

Introduction

Why municipal airports? This book project began with that seemingly simple question. How and why did airports, in particular the major or primary airports serving urban areas and the nation's major airlines, become a responsibility of local governments, for the most part city governments, in the United States? The existing literature on airports touches on that issue, but usually indirectly. A good deal of the literature focuses instead on primarily either the architecture/engineering of airports, federal aviation policies, or the histories of individual airports or limited groups of airports. Many of these works also focus on the period after 1945, a time by which the idea of local public responsibility for airports had been firmly established. To a great extent these works either take for granted the fact that cities assumed responsibility for airports or simply point to the Air Commerce Act's 1926 prohibition of federal aid to airports.¹ Research into the basic question, however, revealed that the answer was far more involved and complex. It was an answer that evolved over time as the result of the interplay between local actions and federal actions and policies, urban boosterism combined with the aviation enthusiasm of the period before 1945, as well as the economic realities of airport operations. In the end, municipal airports became defined as local, publicly owned facilities, the maintenance, improvement, and operation of which also involved federal funding and regulation.

Similar to the other works on the subject of airports, this will concentrate on the history of the primary airports serving urban areas. Urban areas generally have any number of secondary airports. These facilities are both publicly and privately owned and operated. They principally service general aviation

activities such as private flying, aerial photography, flight instruction, aircraft maintenance, police and fire department helicopter operations, and charter companies, among others. And while the stories of these secondary airports are undoubtedly also interesting, the focus in this work will center on cities' major or primary airports—what people generally mean when they mention going to *the* airport.

During the 1990s a number of works appeared focused on the architecture and engineering of airports in the United States and Europe. David Brodherson's 1993 dissertation examined early ideas and designs for the "landside" parts of airports—access roads, terminals, and facilities/devices designed to move passengers from the terminals to the airplanes. He argued that while many design ideas were not fully realized, the 1920s and 1930s represented an important formative period in the history of airport architecture.² In 1996 Deborah Douglas produced a dissertation dealing with early airport history (1919–39). Her work focused in part on airports and technology and included an extensive section on the evolution of airports as systems of technologies. She clearly demonstrated the growing complexity of airports, a development that came relatively rapidly between 1919 and 1939. She concluded with an examination of New York's LaGuardia Airport that defined it as the first modern airport.³ Several books also were published during the 1990s dealing with airport architecture. The first, edited by John Zukowsky, covered airports in the United States, Europe, and Asia. This 1996 work had essays exploring both "landside" and "airside"—runways, taxiways, aprons—architecture and design.⁴ The following year Marc Dierikx and Bram Bouwens published a study focused on airports, particularly airport architecture, in Europe. The work was centered on an examination of the history of Schiphol Amsterdam.⁵ And in 1999 Marcus Binney produced a work that highlighted the architecture of new airports and terminals planned and/or constructed during the 1990s.⁶

The Brodherson and Douglas dissertations, as well as one by Douglas Karsner (see below), included sections on federal aviation policy before 1945. By far the most in-depth examination of federal aviation policies, though, was Frank Robert van der Linden's dissertation on the role of the Post Office, especially under the leadership of Walter Folger Brown, in the shaping of the airline industry in the United States. Van der Linden's work strongly established that between 1926 and 1934, federal aviation policy reflected the ideals of the Progressive Era as well as the vision of the associative state of Herbert Hoover.⁷ Drawing on the work of Ellis Hawley, van der Linden argued that during the Hoover era federal aviation policies sought to establish a business-government relationship based on voluntary cooperation in order to promote efficiency and standardization.

The result of such cooperation would be an aviation sector that would open “new vistas for the business and an expansion of the national economy.”⁸

A number of other works presented case studies of individual airports or limited groups of airports. Two of the earliest dated from the 1970s. They were Richard Doherty’s history of Chicago-O’Hare International Airport, a facility developed after World War II, and Charles Bonwell’s work on St. Louis’s Lambert Field and the evolution of its “airside” and “landside” architecture.⁹ One of the better published works dealing with individual airports was *A Dream Takes Flight: Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport and Aviation in Atlanta* by Betsy Braden and Paul Hagan. Especially when dealing with the pre–World War II history of the airport, Braden and Hagan connected the story of Atlanta’s airport with the development of both the aviation industry and federal aviation policy.¹⁰ Another good work, but one that dealt primarily on the post–World War II era to 1970, was Douglas Karsner’s 1993 dissertation. His work, focused as much on aviation in general as on airports in particular, included case studies of airports in Detroit, Tucson, and Tampa. While he concentrated on the period after World War II—as that was when, according to the author, airports really began to have a significant impact on cities—Karsner, similar to Brodherson, identified the period before World War II as being an important formative one.¹¹ Most works on airports resembled that by Richard Olislager. In 1996 he published a coffee-table book on airports in the American Southwest. In addition to providing an overview of airports in that region—as well as lots of photographs—the book contained short histories of a number of individual airports.¹²

None of these works focused specifically on how and why the airports they studied were essentially local public responsibilities. If they focused on the question at all, as noted, they pointed to the Air Commerce Act of 1926 and its adoption of the “dock concept” as a justification for forbidding federal aid to airports. The concept held that airports were most analogous to docks. While river and harbor improvements had been federal responsibilities, as would the construction and maintenance of the airways, docks had been built, maintained, and improved at the local level.¹³ While the passage of the Air Commerce Act and the adoption of the dock concept were important milestones in the history of airports, the full answer as to how and why airports became the responsibility of local governments is far more complex. These works on airports and federal policies, nonetheless, did provide a number of valuable ideas, helpful in understanding the early history of airports. Brodherson and Karsner, especially, contributed the important conclusion that the period before 1945 must be viewed as formative. Important ideas, relationships, and policies were expressed or witnessed initial development before 1945. However, whether talking about archi-

ture or the influence of airports on shaping the modern city, the realization of the hopes, dreams, and expectations of airport enthusiasts was not in any way met until after 1945. It was also during the period before 1945 that the basic relationships between cities, states, the federal government, and airports were worked out. This period, thus, provided the foundation for the postwar development of airports. Douglas showed how airports represented a relatively rapidly developing system of technologies. And as airports became more complex, they also became more expensive. And van der Linden demonstrated the influence of progressive ideas and associationalism on federal aviation policies, particularly between 1926 and 1934.

So, why municipal airports? Local government responsibility for airports was one that evolved over time. Beginning shortly after World War I, local interests—both public and private—began to establish the first primitive landing fields. Those fields represented the origins of the nation's municipal airports. The local interests were responding initially to the needs of the first “customers” for airports—the Post Office and the military.

Between 1919 and 1926 both the Post Office and the military encouraged local interests to build airports. As will be explained in more detail in chapter 1, they did so because, to a great extent, they had no choice as neither had budgets large enough to build the facilities necessary to support either the air mail program or military aviation training. In the absence of federal funds, both turned to those they deemed most likely to agree to help build airports. Emphasizing particularly the idea that airports were going to be essential to any city's ability to continue to grow and to compete with urban rivals, the Post Office and the military lobbied cities hard.

As a result, by the time the Air Commerce Act formally adopted the dock concept as policy in 1926, at least seven years of practice had already established a strong local role in airport construction. In a way, thus, the Air Commerce Act simply formalized in policy the practices already in place. By 1926, practice and policy may have clearly defined airports as a local responsibility, but they had not yet defined airports exclusively as a local *government* responsibility. Through the 1920s, both local private interests and local governments—often, though not always, working together—built the nation's airports. Between 1926 and the late 1930s, a number of factors would come together to create a situation that vastly favored the local, public ownership and operation of the nation's major airports. They included the failure of airports to operate at a profit, the response of states to the aviation enthusiasm of the late 1920s with the passage of airport enabling acts, and New Deal relief policies that eventually mandated public ownership of any airport receiving federal relief funds. The idea that local governments would

build, own, and maintain the nation's airports, thus, was one that evolved between 1919 and the late 1930s. Therefore, the definition of "municipal airport" must also be seen as an evolving one.

In addition to addressing early on the needs of the Post Office and the military, cities building airports throughout the 1920s and 1930s were also responding to the new technology of aviation much as they had to other new transportation technologies. For example, while his focus was primarily on city governments and their actions regarding the advent of such technologies as the streetcar and the automobile, Eric H. Monkkonen argued that, in terms of all forms of transportation, "city governments subsidized and in other ways encouraged new technologies."¹⁴ Obviously streetcars and then automobiles had far more extensive influences on the shaping of the modern cities than did airports, especially during the formative period before 1945. Nonetheless, Monkkonen, though briefly, included aviation and airports among the numerous transportation technologies he looked at that had benefited in a somewhat traditional way from city government aid.¹⁵

In many way cities responded as they did to the emergence of aviation within a traditional urban booster framework. Urban boosterism—the effort to promote the growth and development of one's city, one that often included a sense of competition with rival cities—has been a theme throughout American urban history. During the formative period of airport development, urban booster arguments promoting airport construction abounded in the literature. Airports emerged by the late 1920s as one of *the* facilities a city had to have in order to achieve its "destined" growth and development and to match or, better, overwhelm its urban rivals.

However, in addition to the fact that cities built airports within the context of their general actions toward transportation technologies and traditional urban boosterism, the urban response to aviation also reflected the influence of what Joseph Corn called "the winged gospel." In his landmark work, *The Winged Gospel: America's Romance with Aviation, 1900–1950*, Corn documented the great enthusiasm, bordering on worship, with which Americans greeted the advent of the flying machine. Particularly before World War II, both pilots and planes captured the imagination of Americans and helped inspire great dreams for the future. The winged gospel was the collection of beliefs about the nature and role of aircraft and their pilots, and what the airplane could and would do for individuals and for humankind. Women and African Americans, for example, saw in aviation a new, highly prized field of endeavor not yet clearly dominated by white males in which they could make a mark and, ideally, find a path to greater equality in American society. The gospel included a vision of a peaceful

future in which both society and humankind itself had evolved to a higher order. At its extreme was a vision of the far distant future in which a superior race of humans lived their lives in the clouds. For the near future, the gospel predicted a world in which the airplane would become as common a form of personal transportation as the automobile. This vision became one of the strongest and most enduring myths in the history of aviation. In the more mundane present, the gospel and its accompanying “airmindedness” inspired such things as model airplane contests to attract children to the field of aviation and the development of aviation-centered school curricula. The enthusiasm, according to Corn, was widespread in American society and marked it, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, as being particularly “airminded.”¹⁶ A close examination of the history of local action on airports, as well as policies dealing with aviation in general and airports in particular, revealed both the influence of the winged gospel and the real limits to its reach.

Cities built airports from 1919 onward in large part because local aviation enthusiasts, particularly those belonging to the business elite, pushed, prodded, and demanded action. While also reflecting more basic urban booster instincts, these local elite evidently bought into the expansive promises of the winged gospel as well. In addition, states acted quickly in the wake of the enthusiasm, bordering on hysteria, following Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic by passing the laws that enabled local governments to own and build airports. And, despite the fact that airports proved far more expensive and far less profitable than promised, cities and aviation boosters continued to seek means to maintain and improve their airports during the 1930s by turning to the federal government for aid.

At the national level, a number of federal aviation programs and policies also clearly demonstrated the influence of the winged gospel. Perhaps the most obvious was Eugene Vidal’s efforts while serving as director of the Aeronautics Branch to encourage the design and manufacture of an airplane cheap enough and safe enough to fulfill the dream of “an airplane in every garage.”¹⁷ If Vidal’s program was designed to provide the planes, then the Civilian Pilot Training Program (1939–46), promoted by the head of the Civil Aeronautics Authority, Robert H. Hinckley, was designed to provide the pilots. Though the program also came to be justified on the theory that the newly trained pilots could rapidly contribute to national defense in case of war, the original idea behind the program was to provide a means to open up the world of aviation to young Americans.¹⁸ When it came to airports, for example, the Federal Airport Act of 1946, as will be shown, also reflected the beliefs of the winged gospel. It emphasized smaller airports — those that could be used by what was sure to be a growing number of gen-

eral aviation pilots following World War II—over larger airports serving primarily the nation’s commercial airlines.

The history of airports, though, also clearly demonstrated the limits to the influence of the winged gospel. The limits became particularly visible during the 1930s, a period that generally saw a diminishment of enthusiasm for airports. Corn’s book examined how a number of women and African Americans came to embrace the winged gospel, but it did not determine the degree to which different social and economic classes came to hold to the beliefs of the gospel. As will be shown, studies done of the local politics of airports in Omaha, Nebraska, and Muncie, Indiana, clearly demonstrated that while the middle and upper classes, particularly the elites, in those cities supported airport construction, the support was far less strong among those cities’ working and lower classes. This suggests that the winged gospel appealed more to the upper and middle classes, those mostly likely to have the opportunity to participate in aviation, than to the working and lower classes.

Other evidence of the limits to the winged gospel came in the form of legal challenges. The late 1920s and the 1930s witnessed a series of lawsuits dealing with the very legality of publicly owned airports as well as asserting the claim that airports represented a nuisance. While courts generally ruled in favor of airports, the challenges were real and viewed as serious. To some extent, airports played the same role in relation to airplanes as garages, filling stations, and parking lots did to the automobile. Americans clearly embraced the automobile but proved far less enthusiastic about garages, filling stations, and parking lots, especially when such facilities located near their homes. In much the same way a number of Americans may have embraced the airplane, but they were far less enthusiastic about airports, whether located nearby or not.

And while certainly a number of federal officials as well as a number of members of Congress could be counted among the true believers in aviation, the same was not true of federal officials and members of Congress in general. This was particularly apparent when, again, it came to the Federal Airport Act of 1946. The aviation enthusiasts may have written into the act the bias in favor of smaller airports, but they were not successful in convincing Congress to fully fund the program created by the act. Clearly Congress—and the federal government in general—was far more “autominded” than “airminded.”

As cities began to construct airports, that activity attracted the attention of members of the emerging profession of city planning. When looking at planners’ periodic interest in airports, one can see a number of elements of the general history of airports. First, planners definitely defined airports as being local. However, whereas urban aviation boosters generally focused on the role their airports

would play in gaining their city a place in the emerging national system of aerial transportation, city planners, especially in the late 1920s and early 1930s, saw airports as parts of a regional or metropolitan (essentially local) system of transportation. That reflected the fact that in some ways city planners also bought into the winged gospel's promise of a future in which airplanes would serve as forms of personal transportation. While planners were wrong about the future of the personal airplane, during the formative period they developed a number of the very basic ideas dealing with the planning of airports. They also provided cities with a tool that would become important in the postwar period, airport zoning.

Though airports became defined as primarily the responsibility of local governments, throughout the formative period the federal government played an important, growing, and evolving role. As noted, the two most important first "customers" of airports in the United States were the Post Office and the military. Over time, the role of the federal government in the establishment, maintenance, and improvement of airports increased. Between 1926 and 1933, the federal government took the first steps toward developing national-level policies and programs concerning aviation. In 1926 Congress passed the first legislation regulating aviation in the United States and created an aviation bureaucracy within the Department of Commerce. Reflecting the associationalism van der Linden identified as shaping aviation policy during this time period, the Aeronautics Branch proceeded to offer limited help to cities interested in building and operating airports.

The first federal financial aid to cities and their airports came with the New Deal through several of its relief agencies, particularly the Civil Works Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and the Works Projects Administration. The aid was indirect, though. It paid almost exclusively for labor to work on airport projects, not for needed material or equipment. By the end of the 1930s city leaders were actively lobbying Congress for more and more direct federal airport aid. Congress in essence authorized such aid in 1938 when it called for a national airport plan and a program for civilian airport improvement. Concerns about the growing federal deficit and the gathering war clouds in Europe derailed the effort, however. The first major federal aid for airports came only with the war-preparedness efforts of the early 1940s and with the war itself. Following the precedent set by the wartime aid, Congress established a long-term program for federal aid to the nation's municipal airports in 1946.

With every increase in aid came an increase in the number and kinds of federal rules and regulations cities had to agree to and follow when it came to the airports. Even when basically all the Aeronautics Branch could offer was advice, local regulations dealing with aviation gradually came to conform to those poli-

cies established in or promoted by Washington. For example, local aviation ordinances specifically mentioned the regulations established under the Air Commerce Act. And, reflecting the Progressive Era desire for standardization, the Aeronautics Branch helped promote and publicize uniform acts dealing with aviation and airports that cities and states could and did use as models. With the coming of New Deal moneys, cities found themselves having to deal far more with federal rules and regulations. The federal aviation bureaucracy in the form of the Bureau of Air Commerce and then the Civil Aeronautics Authority could and did force cities to bring their airports into compliance with federal guidelines. The rules and regulations only became more complex as federal aid increased.

In addition to the federal aviation bureaucracy, cities also forged a relationship with another branch of the federal government, the military. Due to this connection, the history of municipal airports in the United States can be seen in some ways as a case study in evolving civil-military relations. As noted, between 1919 and 1926 the military, particularly the Army's air arm, aggressively sought local help. To fly and train, the military needed available aviation facilities around the country. Neither the War Department nor the Department of the Navy had the budget to build such facilities. Of necessity they turned to the nation's cities. The Army Air Service in particular established programs aimed at encouraging local interests to provide airports. The military's role was less visible from the late 1920s through the late 1930s, but it continued to locate units, especially those of its reserve components, on municipal airports, and representatives of the military when called upon offered advice to cities. From the late 1930s through the end of World War II military needs helped justify the first major programs for direct federal aid to municipal airports. Although both the development of airports in general and wartime spending on airports in particular had a certain regional flavor, the defense-related aid during the 1940s brought significant improvements to airports all over the country. And the continued military value of airports provided part of the justification for the postwar airport aid program.

The growing and evolving relationship between cities and the federal government in a variety of areas, including airports, brought a response from the states. States traditionally had played something of a mediator role between cities and the federal government. That role had been challenged by the New Deal and its direct aid to cities.¹⁹ During the debate and negotiations over the terms of the Federal Airport Act of 1946, states and their congressional allies sought to shape the legislation so that states played their traditional mediator role in terms of airport funding.

As city governments took on greater responsibility for airports, eventually

coming to own them, the means by which cities would manage their airports also changed and evolved. Initially, airport management was an additional duty taken on by an existing department within city government, frequently a department dealing either with streets or, more controversially, parks. Increasingly, though, cities created separate aviation and/or airport departments or commissions to handle the job.

Finally, just as the relationships between cities, states, the federal government, and airports evolved and grew more complex over time, airports themselves grew more complex, as demonstrated particularly in Douglas's dissertation. In 1919 airports were rather simple affairs, consisting mostly of large, open fields with a minimum amount of not very sophisticated equipment. That changed with the development of airport lighting, radio-navigation equipment, the need for a durable all-weather landing surface, passenger demands for greater comfort, weather reporting equipment, and a host of other aviation advances that came with the 1920s and 1930s. Airports were initially promoted as inexpensive. Within a few short years, however, the costs of building and maintaining a full service, up-to-date airport escalated rapidly. Throughout, cities bore the burden of the ever increasing costs. That fueled the drive for direct federal airport aid in the late 1930s.

This work seeks to provide an overview of the early history of municipal airports within the United States. While it focuses on airports in general, examples were drawn from the experiences of a wide variety of individual municipal airports. They included airports located in some of the nation's largest cities, as well as those near smaller, medium-sized cities. There is no claim that the individual airports included in this study constitute a fully representative cross-section of America's municipal airports. The examples used in the study are, in many ways, those airports that captured the attention of the aviation journals of the day. They also include those few airports that have received the attention of historians and other scholars. An effort was made, though, to include airports from both larger and smaller cities and from each region of the country. The nation's major airports, those in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, and Los Angeles, to name some of the largest, may indeed represent the airports closest to the center of and most vital to the nation's aerial transportation system. Their prominent position, however, makes them somewhat special rather than typical. The examples drawn from the histories of the large number of airports at the nation's smaller, medium-sized cities—Milwaukee, Dayton, Omaha, Tulsa, and Wichita, among others—may in some ways be more typical. And to a certain extent, though one that should not be emphasized too greatly, there was a certain regional variation in the development of municipi-

pal airports in the United States. In the end, though, as is often the case, the examples used also represent those cities for which information on the airports was the most readily available to the researcher. However, it should also be kept in mind that, especially during this formative period, it may have been difficult to find any typical airport or set of airports. While developing within a broad framework of federal action and the same general economic conditions, airport developments were largely driven by local politics, conditions, and structures.

Overall, the relationship between cities and airports was one that evolved over time and proved quite complex. This study does not claim to have definitely asked, let alone answered, all the important questions about municipal airports in the United States during the formative period of 1919 through 1947. However, it does attempt to offer some answers and an exploration of the most obvious and important issues. This history of airports in the United States is one that has received little attention. Some work has been done over the last thirty years, and particularly in the last decade, but much remains. The author hopes that this work offers a sense of the possibilities and a starting point for future explorations.