

From Cow Pasture to Executive Airport

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The early twentieth century witnessed myriad aviation developments as new planes and technologies entered service and early pilots, male and female, pushed one another to set, and then break, a host of aviation records for speed, flight duration, and aerobatics. During World War I, the airplane had proved its effectiveness as a military tool and, with the advent of early airmail service, congressionally authorized in 1918, and it showed great promise for commercial applications.

Despite limited postwar technical developments, however, early aviation remained a dangerous business — the realm of daredevils. Flying conditions proved difficult since the only navigation devices available to most pilots were magnetic compasses. They flew 200 to 500 feet above ground so they could navigate by roads and railways. Low visibility and night landings were made using bonfires on the field as lighting. Fatal accidents were routine.

It was during this era of barnstorming and flying circuses that the Town of Leesburg, Virginia, caught the aviation bug. In 1918, a wayward pilot landed his plane in a pasture on Wallace George's farm. George's farm house, located at 229 Edward's Ferry Road, was on the south side of Edward's Ferry Road, west of Route 15. The pilot, no doubt, had been flying along Route 15 when he needed to find a spot to land his craft. Curious townspeople certainly found the sight of an airplane in their neighbor's pasture a fun curiosity.

George's field soon became a popular landing spot for early barnstormers, and, sometimes, for an airmail plane or two. The airstrip, merely a mowed grassy path on the property, gave Virginia's Loudoun County residents their first opportunity to witness firsthand the odd spectacles of wing walkers, aerobatic maneuvers, parachutists, and perhaps a race or two. And, for a small fee pilots would take people for short rides over the Potomac River.

It was during these early days of aviation, that industry leaders recognized that the airplane could not reach its full commercial potential without federal action to improve and maintain safety standards. At their urging, the Air Commerce Act was passed in 1926. This landmark legislation charged the Secretary of Commerce with fostering air commerce, issuing and enforcing air traffic rules, licensing pilots, certifying aircraft, establishing airways, and operating and maintaining aids to air navigation. A new Aeronautics Branch in the Department of Commerce assumed primary responsibility for aviation oversight, and William P. MacCracken, Jr., became its first director.

Although the new federal aviation organization did not have responsibility for airport safety, it did work to identify the country's landing fields. In an airport listing in December 1929, the Aeronautics Branch identified Leesburg as having an auxiliary field.¹ The Department of

¹ Department Of Commerce, *Air Commerce Bulletin*, vol, 1, no. 12 (December 16, 1929): 19.

Commerce's 1934 Richmond, VA, to Washington, DC, airway map also showed Leesburg with an auxiliary field. The 1935 edition of the map, however, did not depict a Leesburg airport.²

In the mid-1930s, the Works Progress Administration began providing funds to states to help identify airports for pilots aloft. The National Airmarking Program in Virginia painted "Leesburg" on the barn at the George Farm, and his landing strip became known for a while as the Leesburg airfield.

Wallace George died in 1938.³ According the *Loudon Times Mirror*, in 1942 the federal government leased 15 acres from the George family, with the intent of developing a more substantial airfield, probably for use as an emergency landing field. The newspaper reported that "Location at Leesburg of one of numerous airfields being constructed at strategic points throughout the nation appeared a certainty with the disclosure of an agreement between A.T. Elgin & J.L. Whitted, representative of the federal government . . . [to lease] 15 acres of land on the west side leading from Route 7 to Dry Mill Road. This could be one of a chain of emergency fields that are being constructed by the Army & Navy along the Atlantic Seaboard."⁴

Despite the paper's speculation, the government did not make any improvements to the field. In 1944, a group of investors bought the George farm hoping to turn the field into a bona fide airport. The Frederick, Maryland, newspaper, *The News*, reported that "an airport and hangar will be constructed on a 40-acre plot on the estate of the late Wallace George." The report said, "All types of flight training will be offered," by the Washington Flying Service, which planned to have 22 aircraft at the airport. James A. Jones, John A. Talbot, Jr., and G. E. Carlson were listed as sponsors of the project.⁵ Construction work on the airport began in early July 1944.⁶ *The Loudoun Times Mirror* reported in 1944: "Surveyors & construction workers are clearing the brush from 40 acres, one mile east of Leesburg on what is known as the George Farm, preparatory to converting it into a landing field for airplanes & to establish a flying school there."⁷ The Washington Flying Service, well known in the region, managed Washington Airport, a privately owned commercial airport, which had opened in 1927 in Arlington, VA, and merged with the adjacent Hoover Field in 1930.

In September 1944, the Washington Flying Service petitioned the State of Virginia Corporation Commission for permission to establish a permanent airport at the Leesburg site. The company had already established a flying school at the field on a temporary basis. During two days of testimony, John A. Talbot, president of the flying service said the airport would be an attractive air park with such adornments as a swimming pool and landscaping. Opponents of the flying school testifying before the commission included Judge J. R. H. Alexander of Leesburg (Loudoun County Circuit Court), who argued that the noise caused by low flying airplanes

² Department of Commerce, Airway Map No. 130, Richmond, VA, to Washington DC, August 1934, <http://historicalcharts.noaa.gov/historical>.

³ *The News* (Frederick, MD), March 16, 1938, 5.

⁴ Quoted from Paul Freeman, *Abandoned & Little Know Airfields: Virginia: Loudon County*, accessed online at http://www.airfields-freeman.com/VA/Airfields_VA_Loudoun.htm#oldgodfrey.

⁵ "To Build Airport," *The News*, July 10, 1944, 2.

⁶ "Leesburg Airport Work Started," *Washington Post*, July 7, 1944, 7.

⁷ Freeman, *Abandoned & Little Know Airfields: Virginia: Loudon County*.

would be a nuisance and that the airport would create hazards that would lower property values. Other property owners near the airport contended that the airport constituted a hazard to livestock.⁸ Apparently, the commission voted in favor of the residents and the Leesburg airpark remained undeveloped.

The Washington Flying Service's hopes of creating a thriving airpark never materialized and, in 1946, the group sold the airfield to Arthur C. Hyde. Hyde owned and operated Congressional Airport located in Rockville, Maryland, where he founded Congressional Flying School, a school that trained pilots during World War II and the first flying school of its kind in the Washington, D.C. area. He also owned and operated Hyde Field Airport, now known as Washington Executive/Hyde Field in Clinton, Maryland.⁹

Hyde made no improvements to the field. However, the Leesburg Airpark appeared on the 1946 Washington, DC, sectional aeronautical chart. The 1947 chart showed field has having a 2,000 foot unpaved runway and a hangar, probably built by the Washington Flying School when it owned the property. In 1947-1948, Alfred "Buddy" DiZerega, S. Ross Libpscomb, and "Tex" Gray brought their air show to the field.¹⁰

In the late 1940s, radio celebrity and pilot Arthur Godfrey began buying property in Leesburg and Loudoun County. He moved to Leesburg and began flying in and out of the Leesburg airpark. On his radio show, Godfrey began referring to the airport as the International Cow Pasture.¹¹

In June 1950, Godfrey purchased the airport from Hyde. A local paper reported that "it was understood that Godfrey plans extensive improvements to the field, used by him in flying to and from his home near Paeonian Springs."¹² The airfield now became known as Godfrey Field. Shortly after acquiring the land, Godfrey offered to donate 58 of the 100 acres to the town of Leesburg, including the airport. The town tentatively accepted the donation contingent on the approval of the town attorney.¹³ The town formally accepted the donated land and airfield in February 1951. The land, according the transfer, "is to be used as a public airport for 20 years. Otherwise, the title will revert to Mr. Godfrey. At the end of 20 years, Leesburg would obtain title without restrictions."¹⁴

At the time of the transfer, the airfield consisted of a single grass strip, a wooden hangar with attached office, a concrete apron, and gas pumps. With town ownership, came opportunity to seek Civil Aviation Administration (CAA) grant money for airport improvements, money not

⁸ "Leesburg Airport Hearing Underway," *The Bee* (Danville, VA), September 21, 1944, 8; "Early Decision on Air Project At Leesburg Seen," *The Bee*, September 22, 1944, 6.

⁹ "Acquires Airport," *The News*, September 5, 1946, 14.

¹⁰ Freeman, Abandoned & Little Know Airfields: Virginia: Loudon County; see also Eugene Scheel, "From Battles to Barnstorms: 218 Years of Aviation," *Washington Post*, November 18, 2001, T03.

¹¹ Loudoun Extra, *Washington Post*, December 30, 1999, V08; other papers reported the name of the airfield as the Leesburg International Cow Pasture, "Business, Professional Women See Godfrey Film About Flying," *Belvidere Daily Republican*, September 29, 1955, 4.

¹² "Godfrey Buys Airport," *The News*, June 5, 1950, 10.

¹³ "Donates Land," *The Bee*, June 15, 1950, 11.

¹⁴ "Leesburg Is Given Airport by Godfrey," *The News*, February 20, 1951, 5.

available to a private owner. The town apparently wanted to seek CAA funding to construct a 3,000 foot long, and 200 foot wide runway.¹⁵ Funding never came through.¹⁶

The 1951 sectional chart described the Leesburg airport as having two runways, with the longest being a 2,000' unpaved strip, but noted that field as "Inactive, usable."¹⁷ The field, however, was not inactive, but used primarily by Godfrey. Godfrey's fleet included a number of aircraft, including a helicopter and a DC-3. Soon, the town council found itself dealing with a number of complaints about noise and the rattling of windows as Godfrey took off and landed. Noise levels increased in 1960 when David Pearce opened a flying school at the airfield with one Piper PA-11 Cub. By that time, the town had expanded the runway to 3,500 feet, still unpaved.¹⁸

As Leesburg's population grew, the airfield, previously located outside of the town, soon became surrounded by the town. In 1960, Arthur Godfrey proposed building a new, modern airport in Leesburg.¹⁹ Leesburg Mayor Frank Raflo presided over the controversial effort to build the airport, in partnership with council members George Hammerly and Stanley Caulkins.²⁰ In 1962, the town council contracted with an engineering firm to examine alternative sites for a replacement airport. The council selected a 100 acre tract approximately two miles to the southeast of town. On October 22, 1962, the council approved a contract to purchase the property from Ruth W. Spitler and Bessie Miller Chamblin for \$65,000, plus a \$5,000 fee to the real estate agent. The sale was contingent on approval of the site by the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA).²¹ The town expected to receive an estimated \$105,000 in new revenues from development on the old airport site.²²

The FAA provided a \$231,592 grant for land acquisition and construction of the new airport – the town had to match the federal grant.²³ The town received permission from Arthur Godfrey to sell the 58 acre site with the airfield that he donated to the town, if the town used the proceeds to build a bigger airport. Tri-State Properties, Inc., and affiliate of Investor Service, Inc., purchased the 58 acre old airport site in October 1962.²⁴

The Town of Leesburg broke ground for the new airport on September 13, 1963. The town council contracted with the E. E. Lyons Construction Company of Vienna, VA, to build the new

¹⁵ "Donates Land," 11.

¹⁶ "Leesburg Bid For Airport Aid Denied," *Washington Post*, March 14, 1952, B3.

¹⁷ Freeman, *Abandoned & Little Known Airfields: Virginia: Loudon County*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹The Arthur M. Godfrey Aviation Foundation, Inc., "Arthur M. Godfrey," n.d., accessed at <http://arthurgodfreyaviation.org/arthur-m-godfrey/>.

²⁰ Margaret Morton, "Frank Raflo: In Memoriam, 1919-2009," *Leesburg Today*, March 18, 2009.

²¹ "Leesburg to Buy Site for New City Airport," *The Danville Register*, October 23, 1962, 9.

²² "Leesburg Stands to Gain \$105,000 in Airport Shift," *Washington Post*, September 9, 1962, B3.

²³ "Virginia, N.C. Airports Get Federal Funds," *The Bee*, August 2, 1963, 1-2.

²⁴ "Leesburg Airport Sold," *Washington Post*, October 19, 1962, C5.

airfield, called Leesburg Municipal Airport at Godfrey Field.²⁵ The town began advertising for an airport operator prior to its opening.²⁶

The new airport opened on October 1, 1964. It had a 3,500 foot paved runway, a terminal building, and hangars. The final cost of construction, funded by the town, the state of Virginia, and the FAA was \$478,000. During the dedication ceremony, Col. Allan C. Perkinson, secretary of the Virginia Advisory Committee on Aviation, praised the new airport, saying: “You now have an airport which has possibilities of becoming the model airport for a community of your size.”²⁷ FAA assigned the airport the three letter identifier W09.

The airport did not prosper immediately as town officials had hoped. General aviation pilots only gradually began using the field, which also housed a flying school. With the airport underused, little development occurred at the field. As late as 1981, when James M. Haynes, Jr., president of Janelle Aviation, took over management of the airport, the field was described as being surrounded by overgrown weeds and having very little activity.²⁸ A pilot who used the airport called it a “weed patch.”²⁹ Janelle Aviation quickly went to work to improve the airport to make it more attractive to the general aviation community.

In October 1983, the town held a formal dedication ceremony for a new terminal and a new FAA automated flight service station at the airport.³⁰ In addition, the town began applying for and receiving federal airport development grants beginning in 1982 to fund a variety of projects. Those projects ran the gamut from land acquisition in 1982, runway construction in 1984, to apron expansion and rehabilitation in 1985. In 1986, FAA grants included money for land acquisition, runway and taxiway extensions, airport draining, airport, lighting, access road improvements, and installation of navigation aids.³¹ In January 1988, when the airport received an automated weather observing system (AWOS), the FAA changed its identifier to JYO, to conform with, then current FAA naming policy.³²

Using FAA grant money, in 1988, the town prepared an airport master plan. The plan called for significant upgrades to the airport and envisioned the airport having at least 30 corporate jets based at the airport by 2008. Federal grants and matching funds from state and local sources and Janelle Aviation, allowed for additional land acquisition, taxiway improvements, signage, runway extension, noise mitigation, and weather reporting equipment.³³ In 1989, as part of a \$10 million dollar upgrade paid for by the company, the FAA, the state of Virginia, and the Town of

²⁵ “Airport Honors Arthur Godfrey,” *The Progress-Index*, September 15, 1963, 13; “New Airport is Started At Leesburg,” *Washington Post*, September 13, 1963, C4.

²⁶ “Briefings,” *Flying Magazine*, June 1964, 82.

²⁷ “Leesburg’s New Airfield Said ‘Model’ of Future,” *The Progress-Index*, October 11, 1964, 15; “Godfrey Airport Duly Dedicated,” *The Progress-Index*, October 13, 1964, 10.

²⁸ Cornelius Foote, Jr., “Once Lazy, Leesburg Airport Takes Off,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 1988, F1.

²⁹ Alison Howard, “Expansion Debate Clouds Leesburg Airport’s Future,” *Washington Post*, October 5, 1989, BVA16.

³⁰ “Leesburg Air Terminal Dedicated,” *Washington Post*, October 25, 1984, VAB4.

³¹ FAA Grant History Report, Leesburg Executive Airport, FAA History Archives.

³² Letter to Stanley Caulkins from Theresa Kraus, FAA Historian, June 8, 2010.

³³ FAA Grant History Report.

Leesburg, Janelle Aviation completed construction of a hangar and office, named the Washington Jet Center.³⁴

Janelle Aviation and the Town of Leesburg's plans to create a haven for corporate jets tended to upset the airport's longtime general aviation users. Arguing that the airport had never been intended as a jet airport, private pilots voiced concerns that they would be forced to pay higher fees for less desirable tie-down space. At a time when many small airports were closing, the town believed that siphoning off the small jet traffic from Dulles International Airport was critical to survival. In 1989, chairman of the Leesburg Airport Commission, Stanley Caulkins gently reminded local pilots that "the airport is a business for the town."³⁵ Larger jets and business travelers would bring in more in storage fees and gas purchases, and, according to the *Washington Post*, "prominence – a priceless commodity." Corporate business would allow for the use of additional federal and state funds to upgrade the airport, such as advanced navigation systems and a new, larger terminal.³⁶

The upgraded airport succeeded in attracting new business, but, initially, not as much jet traffic as hoped for. By 1993, the airport generated approximately \$28 million for the town and Loudoun County. Over 180 private and business aircraft, including at least six jets, called the airport home. The airport had an estimated 80,000 takeoffs and landings per year, with an average of 220 per day.

The cost of the ongoing improvements and a recession, however, took its toll on Janelle Aviation. With the firm losing about \$130,000 annually and owing the town more than \$30,000, the town council cancelled the contract with Janelle. The town assumed direct operation of the airport in January 1993, and hired an airport manager who worked for the town.³⁷ As Janelle Aviation left the airport, Haynes touted his company's accomplishments: "During our 12 years, we have presided over major growth and expansion of the airport, including the longer runway and new ramps – funded primarily by the Federal Aviation Administration – and we have constructed more than \$4 million in new buildings."³⁸

Leesburg embarked on a subsequent, five-year, \$16.5 million improvement plan in 1994. The changes, completed in 1999 included upgrading the electronic guidance system and adding 500 feet to the 5,500-foot runway. The guidance system allowed for operations in a wider range of weather conditions. The runway lengthening project allowed for more jet operations.³⁹ The FAA paid for taxiway lighting and signage.⁴⁰ In 1997, the town worked with the U.S. Customs Service to obtain international landing rights. Under the agreement with the U.S. Customs Service, Customs agreed to have inspectors provide on-site clearance of international flights. In exchange,

³⁴ Stephen Wyman, "Leesburg to Get Hangar-Office Complex; Janelle's \$3 Million Facility Will Serve Corporate Air Traffic," *Washington Post*, November 14, 1988, F7.

³⁵ "Expansion Debate Clouds Leesburg Airport's Future."

³⁶ Dana Hedgpeth, "Recreational Pilots Feeling Left Out; Leesburg Airport Officials Say Economics Behind Focus on Corporate Clients," *Washington Post*, April 25, 1999, V3.

³⁷ Paul Hodge, "Leesburg Takes the Controls and Municipal Airport," *Washington Post*, January 21, 1983, CVA4.

³⁸ Hodge, "Leesburg Takes Controls at Municipal Airport."

³⁹ Peter Pae, "Leesburg Airport: The Corporate Hideaway," *Washington Post*, April 14, 1994, CVA1; "Leesburg Airport Gets Runway Extension Grant," *Washington Post*, April 27, 1989, v.13.

⁴⁰ "Leesburg Takes Control."

the town of Leesburg provided the Customs Service with office space. International flights had to provide customs officials with 24-hour's notice before landing in Leesburg.⁴¹

Hoping to attract more business and executive jets to the airport, on March 28, 2000, FAA received a request, which it approved on March 30, 2000, to change the airport's name from Leesburg Municipal Airport at Godfrey Field to Leesburg Executive Airport at Godfrey Field.⁴² Continuing with improvements to attract more aircraft, on May 12, 2004, Leesburg officials dedicated a new \$3 million terminal at the airport. The town named the new terminal the Stanley F. Caulkins Terminal, in honor of the long-time Leesburg resident, who had been instrumental in getting the airport approved and funded in the 1960s and who had served on the town's airport commission for over 25 years.⁴³

As business at the airport increased, in 2003, the town began work to update the airport master plan. Completed in 2006, the plan called for additional airport upgrades and expansion to be completed in three phases. Completed in the spring of 2009, phase one of the project expanded the airport's south apron by two acres and created an additional 31 paved aircraft tie-down spaces. Federal grants helped fund an environmental study, improvements to the runway safety area, and the construction of perimeter fencing. Between 1982 and 2014, federal grants for airport improvement totaled \$30,731,672.⁴⁴

Phase two began in April 2009, when the town contracted to build ten new T-hangars and six new executive hangars at the airport, bringing the total hangar space to 46 T-hangars and 11 executive aircraft hangars. The town completed construction of the south apron hangars in August 2010 and dedicated them in September. The total project cost was \$2.8 million. Under phase three, the town planned to expand the paved aircraft parking area again, which would provide additional aircraft tie-down spaces, and will relocate the existing fuel farm.⁴⁵

As more aircraft began using the field, the FAA installed new safety equipment. It installed an instrument landing system in March 2011, and installed a new precision approach path indicator and upgraded the AWOS in 2012.⁴⁶ The improvements succeeded in attracting new business – in 2014, 230 aircraft were based at the airport.

The airport has grown exponentially since it opened on October 1, 1964, and now is one of the busiest general aviation airports in Virginia.

⁴¹ Victoria Benning, "Leesburg Airport Cleared for International Arrivals," *Washington Post*, March 27, 1997, v1.

⁴² Letter to Stanley Caulkins from Theresa Kraus, FAA Historian, June 8, 2010.

⁴³ "Stanley F. Caulkins Terminal Dedicated," *Fairfax Times*, May 12, 2004, accessed online at <http://ww2.fairfaxtimes.com/cms/archivestory.php?id=181181>.

⁴⁴ FAA Grant History Report.

⁴⁵ "New Aircraft Hangars Completed at Leesburg Executive Airport," NOVA Business News, accessed at <http://www.novabusinessnews.com/2010/08/new-aircraft-hangars-completed-at-leesburg-executive-airport/>.

⁴⁶ "Leesburg Executive Airport at Godfrey Field," Town of Leesburg Virginia website, <http://www.leesburgva.gov/index.aspx?page=72>.