



## Tar Heel History

# Taking to the Sky

In 1919, Winston-Salem's Board of Trade and citizens worked together to create our state's first commercial airfield, earning the city the title of aviation pioneer.

BY JENNIFER BEAN BOWER

**R**un, Levie, run! There's an aeroplane coming, and it's going to fall on your head!"

Heeding those terrifying words, 10-year-old Levie Smith ran frantically into her house, crouching nervously beside her bed, expecting to hear or feel the impact of a horrifying crash. After several long minutes, Smith realized that her older brother had tricked her. His fabrication had prevented the little girl from seeing her very first airplane.

The event occurred on Smith's father's farm, located off Kernersville Road in the Sedge Garden Community of Winston-Salem. Smith was disappointed that she'd missed the incredible sight, but her days would soon be filled with the comings and goings of flying machines.

### Pooling resources

Even before the end of World War I, the Winston-Salem Board of Trade realized that attracting aviation industries to their city could be a highly profitable venture. From January to March 1918, it investigated the possibility of locating an airplane company in Winston-Salem, but it



Levie Smith Shelton (with daughters Barbara, left, and Nancy) grew up watching planes fly into Maynard Field, and she later built her own home nearby.

couldn't due to the city's lack of a suitable flying field.

In September 1919, James Kuykendall, secretary and treasurer of the board, heard that an airmail route was about to be established between Washington, D.C., and Atlanta,

Georgia, and that a midway stopping point was needed in North Carolina. Kuykendall also heard that fliers were willing to pay \$10 a day for the privilege of landing on an adequate field.

Eager members of the Board of Trade set out to establish a first-class commercial airfield for their city, which would be the first of its kind in the state. Nearby airfields at the time were nothing more than designated areas of cleared land.

In October 1919, the board leased 35 acres of land from William P. Stockton. About seven miles from the center of Winston-Salem, the land partially bordered the farm of John R. Smith, Levie's father.

Enthusiastic volunteers gave their time, money, and equipment to ensure that the field would be ready to secure its position on the government's aero map, should the airmail route become a reality, although it didn't exist at that time. By the end of November, the United States government had approved the new commercial airfield.

### Nation takes notice

The Board of Trade named the field in honor of Lt. Belvin Womble Maynard,

a North Carolina native who had recently won the Transcontinental Air Race. On December 6, 1919, the field was officially dedicated, and Maynard was the first to land on its runway.

Upon its completion, Maynard Field consisted of intersecting runways, which allowed fliers to take off and land from any direction. It was cleared and smoothed, the top surface was softened and compressed against the second layer, and a sandy soil, which prevented the accumulation of mud in bad weather, was spread over the top.

Fifteen-foot-wide letters that spelled out Maynard Field were erected for the purpose of aerial navigation; directional markers were posted on each end of the runways. A wind indicator was erected on a 30-foot pole.

As envisioned, Maynard Field not only offered safe and durable runways, but also hangar space, gasoline, telephone service, a mechanic, and two parking areas for automobiles.

The city soon gained “fame as a pioneer in the science of aviation,” according to the December 30, 1919, edition of the *Winston-Salem Journal*, a science “spreading rapidly over the United States.”

The February 2, 1920, edition of the popular magazine *Aerial Age Weekly* reported that: “Winston-Salem will go on record as being the first North Carolina city to establish a municipal field without government aid. An insight into the prestige gained through the move is seen in a letter received by Mayor Gorrell [of Winston-Salem] from the Boston Chamber of Commerce in which the intellectual metropolis of America asks advice as to how it should go about securing a similar field.”

Famous aviators Harry Runser and Roscoe Turner publicized the success

of Maynard Field by offering flights to the public. They also performed “hair-raising” stunts in which Turner would walk on the top and lower wings of the airplane, as well as hang from the steering gear. A young Winston-Salem boy witnessed this feat and remarked, in a letter to his friend, that “... one of the fellows who must have been weak in his upper story walked on the wings of the plane while flying, then he swung on the ladder under neath [sic]

the plane. I bet his feet felt as if they were flying on reputation.”

Lt. L.D. Merrill, who wintered his plane at the field from 1919 to 1920, called Maynard Field “one of the best and safest fields for landing in the Southeast.” He added: “The people of Winston-Salem should be praised for their progressiveness in giving North Carolina the first private flying field to be officially accepted by the United States government.”



Flying a de Havilland DH-4 named *Hello Frisco*, Lt. Belvin Womble Maynard was the first pilot to land on the runway of his namesake airfield.



Merrill advertised aerial flights over Winston-Salem departing from Maynard Field at a cost of \$20. For an additional \$5, he would treat his passenger to a loop or tailspin.

Merrill's first passenger, and the first local citizen to fly out of Maynard Field, was C.M. Spry. When asked about the experience, Spry said that since the Prohibition Amendment had become effective, aviation now offered the only manner of "getting high."

But flying civilians over Winston-Salem and from one town to another was just the beginning. On November 24, 1920, Runser and Winston-Salem journalist William Dull flew out of Maynard Field with an airplane full of wrapped bundles of newspapers. The newspapers, the *Winston-Salem Air Messenger*, were specifically published to promote air service in Winston-Salem and were dropped on all cities within a 60-mile radius.

The next day, a large air carnival was held at Maynard Field. Aviators from different areas of the country landed at the field, including Monte Rolfe of the Augusta, Georgia,



Although a new airfield diminished the use of Maynard Field decades ago, today a marker honors its significance.

Aviation Company and James Dunn and J.I. Menefee, who were both Curtiss airplane salesmen from Lynchburg, Virginia. After meeting with the scheduled performers of the air carnival, Runser and Turner, the aviators decided to hold an air race over Winston-Salem. Runser's British Avro outdistanced the others, and, according to the *Winston-Salem Journal*, took "victory in the first airplane race ever held in the state."

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#### **Gone but not forgotten**

Events like the air carnival occurred at Maynard Field for many years after its creation. In 1927, city leaders were informed that Charles A. Lindbergh, who had completed the first solo, non-stop transatlantic flight, would be flying the *Spirit of St. Louis* to Winston-Salem as part of his nationwide tour. With intentions of presenting a most impressive airfield to Lindbergh, the board entertained the idea of expanding Maynard Field before his arrival. Unfortunately, the surrounding roads were in poor condition, and there was no land available to allow for expansion of the field itself. It was determined that a new and modern airfield should be built. A site was chosen off Liberty Street, and Miller Municipal Field, renamed Smith-Reynolds in 1942, was quickly constructed.

Not surprisingly, the new field greatly diminished the use of Maynard Field, although it did continue to operate until the mid-1930s. Today, the area that was once the site of Maynard Field is covered by

homes. The only reminders of North Carolina's first commercial airfield are two small buildings, which were once used as a hanger and a telephone station.

At the end of 1919, a newspaper reporter for the *Winston-Salem Journal* proudly stated that Winston-Salem would always be remembered for creating the first commercial airfield in the state. Unfortunately, Maynard Field and those behind

its creation were all but forgotten. That changed on May 18, 2008, when the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission unveiled a marker honoring the achievements of Maynard Field and the progressive-thinking citizens of Winston-Salem.

On the day of the unveiling, several members of the community, including one who had flown a plane out of Maynard Field, gathered at the site and recounted fond remembrances. For others it was a day of learning about a place they never knew existed.

Although she passed away before the unveiling, Levie Smith — who witnessed a daily barrage of airplanes, who walked across Maynard Field on her way to school, and who later married and purchased a lot from Stockton near the end of the runway — did not forget her memories of the field and shared them freely throughout her 93 years. Remarkably, however, her feet never left the ground. 🌊

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