

THE GREENVILLE (SOUTH CAROLINA) MUNICIPAL AIRPORT STORY

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The Greenville Municipal Airport, sometimes called the Downtown Airport in order to distinguish it from the Greenville-Spartanburg Jetport at Greer and the one-time Air Force Base at Donaldson, was formally dedicated on November 11, 1928. This was a community project, the result of a cooperative effort of the Greenville City Council, the Greenville County Delegation, the Greenville Park and Tree Commission, and the American Legion Post No. 3 of Greenville led by George Barr who was Post Commander for 1928. The official name as Greenville Municipal Airport was given by a resolution by Mayor Alvin Dean, and unanimously approved by the City Council in official session. The project would have never reached fruition, however, without the valuable aid and moral support given by many organizations of Greenville to this project.

This account of how all this came about is the result of the meeting of a few old friends at Carrie and Bill Ellis's very beautiful fiftieth wedding anniversary which was held not so long ago at their gorgeous home in Greenville. Ed Sloan, Bill Beattie, George Morgan, and this writer were bending a happy elbow and in general talking old times. Ed Sloan brought up the subject of the building of the airport, and he and Bill Beattie suggested that I should get the facts on paper about what happened, how the Airport actually came about. So, working from memory, with names given me from records, here is the story and the story behind the story. At my home in Orlando, Florida, there are one or two large scrap books containing newspaper stories, clippings and other things about what happened when all this was happening. That is why I say "from memory." I ask your indulgence if this seems to turn into a personal narrative and if by chance I should seem to point with pride, please forgive me.

After coming out of the Air Corps in 1919 (after a tour of duty with the Butler Guards on the Mexican Border) with a Reserve Commission as pilot, I was making a living in the electrical business in Greenville and starting to raise a family.

Airplanes and flying seemed a passed experience for me, except for the matter of Reserve training. In 1926 just after I returned from my Reserve training stint at Maxwell Field, Alabama, a strange and unusual event brought flying back into my life. One afternoon as I was headed for home along the Cedar Lane Road, an airplane landed close by. The pilot hit rough ground and broke a tail skid. I stopped my car and went over to see if I could help, and this "mission of mercy" changed my whole life. The next thing I knew I had the pilot in Tom Fahnstock's garage, getting a leaf of an old auto spring shaped to fit and make do for the broken tail skid. He was Errett Williams, a "barnstormer" who had brought his single-engined, two-cockpit Eagle Rock airplane to Greenville to try his luck. That pasture along-side the Cedar Lane Road was about the only place around a man could "sit a plane down." As kindred spirits, Errett Williams and I quickly became friends. It wasn't long before I had on a pair of goggles and, with Errett in the other cockpit, was looking down from a couple of thousand feet up.

Shortly after, a second event happened, again out of the blue, but this time the principal character arrived by train in the person of Charles I. Stanton, an official from the Federal Airways' out of Washington. The Federal Airways route between New York and Atlanta was being established and Stanton wanted to establish an air mail stop in the area as a point about half-way between Atlanta and Greensboro which was already a designated stop. Since the straight-line route would go over near Simpsonville, Anderson, Spartanburg, or Greenville would be possible locations for the stop. Of the three, Stanton preferred Greenville since it required little deviation from the Federal Airway. The Greenville Chamber of Commerce was easily convinced of the desirability of the air mail service for Greenville and quickly formed a committee with George Wrigley, my old boss

¹The U. S. Federal Airways was the system of routes approved for air mail and passenger planes being established by the Post Office Department. The Federal Airways were marked by light towers with rotating beacons and additional flashing beacons to make possible night flying by visual contact from the planes. By 1945, 35,000 miles of lighted routes had been established before advancing technology made them no longer necessary. Francis Walton, editor, *The Airman's Handbook* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1945), pp. 89, 355-357.

at J. E. Sirrine's as chairman. Mr. Wrigley asked me to be a member along with Major Richard Watson, then Mayor, representing the City of Greenville. In all, about six of us listened to Stanton's official offer. He explained the advantages to the city of air mail service, and why Greenville was the natural first choice for a stop in this area. Then he dropped the clincher: this would be done if the city would provide a proper airport east of the city.

Despite the excitement and the possible advantages to Greenville, it boiled down to "no go." Mayor Watson said that the city could not afford to build the required facility. To make a painful event short, that was that. In contrast, Spartanburg received Charlie Stanton with open arms and built its airport to meet the federal specifications. From then on all Federal Airways maps, publications, charts, and records, Spartanburg was the official stop in upper South Carolina. Eventually the Greenville-Spartanburg Jet Port changed all this but that was a generation later.

Being on the losing end of that try for an air mail stop for Greenville was "the driving spur" which goaded me to continue to work for a federally approved airport -- that and the belief that the airplane was sure to come into its own, and soon. Then the American Legion elected me as Post Commander for 1928. At our first meeting all present agreed that the Post should take on the development of a local airport as our major project for 1928. When I say "our" I guess you know what I mean. In so many cases like this results are in direct proportion to one man's activity.

Although Errett Williams and I used the Cedar Lane field as our base, we both eliminated that place as not meeting what we considered our need. We looked over many likely locations and finally settled on a big piece of farm land belonging to Richard Sullivan and believe it or not, Major Watson. The tract was about two hundred acres, more or less, and the price was in the upwards of \$25,000. Then we asked for representatives of the Federal Airways in Washington to come and look over our selection. Two engineers, Jack Worthington and later Jack Sommers, approved of our selection. Both of these men, including Charlie Stanton also, were ex-military pilots.

Then we started looking for money without much luck or encouragement anywhere. But one day the sun broke through the clouds. I made the rounds and talked to every man on the City Council. One day Councilman J. H. Huff, of Ward 4, who at the time was Superintendent of Camperdown Mills, placed in my eager but almost empty hands the sword that was to cut this Gordian Knot.

"George," he said, "I believe I can tell you how to put this thing over, how to get your \$25,000.00. Split it four ways, \$6,250.00 each. One fourth, or \$6,250.00 from the City, and equal amount from the County. Go to Alex McPherson of the Park and Tree Commission for another fourth and when you dedicate your Airport put on a big Air Show, charge \$1.00. The Legion can pay its fourth in this manner. I don't believe anyone will turn you down on this proposition. As a member of the City Council, I believe you are O.K. there."

I first tried Alex McPherson, the very fine civic-minded Chief Engineer of J. E. Serrine and Co. Mr. Alex, as every man who ever leaned over a drawing board at Serrine's called him, was all for it. He was enthusiastic about what we proposed and where we proposed to locate. He showed me a large blue print on which was marked a circle around Greenville for the future. Our location was near this circle east of the city (the circle is now U.S. Highway 291). "This will be good for the City, good for our plans for the future," said Mr. Alex.

The American Legion Post approved the Air Show proposition, and the job was half done. With these successes to boost the spirit, I called on the County Delegation.² I had felt that the County shouldn't be much trouble, but I guessed wrong. The Delegation received our proposition coldly. I spoke of the future of air travel, etc. and more etc. I could not thaw the

²The "County Delegation" consisted of the county senator and the representatives of the county in the State House of Representatives. Under the law of the 1920's the county delegation functioned virtually as a county council since all taxes and appropriations, and much of the county government, was included in the county "supply bill" which was passed annually by the General Assembly. Such county measures passed, almost without exception, as written by the county delegation since the General Assembly considered such bills as "uncontested measures." Vladamir Orlando Key, Jr., *Southern Politics* (New York: Random House, 1949), pp. 150-155.

frigid atmosphere. They could not see the spending of so much money in a tight budget when there were no airplanes around.

The main stumbling block and outspoken opponent of any such idea was a gentleman from upper Greenville County with a wonderful nickname, "Mountain Lion" Sloan.³ He was irrevocably and completely against the idea, period. One night at a big political rally "Mountain Lion" was holding forth and I was taking care of the public address system, sitting on the platform right behind the speaker. Said "Mountain Lion" to his prospective voters: "Some people talk about putting up good money for an Airport. Well I am against it. We ain't got no Airplanes, there ain't no Airplanes around here. If you ain't got no horses, what you want to build a barn for?" He brought down the house and my face was burning red. I knew who everyone was laughing at.

It turned out that "Mountain Lion" was not re-elected and the County Delegation passed the word that they would go along and provide their fourth of the purchase price.⁴ One more to go -- the City.

Along with a delegation from the American Legion Post including Fred Graham, Townsend Smith, Ben Sloan, Ed Hughes, Editor Charlie Garrison of the Greenville *Evening Piedmont* and a few others, I presented the Airport Proposition to Mayor A. H. Dean and the Council⁵ in official session. After explaining what such a thing as a good airport would in time mean to Greenville and how the finances stood, Col. Dean

³Clarence Erkin Sloan served a term in the House of Representatives (1925-1926) and a term as County Senator (1933-1936). *South Carolina Legislative Manual for 1933* (Columbia: State Printer, 1933), p. 30. He was an inveterate campaigner and the context implies that he ran unsuccessfully for re-election in 1926.

⁴The Greenville County Delegation of 1928 consisted of Senator James McDowell Richardson and Representatives Hoke Barrymore Black, Alexander Nelson Brunson, Jr., William Henry Keith, James Lyle Love, and Lewis Eggs Wood. *South Carolina Legislative Manual for 1927*, pp. 14, 103.

⁵The county's share was included in the Supply Bill of 1928 with the provision that no payment was to be made until the other three-quarters of the cost was paid in full. *Senate Journal for 1928*, 307, 992-993; 35 *Statutes at Large*, 1539.

⁶Council Members in 1928 were: A. C. Mann (Ward 3), H. C. Beattie (Ward 2), Kerr Wilson (Ward 3), J. H. Huff (Ward 4), L. B. Clardy (Ward 5), L. A. Mills (Ward 6) or Wesley Key who filled the expired term of L. A. Mills. Information supplied by the City Manager's Office.

asked for a vote for the City's share of the finances and the result was unanimous. The Airport was assured.

Mentioning Charlie Garrison, Editor of the *Evening Piedmont*, let me add a point right here. Both the *Greenville News* and the *Piedmont* were enthusiastically behind this project all the way. Without their support, it is doubtful if we could have made it.

Right here a personal note if you please. After the City Council's vote of approval, some kind words were passed back and forth, and Mayor Dean suggested the airport be named for me. Every Councilman assented. Rising to my feet, I thanked everyone for everything including such an honor but pointed out whatever designation be given the field it should be associated with the name of Greenville. If it were given any other name, somebody was going to have to look in a book or some other record every time the name came up. This point was recognized. Then upon further suggestion of the Mayor the Field was officially given the name of "Greenville Municipal Airport."

To own and operate Greenville Municipal Airport, an Airport Commission was created.⁴ The first Commission consisted of George Barr as chairman with Milton Smith, Albert Rickman, Dr. Emmet Houston, and W. T. Adams. The money came forth; the land was purchased; surveys were made; runways were designed and laid out. County road equipment was brought in for the grading and before very long Errett Williams and I in his reliable Eagle Rock made the first landing. During the late summer of 1928, some notable aviation people paid visits to Greenville Municipal Airport. To mention a few, these included 1st Lt. Ira Eaker of the Air Force, later Lt. General and Commanding Officer of the Eighth Air Force in England during World War Two. Another visitor was Elliot White Springs on his way to Chicago. Also included in this list were Rosco

⁴"An Act to Create Greenville Airport Commission for the City and County of Greenville," 35 *Statutes at Large*, 1898. The act ratified on March 10, 1928, provided for a Commission of five: two selected by the City Council, two selected by the County Delegation, and the fifth selected by the other four. The commissioners chose their own chairman.

Turner and Frank Hawkes, both ex-Army fliers doing civilian aviation work.

The big day of dedication was on November 11, 1928, and thousands of people watched a fine air show. Congressman J. J. McSwain was instrumental in having many military aircraft and personnel present. Since that big day in November, 1928, much money has been spent and many improvements made to the field. An airmail stop was designated and passenger business flourished. Greenville took its rightful place as a stop on the Federal Airways system. And now, what was once a corn field considerably out-of-town is almost downtown. The Greenville-Spartanburg Jetport now provides service for both these cities for the big planes, hardly visioned in the days of 1928. This is as it should be, but Greenville Municipal Airport will for a long time to come still be a valuable link on the Airways system.

Maybe if I had had a little more crust that night at the Council meeting when everybody was in such a good humor I might have said a word or two about the possibility of calling the Airport Road something on the order of Barr Boulevard. But anyway that did not happen.