

Fletcher's Airport and Drag Strip – Forgotten History Remembered

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Many of the newer residents of Fletcher probably don't realize that Fletcher currently has a small private airport or that at one time, the largest airport in the mountains was located in what is now Fletcher. Following is a short article that describes the historic airport and some of its colorful history.

In the mid-twenties, Asheville leaders decided that in order to compete with other growing cities in the Carolina's, an airport was needed right here in the mountains. In 1928, the City of Asheville leased 50 acres of land in south Buncombe County near Hooper's Creek and built a small 50 acre airport with two unpaved grass runways. It was reported that a hanger there had "Asheville Airport" painted on its roof.

By the early thirties, the cities of Asheville, Hendersonville and Henderson County decided that this area needed a larger airport to serve the growing communities and together in 1936, they purchased 122 acres of land including the unpaved runways of the original airport in order to expand it into a more regional airport. The airport was now referred to as the "Asheville-Hendersonville Airport" and soon afterwards, one of the grass runways was paved. The addition of the paved runway greatly opened up the airport for expanding commercial business.

According to the Asheville Civil Air Patrol web site, in 1942, the Western North Carolina Squadron of the Civil air Patrol was activated and in 1943 they started training cadets. The squadron operated from the Asheville-Henderson Airport.

Pilots from the Western North Carolina Squadron flew various missions from Missing Aircraft Search to Forest Patrol, and other missions as required by the war effort.

In reaction to wartime demands, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers operated the airport from 1943-1947, providing air transportation for their communications and weather headquarters. Both Army and Navy flight operations were conducted from the field. During this time, federal funds were acquired to build a total of three 4,000 foot paved runways, a control tower and a fire station.

Major commercial service began after the end of WW2 with flights by Delta Airlines, Capital Airlines and Piedmont Airlines. In fact, the Asheville-Hendersonville Airport was one of the enroute stops on Piedmont's inaugural service from Wilmington, NC to Cincinnati, OH.

The airport also played an important role in the military both during and after the war. The Stencel Aeronautical Research Corporation opened a plant in 1958 in Arden about two miles from the Asheville-Hendersonville Airport. Stencel developed aircraft ejection seats at their plant in Arden and tested them at the Asheville-Hendersonville Airport. The company's founder, Fred Stencel, maintained three different aircraft at the airport during this time to support their research and development efforts.

As the local economy continued to grow it became apparent that A&H Airport needed a really major expansion. The Asheville-Hendersonville Airport was limited due to the proximity of mountain ranges surrounding the campus, so a new location and airport was planned by leaders in Asheville. In order to grow the airport to accommodate larger planes used in commercial air travel, a bond issue was passed in 1957 authorizing the City of Asheville to expend up to \$1.2 million

dollars to build a totally new airport. Various studies were conducted to find a location for a new airport. The result was a historic large land swap. Asheville and Buncombe County took ownership of property previously located in Henderson County west of Fletcher and in return, Henderson County took ownership of most of the property where the old airport was located near Hooper's Creek in what used to be Buncombe County.

In January 1961, the new Asheville Regional Airport opened roughly 3 miles to the west of the old Asheville-Hendersonville Airport. The new airport featured a much longer runway that could handle the demands of newer and larger aircraft. The old Asheville-Hendersonville Airport closed at some point between 1961-63 and was labeled as an "Abandoned Airport" on a May 1963 Charlotte Sectional Chart.

Sometime in 1961, one of the runways at the old Asheville-Hendersonville Airport also began being used as a local drag strip. It is reported that the few remaining aircraft would be pushed aside to make room for the racing of cars. A organization called "A and H Dragstrip" had a grand opening on April 3, 1966 and held drag races every Saturday night and Sunday Afternoon during summer months.

Apparently, the commercial venture didn't last too long and eventually shut down.

In January 1970, Gregori DeLia from Asheville unsuccessfully petitioned Asheville city council to reopen a drag strip at the old Asheville-Hendersonville Airport.

Many churches, schools and businesses joined Senator Carol W. Wilkie to protest against the proposal. In March of that year, the City of Asheville agreed to place speed breakers on the abandoned runways to prevent any further unauthorized drag races.

In December 1985, L.A.White opened Cane Creek Airport on property which used to be part of the Asheville-Hendersonville Airport. The Cane Creek Airport is a

small private airport with a 2780 foot grass runway. As of 2012, it is still listed as an operational airport and is used by 5 single engine planes and two gliders.

Over the years, numerous manufacturing plants like Steelcase, Eaton and Wilsonart built large facilities on the old airport property which later became known as Fletcher Business Park. To this day, if one looks at a current overhead photo of Fletcher Business Park, you can still see the layout of the original airport, its three paved runways and the grass runway of Cane Creek Airport.

Sources of material for this article:

- Much of the information and photos came from “Abandoned and Little Known Airfields” (www.airfields-freeman.com) by Paul Freeman. I thank him for all the research he accomplished as part of his groundbreaking project.

- Some of the photos as well as information on the Civil Air Patrol came from the Asheville Civil Air Patrol web site (www.ashevillecap.org/) and Frank A. Blazich Jr. a CAP Historian.

- Hendersonville Times News Articles:

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Jan 8, 1970

Mar 4, 1970

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