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Floyd Bennett Field Historic District

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Floyd Bennett Field on Barren Island, Jamaica Bay, is significant in the evolution of aviation history and municipal airport construction. The Field was the first municipal airport in New York City. Constructed between 1928 and 1931, the airport was designed to attract the increasing volume of air traffic directly to New York City, rather than Newark Airport where the vast majority of New York bound flights terminated. In 1933, Floyd Bennett Field was the second busiest airport in the country, with 51,828 landings and takeoffs, but only a minor percentage of this activity consisted of the mail, freight and commercial passengers which generated revenue. Although the mail and airline contracts continued to go to other airports, Bennett Field became noted as a prime airport for the experimental fliers who sought to establish speed and distance records, due to the unusually long runways and the fair weather conditions there. In 1933, Wiley Post broke his previous record for an around-the-world flight by landing at Floyd Bennet Field seven days, eighteen hours, and forty-nine minutes after he took off from there on July 15.

Following the opening of Idlewood Airport in 1939, Bennett Field was closed to commercial use and eventually conveyed to the U.S. Navy in 1941. Although the site was subsequently enlarged, the original complex of steel frame and brick hangars and support buildings has not been substantially altered. The surviving field and several support buildings, especially the hangars, are important in early aviation history and the evolution of municipal=airport construction.

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The creation of Floyd Bennett Field began with the formation of the Fact-Finding Committee on Suitable Airport Facilities for the New York Metropolitan District. The committee, which consisted of both public officials and representatives of commercial interests, issued a report in November, 1927, which contained an inventory of existing airfields and the primary and secondary choices for the site of the new field.

Although the Barren Island site was listed as a secondary choice, it was selected. Situated on the western shore of Jamaica Bay, this desolate location was free of surface obstructions and offered relatively good weather conditions. The waters of Jamaica Bay also provided for the construction of a seaplane base. Although the site lacked proximity and ready means of transportation to downtown New York, the construction of an airfield here was viewed at the time as a facet in the proposed development of Jamaica Bay as an industrial harbor. Dredging and filling which would be required in the course of construction had been conducted continually in Jamaica Bay since 1900, as a part of harbor development. A further factor in the selection of the Barren Island site was the endorsement of Clarence Chamberlain, a noted flier who had been appointed as New York City's consulting engineer on aviation.

The city Department of Dock's commenced construction of the airport in 1928. The first step consisted of creating a 387 acre area with a level grade of sixteen feet above mean low water. This area was created out

of sand fill pumped out of channels being dredged in the Bay and onto the sandy and marshy Barren Island. Subsoil and topsoil planted with grass, were added later to bind the sand fill and to prevent drifting. In this same year, plans for the runways, hangars and support facilities were being worked out by the Department of Docks. Construction of Airports, published by the U.S. Department of Commerce in 1928, provided the planners with basic guidelines and specifications for airport layout and construction. The two main runways, constructed of reinforced concrete, were completed in 1921. In 1930, the steel frame hangars were erected and plans for the administration building were being drafted by the Bureau of Engineering of the Department of Docks. The brick administration building which housed the control tower was completed by the fall of 1931. The official opening however, was held on May 23, 1931. The ceremonies were presided over by Mayor James Walker and were attended by Cora Bennett, widow of Floyd Bennett for whom the field was named (Bennett had gained national prominence as a copilot of Admiral Richard Byrd's Greenland and North Pole expeditions in 1925 and 1926. A winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, Bennett had attempted to fly to the rescue of three fliers who had been forced down on Greenly Island in 1928, but had contracted pneumonia which eventually caused his death). Notable fliers who were present included Charles Lindberg, Admiral Byrd, Captain John Towers and Lieutenant Eric Nelson. A massive Army Air fleet of 650 planes conducted maneuvers over the field and elsewhere in the area,

Construction of the airport was largely completed by the end of 1931, although the hangars and runways had been used for some time before then. Renovations, alterations and expansions continued to be made to the facilities as long as the field was in operation. In the years 1916 to 1938, the Works Progress Administration was in charge of all renovations and modifications at the field, which included additions to the hangars, repairs and alterations to the administration building¹ and construction and installation of new facilities.

At the time of its opening in 1931, Floyd Bennett Field was described as having the longest runways in the world.² This asset was undoubtedly a major factor behind the large volume of traffic which began to pass through the field. By 1932, Bennett Field was described as "the most desirable American Field as an ocean top terminal"³.

The long runways, unlimited take off and landing room over Jamaica Bay and the regularly good weather conditions combined to attract virtually every major American flier and many foreign aviators of the times.

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1. Abernathy, Charles, Final Report of the Works Progress Administration for the City of New York (New York, W.P.A., 1943) p.164.
 2. National Aeronautical Chamber of Commerce; Aircraft Yearbook for 1932 (n.p., 1932) p.152.
 3. New York City, Department of Docks, Sixty First Annual Report (New York, 1932).

While the airport garnered accolades for its superior facilities and hosted the premier fliers of the day, on a more basic level, a serious deficiency became apparent. Commercial usage by airmail and express freight carriers was the main source of revenue for any airport, and the award of such contracts was essential for commercial success. Facilities were planned to accommodate this business, such as a pneumatic tube running between Manhattan and Jamaica Bay. However, without the necessary contracts, these plans could not be implemented. Instead, contracts continued to go largely to Newark Airport. Although Newark was roughly the same distance from Manhattan as Bennett Field, existing roads made it more readily accessible. The sole commercial airline to use Bennett Field, American Airlines, scheduled only its New York-Boston flights through there. The Aircraft Yearbook for 1934 graphically revealed the problem. It recorded that in 1933, there were 51,838 landings and takeoffs at Bennett Field, 52 airline passengers, 98 bags of mail and 100 pounds of express. In the same year, Newark Airport with 19,232 landings had 120,000 airline passengers, 1.5 million pounds of mail and 425,000 pounds of express freight.⁴ Thus the second busiest airport in the country in terms of landings and takeoffs, lagged far behind its neighboring rival in revenue and generating commerce. Although it never became commercially successful, nonetheless, in the

4. Aircraft Yearbook for 1932 (n.p., 1932) P. 159.

era of intense public interest in aviation, Floyd Bennett Field was the terminus of an outstanding number of record flights. A sampling of these records are recorded below.

In 1932, James Haizlap flew from Los Angeles to Floyd Bennett Field in ten hours and nineteen minutes, establishing a new West-East transcontinental speed record. In 1934 this record was broken by Colonel Roscoe Turner who flew from Burbank, California to Bennett Field in ten hours, two minutes and fifty-seven seconds. The year before, Turner also established a new East-West transcontinental record, flying from Bennett Field to Los Angeles.

The nonstop transcontinental speed record was set by Lieutenant Commander Frank Hawks in 1933, when he flew from Los Angeles to Bennett Field in thirteen hours, twenty-six minutes and fifteen seconds. In 1935, this record was broken by Major James Doolittle who was clocked in eleven hours and fifty-nine minutes. In this same flight Doolittle also established a passenger transport airline transcontinental record. Both Doolittle's records were broken three months later by Commander D.W. Tomlinson, who flew from Burbank to Bennett Field in eleven hours, five minutes and forty-five seconds. Tomlinson was flying so fast when he reached Bennett Field, he was forced to continue ten miles farther in order to slow down for a landing. A few days after this flight Tomlinson and Joseph Bartles made a series of test flights on a closed course between Bennett Field and Norfolk, Virginia. In the

course of these flights, nineteen record times were established.

The women's nonstop East-West transcontinental record was by Laura Ingalls in 1935. She flew from Bennett Field to Burbank in eighteen hours and twenty-three minutes. Three months later she established the nonstop West-East record, flying from Burbank to Bennett Field in thirteen hours, thirty-four minutes and five seconds. The women's East-West speed record was set in 1936 by Louise Thaden and Blanche Noyes flying from Bennett Field to Los Angeles in fourteen hours, fifty-five minutes and .01 second. The women's West-East speed record was set in 1938 by Jacqueline Cochran who flew from Burbank to Bennett Field in ten hours, twenty-seven minutes and fifty-five seconds.

On July 15, 1933, Wiley Post took off from Floyd Bennett Field in the Winnie Mae in an effort to break the round-the-world speed record which he set with Harold Gatty in 1931, flying the same plane. On July 22, Post landed at Bennett Field having covered 15,596 miles in seven days, eighteen hours and forty-five and a half seconds. Not only was this a new record, but it was the first solo flight around the world.

Five years later in 1938, Howard Hughes with a crew of four made an around-the-world flight starting and finishing at Bennett Field. This flight which covered 14,791 miles in three days, nineteen hours, eight

minutes and ten seconds, was made to collect navigational data.

Shortly after Hughes' flight, Douglas Corrigan embarked from Bennett Field supposedly on a flight to California. However, Corrigan flew instead to Ireland, thus fulfilling his wish to make a transatlantic flight. For this apparent lack of orientation, Corrigan lost his experimental license and earned the nickname "Wrong-Way".

In 1939, Idlewild Airport, the second municipal airport in New York City was opened, and the commercial use of Floyd Bennett Field began to draw to a close. In the same year, the U.S. Navy offered to purchase the airfield, which they finally did, in 1941, for \$195 million. The airport was renamed the naval Air Station, New York, or the Brooklyn Naval Air Station, New York. The 387 acre site was expanded to 1,288 acres and the physical plant was similarly enlarged. In the course of World War II, the new Navy base became the central terminal for transcontinental flights for all North Atlantic cargo. The Navy continued to operate the field for thirty years. In 1971, it became a Naval Air Reserve Training Detachment where ground crews received technical training. In 1972, with the establishment of Gateway National Recreation Area, Floyd Bennett Field was acquired by the National Park Service, and now serves as the headquarters of the Jamaica Bay unit of Gateway. The only air activity now conducted in the original Bennett Field complex is the use of Hangars Three and Four by the New York Police Department helicopters.

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