



A unique aviation destination, AHM&EC attracts 30,000 visitors each year.



An impressive collection of vintage and modern rotorcraft inspire visitors.



Guests enjoy the 20th anniversary program in the museum's new theater.



Rep. Dan Truitt, Board Chairman Marc Sheffler and Senator Andy Dinniman.

Celebrating 20 Years by Looking Back

The American Helicopter Museum & Education Center

By Bob Beggs, Co-Founder & Trustee

In 1993, the American Helicopter Society (as it was then known) was celebrating its 50th anniversary and the AHS Philadelphia Chapter decided it was time to do something big to recognize the “rich heritage and technical & operational achievements in rotary wing flight by the men and women of the Delaware Valley.” After several informal planning meetings, the chapter established a 50th Anniversary Committee, which first met formally on July 30, 1993. Among the 16 attendees were rotorcraft pioneers Lee Douglas, Joe Mallen, Steven Pitcairn, John Schneider, George Townson, Frank Piasecki, Peter Wright Sr. and Edward Burke Wilford.

Many ideas for recognizing the 50th anniversary were discussed, including a dinner and reception for rotorcraft pioneers, a helicopter history documentary for television, a monument in downtown Philadelphia and a rotary-wing “history trail” to key locations where early helicopter development took place. The idea that resonated with the majority was to build a “permanent rotary wing restoration, conservation and exhibition facility.” Peter Wright, Sr., then president of Keystone Helicopters, offered several aircraft that he had collected to jumpstart the initiative.

Initially, the committee met weekly to become incorporated. Peter Wright and I worked together to create an organizational structure, and recruited additional enthusiasts to assist with fundraising, public relations, aircraft acquisition, facility searches and a myriad of other tasks required to establish a museum. Ironically, the museum was incorporated as the National Helicopter Museum, until we discovered that the name had already been taken. We regrouped and reincorporated as the American Helicopter Museum & Education Center (AHMEC) in December 1993. That month was also an inflection point for the nascent museum, when a well-connected group of aviation enthusiasts desiring to start a Delaware Valley Aviation Museum suggested the helicopter museum join forces with them. Acknowledging that helicopters are overlooked in most aviation museums, we unanimously declined, protecting our original mission to “preserve autogiros, convertiplanes and helicopters.”


The new year began with the restoration of the first helicopter for the museum — a Piasecki HUP-2 — by retired Boeing employees, some of whom remembered building that tail number back in the 1950s. Soliciting donations from friends and associates, the team raised \$5,670 by March as an initial budget. The 50th Anniversary Committee grew in number and an Advisory Committee was established consisting of luminaries Arthur Young, Sergei Sikorsky, David Smith, Carol Suggs, John Zugschwert (Emeritus AHS Executive Director), Juan de la Cierva (the nephew of his famous namesake), Joe Mashman, Joe Cribbins and Frank Jensen.

A generous offer of property in downtown Philadelphia near Independence Hall was compelling, but the cost to construct a new building was beyond our means. The search for a suburban location began in earnest. Working with Andy Bro, an aviation

museum consultant, we kicked fundraising into high gear and launched the Cornerstone Campaign. Many generous donors identified as the “Founding Members” made financial contributions that enabled the organization to lease a building in the recently vacated MBB Helicopters complex in West Chester at the Brandywine Airport. (MBB, having recently become Eurocopter, consolidated operations in Grand Prairie, Texas). Al “Bud” Leonard worked tirelessly acquiring and transporting helicopters and other artifacts. An agreement with the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum resulted in the loan of several historically significant rotorcraft to complement our own growing collection. Exhibit planning was assigned to a few helicopter historians, and professors and teachers from regional schools, along with Don Graeb from Creative Productions in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Together, they developed a comprehensive plan for the facility, displays and programs which served as the blueprint for a team of spirited volunteers, some of whom had restored the HUP earlier, for converting the old MBB maintenance hangar into a full-fledged museum. Within 18 months and countless hours of volunteer labor, the American Helicopter Museum & Education Center celebrated its grand opening on Oct. 18, 1996.

Twenty years later, the American Helicopter Museum remains true to its founders’ vision: preserving rotary-wing history, educating society about helicopters and their lifesaving missions, and inspiring future generations. Hosting 30,000 visitors annually, along with education and outreach programs that reach thousands more, our American Helicopter Museum has truly come of age.

On Oct. 27, 2016, we hosted a 20th Anniversary Reception to celebrate and remember all that has been accomplished since 1996. Attendees included several of the original volunteers, staff and donors who have seen the museum grow and evolve into a worthy destination for aviation enthusiasts of all ages. Marc Sheffler, AHMEC Board Chairman, presided over the festivities, and Pennsylvania State Senator Andy Dinniman and Representative Dan Truitt bestowed recognitions. AHS International Executive Director Mike Hirschberg also spoke and presented a gift, along with John Romanski, who awarded a medal and certificate from the Association of Polish-American Engineers. All who participated were able to experience the museum’s newly expanded facility including a 200+ seat theater, Pioneer Hall, the Cobra Simulator, helicopter-themed toddler play area and recently acquired rotorcraft now on display.

Now is a great time to visit the museum and experience helicopter history in a new way. Stop by on your next trip to Philadelphia or explore from afar at www.americanhelicopter.museum. While there, consider a Museum membership. It is a great value and supports the unique and important programs of the museum. 

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Museum Hours
Wednesday-Saturday: 10am-5pm
Sunday: Noon-5pm
Closed Monday and Tuesday (groups only)



AHMEC adds new interactive Aerovelo Atlas exhibit

The museum inaugurated its newest exhibit, the Interactive Aerovelo Atlas, on Nov. 26, when one of the Atlas designers and company co-founders visited the museum. Cameron Robertson demonstrated the four-paneled, interactive stationary bicycle-based display that informs and mimics the Atlas’ historic flight.

The Atlas won AHS International’s Igor I. Sikorsky Human Powered Helicopter Competition by hovering for 64 seconds (with sufficient station keeping) and achieving an altitude of 3.3 m (11 ft). Designed by Robertson and Dr. Todd Reichert and constructed with the help of University of Toronto students and graduates, the Atlas had four Mylar-covered rotors, four lightweight trusses, and four hubs connected to a modified bicycle. Controlling the quadrotor entailed leaning the bicycle.

Following Aerovelo’s success on June 13, 2013, Robertson and Reichert donated one of the rotors to the AHMEC. It hangs in the helicopter gallery above the new Interactive Atlas exhibit.

The museum’s exhibit features a stationary bicycle connected to a miniature version of the Atlas. When pedaled, the bicycle’s power lifts the model along a pole toward the gallery’s ceiling. Equipped with a camera for a bird’s eye view of the museum, the Atlas model remains hoisted for a minute before settling back down.

• For more on AHS International’s Igor I. Sikorsky Challenges, go to www.vtol.org/challenge.