

Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport Upstate South Carolina's Gateway To the World

Dave Partridge*

Three key developments during the late 1950s and early 1960s opened new doors of economic opportunity for South Carolina's Upstate and made possible the prosperity of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The critical timing of those developments was vital because the Upstate was falling behind its competitors to the east and west. The region was not keeping pace with the rapidly-expanding global economy.

The first development was the building of Interstate 85. By 1962 most of its almost one hundred miles was open across the Upstate, providing our region with quick and convenient travel to Atlanta and beyond and to Charlotte and the major cities and ports along the east coast. (Later, I-26 was built, crossing I-85 at Spartanburg and offering easy access to our growing state ports and coastal resort communities.) Establishment of a state-wide system of technical education was the second key development. The once dominant textile industry was in decline. Governor Fritz Hollings made technical education his priority. In 1962 Greenville's technical education center opened, the first of several across the state. Those centers, many of them later called colleges, focused on training people for the types of skills that an increasingly sophisticated work force would need to help business and industry remain competitive and to attract new and diverse companies to the area. The building of a regional airport was the third development. It had to be an airport with the facilities and size to attract more airlines with bigger planes and to transport both passengers and cargo between the Upstate and the rest of a fast-shrinking world.

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The call for a regional airport had been sounded years earlier. The Upstate had several airports dating back to the 1920s and 1930s, some built to serve as stops on fledgling airmail routes. One of those was the state's first airport which opened at Spartanburg in 1927, just in time to host a visit from a new American hero who was promoting aviation and the need for airports. A few months before, airmail pilot Charles Lindbergh had been the first to fly the Atlantic solo. Almost two decades later, America's other original aviation hero came to Greenville to promote a new kind of airport. Eddie Rickenbacker had been America's top World War I ace. He was now the owner and president of Eastern Airlines. At the invitation of chamber of commerce leaders from several cities, Rickenbacker challenged his audience of more than three hundred to begin planning a regional airport. His planes, he warned, could not continue serving cities only thirty miles apart. Planes would be bigger, heavier, faster. Carefully-located, bigger, more sophisticated regional airports would be needed. Many in the big crowd agreed with Rickenbacker. That was April 5, 1945. It would be twelve years before serious planning began. Pulling the region together to work on such a massive task would be a daunting challenge. Strong leaders were needed.

Since 1939 the founder of Daniel Construction Company and the president of the giant Milliken textile company had worked together designing and building many of Milliken's plants. Charlie Daniel had been promoting the regional airport concept for years. Finally, in 1957, his schedule cleared of other pressing public responsibilities, Daniel, along with Alester Furman, Jr and Walter Brown, met with Roger Milliken and asked him if he would lead the effort to gain support for and build a regional airport. Out of respect for his longtime friend, Charlie Daniel, Milliken agreed.

Over the next year, Milliken and Daniel paid the cost of retaining an engineer, a New York architectural firm and other experts in several disciplines. Milliken also decided he wanted the airport terminal to be attractive and in a beautiful setting. So he retained the renowned landscape architect, R. K. Webel, who was already working on the design of the new Furman University campus. One of Webel's first tasks was to begin creating a garden which Milliken wanted to have

on the runway side of the terminal. Finally, on November 11, 1958, just a year after initial planning had begun, Milliken presented the group's proposal for the airport to a joint meeting of the Greenville and Spartanburg County legislative delegations. Only a month later, after holding committee meetings and having received endorsements for the plan from officials of the Spartanburg and Greenville local airports, the two delegations endorsed the initial airport plan and public funding for it through a proposed tax levy on residents of the two counties. A few days after receiving full legislative approval on March 25, 1959, Governor Hollings signed the bill creating the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport Commission and appointed six original members, three from each of the two counties. Roger Milliken was elected chairman and still held that post in 2007 when the airport observed its forty-fifth anniversary. The other five original commissioners were L. A. Odom and S. J. Workman from Spartanburg County and Hugh Aiken, John Ratterree and W. T. Adams representing Greenville County.

The process of winning federal approval and funding hit many snags and it was not until January 18, 1961, that the initial federal grant was received, so that site preparation work could begin. In the meantime, a proposal to consider as a site the recently-deactivated Donaldson Air Force Base was heard and rebuffed by both the new airport's board and federal officials.

The chosen site lay on a high, gently-rolling plateau partially in Greenville County, mostly in Spartanburg County, and just north of the new I-85, almost halfway between Greenville and Spartanburg. The pastoral farming community around the site was known as Flatwood. The airport, and three decades later BMW, would occupy all of Flatwood. The farms disappeared and the families moved, many nearby. Construction began there in July of 1961 and just fifteen months later, the \$10 million airport received its first Eastern Airlines flight on October 15, 1962. On Sunday, November 4, an estimated fifty thousand people attended dedication ceremonies highlighted by the presence of speeches by many dignitaries and the first aerial acrobatic show in South Carolina by the jets of the Navy's famous Blue Angels.

Known originally as the Piedmont Area Airport, it became popularly known as GSP and was often referred to simply as the jetport. But no

jets arrived until 1965, prompting it to be called derisively by many, the jetless jetport. Indeed, air traffic was sporadic. The airport opened with just Eastern and a small commuter airline. By the mid-1990s, as many as five major airlines - including Eastern, Delta, and American-plus smaller ones, were providing service most years. And from its opening, GSP's corporate and private aircraft owners have had the services of Stevens Aviation, one of the nation's largest and most respected fixed base operators.

As predicted, GSP became a major economic force in the Upstate. Its presence was a prime reason why many business firms - Michelin and BMW among them - chose to locate in the Greenville-Spartanburg area, often near the airport. The expansion of its cargo facility and its designation as an inland customs port have made the airport increasingly attractive in the burgeoning global economy and boosted South Carolina's emphasis on exporting and attracting overseas firms to the Upstate. A major expansion in 1989 virtually doubled the passenger terminal's size and added parking and other support facilities. The same day that September as the expansion was shown to the public, longtime executive director Dick Graham retired, replaced by his assistant Gary Jackson.

With the locating of BMW's plant next to the airport in the mid-1990s, the airport was asked to extend its runway from 7600 to 11,001 feet. That enabled what was by then known officially as Greenville-Spartanburg *International* Airport to accommodate the largest and heaviest aircraft in the world.

One of the Airport Commission's priorities has been to keep adding enough property so that the airport will have room to expand and ensure safety and security far into the future. That additional land will also provide adequate space for a second runway if and when passenger and cargo traffic demand. Over the years, some of the airport's expansion plans have run counter to the plans of the next-door neighbor, Greer, and other property owners. However, most of those dilemmas have been solved, at least on one occasion with help from the state legislature.¹⁴ Those confrontations also led in 1995 to the formation of the Airport Environs Planning Commission which was given the duty of monitoring, mediating, and approving requests for development on land within the airport's extended perimeter.

By GSP's forty-fifth anniversary on October 15, 2007, the airport was again facing challenges presented by the ever-changing aviation industry and prompted by energy costs that were negatively affecting airlines' financial health. Those challenges were leading to reductions in flights and seats, higher ticket costs, and increased competition from the airports in Atlanta and Charlotte where more flights, often at cheaper rates, were frequently available. GSP's leaders were trying to recruit a major low-cost airline to keep lower rates at GSP. By late 2007, it was a challenge which remained unanswered.

Nevertheless, the widely-held recognition of Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport's overall economic contribution to the region remains. Its central location and beautiful R. K. Webel-designed landscaping, its passenger-friendly, attractive terminal, and convenient parking are features that many visitors and residents appreciate. "Consider the Upstate without GSP," said Spartanburg mayor William Barnet III, "it would be incredibly different." Even Stevens Aviation's vice president for operations never tires of his frequent trips to GSP from his office a few miles away. "Coming here to GSP," said Larry Baker, "it's like a state park. I've been to a lot of airports and there's not a more beautiful airport in the country."