

THE QUEST TO BUILD A GREAT

AIRPORT IN WINSTON-SALEM.

by Walter R. Turner

WITH THE BREAK OF DAWN ON SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 1942, in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Mayor Richard (Dick) J. Reynolds, Jr., had every reason to feel proud. Several years of planning and effort would culminate today with the dedication of the administrative-terminal building at Smith Reynolds Airport, named in honor of his late brother. Everything was in order—the American Legion band, the elegant luncheon, the ceremony, the air show. And even though Eddie Rickenbacker of Eastern Airlines could not attend, the airline was sending its general counsel and had placed a one-page advertisement in the city's newspapers with a banter headline, "Congratulations to Mayor R.J. Reynolds."¹

With the war heating up and his marriage not going well, Reynolds, 36, was ready for a change. He would announce his resignation as mayor and join the Navy the next day. Although he would always maintain an interest in his hometown, he would live now mostly in other locations.²

Among the crowd at the airport dedication that day was the 24-year-old vice president of the airport-based Piedmont Aviation, Tom Davis. The company had just secured one of 14 Department of Defense contracts awarded to teach students who would then become flight instructors.³ Davis would be promoted to president of the company the next year and become the founder of Piedmont Airlines.

Symbolically, the baton was being passed from Dick Reynolds to Tom Davis. From prewar to postwar. From seeking the recognition of established airlines to the steady building of a new airline. But to fully understand the contributions of these aviation pioneers and the development of the airport, one must begin with the events of 1927.

The first event was the announcement on July 12, 1927, that Charles Lindbergh, who had just completed his New York City–Paris nonstop flight, would visit Winston-Salem in October as part of a national tour. At the time, the city had two small airports with dirt runways. A new airport was hurriedly constructed four miles north of downtown and named Miller Municipal Airport. Forsyth County leased the land and Clint Miller provided \$17,000 for the airport's development and facilities. During the euphoria of the Lindbergh visit, Robert Lasater contributed \$100,000 to buy the airport land from the county and then transfer it to the Airport Commission.⁴

Another event that would impact was the involvement of young Dick Reynolds. By 1927 tobacco company founder R.J. Reynolds and wife Katherine had died, leaving four children. The oldest, Dick, turned 21 years old that year and moved to New York City. Already an experienced pilot, he took an examination from the Federation Aeronautique Internationale and obtained an aviation license signed by Orville Wright.

With a generous inheritance and inspired by Lindbergh's achievement, he purchased Curtiss Field on Long Island and established Reynolds Aviation, a taxi service and fixed-base operation.⁵ Services included flying lessons, sightseeing trips, delivering packages to ships at sea and experimenting with amphibian aircraft. Dick's younger brother Smith took flying

Eastern Airlines commercial flight at Smith Reynolds Airport, June 1942, the month that the new terminal building opened.



lessons during a summer vacation from school. One of Dick's new friends was Mac McGinnis, who had helped Charles Lindbergh with preflight checks on the *Spirit of St. Louis* at Roosevelt Field.⁶ Both Smith and Mac would later have roles in Winston-Salem aviation. Expanding to a fleet of 13 planes, Dick Reynolds hoped to win the mail contract for the New York-Chicago route, but lost the bid to United Air Lines.

Reynolds also established a branch of Reynolds Aviation in his hometown of Winston-Salem in 1927. Its machine shop was capable of overhauling engines and airplanes. Flight instruction and charter flights were available. By 1930 four planes were flying scheduled stops to New York, Washington, Detroit and to Carolina beaches. The airplane fleet included a Waco, a Fokker *Universal* and two Monocoupes. But the competition was too much. Eastern Air Transport, which became Eastern Air Lines, began flying passengers and mail that year on a north-south route from the nearby Greensboro airport.

Reynolds became involved in other businesses, but he wanted aviation to continue growing at Winston-Salem. He disbanded Reynolds Aviation and made a loan so that his friend, Mac McGinnis, could start Camel City Flying Service at the airport in 1932. The name and symbol on the company's stationery came from the popular cigarettes made by Reynolds Tobacco Company. Camel City took over the hangar remnants of Reynolds Aviation continuing the same services except for scheduled commercial flights. In addition to flight instruction, charter service and hangar storage, the new company's priorities were selling Piper and Stinson *Reliant* planes and expanding the repair shop. Camel City maintained five to eight employees. McGinnis was also employed as Reynolds' personal pilot. He would continue flying Reynolds on and off until the early '50s.⁷

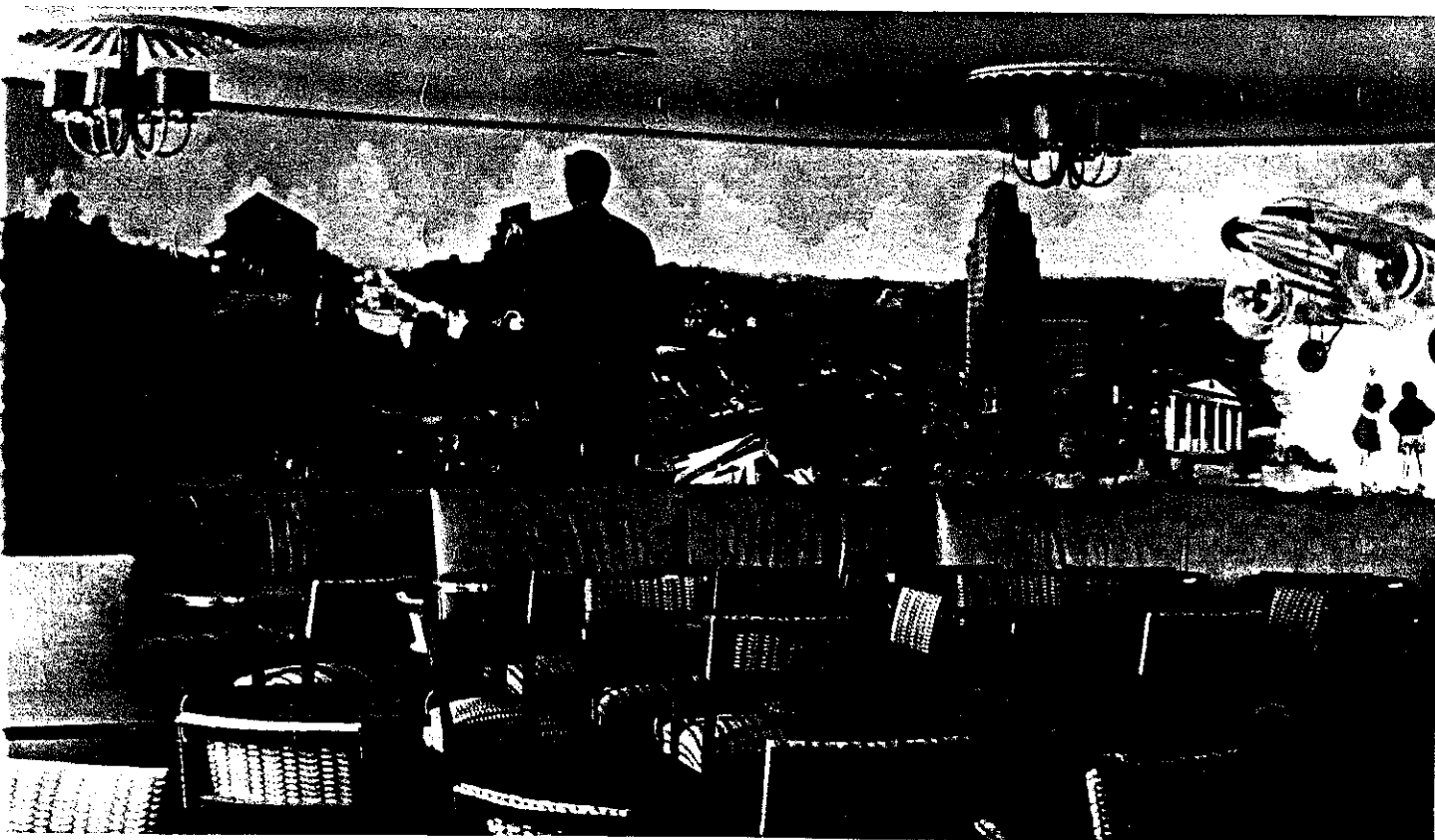
During the Reynolds Aviation-Camel City transition, an

event happened in 1932 that would have a profound influence upon the future of aviation in Winston-Salem. Z. Smith Reynolds, the 20-year-old brother of Dick, died of a gunshot wound at the family estate in Winston-Salem. The question of whether it was a suicide or murder was never determined. Smith was an aviation enthusiast. He not only held a license from the Federale Aeronautique Internationale, but also held a transport license and a mechanic's license. In the previous year he had flown solo 17,000 miles from London to China in an 80-hp Savoia-Marchetti amphibian.

Smith's death devastated the Reynolds family. But by 1936 Dick Reynolds and his sisters, Mary Reynolds Babcock and Nancy Reynolds Bagley, invested Smith's inheritance of \$7.2 million to start the nonprofit Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation for the purpose of "charitable works in the state of North Carolina."⁸ With Dick Reynolds as president, the Foundation would have a major influence on the Winston-Salem airport.

Another person who would have a major influence on the airport and the future of commercial aviation was Tom Davis, the founder of Piedmont Airlines. Growing up in Winston-Salem, he took flying lessons from Mac McGinnis at Camel City Flying Service. Because of asthma, a lifelong condition that kept him from joining the military, Davis attended the University of Arizona for the climate and took premed courses to become a surgeon. When he returned from college to Winston-Salem in 1939, McGinnis hired him to sell Pipers and Stinsons in the state. Davis enjoyed flying so much that he concluded his future was in aviation rather than medicine. Although McGinnis was a

The 24-foot mural located in the dining room of the new terminal building, Smith Reynolds Airport. The artist was Charles A. Jenkins, Jr., of Winston-Salem. The mural is being restored and will be returned to the building at a different location.



talented pilot and mechanic, he was not the kind of businessman who could lead Camel City in profitable growth. New leadership was needed.

Charles Norfleet, a trust officer at Wachovia Bank and secretary of the Forsyth County Airport Commission, talked with Davis about taking a more active part in Camel City. Because Camel City had never been able to pay its debt to Dick Reynolds it was arranged for Davis and Reynolds to get together. As Tom Davis recalls, "I went by Dick's house and he suggested that if I would pay off Mac's note, he would see that I became the principal stockholder of the company."⁹ The two men agreed that Davis would pay Reynolds \$14,000 and that the remainder of the debt would be canceled. They may have talked about what role Mac McGinnis would have in the new arrangement, although that would be Davis' decision.¹⁰

This was a pivotal movement for both Dick Reynolds and Tom Davis. Reynolds, now freed of the financial problems of Camel City, would not have to confront the leadership inadequacies of his friend, McGinnis, and could now concentrate his energies on the new terminal building. Davis, who was 22 years old, established himself as a person with financial means and talent who was not financially dependent upon Reynolds.

Tom Davis reorganized the company and named it Piedmont Airlines, Inc., on July 2, 1940. Although Mac McGinnis was appointed president because of his experience, Tom Davis as vice president, treasurer and major stockholder was the recognized leader. "Mac was amenable to the circumstances of my acquiring the company," says Davis.¹¹ Within the next year Davis oversaw the construction of a larger hangar, opened 17 new Piper and Stinson dealerships in North Carolina and secured Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAB) approval of the first fully certified aircraft and engine overhaul shop between Washington and Atlanta.¹²

But this was not a smooth transition for the company. Zeke Saunders, who joined Piedmont Aviation as a flight instructor in 1941, remembers, "Mac was volatile. He would fire someone in the morning and Tom would hire them back in the afternoon. Tom became a kind of mediator."¹³ In 1943 McGinnis left the company to become a test pilot for Consolidated Aircraft in San Diego, and Tom Davis became president of Piedmont Aviation.

The main activity of Piedmont Aviation during the war was to train more than 1,000 young men to be flight instructors and cadets for the military. This included classroom work in the terminal's basement and flying experience. The biggest challenge was training a group of Latin Americans who spoke little English. "Every time things didn't go right, they were going to call [Secretary of State] Cordell Hull," recalls Saunders.¹⁴ The Piedmont Aviation staff of flight instructors, mechanics and support personnel increased to 85 by 1945 compared to only eight in 1940.

By the late '30s, Dick Reynolds and Charles Norfleet were formulating a plan for the Winston-Salem airport to have a major breakthrough. Although funds from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) would continue to be available for airport development, WPA funding along with local government allocations would not be adequate to put Winston-Salem ahead of the competition. The grand strategy was that Eastern Airlines serve the airport with commercial flights, that the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation make large contributions to the airport, and that the airport be renamed "Smith Reynolds Airport" as a

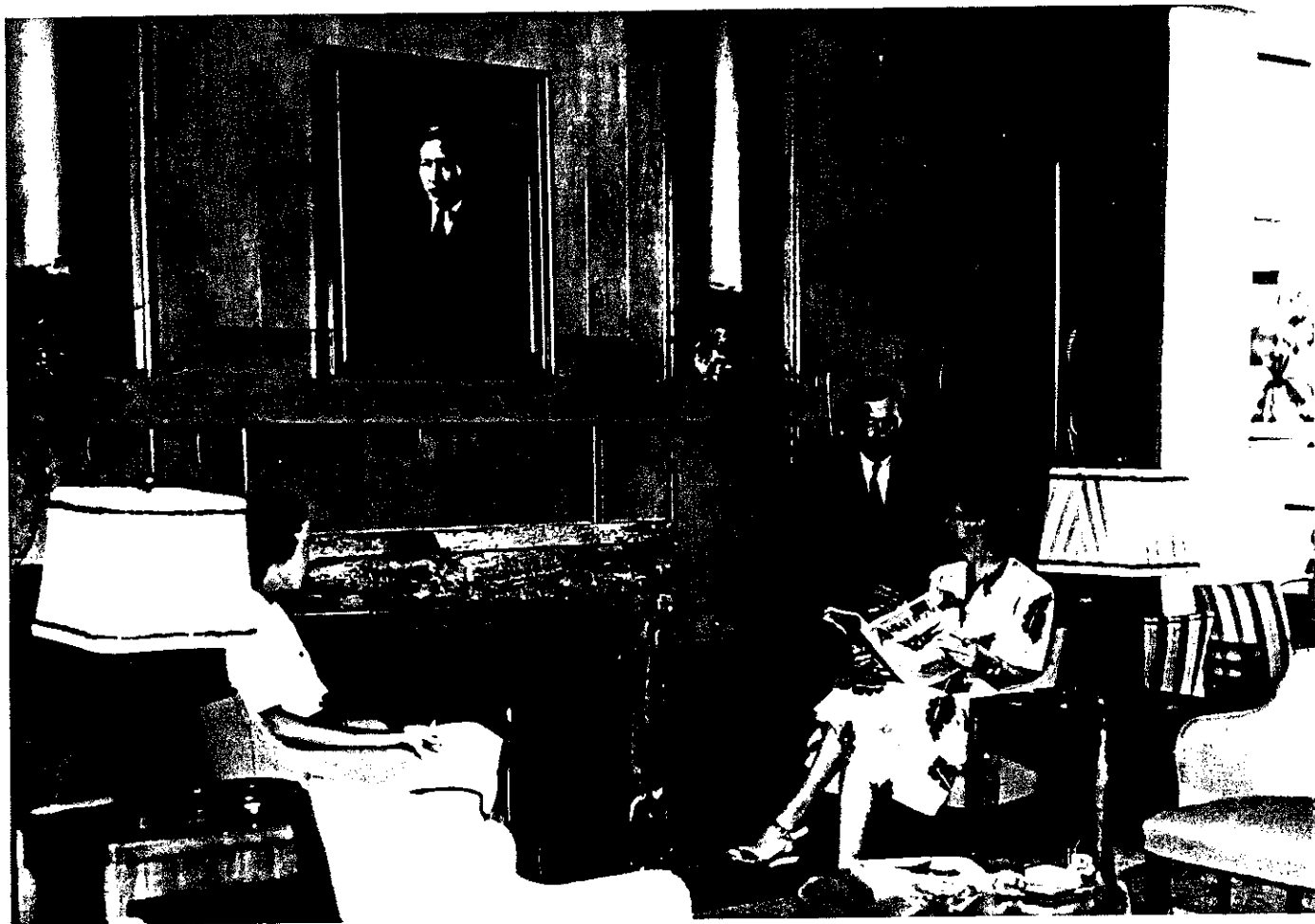


Mayor Richard J. Reynolds, Jr., unveiling the bust of his late brother, Smith Reynolds, at the dedication of the new terminal building of Smith Reynolds Airport, June 13, 1942.

memorial to Dick's late brother. To strengthen his bargaining power with Eastern Airlines, Reynolds became one of the airline's largest stockholders. There is speculation that Eastern, during negotiations with Reynolds, promised to make Winston-Salem its hub for North and South Carolina operations.¹⁵

When the main runway was extended to 4,000 feet in 1941, Eastern began serving Winston-Salem with one daily flight to the north and one to the south. The city's lively celebration at the airport attracted 10,000 people.¹⁶ But the most visual aspect to the airport's development would be a new administrative-terminal building. For this project, Reynolds contacted a person who was designing impressive buildings.

Howard L. Cheney was an architect who had made his reputation in Chicago and the Midwest, but by the '30s was designing buildings nationwide. He designed the Federal Building for the 1939 New York World's Fair, a building with prominent Art Deco embellishments and interior decorating.¹⁷ What caught the attention of the aviation industry was Cheney's design for the Washington National Airport, which opened in 1941. The airport was considered a great success. There were several positive articles about the airport in the *New York Times*. One article described the lobby, "Curving in a broad arc away from the landing area, the building is immediately notable for the huge lobby, its whole side devoted to tall windows overlooking the field, the river and the capital beyond."¹⁸ It was considered an Art Moderne or streamlined style of architecture because of its banded windows, smooth surfaces, and stainless steel trim and railings.



The administrative-terminal building at Winston-Salem, designed by Cheney and his assistant Ben Smith, was in many ways a smaller version of the one at Washington National Airport. It was also built in the Art Moderne style, and was both functional and attractive. But the Smith Reynolds terminal had something that even Washington National did not have: a series of artistic features especially designed for the building. The heart of the building was the lobby, which included a formal bust of Smith Reynolds, a marble tablet from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, and a brass chandelier hanging from a domed ceiling. But to keep the room from being too formal and to make it practical for passengers, a rounded couch and ticket counter were added and picture windows overlooking the field. The restaurant included a 24-foot mural portraying the history of Winston-Salem. Upstairs was the private Sky Club, which included a marble fireplace, a mosaic panel in wood showing the runways, and provided the option of dining on a terrace.¹⁹ Although there is no documentation to indicate how Dick Reynolds and Howard Cheney collaborated in planning the building, it is probable that Cheney was given full authority to orchestrate the artistic features.

During the 1940-1943 period, the WPA furnished \$435,000 and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation furnished \$645,000 to acquire land, improve runways and build the new terminal building.²⁰ It was the generous contribution from the Reynolds Foundation that assured a high quality result.

World War II was a busy and exciting period at Smith

Reynolds Airport. The United States Army Air Corps made significant contributions to the airport, including installing the Weather Bureau, control tower facilities and extending the main runway to 6,654 feet. That probably made it longer at that time than the runways at either Washington National Airport or New York's La Guardia Airport. There was a training program for B-25 pilots. Barracks were built at the airport for military personnel. The Air Corps' Office of Flying Safety set up its national headquarters in downtown Winston-Salem and at the airport with 600 officers and personnel. The Sky Club in the terminal, with its fireplace in the cold months and terrace in the warmer months, served as an informal officers' club and gathering place for pilots and aviation officials. The news from overseas came over the radio and newspaper, and everyone waited anxiously for letters from the fronts. Zeke Saunders was in the China-Burma-India Theater flying missions over the "Hump." Dick Reynolds was fighting the Japanese in the Pacific aboard an escort carrier and was promoted to lieutenant commander.

When all commercial airports received a three-letter identifier during the war, Smith Reynolds became known as "INT." The airport had wanted an identifier starting with "W" but apparently all of the available "Ws" were already taken.²¹ By the end

Painting of Smith Reynolds by P. Phillip and marble fireplace in Sky Club in new terminal building of Smith Reynolds Airport. The painting is now in the Board Room of the building. The fireplace was partially removed and covered by a wall in 1987.

of the war, the vision of Dick Reynolds had been fulfilled. Smith Reynolds Airport was unquestionably the best airport in the state and one of the finest small airports in the nation.

What developed after the war was the ongoing competition for passengers between the Winston-Salem and Greensboro airports. Population and geography were disadvantages for Winston-Salem, a city with 80,000 people. Greensboro with 59,000 and nearby High Point with 38,000 had a joint airport west of Greensboro.²² The Greensboro-High Point Airport was located eight miles from both Greensboro and High Point and 17 miles from Winston-Salem.

In September 1946, for example, Winston-Salem served only 1,400 commercial passengers compared to Greensboro-High Point's 4,251. The other major airports in the state served 4,908 (Raleigh-Durham) and 5,100 (Charlotte).²³ The irony was that Winston-Salem, even with the best airport in the state, could not compete with the other three airports in the number of passengers.

With these passenger statistics, it is understandable that Eastern Airlines refused to make Winston-Salem its Carolina hub. Upset over Eastern's decision, Dick Reynolds began selling his stock in Eastern, investing instead in rival Delta Airlines. Soon he was the major stockholder in Delta Airlines.²⁴

Capital Airlines, which was eventually purchased by United Airlines, began serving Winston-Salem in 1947. During this period, Tom Davis was starting Piedmont Airlines in Winston-Salem. An application was sent to the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB) in 1944 and finally approved in 1947. Southern Airlines, based in Birmingham, Alabama, was the only other airline in the South to win CAB approval at that time. After legal delays caused by another company in North Carolina competing for CAB approval, Piedmont started commercial service in February 1948 with three DC-3s and 250 employees.²⁵

Piedmont Airlines' strategy was to be an east-west airline and to fly to smaller communities not served by the trunk lines. The route structure included areas between the Carolina and Virginia coasts on the east and the Ohio Valley on the west. Throughout its history Piedmont Airlines had its headquarters at Smith Reynolds Airport. Although it was difficult to obtain new routes from the CAB, the airline experienced steady growth.

By the mid-'50s, Winston-Salem's competitive position with Greensboro-High Point had improved only slightly. In March 1954 Winston-Salem had 2,976 passengers to Greensboro-High Point's 7,738. Smith Reynolds Airport had experienced problems operating in the black since the war.²⁶ Leaders from Greensboro began advocating that all commercial traffic for both Greensboro-High Point and Winston-Salem be consolidated at Greensboro-High Point's Friendship Airport. A committee was organized with representatives of the chambers of commerce from Winston-Salem, Greensboro and High Point. The aviation consulting firm of Gotch and Crawford in Washington, D.C., was hired to conduct research and make recommendations. In 1956 the consultants stated:

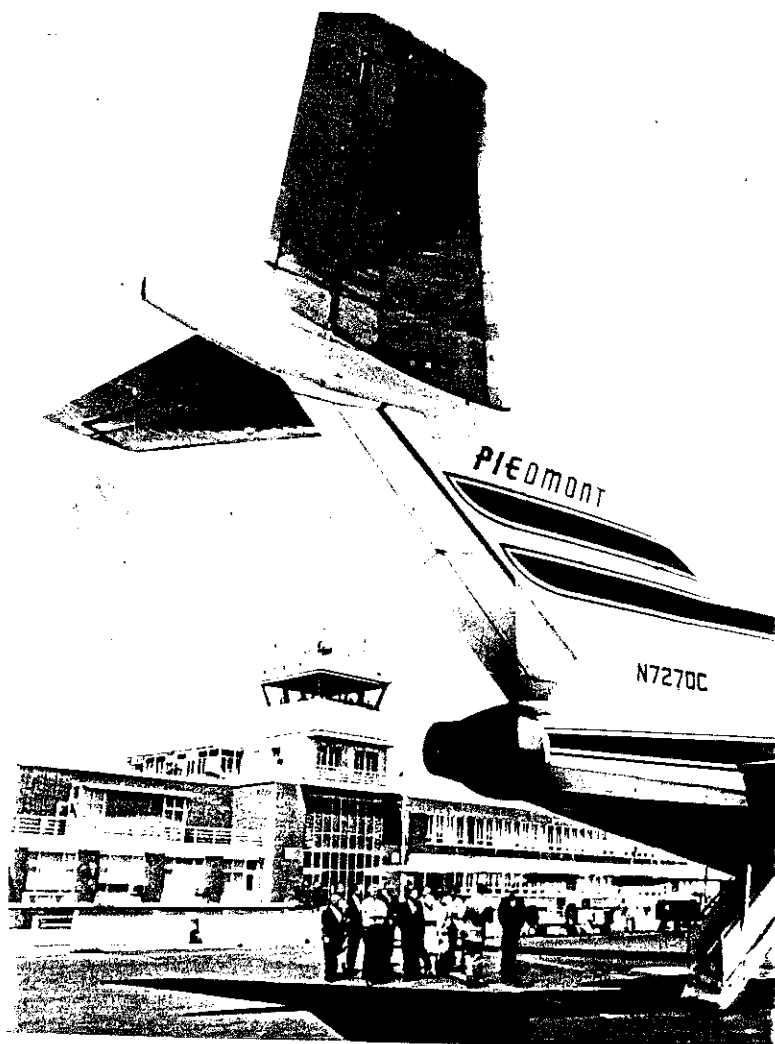
"We conclude and recommend that a new central airport be built at or near the site we recommend. Short of this, we recommend that Friendship [Greensboro-High Point] Airport be

upgraded in facilities . . . and that all airline service at Smith Reynolds Airport be transferred to Friendship, with the possible exception of Piedmont's local service."²⁷

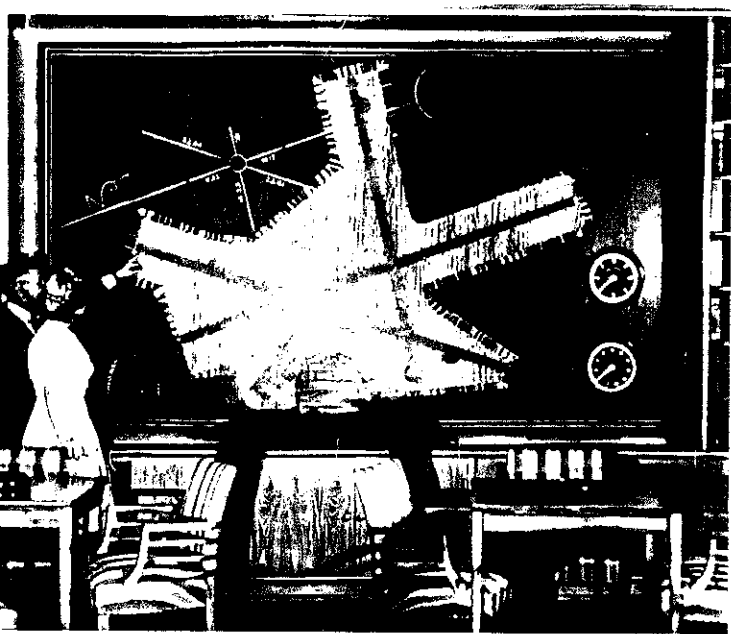
The site recommended for a new airport was equidistant from Winston-Salem and Greensboro. The plan involved two phases of construction with the first costing \$8.2 million. Although the recommendation was endorsed by Eastern Airlines, United Airlines and the chambers of commerce, it drew a mixture of reactions in the affected communities. Shortly, the Greensboro-High Point Airport announced plans to build a new \$540,000 terminal building, which opened in 1958.²⁸

During the 1957-1960 period, Smith Reynolds Airport improved its runways and made the first additions to the terminal building. A new control tower, one floor higher than the old one, was added. A new west wing of 6,000 square feet was added, which provided airline ticket space on the first floor and offices for Piedmont Airlines, the FAA and the airport manager on the second floor.²⁹ These additions were basically compatible with the terminal's architectural style. The Sky Club on the second floor was closed and that space used for office purposes.

In 1961 the CAB made a final ruling on the airport consolidation issue. The Board ordered the termination of trunk line (Eastern and United) stops at Smith Reynolds and their consolidation of that service at Greensboro-High Point, but allowed Piedmont to continue service at Smith Reynolds. A



Piedmont Airlines 727 on the tarmac at Smith Reynolds Airport in the early '70s. Picture shows how the terminal building looked after the additions of 1957-1960, but before the security addition blocked the large picture windows.
(From Thomas H. Davis Collection)



Mosaic panel in wood in Sky Club in new terminal building of Smith Reynolds Airport. The panel shows the airport's runways, and on the right side the wind direction and velocity. It was designed by Hall Crews, an architect in Winston-Salem. The panel survived but was covered by a wall in 1987.

legal appeal by Winston-Salem failed. Beginning in October 1961, only Piedmont Airlines provided passenger service from Smith Reynolds Airport. The airport's Weather Bureau was removed in 1965.³⁰

Although Winston-Salem had lost the consolidation battle with Greensboro, the twin city was delighted at the continued growth of Piedmont Airlines. In 1966 Piedmont acquired jets and opened service to New York City, steps which stimulated the airline to expand at a faster pace. The airline had outgrown its office space in Winston-Salem and considered moving the headquarters to Atlanta, New York or Roanoke. But with the decision to stay permanently in Winston-Salem, a new headquarters and hangar complex was built at Smith Reynolds.³¹

In the early '70s a series of physical alterations began that would change the Smith Reynolds Terminal Building almost beyond recognition. Primarily because of a concern for security, a small one-story addition on the field side of the terminal was built in front of the picture windows.³² A Winston-Salem company designed a stained glass design approximately 6 by 15 feet that was placed over the top of the picture windows in the lobby.

The '80s brought more changes. Piedmont Airlines took advantage of federal airline deregulation in order to grow more rapidly and to organize hub systems at Charlotte, Dayton and Baltimore-Washington. But because Piedmont was now operating more like a national than a regional airline, it discontinued its five daily flights at Smith Reynolds in 1983 and moved out of its offices on the terminal's second floor. Tom Davis commented at the time, "This is, after all, our home . . . but our experience has been that this marketplace cannot support duplicative large jet service at both [Smith Reynolds and Greensboro-High Point] airports."³³ Since 1982 Smith Reynolds has had commuter flights to Charlotte from Sunbird Airlines, Piedmont Express, and now USAir Express.³⁴

In 1984 the terminal lobby was rebuilt.³⁵ The chandelier was taken down and given away. The walls were reconstructed in a different color. The marble tablet was removed and stored in the basement. A baggage ramp was installed. Three years later the terminal's restaurant closed for lack of business. In the late '80s alterations were made in the former Sky Club on the second floor. The marble fireplace was partially dismantled and covered with a wall. The aging mosaic panel in wood was retained but covered by a new wall. When cracks appeared on the terminal's outside red brick, a light gray stucco was applied in 1993 to give the building a more modern look.

In 1987 it was announced that Piedmont Airlines and USAir would merge in 1989. In reality USAir purchased Piedmont Airlines and kept its headquarters in Arlington, Virginia. This development was a shock to Piedmont's 20,700 employees, who were proud of their airline's achievements. While the great majority of these employees continued in their same positions with USAir, many of Piedmont's top administrators took early retirement. Since that time USAir has maintained approximately the same number of employees based in Winston-Salem, who work in the areas of reservations, accounting, maintenance, and the Frequent Traveler Program.

Roger Morgan, who has been Director of the Airport Commission of Forsyth County for 10 years, says that the airport is in good financial condition. The Commission has seven employees. One of the largest tenants is a newly established company. Piedmont Aviation, a full-service, fixed-base operator which leases 30 acres for its comfortable office and hangars. The RJR-Nabisco Company retains the modern office and hangars built for Reynolds Tobacco Company. These companies can only be reached by a private gate. They have attractive passenger waiting areas and their customers do not often utilize the terminal facilities.³⁶

The terminal building is occupied presently by USAir Express, rental car agencies, the control tower and the airport commission staff. Leisure Air, a charter airline, occupied several offices from 1992 before going bankrupt in 1994. The former dining room and Sky Club areas are now empty and await new tenants or uses.

During 1994 there was much discussion in Winston-Salem about what to do about the airport's deteriorating 24-foot mural. Winston-Salem has a strong tradition of supporting the arts. At the September 1995 meeting of the Airport Commission, it was decided that the mural would be restored and returned to the terminal, but at a new location in the lobby. The Commission agreed to coordinate a campaign to raise \$30,000 for the restoration to add to the \$9,000 already contributed by Leisure Air.³⁷

The debate about the mural leads to a more fundamental question: what is the future of the historic terminal building at Smith Reynolds Airport? "Some of my younger commission members think we should tear it down and build a new building," says Roger Morgan.³⁸

In this society it appears to be acceptable to renovate houses, large commercial or cultural buildings and even airplanes, but not airport terminals and hangars. Primarily because Smith Reynolds Airport did not become a busy commercial airport, the terminal building retained its basic character for 30 years. That is noteworthy in the context of what has happened to other airports which built attractive buildings in their earlier years. But now the terminal has lost its elegance, most of its artistic

features and the lobby's unique view of the field.

If current plans are implemented, the lobby by early 1996 will include the bust of Smith Reynolds, the mural on a high wall and the large stained glass design—giving the lobby an impression of having an unyielding collection rather than a comfortable ambience. In assessing the changes since the building's original construction, Winston-Salem historical architect Charles Phillips comments, "It's a real shame that the airport commission doesn't recognize the significance of their building and treat it with more respect."³⁹

Although the airport is still called Smith Reynolds, few of its passengers are aware of the aviation legacy of the Reynolds family or Tom Davis. A recent development in the state is discussion about organizing a North Carolina Aviation Museum. Some want the museum located at bustling Raleigh-Durham International Airport, near the state's Capitol. Others advocate placing it at Smith Reynolds Airport, site of the historic terminal building and the birthplace of Piedmont Airlines.

When one turns off the expressway and drives up the Liberty Street hill, the airport has a settled look. The terminal on the right is small and still has free parking. The Thomas H. Davis Training Center on the left is a reminder of the man who built an airline. At a flashing light one might have to stop while an airplane crosses the street to a hangar. Looking to the right again, one can see numerous small planes. Beyond are older hangars with the fading light blue name, "Piedmont Airlines." Further on is the former Piedmont headquarters where, thanks to USAir, Tom Davis and his longtime administrative assistant and "Girl Friday," Cheryl Hartman, still maintain the presidential suite and the Piedmont Airlines spirit.

Smith Reynolds Airport is very much alive. □

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Left to right: Eddie Rickenbacker, President of Eastern Airlines; Bob Miller, Sales Representative for Piedmont Airlines; and Thomas H. Davis, President of Piedmont Airlines, on May 15, 1953, at dedication of new airport terminal at Roanoke, Virginia.
(From Thomas H. Davis Collection)

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All photos by Dermid Maclean June 1942, for Richard J. Reynolds, Jr., via Reynolds House Museum of American Art unless otherwise noted.

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