

FAA's Mysterious "Records Center"

The Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) was little more than two years old when John F. Kennedy became president. Kennedy, an active cold warrior, came to office at a time when the Cold War was heating up. Shortly after his election, Cuba openly aligned itself with the Soviet Union. In April 1961 Kennedy approved the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. In August construction of the Berlin Wall began, and late in 1961, Kennedy ordered additional equipment and military advisors and support personnel be sent to South Vietnam to help in that country's war against the Vietcong guerrillas. U.S. support to South Vietnam continued into 1962, and in October of that year, the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the U.S. and Soviet Union to the brink of nuclear war. During the Kennedy administration, both the U.S. and the Soviets increased spending on nuclear weapons that resulted in an arms race.

With the possibility of nuclear war a constant threat, Kennedy wanted federal agencies to prepare for the worst case scenario. On February 16, 1962, he issued Executive Order 11003, "Assigning Emergency Preparedness Functions to the Administrator of the Federal Aviation Agency." The order mandated FAA Administrator Najeeb Halaby "to prepare national emergency plans and develop preparedness programs covering the emergency management of the Nation's civil airports, civil aviation operating facilities, civil aviation services, and civil aircraft other than air carrier aircraft. These plans and programs shall be designed to develop a state of readiness in these areas with respect to all conditions of national emergency, including attack upon the United States." As part of this requirement, the President ordered the Administrator to:

- analyze the potential effects of attack as a basis for developing and promoting a national program of vulnerability reduction,
- develop a means to minimize the effects of overt or covert attack on civil aviation facilities, except aircraft manufacturing plants, and

- plan for disaster recovery.

FAA's emergency preparedness plan had to "include, but shall not be limited to, guidance with respect to deconcentration and dispersal of facilities and equipment, organization and training of facility employees, shelter, evacuation and relocation plans, records protection, continuity of management, and emergency repair and recovery of facilities."¹

In response to the order, FAA personnel immediately went to work, providing technical guidance to the civil aviation community on the protection of essential operation facilities against enemy attack. They worked with the air carriers to develop emergency preparedness plans, developed a prototype airport disaster plan, provided guidance for airport authorities on pre-emergency planning, survival, and recovery, and issued a publication on nuclear accident procedures for airports. The agency also began work to reduce the vulnerability of its own facilities and services, as well as improving its emergency operating capability.²

As part of its plans, on October 27, 1962, coincidentally just as the Cuban Missile Crisis was ending, the FAA sent small group of employees from Washington, DC, headquarters to staff a small office in the former federal court house and post office building in Martinsburg, West Virginia. The FAA sealed off the main entrance to the building, and posted a sign at the new entrance that said "Records Center." Martinsburg residents, perplexed by the FAA's sudden move into the community, probably became even more curious if they saw the FAA employees moving c-rations and cots into the building. FAA posted a 24-hour guard on the premise. According to one reporter, a "local source" said the facility was "classified" and closed to the general public. A FAA official explained the facility was simply "an auxiliary center for keeping

¹ John F. Kennedy: "Executive Order 11003 - Assigning Emergency Preparedness Functions to the Administrator of the Federal Aviation Agency," February 16, 1962, Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58942>.

² Federal Aviation Agency, Fourth Annual Report, 1962 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1963): 51-52.

FAA records.” Disappointed local officials had hoped the building, which had been declared surplus by the General Services Administration when the post office and federal court moved to a new location, could be used for the local library.³

In reality, the building would become the FAA’s command and control center for the eastern seaboard in case of an emergency. FAA staffed the emergency operations center with personnel, installed communications equipment, and even moved records into the building necessary to keep the agency and the national airspace system operating in case a natural or manmade disaster made it impossible for operations to continue at the FAA Headquarters building. A skeleton crew of approximately 10 FAA employees manned the facility. In the event the facility became active during a crisis, FAA also had arrangements to use North Middle School, a public school near the Records Center, as additional space for employees. The school opened in 1961.

In 1988, the Federal Aviation Administration leased property from the Washington County, MD, Department of Natural Resources on June 30, 1988, at the cost of \$1.00 per year for 25 years and moved its emergency operations center from Martinsburg to a former U.S. Army Corps of Engineers communication site at Lambs Knoll, South Mountain State Park, Clear Spring, MD. FAA renewed that lease for additional 25-years in 2013.⁴

NOTE: Willoughby J. Edbrooke, Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department, designed the building, which was built in 1895. This building served as the post office, federal courthouse,

³ “FAA Records Center No Longer Temporary; Building Not Available to City Library,” The Morning Herald (Hagerstown, MD), November 12, 1962, 2; “New Facility Manager at Records Center,” The Morning Herald, February 22, 1963, 2.

⁴ Department of General Services Action Agenda, Item 15-LL, July 3, 2013, pp. 30-31, accessed online at <http://bpw.maryland.gov/MeetingDocs/2013-July-3-Agenda.pdf>.

and, for a time, housed the IRS until 1961. The FAA acquired the building and used it until 1999. In 2006, the facility became a local art center.