THE QUEST TO BUILD A GREAT AIRPORT IN WINSTON-SALEM

by Walter R. Turner

With the break of dawn on Saturday, June 13, 1942, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Mayor Richard (Dick) Reynolds, Jr., felt every emotion to feel proud. Several years of planning and effort would culminate today with the dedication of the administrative terminal building at Smith Reynolds Airport, named in honor of his father. Everything was in order—the American Legion band, the elegant luncheon, the ceremony, the air show. And even though Eddie Rickenbacker of Eastern Airlines could not attend, the airshow was proceeding in general council and had placed a one-page advertisement in the city's newspapers with a banner headline, "Congratulations to Mayor R.J. Reynolds.""

With the warm weather and his marriage on going well, Reynolds, 26, was ready for a change. He would announce his resignation as mayor and join the Navy the next day. Although he would always maintain an interest in his hometown, he would now mainly be in other locations.

Among the crowd at the airport dedication that day was the 24-year-old vice president of the airport board, Friedman Aviation, Tom Davis. The company had just secured one of 14 Department of Defense contracts awarded to each student who would then become flight instructors. Davis would become president of the company the next year and become the founder of Piedmont Airlines.

Symbolically, the button was being passed from Dick Reynolds to Tom Davis. From now on, Davis would seek the recognition of established airlines to the steady building of a new airline. "To fully understand the contributions of these aviation pioneers and the development of the airport, one must begin with the events of 1927."

The fateful event was the announcement on July 12, 1927, that Charles Lindbergh, who had just completed his New York City-Paris nonstop flight, would visit Winston-Salem on October 1 as part of a national tour. At the time, the city had two small airports with dirt runways. A new airport was being constructed four miles north of downtown and named Miller Municipal Airport. Forsyth County leased the land and Carl Miller provided $17,000 for the airport's development and facilities. During the introduction of the Lindbergh visit, Robert Saunders contributed $100,000 to buy the airport land from the county and then transfer it to the Airport Commission.

Another event that would impact was the coatmaking of young Dick Reynolds. By 1927 tobacco company founder R.J. Reynolds and wife Katherine had died, leaving four children. The oldest, Dick, was 21 years old that year and moved to New York City. Already an experienced pilot, he took an examination from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale and obtained an aviation license signed by Orville Wright.

With a generous inheritance and inspired by Lindbergh's achievement, he purchased Curtis Field on Long Island and established Reynolds Aviation, a taxi service and fixed-base operation. Services included flying lessons, sightseeing trips, delivering packages to ships at sea, and experimenting with amphibious aircraft. Dick's younger brother Smith took flying
lent to a summer vacation from school. One of Dick's new friends was Mac McCloskey, who had helped Charles Lindbergh with the flight checks on the Spirit of St. Louis in Roswell, New Mexico. Dick and Smith had flown twice in the airplane, but they had only seen it from the air. Reamels had been excited about the prospect of flying in the airplane, but Smith had been cautious, fearing that the airplane might fall apart in the air. Dick had been determined to fly, and he had succeeded in doing so, but he had not been able to avoid the sound of the engine, which was louder than he had expected.

Reamels also established a branch of Reamels Airways in his hometown of Winona, Minnesota, in 1932. His mechanic shop was equipped with the latest tools and equipment, and he was able to offer his services to other pilots and aircraft owners. Dick had flown his airplane for the first time that year, and he was excited to have the opportunity to fly for a living. Reamels was a pioneer in the aviation industry, and his contributions were significant in the development of the industry in the United States. In the years that followed, Reamels continued to expand his business and to offer his services to a growing number of pilots and aircraft owners.
The administrative-cum-terminal building at Winston-Salem, designed by Dean and his associate Ben Smith, was in many ways a smaller version of the one at Washington National Airport. It was also built in the Art Moderne style, and was both functional and austere. But the Smith Reynolds terminal had something that even Washington National did not have: a series of scenic features especially designed for the building. The heart of the building was the lobby, which included a formal lounge of Smith Reynolds, a marble desk from the Smith Reynolds Foundation, and a water fountain hanging from a wooden ceiling. To keep the views from being formal and to make it practical for passengers, a rounded entrance and exit doors were added and picture windows overlooking the field. The main entrance had a 24-foot temple entrance with a 6-foot statue of a boar. The building was designed to allow passengers to see the boar from the main lobby and to enjoy the view of the airport.

During the 1960s, Smith Reynolds was known as the "Piedmont Airport" and was one of the first airports to offer non-stop flights to Hawaii. In addition, it was the home of Piedmont Airlines, which operated the "Piedmont Express" service. The airport was also a major hub for American Airlines and was one of the first airports in the country to offer non-stop flights to Europe.

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In 1984 the terminal lobby was refurbished. The chandelier was taken down and given away. The walkways were rearranged in a different color. The marble floor was removed and stained in the basement. A baggage ramp was installed. Three years later the terminal's entrance changed for lack of business. In the last 10 hours work it was made in the former Sky Club on the second floor. The marble floor was partially damaged and covered with saw dust. The aging monochrome in wood was retained but covered by a new wall. When rains appeared the terminal's ceiling held leaks, a light grey measuring tape was applied in 1995 to give the building a more modern look.

In 1997 it was announced that Piedmont Airlines and USAir would merge in 1998. In early USAir purchased Piedmont Airlines and kept its headquarters in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The development was to exchange a stock of Piedmont's $27,000 employees, who were paid of that airline's achievements. While the great majority of these employees continued in their same positions with USAir, many of Piedmont's top management and key employees did not.

Although USAir/Salem failed and later merged with Trans World Airline, the new airline company continued in Winston-Salem.

Early in the 1980s a series of operational changes began that would change the Winston-Salem Terminal Building almost beyond recognition. Primarily because of a concern for security, a small one-story addition on the field side of the terminal was built in front of the picture window. A Winston-Salem company designed a curved glass design approximately 15 feet that was placed over the top of the picture window in the lobby.

The 1980s brought more changes. Piedmont Airlines took advantage of federal airline deregulation in order to grow more rapidly and increase the real estate of the Charlotte/Durham/Baltimore-Washington. Because Piedmont was now operating more like a regional than a major airline, it discontinued its daily flights as Piedmont in 1983 and moved out of its offices on the terminal's second floor. Tom Davis commented at the time, "This is the third time there has been a major change in our ownership... the first time there was a change in ownership... and the last time there was a change in ownership." Since 1983, Piedmont Airlines had run commuter flights to Charlotte from Sunshin Airlines, Piedmont Airways, and now USAir Express.

In 1994 there was much discussion in Winston-Salem about what to do with the airport's deteriorating 24-hour terminal. Winston-Salem has a strong tradition of supporting the arts. At the September 1995 meeting of the Airport Commission, it was decided that the cultural tradition support the airport terminal, but also to make it a new location in the future.

The Commission agreed to construct a campaign to raise $300,000 for the renovation and add to the $90,000 already in the pocket of the terminal.

The debate about the cultural building more fundamental question: what is the future of the historic terminal building in Winston-Salem Airport? "Some of the younger community members think we should tear it down and build a new building," says Roger Morgan.

In this society it appears to be acceptable to renovate homes, large commercial or cultural buildings and even airports, but not airports terminals and hangars. Primarily because Smith Reynolds Airport did not function as a training center and the terminal building was in bad condition for 15 years, This debate was also impinged on other airports which run extensive building in this earlier era. But now the terminal has its own unique view of the field. If current plans are implemented, the airport by early 1996 will be the home of Smith Reynolds, the mural on a high wall and the large raised glass display giving the building a new impetus of having an outstanding collection rather than a comfortable ambiance. In assessing the changes since the building's original construction, Winston-Salem cultural director, Charles Phillips comments, "It's a must that the airport commission don't recognize the significance of their building and treat it with respect."