A Piece of History
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Walter Turner, a museum historian

AIRPLANE

He and Walter Turner, a museum historian, said that Piedmont bought the plane from Western Airlines in 1956. Named the Potomac Pacer-maker because it flew routes from Triad to Washington, Piedmont used the plane until 1963, 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 ceiling.

MacKlin and other Piedmont employees helped find needed parts to reassemble the plane. About 60 feet long, with a wingspan of 91 feet, the re-assembled plane will fit easily in the 600-601-long, 150-foot-wide and three-story-high building that was once used for overhauling train steam engines.

However, because the Back Shop is being renovated, 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's aviation, 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 $200,000 and $500,000.

MacKlin declined to say how long it might take to get the plane rebuilt for display conditions. However, he intends to say it's 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 resired," 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.

Piedmont began operations in 1948 with three DC-3s 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 19 or so large airlines in the country.

In 1950, 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 short-term operation but kept growing, expanding and became beloved by those who worked for them and flew them."

Miller agreed, saying that the old Piedmont Pacer 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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