

CLASSIC AIRPLANE: 'IT FLEW LIKE A DREAM'

# A Piece of History



A Piedmont Airlines DC-3 lies in sections on the floor of the N.C. Transportation Museum Back Shop, where it will be reassembled as a museum centerpiece.

JOURNAL PHOTOS BY DAVID ROLFE

## Two local men aid restoration of Piedmont DC-3

By Jim Sparks  
JOURNAL REPORTER

**H**oward Miller flew Piedmont Airlines planes for a living. Co-worker Ronnie Macklin's job was to keep those planes flying.

Now the two Winston-Salem men are helping to lead the N.C. Transportation Museum's efforts to restore and display one of the DC-3 airplanes that helped build the former aviation company based in Winston-Salem. Piedmont Airlines was taken over by U.S. Air in 1989.

Various sections of the old plane now lie on the floor of the enormous Back Shop building at the museum in Spencer on the site of what was once Southern Railway's largest steam-locomotive repair yard.

Ronnie Macklin leaned against the cabin section of the former passenger plane as though it was the shoulder of an old friend.

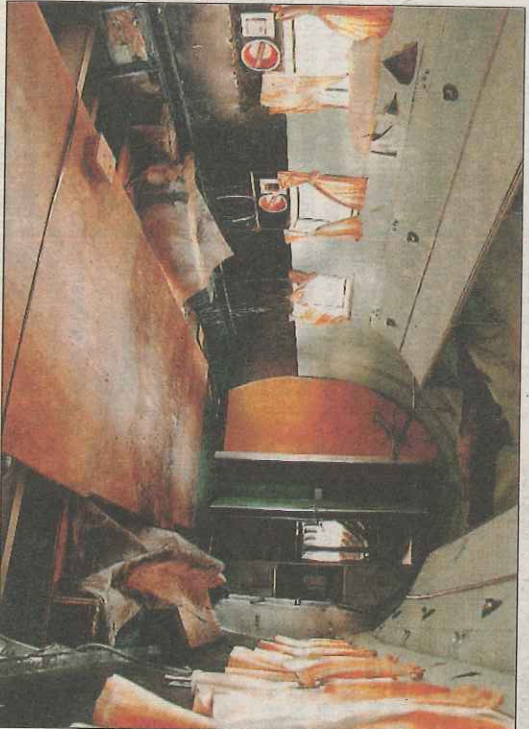
"If you took all the good things in aviation and put them in an airplane, that's what the DC-3 was," Macklin said. "It was exceptionally well designed."

"And it flew like a dream," Miller chimed in.

Miller, 80, worked as a pilot for Piedmont from 1954 until his retirement in 1985.

At Piedmont, Macklin, 83, directed training, maintenance and quality-control operations from 1953 to 1988, when he retired.

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Coat hangers and curtains are still in the passenger compartment of the old DC-3, which was the mainstay of Piedmont Airlines.



*"The ... advantage of this plane is ... we can tell both its and Piedmont's story in the context of state and national transportation history."*

Walter Turner, a museum historian

## AIRPLANE

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He and Walter Turner, a museum historian, said that Piedmont bought the plane from Western Airlines in 1956.

Named the Potomac Pacemaker because it flew routes from Triad to Washington, Piedmont used the plane until 1965, when it was sold along with the remaining DC-3's in the company's fleet.

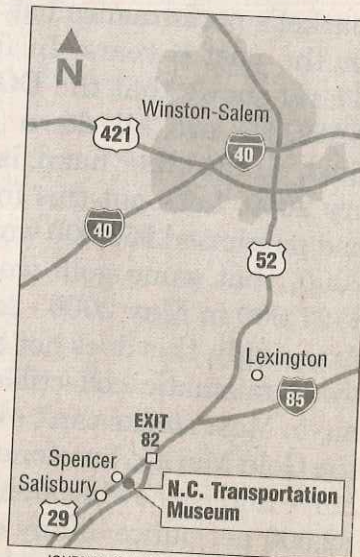
The Museum of Life and Science in Durham rescued the plane from an aircraft graveyard in 1978.

It was displayed outside on the museum's grounds until the transportation museum bought it in 2003 for \$30,000.

The next year, the old DC-3 was taken apart and taken to the Back Shop building. Plans call for it to be eventually displayed there — possibly hanging from the rafters.

Macklin and other Piedmont employees helped find needed parts to reassemble the plane.

About 60 feet long, with a wing span of 91 feet, the reassembled plane will fit easily in the 600-foot-long, 150-foot-wide and three-story tall building that was once used for overhauling train steam engines.



JOURNAL GRAPHIC BY CASSANDRA SHERRILL

However, because the Back Shop is being renovating, museum officials are looking for another place for rebuilding and housing the plane along with another DC-3 that they plan to buy and strip for parts.

"We have to find a hangar," said Knox Bridges, the head of the museum committee overseeing the DC-3 restoration effort. "That's the big issue."

"Lining up the volunteers and a parts plane won't be a problem. But we need a place where we can put both

planes. Then we can move forward."

Bridges, 45, a financial manager from the Charlotte area, is a member of the board of directors of the transportation museum's foundation.

The foundation will help raise the money to restore the plane. Bridges said he expects the job to cost between \$250,000 and \$500,000.

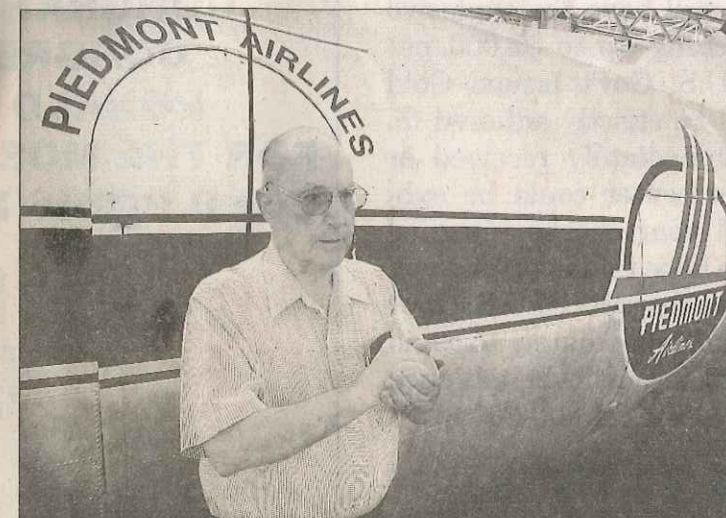
Macklin declined to say how long it might take to get the plane rebuilt for display condition. However, he intends to see it dedicated.

Although he won't be doing much of the heavy rebuilding work, there are plenty of old Piedmont employees and other skilled volunteers around to help.

"I won't say how long it's going to take, but I will say this, it's going to be restored," Macklin said.

Having the DC-3 would help the museum broaden its focus by giving it a tool to teach about the development of commercial passenger aviation from several different angles, Turner said.

"The big advantage of this plane is that we can tell both its and Piedmont's story in the context of state and national transportation history," Turner said.



JOURNAL PHOTO BY DAVID ROLFE

Ronnie Macklin did maintenance on the DC-3, which was nicknamed the Potomac Pacemaker because it flew from the Triad to Washington.

states, Turner said.

Built for the war effort, in versions known as the C-47 or C-53, it had open cargo space for use as freight and troop transport plane. It also had two engines so that if one went out it could still fly.

"It was just a workhorse for the Allies in World War II," Turner said.

More than 10,000 of the

stop.

After the war, regional airlines that started popping up all over the country used DC-3's to get their operations off the ground.

The planes were cheap and easy to come by.

They were also able to fly long enough routes to let the small airlines develop a market, make money and grow.

Piedmont began operations in 1948 with three DC-3's and used 24 of them during the next 17 years.

Although there were three other small airlines based in Charlotte after the war, Piedmont was the only substantial commercial airline based in the state, Turner said.

Founded by Tom Davis, Piedmont grew into one of the 10 or so largest aviation companies in the country. It had 24,000 employees when it was taken over in the late 1980s.

"Piedmont was a remarkable airline," Turner said. "It started small, as a shoestring operation but kept growing, expanding and became beloved by those who worked for them and flew them."

Miller agreed, saying that the old Potomac Pacemaker is the right plane to help tell the company's story.

He said he remembers flying the plane and is thrilled that it is going to get a new life inside the museum.

"It definitely belongs here," Miller said.

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