

Airports in Northern Virginia, Past and Present

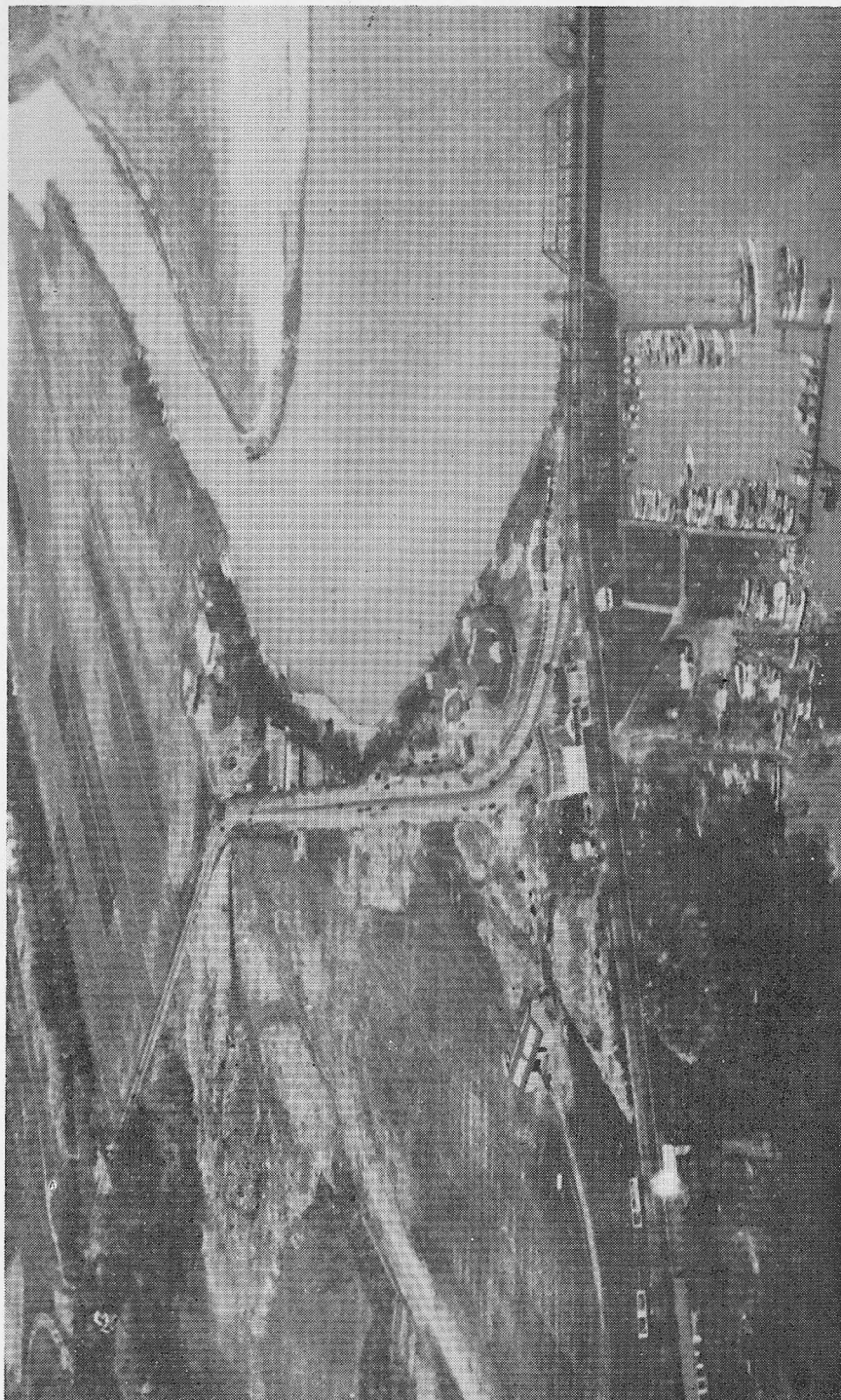
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Airports always have been controversial. Almost from the day the Wright Brothers closed their bicycle shop and headed for Kitty Hawk, flying fields and airports have been topics of public discussion, criticism and controversy. Today although most people acknowledge the importance of airports to the economic well-being of the cities and the country, they are increasingly critical and demanding of airports. Whatever the problem, late schedules, poor schedules, old limos, inadequate restaurants, even lost baggage, the airport often gets blamed. An amusing jet age jingle comes to mind—breakfast in dear old London, lunch in gay Patee, dinner in New York City, baggage in Italy—and there again the airport would probably get the blame. But despite all the discussion and all the criticism airports have survived and improved vastly over the years.

Looking back over our shoulders at the airports in Northern Virginia in the past, we have to focus on the old Hoover Field, the predecessor to Washington National. It was located in a pasture at the south end of the 14th Street Bridge on land now generally occupied by the Pentagon. Hoover Airport opened for operation in 1926 and the following year another airport, known as the Washington Airport set up shop right next door, having formerly been a race track and horse show grounds. How these two cozy neighbors got through the next few years is lost in the haze of history but apparently somewhere along the line calm heads prevailed and in 1930 they were combined to form a single airport, subsequently named Hoover Airport.

Even by 1930 standards, Hoover Airport was woefully inadequate. Today it could not exist. The terminal building was very small. It had a single runway 2,400 feet long which was intersected at mid-point by a heavily used highway known as Military Road which carried traffic from north Arlington to the Highway Bridge. Guards had to be stationed at the runway-road intersection to stop vehicles by dragging a chain across the road when aircraft were landing or taking off. The signal for the chain draggers was operated from the control tower. I cannot say how much the chainmen were paid, but it was a very important job. You can mix jets and prop planes, big ones and little ones, but you just cannot mix airplanes and autos. So whatever they were paid was not nearly enough. A controversy between the Arlington County Board and the Federal authorities went on for years over the desire of the latter to close Military Road.

* Based on a talk before the Arlington Historical Society, March 10, 1967.



Late 1920's. 14th Street Bridge—Virginia Side, showing Amusement Park; Capitol Airport; Hoover Field; U.S. Experimental Farm, etc.

There were other little inconveniences at Hoover. Its runway pointed directly at the Lincoln Memorial. It also was flanked by electrical poles and there were smoke stacks on the southeast approach—something else you don't mix with airplanes. The airport's waterfront area, now the lagoon next to the Pentagon, was an amusement park known as Arlington Beach. Next to this was an area frequently used for revival meetings and mass baptisms. The site was further distinguished by a commercial dump marked by an almost permanent cloud of flame and smoke.

In 1933, one famous flyer just after completing his round-the-world-flight said, referring to Hoover Airport, "I've seen better landing fields in Siberia." However, the taxi fare to downtown Washington was only fifty cents. The inadequacies of Hoover Airport, fortunately, were recognized early and action was initiated for a new facility.

As it turned out, Washington National was built after long and bitter controversy. The first legislation for it was submitted in 1927 and re-submitted every year for ten years before it was authorized. There was the question of retaining and improving Hoover Field. The old Benning race track in Northeast Washington seemed to be in the running for some time with proponents claiming that a million dollars spent there would inject new life into the whole Northeast section, stimulating home building and all forms of business. Likewise, the old Hybla Valley site south of Alexandria and Hains Point were considered. Another site, flanked by Seminary Road and Leesburg Pike, between Alexandria and Bailey's Crossroads was offered. There were other suggestions too, but the Gravelly Point site was finally selected by the late President Roosevelt, who told a press conference on September 26, 1938, he was "tired of waiting for Congress" to pick a site for Washington's new airport after 12 years of wrangling. Whereupon he selected the mud flats along the Potomac at Gravelly Point as the location. Two months later on November 21, 1938, the first ceremonial shovelful of dirt was moved signalling the start of construction. The cornerstone of the terminal building was laid on September 26, 1940, by President Roosevelt and Washington National finally opened for business on June 16, 1941. And I might say, it became an almost immediate success following the cries of "over-built"—"white elephant"—"it will never be used to capacity."

The *Architectural Forum* of September 1941 included an article on Washington National Airport by Joseph Hudnut. Perhaps these excerpts will be of interest.

"My visit to the Washington Airport seems to confirm the opinion which my experience at the LaGuardia Field had taught me. The authorities in both places have been, I think, at too great pains to provide in sumptuous waiting rooms, magnificent in scale, sources of entertainment and astonishment which, innocent in themselves, must weigh somewhat heavily



This aerial view, taken by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey from 6,900 feet, shows the Hoover Airport (near the Highway Bridge) and the planned layout of the National Airport superimposed on the shore line as it existed in 1934. It also indicates the relocation of the Mt. Vernon Boulevard necessitated by the construction of the Airport. Indications of the filling operation required to build up the Airport area can be seen in the river.

upon travelers impatient of delay. Especially is this true at Washington where all passengers, outgoing and incoming, are so directed from automobile to plane or from plane to automobile that they must, willy-nilly, experience the luxury of space thus provided. I find it difficult to believe that this glorification of travel is a necessary condition of traffic control. The intention is rather to promote through architecture an arresting and favorable publicity even at the cost of some inconvenience to travelers. The Washington Air Terminal is in many respects an exciting building. It is a pity, I think, that it could not have been shaped to its useful ends with a greater immediacy and directness."

We are hearing the same sort of thing now in relation to Dulles. In our opinion the detractors of Dulles today are just as wrong as those of 25 years ago. Our reasoning is that there seems no end to the growth capacity of aviation.

When the Washington National Airport opened officially on June 16, 1941, the airlines had drawn straws to see which would be the first to land. American won the honor and arranged for one of its flights that normally would arrive before midnight to delay its approach until 12:01 on the 16th. Eastern Airlines was to be second to land. However, the American pilot arrived late and Eastern was on time and kept clamoring for a clearance. As one veteran controller said, "We finally got American in first, but Eastern was still grumbling when he was taxiing up to the ramp."

Hervey F. Law, who became manager of National in 1943, said, "Already the terminal was too small. Those in charge of construction had thought it was going to be a white elephant, so they cut about 300 feet off the north end, saying we would never get enough traffic to fill it." Here in 1967, I can only say we could use several times over that 300 feet which was so unceremoniously cut from the terminal building.

And so it has been at Washington National throughout the years—controversy over its approval, controversy over the site, controversy regarding its size and capabilities, and now controversy over its use by jet aircraft. But it is still doing the job for which it was built—providing service to the public.

I have delved briefly into early history, but I believe that recent airport history is far more important to all of us. Four years ago, Dulles opened its doors joining 25-year-old Washington National to serve this area. From an airport and citizens' standpoint this was an ideal situation. National could serve the short-haul and commuter market, and Dulles the long-haul and overseas market. But it has not worked out that ideally. Close-in National is over-used and Dulles has not yet reached its great potential. Why is that, you ask? There is no one single answer. There is the matter

of convenience—of habit—and importantly, the availability of more air-line service at National.

And controversy has continued. The Federal Aviation Authority opened Washington National to two and three engine jets on April 24 of last year. From the minute the decision was announced on January 11, 1966, controversy has swirled around Washington National with ever-increasing velocity. There were those who said it should not have been opened to jets. To this we can only say that Washington National was the only major airport in the country not accommodating jets prior to April 24, 1966. We must add that had we not opened the airport to the small jets, the airport soon would have lapsed into a second rate facility as the airlines replace their piston fleet with the more efficient and faster jet aircraft. The airlines just do not go out and spend millions on airplanes without good reason. The original demand was for the four engine jets, which came on the market in 1958 which were not and still are not suitable for Washington National Airport. Now the demand is for smaller two and three engine jets acceptable at Washington National to serve the short-haul market. Next the demand will be for the big fellows with a 500 passenger capacity. We already are seeing this demand with the stretched-out versions of the four engine jets. A little further down the road is the supersonic aircraft and those capable of carrying up to 1,000 passengers.

Needless to say, none of these aircraft will ever operate at Washington National, nor will the four engine jets. That is an often stated and firm policy of the Agency. There are those who want Washington National closed. To this we can only say it would not be in the public interest. If Washington National were to be closed tomorrow, Dulles and Friendship would not be able to handle the eight million passengers it accommodated in 1966. Most certainly another airport would be required for the Washington area, and as indicated earlier, selecting a site and building an airport is a long and difficult job. This would be extremely expensive and would of necessity have to be located far out. The convenience of a close-in airport would be lost forever. So would a \$44 million investment in Federal Government funds. The effect would be felt not only in the Metropolitan area, but by businessmen and officials at every airport east of the Mississippi.

The main objection to Washington National, of course, is the noise of the aircraft. There is no question that aircraft *do* make noise and that the noise disturbs people. But at Washington National we have the advantage of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers over which to route flights. The situation here would be much worse noisewise if it were not for these two natural routes. We are fortunate also that the airlines have voluntarily agreed not to run jet operations between the hours of 10 P.M. and 7 A.M.

We recognize the noise problem and have done our best to alleviate it

at Washington National. We have established noise abatement procedures for jets that call for a reduction in power and a shallow climb-out until reaching the area of Cabin John. We are still working to better the procedures and to make them more acceptable to the people along the banks of the rivers. Meanwhile, we will continue to do whatever possible with noise abatement procedures consistent with safe operations. And I might add, safety is the prime responsibility of the Federal Aviation Agency.

Another pressing problem at Washington National has been congestion in the terminal, the parking lots, the baggage claim areas, and on the roadways. There is no congestion in the air or on the runways. Our safety standards and air traffic control rules prohibit this sort of congestion. True, the airport is one of the busiest in the country—but safety is not compromised. The aircraft separation standards at Washington National are identical with those used nationwide, and they have been thoroughly tested and found successful. If, for example, the demand on the field is greater than the runway capacity to handle it, the result is in delays either in the air or at the points of origin—not in any lessening of our safety standards. We have made some progress in solving the congestion. The airlines agreed to limit their flights to 40 in any given hour except for extra sections, and general aviation users of the airport also have agreed to do whatever is possible to restrict flights for no other reason than to cut down on the congestion in the terminal area. In addition, there is in being a 650 mile first-stop restriction for air carrier flights except for certain “grandfather” locations of 1,000 miles or less, which had non-stop service in 1965.

The airlines also have cooperated in building new passenger handling facilities—ticket counters, and hold rooms at their own expense and on a short term basis. They plan to spend approximately \$11 million of their funds for these purposes.

Meanwhile, the agency has an architect and engineering firm making studies for a proposed modernization of Washington National. By early summer the firm will present to the agency several concept designs for modernizing the airport. Our instructions to the firm were that the plans were to be reasonable and sensible and we will accept no other concepts. The improvements would all be on the terminal side. No realignment of runways is contemplated. We will stay within the established airport boundaries. The emphasis will be on better and more efficient functional passenger handling facilities. We will discuss our plans with the proper authorities.

But it will be the Congress alone that will decide on whether the planned modernization goes forward. As airport managers—and that is what we are, even though it is unique in Government—we believe that the planned modernization would give Washington National more years of useful service to the citizens of the Nation. That is its full purpose—to provide good close-in service to not only the citizens of the Washington

area, but to all the points east of the Mississippi River and to a much lesser degree to those beyond mid-continent.

That brings us to the subject of Dulles, named for a former Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Here again there was controversy and years of effort in the planning stage. The search for the site started as far back as 1948, some 14 years before it opened in November 1962. But here, finally, we have the airport of not only the immediate past, but the present, and most certainly of the future. It was designed to be the airport of the future and there was no thought that it would blossom into full use overnight. We regret that while its growth is lagging somewhat behind the original forecasts, the "sleeping giant" as it has been referred to, has aroused itself and has started to flex its aeronautical muscles.

As an airport, Dulles has just about everything—beauty, functional design, plenty of space (10,000 acres), an access road of its own. The one thing it lacks is sufficient and convenient schedules. There are two different views as to why it lacks these schedules. Our belief is that if the schedules were put in at Dulles the people would use them, in effect, change their flying habits of heading toward Washington National every time they went on a trip. The other view is the one taken by the airlines. They say that the schedules and service depend on public demand.

But regardless of the reason, Dulles is steadily growing both in traffic and passengers. The number of passengers using the airport increased by 18.1 percent in 1966 to 1,225,000 passengers, about one-quarter of the design capacity of four million passengers a year. In the near future some of the new family of jets previously mentioned will be in service and Dulles will be ready for them. In addition, recent forecasts tell us that air travel will double its present rate by 1970 and triple it by 1975. With all this we do not see how Dulles can fail to take its place as one of the busy airports in the Nation—and thus the world.

I have discussed only the major airports in Northern Virginia, but it would not be fair not to mention some of the smaller airports that make up the over-all system. Airports such as Godfrey Field at Leesburg, Manassas Airport, Fredericksburg, and Bailey's Cross Roads, all contribute to air transportation in all its forms in the Northern part of the Commonwealth.

Both Washington National Airport and Dulles International Airport are rich in history in other ways. On the hill overlooking Washington National, but within its boundaries, is the site of Abingdon described as a "mansion house located on the uplands."

In 1778 this land was purchased by John Parke Custis, son of Martha Washington, and as history says, much to the displeasure of General Washington. His widow, Eleanor Calvert lived here for some years after her

marriage to Dr. Stuart but eventually State legislation was enacted to permit her to break the sales contract and the estate reverted to the Alexander family which had acquired it in 1669. At the start of the Civil War it was the property of Major Bushrod Hunter and his son, both of whom went south to fight for the Confederacy. The mansion was confiscated, but later was returned to the Hunter family through the efforts of an attorney, James A. Garfield. I cannot say if the attorney was later to become President James A. Garfield, but it is an interesting thought for speculation.

At Chantilly, where Dulles is located the history was more violent. The Union lost two of its most promising generals, Isaac Stevens and Phil Kearny, and 1,000 troops in a brief but bloody engagement in a driving rain late in the day of September 1, 1862, in the vicinity of the Chantilly mansion. They were killed while leading their troops in stopping a circling movement by Stonewall Jackson, who was attempting to get behind General John Pope's Union forces entrenched at Centreville. The action at Chantilly was an aftermath of Pope's defeat by Lee at the second Battle of Manassas—or if you will—Bull Run. On the less violent side, the Sully Plantation House still stands within the boundaries of Dulles Airport, in fact one-quarter of the airport property was part of the plantation. It was built in 1794 by Richard Bland Lee a signer of the Declaration of Independence and Northern Virginia's first representative in the Congress when it met in New York and Philadelphia. Lee along with Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson were co-authors of the Bill that made Washington the Nation's Capital. He was the younger brother of Light Horse Harry Lee and the uncle of the famous Robert E. Lee. The mansion is open to the public and is operated by the Fairfax County Park Authority.