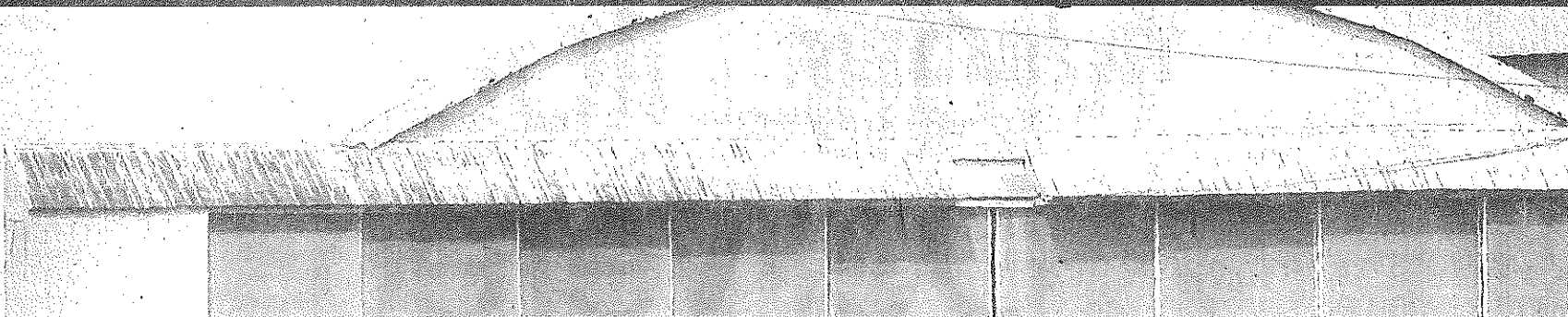


# a mere shadow

A once-bustling airport tries to find its place in a new era



By Wesley Young  
JOURNAL REPORTER

In 1963, Smith Reynolds Airport had 130,000 takeoffs and landings, making it the busiest airport in the state and ranking it No. 85 in the country. Those days are long gone.

JOURNAL PHOTOS BY DAVID ROLFE AND  
BRUCE CHAPMAN

Top, clockwise from left, Smith Reynolds Airport is landlocked with no room to grow; a baggage-claim area is empty; 'Piedmont', still visible on a hangar, is a reminder of the airport's heyday.

It's been almost 10 years since regularly scheduled passenger service stopped at Smith Reynolds.

Last month, Smith Reynolds lost its director Larry Scantlin. Although they wouldn't discuss specifics about Scantlin's departure, airport officials said they wanted a leader who could

bring a fresh approach to promoting the airport as an economic asset.

About the same time, subcontractors on a federally financed runway project began complaining that they hadn't been paid by the prime contractor, Mainline, a Durham company.

Then Pace Airlines suspended operations on Sept. 17. William Rodgers Sr., the owner of Pace, was arrested Tuesday and charged with failing to pay employee health-insurance premiums.

Pace still owes the airport almost \$900,000 in overdue rent.

On the upside, officials say, the airport keeps a healthy reserve — currently estimated at

\$1.7 million — and is financially self-supporting.

Still, many people remember — and long for — the old days, when Smith Reynolds was in its heyday.

People close to the airport say that those glory days are unlikely to return.

Tom McKim, an attorney for R.J. Reynolds who serves as chairman of the five-member airport commission and others familiar with the airport said that there are obstacles to progress at the airport — the chief being that the airport is essentially landlocked, with little room to grow.

"It has taken a while for some people to come to terms with the notion that Winston-Salem may

never really be an air-carrier airport again," McKim said. "That would be nice but that is not realistic."

Dudley Humphrey, a former member of the airport commission, put it even more bluntly.

"I think that Winston-Salem had totally unrealistic expectations of maintaining a scheduled air-carrier service," Humphrey said. "That just didn't make sense."

## History of the airport

In 1927, the airport got off to an auspicious start.

Winston-Salem learned that famous pilot Charles Lindbergh

# Airport

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would stop here during a cross-country trip to promote aviation.

Local leaders responded by creating a new airport to replace a landing field in the Sedge Garden area, and named it Miller Municipal Airport in honor of Clint Miller, a local man who donated \$17,000 to the effort.

Lindbergh came and told civic leaders that they needed to be in the forefront of aviation.

They took his advice.

In 1940, Dick Reynolds, the son of R.J. Reynolds, and his sisters donated about \$645,000 for airport improvements.

That money paid for the building of the terminal and led to the renaming of the airport for Z. Smith Reynolds, the youngest son of R.J. Reynolds, who had died in 1932.

Z. Smith Reynolds was an avid aviator. When he was 20, he flew solo from London to Hong Kong.

After serving as a military training base in World War II, the airport became the home of Piedmont Airlines and business boomed.

Piedmont evolved from a "puddle-jumper" to a major air carrier.

But by the time Piedmont merged with USAir in 1989, Smith Reynolds Airport had long been surpassed by Greensboro as the Triad's destination airport.

Passenger boardings at Smith Reynolds dropped from about 33,000 in 1980 to 2,711 in 1984.

The number of boardings rebounded somewhat, the airport served about 8,000 passengers in 1999 before passenger service was stopped in early 2000.

Planes still fly in and out for maintenance and repair. The airport has a flight school and aircraft sales. People fly private planes and corporate jets out of the airport.

The airport has about 40,000 takeoffs and landings each year.

Landmark Aviation, the airport's largest tenant since Pace suspended operations, sells

jet fuel and repairs and sells planes.

"The lights aren't going to be dimmed anytime soon," McKim said. "The airport is a terrific asset to the community. The long-term prospects are quite bright."

## Emerging 'aerotropolis'

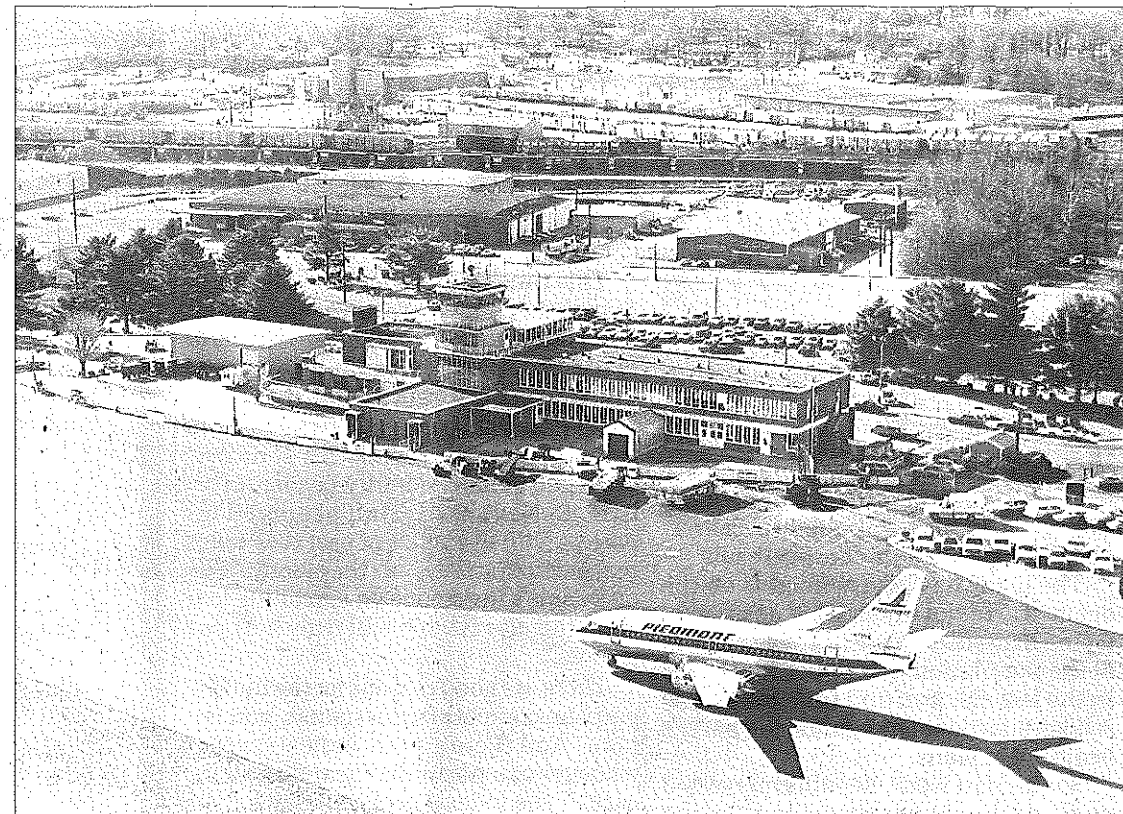
What is realistic, airport officials and others say, is to think of Smith Reynolds Airport as part of what people are calling the emerging "aerotropolis" of the Piedmont Triad.

That's the conclusion drawn by John Kasarda, an expert on aviation at UNC Chapel Hill and the author of reports in 2007 and 2008 outlining the aerotropolis concept.

An aerotropolis, Kasarda says, includes distribution centers and business and technology parks. Kasarda said that Smith Reynolds, with its proximity to downtown and Wake Forest University, could become a growth center for businesses that need highly educated labor, air access and urban amenities.

But area business recruiters point out that the presence of a general-aviation airport such as Smith Reynolds is rarely a deal-maker when it comes to a company's relocation decision.

A few companies a year may inquire about the airport as they look for a business site, said Bob Leak Jr., the president



JOURNAL FILE PHOTO

Smith Reynolds Airport was once the home of Piedmont Airlines, which merged with USAir in 1989.

of Winston-Salem Business Inc., an organization that promotes development in the city and Forsyth County.

"Rarely does that drive the deal," Leak said. "(They look at) labor, facilities and access to the market. Then if all that is available, a nice thing to have is an airport."

Leak's not bad-mouthing the airport, though. He said that it is one of the few general-aviation airports that has a continuously manned tower and is one of the finest general-aviation airports in the country.

A general-aviation airport is one that doesn't have regular passenger service.

Leak said that his organization is "bullish on the airport," even though there's that nagging problem of available land.

"When you have a company that needs a large footprint there is not that opportunity."

## Looking for new ideas

It's legitimate to ask whether the Winston-Salem area needs to invest a lot in an airport, if the aerotropolis focuses on PTI as the engine of the area's economy, said Don Kirkman, the president

and chief executive officer of the Piedmont Triad Partnership.

"In terms of our primary passenger air terminal in the Piedmont Triad there is no question that PTI is that airport," Kirkman said.

"We need to recognize that and embrace that. But we have a number of other airports that have excellent facilities, and they are all trying to maximize the economic return."

Kirkman said it's great that the airport commission in Forsyth is embarking on a strategic analysis to guide the airport's future direction. McKim serves on the aerotropolis leadership board and will be an effective voice for Smith Reynolds, Kirkman said.

County commissioner Ted Kaplan, the county's representative on the airport commission, said he sees opportunities amid the current struggles. Kaplan said that the airport is in the process of developing a job description for a new director, but doesn't have a specific timetable for getting that done or hiring someone.

"That building that Pace oc-

cupies is a unique facility in the airline industry," Kaplan said. "You can park three Boeing 737s in there and do maintenance work. Anyone with a fleet of them will be looking for a place to have maintenance done on those planes."

Kaplan said that it is important for people to realize that the airport is self-supporting. Although the county owns the airport land, the airport requires no county subsidy for its operations.

The airport has nine employees.

The city has invested in a business park near but not at the airport. McKim said that airport officials are aware of the need to make more land available. That need, or others, may emerge from the airport's planning process.

"We are interested in identifying new ideas," McKim said. "Part of that is going to be the aerotropolis, but I don't want to oversell that, because primarily our destiny lies in our own hands."



JOURNAL PHOTO BY DAVID ROLFE

These days, the passenger boarding area is usually empty.