

Airport Background Information

For

“A Tale of Four Airports”

By Henry Fiorentini

For those who are interested, this document provides additional information about the four airports referenced in Henry’s article. It is organized into three main sections:

- Airport Developments discusses the origin and development of the various airports over the years.
- Post-War Aviation Changes discusses the drastic climate change which resulted in the extinction of many small airports.
- Airport Dispositions looks at the impact of those post-war changes on each of the airports.

The primary source is *Aviation Chicago Timeline* by Michael Haupt. It is available in hardcover and paperback from your favorite bookseller or at aviation-chicago.com



Airport Developments

Pal-Waukeee Airport

In the early 1920s, a barnstormer Roy Gauthier, made regular visits to Cook County in the vicinity of Dam #1. The area became known informally as “Gauthier’s Flying Field,” although no actual airport existed.

On June 1, 1926, two Wheeling farmers, Frank and Pete Barchardt, dedicated 40 acres of their land to become an airport. They didn’t just designate an area for planes to land. They hired an experienced pilot to run operations and purchased a Swallow biplane. By the time they sold the airport two years later, They had built two permanent hangers, and started the Pal-Waukeee Air Port and Service Station at the corner of Palatine and Milwaukee Roads.

After Lindbergh flew to Paris, aviation was as big as the recent internet bubble. In 1928, three Lake Forest businessmen and aviators, led by Owen Barton Jones, purchased the airport. Immediately, they began investing big bucks to improve the airport to make it the “best-equipped airport in the area.” By 1929, a Cook County Board found Pal-Waukeee as one of six of the many airports in Cook County that were deemed safe to fly from. In the 1930s, Jones led the airport, adding lighting for night flights, improved facilities, and a large administration building which also housed first class restaurant and an aviation country club.

Pal-Waukee actively participated in the Century of Progress. They built a blimp hangar large enough to house two Goodyear blimps that were used to provide sightseeing flights from Northerly Island. The airport itself purchased two ten-passenger Sikorsky S-38 amphibians that provided sightseers an opportunity to view the Fair and the city from the air.

The airport actively supported the war effort. A week before Pearl Harbor, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP) created the first Illinois squadrons at Pal-Waukee, Sky Harbor, and Machesney (in Rockford). Besides search-and-rescue missions, the CAP also towed targets for Ft. Sheridan gunnery practice. They also made planes available around-the-clock to transport people for defense-related industries and bond drives.

The Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program was also important to the war. Early in the war, the military didn't have enough pilots to train all the recruits. The CPT program enlisted civilian organizations to provide "primary training" getting new recruits to the point they could solo. The recruits from Pal-Waukee went to Glenview for "basic training" in Stearmans followed by "advanced training" in SNJs (T-6s).

In 1945, George Priester, a railroad engineer who took an interest in flying started a flight school at Pal-Waukee. About the same time, Oliver Parks, from the East St. Louis area, started an Ercoupe dealership at the airport.

In 1946, Owen Barton Jones wanted to sell the airport for unknown reasons. Oliver Parks saw this as an opportunity to expand his business and purchased it. Parks bought into the post-war vision that everybody would soon be flying, and the Ercoupe fit into that vision.

By 1953, it became obvious that the "everybody flies" vision was evaporating. Parks needed to pull back his expansion to the East St. Louis core. He needed to sell the airport. By this time Priester was able to put together a down payment and purchased the airport.

Like Owen Barton Jones before him, Priester continuously invested, improved, and expanded the airport.

In April 29, 1967 a Control Tower is operational greatly improving airport safety. The FAA was reluctant to provide a tower at a privately-owned airport. Priester made the case that often, especially on week-ends Palwaukee activity was greater than O'Hare. Unless something was done, a disaster was looming. As a compromise, Priester paid for the construction and infrastructure of the tower and the FAA provided the instrumentation and staff.

Sky Harbor Airport

In the 1920s, Chicago was home to a "luxury airline," Gray Goose Airlines, a subsidiary of Universal Aviation Corp. (UAC). In 1929, UAC spent \$500,000 for a lavish airport as home for Gray Goose. They built Sky Harbor a few miles west of Glencoe in what is now Northbrook, a convenient location for their North Shore passengers.

Designed as the "Airport of Tomorrow," it featured an elegant, art deco terminal which included three restaurants which were popular with the area residents and Ravinia attendees. The top level of

the terminal featured the over-the-top, members-only Club Petrushka, that provided fine dining and spirited dancing.

The airport's hangar was also of art deco design, with an elaborate curved roof. The hangar building still exists today.

More than 6,000 people turned out for the dedication. in June of 1929. Later that year, Sky Harbor ranked as one of the six, "safe airports" in Cook County.

Like most of the larger airports, Sky Harbor held a lot of exhibitions and air shows. The most notable exhibition was the Hunter Brothers Endurance Flight. Two brothers took off in a Stinson Detroiter on June 11, 1930 to establish the record for the longest flight. They circled the airport and were resupplied from another Detroiter flown by their two other brothers. After flying over 38,000 miles, they landed 23 days later, on July 4th.

The Great Depression took its toll on Sky Harbor. In 1939, the airport was purchased by Bill Turgeon and some associates who began a modest flying school. The ornate terminal building was in extreme disrepair and had to be demolished.

The lead up to the war helped the airport as it began training pilots for the Navy through the CPT program. Sky Harbor was also home to one of the first three CAP squadrons in the state.

After the war, things were again bright for Sky Harbor, The original Midway Airlines began serving North Shore residents with commuter hops to Midway, Meigs, and DuPage airports. Midway schedule the 17-minute flight to Midway 15 times a day.

[Curtiss-Reynolds Field \(Glenview\)](#)

Curtiss was a huge aviation services conglomerate in the 1920s, operating facilities all over the country. In early 1929, they opened an aviation school for both mechanics and pilots. As was the practice at the time, offices and classrooms were in a loop high rise and practice fields were in the suburbs. Curtiss had fields in Glenview.

Curtiss Flying Service operated a chain of what we today call FBOs. They had 12 luxury facilities in the major markets and another 35 in smaller markets.

Fred Reynolds started a flying field in Glenview, near some of the Curtiss practice fields. Curtiss liked his location and partnered with him to create the crown jewel of their chain. Curtiss provided \$3 million for construction in addition to whatever Reynolds had already invested. Like Pal-Waukee and Sky Harbor, the 1929 Cook County safety study cited Curtiss-Reynolds quality.

Hangar One was Curtiss-Reynolds most notable feature. The massive building with a continuous roof was about five times the size of typical hangars of the day. A large concrete ramp surrounded it on three sides.

Inside was equally lavish with a fine restaurant and lounge on the upper level. A glass enclosed promenade went around the whole facility allowing passengers and other observers to watch activities both inside the hangar and outside on the airfield.

Only a few months after Sky Harbor opened, Curtiss-Reynolds field was dedicated on October 20, 1929. Over 35,000 people attended the dedication activities which included an air show and the arrival of the Ford Reliability Air Tour. Nine days later, the stock market crashed.

During the Depression, air shows were a common way for airports and pilots to generate some income and hopefully stir interest that results in future business. Curtiss-Reynolds was fortunate to gain events with national exposure. The summer of 1930 had the return of the Ford Reliability Air Tour and the National Air Races. The International Air Races were held in 1933 in conjunction with the Century of Progress. Also that year, the *Graf Zeppelin* made appearances at the Century of Progress and moored at Curtiss-Reynolds.

Air shows didn't provide sufficient income for most airports, especially as the Depression lingered and personal finances suffered, and people tired of seeing airplanes. Fortune shined on Curtiss-Reynolds in the form of the Navy.

The Great Lakes Training Center had operated an aviation squadron since WWI. As war loomed, it ramped up efforts and outgrew the facility at Great Lakes. In 1937, the Navy rented half of Hangar One and invested in the airport to improve facilities to their standards. In 1938, United Air Lines offered service from Curtiss-Reynolds to New York, a popular route for North Shore residents.

The Navy kept growing and commercial activity either declined or held steady. In 1940, Curtiss-Reynolds sold the airport to the Navy. The \$3+ million facility with Hangar One, all the runways and land was sold for \$530,000.

Glenview Naval Air Station (GNAS) was one of the Navy's three important Air Stations during WWII. They trained over 9,000 cadets who conducted over 2 million landings and takeoffs. Even with multiple runways, all this activity could not happen at a single airport.

They established over a dozen Naval Outlying Air Fields (NOLF) around the area as pilot practice areas. Most had a grass runway, but some were different. One contained a wood strip the exact dimensions of a carrier deck. Another had a runway of steel mesh as used in the South Pacific. After the war, many of these became private airports.

Lakefront Airport / Northerly Island (Meigs)

A lakefront airport has long been viewed as essential by urban visionaries. A coauthor of the Burnham Plan for Chicago, Edward Bennet, envisioned a lakefront airport in 1916. When Northerly Island was constructed in 1920, Mayor William Hale (Big Bill) Thompson advocated it as the site for an airport. Again, before the Depression, plans were made in 1929 to construct a \$10 million airport on Northerly Island.

Then the Century of Progress was held on the lakefront in 1933 and 1934, Northerly Island did become an aviation hub for sightseeing flights. Goodyear operated two blimps and Pal-Waukee airport flew two Sikorsky S-38 amphibians. On the Fourth of July in 1933, an air show on Northerly Island entertained nearly 75,000 spectators with aviation feats.

Following the Century of Progress, various plans to build a permanent airport at Northerly Island were made and postponed for over a decade. Construction finally began in 1946 and on December 10,

1948, Northerly Island Airport was dedicated. The following year the City Council renamed it to honor Merrill Meigs, a leading figure in Chicago aviation.

Post-War Aviation Changes

To understand the rapid demise of small airports, you must consider three factors.

Attitude

Prior to the war, flying field popped up and disappeared quickly. Many, if not most, fields were made when a pilot bought or leased a bit of property to land his plane. He might build a makeshift hangar to keep the plane out of the elements. He would then rent space to other pilots to help offset his costs.

When the founder was ready to move on, he would close the airport or sell it to one of the tenants. Sometimes, a tenant would have a dispute with the landlord and go off to start an airport of his own.

After the war, pilots expected more. Hangars needed to be more solid and durable. They wanted night capabilities. As planes got nicer and more expensive, so did pilot expectations. Runways need to be improved with cinders if not paved and radio capabilities were desirable.

Also, many pilots had jobs outside of aviation. They had little desire and no time to run the airport themselves. They expected services be provided to them in a prompt professional way. If they didn't like the service they were getting, they found another, better airport rather than starting one themselves.

Economic

All these increased expectations, come with a price tag to be paid by the airport owner who either dug into his personal finances or passed the cost on to tenants. Being privately owned, there were no Federal or State funds available to make improvements.

As dissatisfied tenants left, the economies of scale kicked in. Like many small businesses, airports with a dwindling number of customers couldn't afford to make improvements to change the trend. Other airports with increasing activity had funds to expand and increase services.

Like all businesses, being privately-owned means the owner must pay taxes directly. Compared with other companies with a similar revenue stream, airports own a disproportionate amount of land. Scores and hundreds of acres are the norm. Property tax impacts airports disproportionately for their income. As the city and suburbs developed during the post-war boom, property taxes skyrocketed.

At the same time, the post-war boom made the land more valuable. Increasingly, airports were among the few blocks of large, contingent land ideal for shopping centers, industrial parks, or large housing developments. Developers could acquire land for a project from a single seller rather than negotiating with a number of individual owners of small chunks of land.

Faced with the option of ever-increasing expenses or having a windfall of cash, many chose the latter.

National Air System

Throughout the post-war boom period, the overall attitude was that bigger and faster is better. Jets were the trend. But they presented a problem. First, they needed larger and more solidly constructed runways. Second, by carrying more passengers, they taxed existing terminals designed for smaller planes and fewer people.

During the 1950s, the focus of aviation experts and the FAA were to expand and improve airports to enable the National Air System to accommodate passenger jet traffic. Chicago wasn't the only city that needed to build a new airport for jet traffic.

Little airports were passé. They were there and served a purpose, but a relatively minor one. They were not worthy of serious planning attention.

By the middle of the 1960s, most of the airport expansion projects were well underway and the National Air System had a bright outlook. Small planes, however, were a fly in the ointment. Landing and taking off from a major airport slowed the operations behind them. ATC needed to maintain separation around them, forcing larger jets to slow down in the air or wait on the ground because of the small plane.

By the mid-sixties, the trend was recognizable that small airports were rapidly being purchased by developers. Planners suddenly realized that when a small airport disappears, the planes go elsewhere. It became obvious that as the trend continued, the number of small planes at major airports would increase, not decrease.

In the early seventies, the FAA began addressing the looming crisis. First, the FAA allowed FAA facilities such as control towers and navigational aids at privately-owned, public-use airports. But they realized it was only a stop-gap measure. There was no guarantee that the owner would ultimately choose to sell the land to a developer.

Public ownership of airports was only guaranteed solution. Such airports became "reliever airports" because they relieved the stress on the overall system.

One way to look at it, is to postulate that a reliever airport closed. What would happen if all the flight operations at that airport shifted to O'Hare because there were no other options? Not only would it interfere with and slow down commercial operations at O'Hare, but the impact would snowball throughout the nation.

Everything at O'Hare would have to expand. Parking, terminals, hangars would need to be transformed to handle an influx of small aircraft. That means commercial passengers would have an even more difficult and longer time getting around the airport and to their ultimate destination

Airports Disposition

Sky Harbor Airport

Sky Harbor is a perfect example of a private airport succumbing to economic pressures of the changing times. Bill Turgeon did fairly well, operating the airport after the war and through most of the sixties. However, he reached the point where he received an offer he couldn't refuse.

Arthur Rubloff, a major Chicago developer, purchased the airport in 1968 and wanted to transform it into an “air-industrial park.”

Rubloff’s vision was to provide space for companies operating their own airplanes. Their plant or warehouse space would be at the same location as their airplane, eliminating a commute when a flight was needed. But his vision was flawed.

The industrial park thrived as companies snatched up the industrial space. But there was little interest in the space by companies that owned aircraft. Over the years, the industrial area impinged on the airport area and he closed one of the two paved runways.

On January 31, 1973, Rubloff finally shuttered the air, developing, turning the remaining space for non-aviation users.

[Curtis-Reynolds Field \(Glenview\)](#)

At the end of the war, the Navy’s need for new pilots drastically dropped. By 1950, the Navy had disposed of the NOLFs. Many, such as Chicagoland, Libertyville, and Elgin, were purchased by individuals and thrived for a while before being sold to developers.

GNAS remained active throughout the Cold War, although far beyond its capacity. Attempting to utilize its facilities as much as possible, the Navy allowed other branches to use it as well. In 1969, the Coast Guard stationed helicopters there for search-and-rescue missions. In 1976, a detachment of Huey helicopters transferred to Glenview from Ft. Sheridan.

When the Cold War thawed, the military realized it had far more bases than it needed, even in a wartime setting. In general, closing military bases is a sensitive matter. Besides the history and tradition of the base, many are the economic lifeblood of a community. State and local political leaders apply pressure to keep their local base from being closed.

Glenview was an exception. Its economic impact was negligible on the region. Many leaders saw far more potential in using the land for commercial and residential development. Plus its proximity to O’Hare, Palwaukee, and other airports meant potential conflicts with air operations.

The relative lack of opposition made the 1993 decision to close GNAS a no-brainer. On September 9, 1995 GNAS was decommissioned. The land and facilities were turned over to the Village of Glenview.

In short order, they removed over 100 military buildings. Over a million cubic feet of concrete, including a new 8,000 runway, were pulverized. Only a few token buildings and remnants remain.

[Notherly Island \(Meigs\)](#)

Unlike the other closures, Meigs demise was not as much economic as a clash of wills.

The first threat to close Meigs was in 1972 by Mayor Richard J. Daley. He backed down when the FAA threatened to cut operational spending.

In 1980, Mayor Jane Byrne propose another Chicago World’s Fair. Following the design of the Century of Progress, Byrne envisioned the Fair occupying a large lakefront area which included all of Northerly Island. Fair plans never materialized and the airport remained.

Again in 1994, the City threatened to close the lakefront airport. This time, the state legislature passed a bill keeping the airport open.

Meigs Field first closed on September 30, 1996 by Mayor Richard M. Daley in order to transform Northerly Island into a park. Some rumors included a gambling casino on the land.

At least part of the reason for the closure was a conflict between Daley and the Republican Governor, Jim Edgar. The State of Illinois was a heavy user of Meigs as the Governor and other officials would frequently fly from their Chicago offices to Springfield for meetings and return to their office a few hours later. Chicago wanted the state to stop efforts to develop a third airport and expand O'Hare instead.

Daley and Edgar reached a compromise and Meigs reopened January 6, 1997. The City agreed to keep Meigs open for at least 5 years while the state approved construction of a third east-west runway at O'Hare.

Meigs end came in the middle of the night, March 31, 2003 when the runways were destroyed beyond repair.

As I recall (I haven't verified this), there were several reasons the City received only a token fine. First, Meigs development was all paid for by Chicago. By not requesting Federal funds, it was not required to keep the airport open for 20 years or whatever the usual term is. It's agreement with the State to remain open for 5 years had been fulfilled. The only violation they could be given was failure to provide sufficient advance notice for charts to be updated (6 months I think).

Palwaukee Airport

Palwaukee experienced a different fate due to the determination of the Priesters. George and Charlie were both determined to see the airport remained operational. Over the years they turned down repeated lucrative offers from developers. They also used their own funds in legal battles to keep the airport operating safely.

In the mid-1970s, the FAA and the Illinois Division of Aeronautics were worried about the rapid loss of private airports and the impact on O'Hare. A study funded by the Division identified Palwaukee as a key airport to preserve. Accordingly, the Division searched for buyers to bring the airport into the public sector.

Over the next few years, the Division pursued a number of potential owners including Cook County, a single municipality, a large consortium of municipalities, and others. Eventually, the two present owners agreed.

Then there was about a five-year negotiation as the two municipalities and the Priesters fought over terms. On several occasions, one or the other municipality would back out, only to be persuaded by the state to remain.

Eventually, an agreement was reached and on December 26, 1986 the Priesters sold Palwaukee to the City of Prospect Heights and the Village of Wheeling. Twenty years later, the airport officially changed its name to Chicago Executive Airport, although the PWK identifier remains the same.