman Charles F. Hopkins, Jr. arranged with the Curtis Exhibition Company to conduct airplane flights here in conjunction with the Southern Championship Speedboat Races hosted by the St. Augustine Power Boat Club. Two noted aviators, James J. Ward and J.A.D. McCurdy, brought their planes here and treated the crowd of spectators along the bayfront to "the most daring flights yet seen in Florida." The initial thrill of seeing the planes streak through the air was augmented by a display of stunt flying and a race between an airplane and a speedboat [and won, fortunately for aviation, by the airplane.]

During the succeeding winters, barnstorming pilots would moor their seaplanes along the bayfront, put on exhibitions and races, take up passengers and engage in various publicity stunts. St. Augustine was also a popular locale for movie makers. Memorable flying scenes in the classic silent screen serial, "The Perils of Pauline" were shot here, with local residents as extras in the cast.

In 1916 St. Augustine got its first school of aviation, which trained Canadian flyers for military service in Europe. The Little Links Golf Course at the south end of the city was taken over by the army, leveled and marked to become the Ancient City's first landing field. It was completed in November 1918, just as the armistice was signed, so it saw little use and was soon returned to recreational purposes.

The elimination of the field did not eliminate flight in St. Augustine. Retired military pilots and veteran barnstormers combined after the war to form flying circuses which traveled from town to town putting on breathtaking exhibitions of stunt flying, racing and wing walking. Mable Cody's Flying Circus and the Gates Flying Circus made several appearances in St. Augustine during the 1920's.

A decade later, a campaign to establish an airport was organized by Lucius "Shorty" Rees, who had learned to fly during World War I and later did barnstorming out west with Charles Lindbergh as his parachute jumper.

Rees spoke to civic groups in town, offered free flights to their members, and hammered away at the need for an airport. The Jaycees adopted this need as one of their programs and subsequently leased the old Lorillard Race Track off State Road 16

as a site. So, in 1928, a decade after the army had established its short-lived landing field, St. Augustine acquired its first public airport.

Rees and his partner J.W. Richbourg set up St. Augustine Flying Enterprises, Inc. (with the comforting acronym SAFE) to operate the airport, train pilots, carry passengers, and repair and service aircraft. When Lindbergh made a forced landing on Flagler Beach, Rees and Richbourg were called to fix his plane.

## ***The City Airport-1933***

With the advent of the New Deal in 1933, increasing amounts of money were made available for public works projects (WPA) to provide jobs for the unemployed. Aviation in Florida was one of the great beneficiaries, as a number of landing fields were either built or improved under the program. The Civil Works Program (CWP) allotted \$40,000.00 to St. Augustine for airport improvements, but it could not be used at the old Lorillard Race Track site, because the property was only under short-term lease and the purchase price would have been prohibitive. A search for a new site was launched, made easier by the fact that large tracts in boom-period subdivisions were available at fairly low prices.

On December 27, 1933, the St. Augustine City Commission voted to purchase 276 acres in Araquay Park, north of the city, for \$8,000.00. Work on clearing the land began immediately. Subsequent Government grants throughout the decade made possible additional improvements to the field.

Following the outbreak of World War II in 1939, vast new sums were provided to upgrade the St. Augustine Airport with an eye toward its possible military use. After the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, civil aviation was cancelled and the U.S. Navy took over the airport. It was used as a satellite gunnery base in connection with the Jacksonville Naval Air Station. Local planes were dismantled and put in storage "for the duration". The war ended in 1945, and then began the process of returning military facilities to civilian use. In May 1946 the St. Augustine Airport was returned to the city.

Then followed an immediate aviation boom, here as elsewhere. Many men learned to fly during the war and wished to keep up their skills. Others used their GI benefits to take flying lessons. Government subsidies made possible the establishment of "feeder airlines" which provided passenger and airmail service to a host of smaller cities. St. Augustine had airmail service augmented in 1947, and for a time the local airport was a scheduled stop for not one, but two, passenger airlines.

But the boom was short lived. With a cutback in government subsidies and limitation in GI benefits, the flying school and feeder airlines went out of business. By 1950 the St. Augustine Airport, with weeds growing through the cracks in the runway, was seen as a

"white elephant" the city could ill afford. It was closed down and leased to the local Moose Lodge for \$1.00 a year.

It was not long, however, before the white elephant became a bonanza - a major factor in the industrial development of the Ancient City. In June 1954 it was announced that the Fairchild Engine and Airplane Corporation would construct a large aircraft modification plant at the airport. The facility was opened in 1955.

### ***The Airport Authority - 1964***



It was a highly competitive industry, and many improvements were necessary at the airport to enable the Fairchild Corporation to meet the government contracts, which were their lifeblood. In order to bid on work for jet planes, the runways at the airport had to be lighted, and one extended to the 8,000 feet required for jet takeoff and landing. The city commission had administrative responsibility for the airport. However, increasing demands required more than the Commission could deal with, both in terms of time and money, given their many other responsibilities.

As a result, State Senator Verle Pope introduced in 1963 legislation to create the St. Augustine Airport Authority, a special governing body to oversee the necessary work, with the power to tax and issue bonds. The state legislature passed the bill, providing that it should be approved by the voters at a special election on May 5, 1964. The idea of an Airport Authority attracted widespread support as election day approached. Mayor Joseph Shelley, the St. Augustine Record, the Rotary and Kiwanis Clubs, the Board of Realtors, the Retail Merchants Division of the South Improvement Association and the West Augustine Civic Club all endorsed it. This seemed to provide a stimulus because the voters, by nearly three to one margin, supported the creation of the Airport Authority.



Governor Ferris Bryant first appointed banker X. L. Pellicer then lumberman Charles M. Lance and automobile dealer C.A. McQuaig for the three member Airport Authority. At the organizational meeting on July 31, 1964, Pellicer was elected chairman. City and county funds totaling \$35,000 and bank loans of \$200,000 were obtained to enable reconditioning work to begin, and on November 3, 1964 a \$900,000 bond issue for airport improvements was endorsed by the voters in an overwhelming 4,485 to 1,056 margin. With the financing in hand, the improvements went ahead rapidly. In 1965 the airport was deeded to the Authority by City of St. Augustine and contracts were let for extending and lighting the runways.



The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requested that the Authority acquire land adjoining the runways for purposes of expansion and air traffic safety, offering to pay half the cost. In June 1965 the first purchase was authorized - \$32,000. For the Copsey property. This purchase was followed by many other such purchases over the years. A terminal building and more hangars were constructed in 1966.

Of course this hectic pace could not continue forever. The Authority had met its obligation to make major improvements at the airport, and this was followed by a period of settling in and a time of trial. Since the Authority was charged with operating

the airport for purposes of civil aviation as well as industry, one of its early acts was to adopt a set of minimum standards for a fixed base operator who would lease the general aviation facilities at the airport. However, the first two fixed base operators ran into financial difficulties. The amount of airport traffic did not meet their optimistic expectations, and it fell back on the Authority to make other arrangements to handle general aviation at the field.

Col. Ernest H. Moser (Retired), a veteran aviator with a long and distinguished career, was hired on an interim basis as salaried director of the airport in 1967. After assessing the situation, Moser formed his own firm, Aero Sport, Inc., which signed a lease with the Authority in January 1968 to act as a fixed base operator. In addition to a wide variety of general aviation services, Moser revived the popular flying circuses, like those which had thrilled audiences here in the 1920's. He also arranged for the Experimental Aircraft Association to hold its regional meetings here. Aero Sport grew and spawned additional aviation-related businesses.

With the problem of the fixed base operator settled, the Authority went on to make further improvements at the field as they became necessary and when money could be raised. Among other improvements, there were additional land acquisitions, runway extensions, new hangars and tie down pads, and a beacon light. But there were not only new items to be considered. Maintenance of existing facilities was a continuing matter. Paint chipped and peeled, weeds shot up, trees grew into the glide path, and runways cracked, sagged, and eroded. All of these had to be dealt with to avoid damaging aircraft and risking lives.

To assist the authority in overseeing these projects, a staff was hired. In 1971 James Howard, recently retired Aviation Director of the Jacksonville Port Authority, was contracted as authority representative. He continued until 1975 when ill health forced his resignation. In 1977 General Ralph Cooper, retired Assistant Adjutant General of Florida, was hired as Executive Director of the Airport Authority. He was succeeded in 1979 by A.H. "Gus" Craig, who had served 18 years in the Florida House of Representatives. Craig was a long-time pilot who flew his plane back and forth to the legislative sessions in Tallahassee.

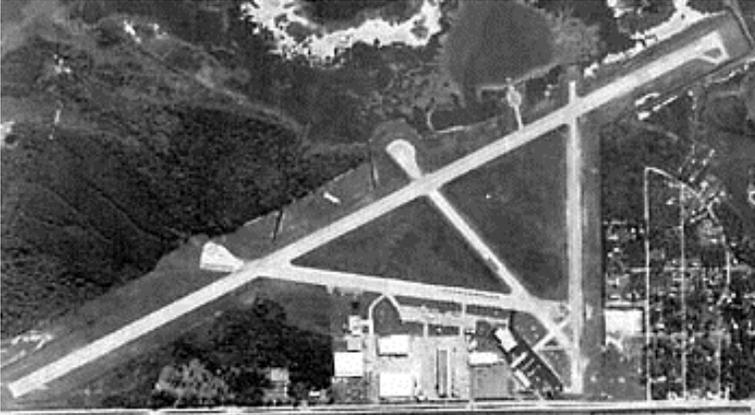
In March of 1988, the position of Executive Director was passed on to Mike Campbell who had overseen many of the expansion projects at the airport. Campbell ushered in an era of remodeling and expansion at a time when corporate aviation was beginning to increase at the facility. Edward Wuellner who had been Airport Manager at Hernando County, Florida airport, succeeded him in January, 1996.



The first three members of the Airport Authority were appointed by the Governor. Subsequent members were elected by the voters. The size of the authority was increased from three to five in 1967. The members are elected for four-year terms and serve without pay. Two officers, a chairman and a secretary-treasurer, are selected annually from the members.

There is a long history of interest among deaf people in aviation in St. Augustine, which is the home of the Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind. In the 1920's, one of the visiting pilots here had a mechanic who knew sign language and arranged flights for deaf residents of the city. In 1973 Tom Kerr became the first deaf pilot here to receive his license. His instructors at Aero Sport included James Moser, F.B.O. and Steven Edwards, later a chairman of the St. Augustine Airport Authority. Robert McClintock, a retired accountant, made history with his election to the Airport Authority. The February 1981 issue of Deaf American hailed him as the first deaf person to hold elective office in the nation during the last half of the century.

The authority was originally empowered to levy a tax of up to 1 mill to finance its operations. But it has never made full use of its power to tax and that is something for which taxpayers have long had reason to be grateful. The authority members have always been conscious of the need to minimize the burden on the public. The tax millage they recommended was consistently lowered year after year from .500 to .470 to .257 to .254 to .242. It was only in 1981, when faced with the necessity of major capital outlays that the millage went back to the earlier .5 level. Then in 1982 it was lowered again to .408.



It was perhaps in tribute to this fiscal responsibility that the 1982 elections saw the rare thing, in this tax conscious age of people voting themselves into a taxing district. The Airport Authority district originally included only part of the eastern half of St. Johns County. The proposal on the ballot provided for expansion of the district to the entire county, with the millage cap lowered from one mill to .5. It received the support of the majority of those located outside the original district.

The twentieth century has seen aviation grow from a wild dream to an accepted reality of everyday life. St. Augustine has been a participant and a beneficiary of this growth. The economic impact of aviation on the community has been significant. But the forward march of progress has not been without its backward steps. In 1976 the Fairchild Corporation announced that it would close down its St. Augustine operations. This blow to the local economy was somewhat softened when an industrial park was created at the former Fairchild facilities. Then in 1980 the industrial park was sold to the Grumman Corporation for an aircraft modification plant.

Aero Coach, a commuter airline based in Ft. Lauderdale, initiated service on April 15, 1983, with connections to Jacksonville, West Palm Beach, Ft. Lauderdale, and the Bahamas. Unfortunately, the number of passengers using this service was not enough for Aero Coach to maintain St. Augustine on its air route, and the service was terminated on December 16, 1983.

The closing months of 1983 saw ground broken on the southern edge of the airport for hangars and for improvements to runways and taxiways. During this same year, a PLASI system of approach lights was added to runway 31. The twentieth anniversary year of the Airport Authority, 1984, opened with relocation of authority offices from downtown St. Augustine to the Priester property which was acquired and made part of the airport in 1983.

## ***The Current Airport 1980's, 1990's, and Beyond***



The year 1986 brought the addition of a VASI system of approach lights to runways 13 and 06. Also, the airport was given FAA Part 139 certification, enabling the airport to land large passenger aircraft carrying over 35 people. This certification process made the airport safer and in a position to receive more Federal money. Around this same time, the airport was given "Reliever Status" which recognizes the potential of the airfield to take the General Aviation overflow from Jacksonville International Airport.

In 1988, PGA Tour and Aero Sport together built a hangar to house the first corporate Jet to be based at St. Augustine, PGA's Westwind.

In 1989, an AWOS was built affording pilots the ability to get current weather conditions automatically by radio or phone. The same year saw the installation of a new environmentally safe fuel farm, under lease to Aero Sport, which had double the capacity of the one it replaced and included up-to-date inventory control mechanisms.



Grumman undertook large projects in 1989, including the building of their "North 40" for use in a Federal Express 727 modification contract. Grumman, along with the Airport Authority, also built a facility to house the U.S. Coast Guard's E2C Hawkeyes and their Drug Interdiction Program. After operating along the coastline to catch drug smugglers for only two years, the Coast Guard left the airport.

In general, the 1980's brought about many improvements to the infrastructure of the airport. Among the projects were the repaving and enlarging of the FBO's ramp, the addition of Taxiways B and D, and the overlaying of many runways and taxiways, including Runway 13-31.

The improvements continued and escalated in the 90's. In 1991, the Authority moved into a new building on U.S. 1 which included increased office space, a conference room and a large meeting room. The following year, a corporate hangar area was developed on the NW side of the airport.

The year 1994 saw the completion of the remodeling and expansion of the Terminal Building/ General Aviation Facility adding more office space, a pilot briefing area, pilot lounge with shower facilities, ticket counters with nearby waiting and baggage areas for eventual commuter service, a meeting room, and a second-story facility for a restaurant. A 3rd corporate hangar was built in the NW area for the Ring Power Corporation, and Grumman built a "Hush House" to reduce the amount of noise produced by running their military jets on the ground.

In 1995, North American Top Gun, started a fighter pilot school using 3 WW II T-6 aircraft, and in 1996 they occupied their new facility, built by the Airport Authority. Likewise, in 1996, Prestige Aircraft Refinishing, which had operated for years at the airport as Aero Aircraft Refinishing, occupied their new state-of-the-art paint and

stripping facility, also built by the Authority. That year, the NE area became home to a new hangar for the Luhrs Corporation and the airport's 4th based corporate jet.

The Fly-By Cafe opened its doors in 1997 offering a second-story view of the airfield, a menu of aviation-themed dishes, and colorful murals of airplane and airshow memorabilia. This same year, work began for the development of another corporate hangar area, to include 6 new hangars. Regency Aviation was the first tenant in this new area in 1998 and were followed by corporate hangars for the sheriff's office, SK Logistics and Future First Aviation.

The late 90's saw many mergers among military contract companies in the United States, and during that time, the Grumman Corporation became Northrop-Grumman.

Throughout the 80's and 90's the airport has added over 100 hangars for single and twin-engine airplanes and currently has over 200 based aircraft. The Airport Authority staff grew to 11 employees to administer and maintain the running of the airport.

What is past is prologue. The work of aviation pioneers like Lucius Rees established a foundation for later growth. During the past three decades the St. Augustine/ St. Johns County Airport Authority has added further chapters to our aviation history. Continuing improvements to the field will help to keep the Ancient City and St. Johns County abreast of the times.