An early photograph advertising the Army Aviation School with two of the government’s planes circling overhead. The Rex Smith Aeroplane hangars are in the foreground with the Army hangars in the background. Smith was a civilian pilot who flew planes of his own design and worked with other local aviation companies to provide instruction and exhibitions to the residents of the nation’s capital who were hungry for anything that had to do with flight, ca. 1911. National Archives, USAF Collection.
An early photograph advertising the Army Aviation School with two of the government's planes circling overhead. The Rex Smith Aeroplane hangars are in the foreground with the Army hangars in the background. Smith was a civilian pilot who flew planes of his own design and worked with other local aviation companies to provide instruction and exhibitions to the residents of the nation's capital who were hungry for anything that had to do with flight, ca. 1911. National Archives, USAF Collection.
t didn’t take long for the accomplishments of the Wright brothers to fire the imagination of the American people. By the time the brothers had perfected their invention, flying fever had taken hold everywhere, and not just for recreational purposes, although not everyone was open to practical uses for airplanes. The Wright brothers had approached the U.S. government about the possibilities of using the airplane in some type of government service, but with no results. Not until the Wrights began marketing their invention abroad did they get any interest from the United States.

In 1907, they were invited to meet with the Signal Corps of the Army to discuss providing them with an airplane. Eventually, the Army put out a request for a heavier-than-air flying machine that could carry two people, go at least 40 miles per hour, remain airborne for at least one hour and 125 miles, and be sufficiently easy that a man of average intelligence could become proficient in its use within a reasonable about of time. Over 40 proposals were submitted, but the Wrights won the contract.

By 1909 the Wrights had perfected their specified airplane, and after numerous flying trials at Ft. Myer, Virginia, it was officially accepted by the government. The Wrights were then required to train two U.S. Army officers to fly the new plane; Ft. Myer being deemed too small to be a pilot training facility, they looked around for a more suitable area.

Lt. Frank Lahm, a member of the Aeronautical Board formed to oversee the Wrights’ acceptance trials, and a balloonist for the Signal Corps, knew the perfect place — a large level field in the town of College Park that was close to the Maryland Agricultural College (now the University of Maryland) and adjacent to the B&O railroad tracks. It was hoped that its remote location would detract the large crowds that kept appearing at Ft. Myer.

On 25 August 1909, the Army Quartermaster signed a renewable lease for 160 acres of property with one of the owners, Edward Newman, for $200 per month. A well and pump were installed in the middle of the field, a small temporary hangar was erected, and the field cleared of brush and debris.

Ten enlisted men — one corporal and nine privates — were assigned to the training field to assist Wilbur Wright and his two students. Some of these men had participated in the trials at Ft. Myer, and some were former members of the Ft. Myer balloon squad. At College Park they had much more responsibility for the aircraft than they had had previously — they looked after the tower, arranged the starting track with deference to the wind, moved the airplane, made a preliminary inspection, tested the working parts, and started the motor. They were also responsible for acquiring all the materials needed to make repairs. In their spare time, they practiced telegraphy — the duty of Signal Corpsmen.

The men lived in one of the hangars, and Wilbur Wright and his two trainees stayed in private homes in College Park. Lt. Lahm, who had recommended the field in the first place, and Lt. Frederick Humphreys were the two army pilots chosen to be trained, and in November 1909, both pilots soloed after little more than three hours of instruction. Their training attracted many spectators to College Park, including the Chinese Prime Minister, Wu Ting Fang and his wife. At the conclusion of the flights, he congratulated Wilbur Wright, although he had some reservations about the airplane’s abilities. “When you get it finally perfected,” he said, “bring it to China.” Since his students had completed their training, Wilbur returned to Dayton, and the two pilots were reassigned elsewhere. Soon after, the army decided to move the training to a warmer area, and the facility moved to Ft. Sam Houston, Texas.

In 1911, however, the U.S. Army Signal Corps opened an official Army Aviation School at College Park Airport. Congress made its first specific provision for airplane
funds, which paid for two Wright B airplanes, two Curtiss-type airplanes, and one Burgess-Wright airplane. The Army leased more land nearby and erected four more temporary hangars, a small headquarters building, and a hospital tent. Later, two additional hangars were added to accommodate the growing number of aircraft, and a larger hangar was added in 1912.

First Lt. Roy Kirtland, 14th Infantry, was assigned to oversee the establishment of the aviation school at College Park, and reported there on 3 April 1911. He served as Secretary of the Aviation School and flight instructor for two years, along with two other instructors, 2nd Lt. Henry H. “Hap” Arnold, and 2nd Lt. Thomas Milling. They were sent in May 1911 to the Wright Company’s flying school near Dayton, Ohio, to receive their training and came to College Park in June. The first commanding officer of College Park Aviation School was Capt. Charles Chandler.

A detachment of enlisted mechanics, beginning with a group of 15 men from Ft. Wood and growing to a total of 39, maintained the fleet of airplanes kept at College Park. They were trained by a civilian mechanic, Henry Molinaeu. First Lt. John Kelley, of the Medical Reserve Corps, served as the medical officer at College Park, and became the world’s first flight surgeon.

The officers assigned to the training school resided in Washington and came by car or train to the field each day. The mechanics stayed in one of the hangars and so were able to guard the planes as additional duty. Twelve other officers attended the aviation school over the next two years. In November 1911 the school moved to Augusta, Georgia for the winter and returned the following April.

Sadly two fatal airplane crashes happened at College Park: Lt. Leighton Hazelhurst and Mr. A.L. Welch on 11 June 1912, and Lt. Lewis Rockwell and Cpl. Frank Scott on 28 September 1912. Scott was the first enlisted man to die in a plane crash in the United States.

In late 1912, the school again moved to Georgia for the winter, but the planes were split up — the Curtiss airplanes went to San Diego to Glenn Curtiss’ facility there, and the Wright planes went to Georgia. During that winter, the Army decided not to continue the school at College Park, and ultimately the rest of the equipment was sent to North Island in San Diego, where the Army established its first permanent aviation school.

In 1927, George Brinckerhoff took over the management of the airport. By this time, airports everywhere were hosting all sorts of exotic air meets and air shows, attracting thousands of visitors. Many spectators would come with picnic lunches to College Park and make a day of it.

The Washington Air Derby Association, the DC Air Legion, the Washington Women’s Pilot Association, and other aviation groups in this area sponsored some of these huge events with the cooperation of Brinckerhoff. He built checkered pylons and grandstands and special displays for the trophies to be presented. The best-known event was the Langley Day Air Meet, named for aviation pioneer Samuel Langley.

In addition to all the military activity at College Park, there was also civilian aviation activity. The first civilian aircraft company to be established here was the Rex Smith Aeroplane Company, owned by well-known inventor and patent attorney Rexford Smith. The company was often in the news for entertaining and flying politicians and other celebrities, giving the company much media attention and support.

Other companies soon followed, including the National Aviation Company, which was formed to give instruction on Curtiss, Bleriot, and Wright airplanes and provide their mechanical upkeep. The Washington Aeroplane Company, which designed and manufactured the “Columbia” monoplane and biplane and other successful aircraft, came in 1912, and stayed until 1927.

Air Mail

In 1918, after a three-month trial in conjunction with the War Department, the Post office Department initiated the U.S. Air Mail Service from College Park Airfield. Max Miller, Edward Gardner, Robert Shank, and Maurice Newton flew the first 218-mile flight from College Park to New York, via Philadelphia.
The Post Office Department ordered six planes from the Standard Aircraft Company for these flights; other planes used for mail service included the Curtiss Jenny and the DeHavilland DH-4.

In 1919 a hangar was built and a “compass rose” was placed on the field; this rose enabled pilots to line up their planes on a north-south directional axis to calibrate their compasses for their flights before the use of radio instruments.

The airmail station at College Park closed in 1921, and by 1926 the Post Office Department had turned over the service to private enterprise to improve cost, efficiency, and speed of delivery.

Berliner descent

In 1920, a new kind of flying machine made an appearance at College Park Airfield. It was not just another type of aircraft — it was an attempt at an altogether new way to fly.

Controlled vertical flight intrigued inventor Emile Berliner and his son, Henry. Emile Berliner was already an inventor of some note, having invented the gramophone, the telephone transmitter (mouthpiece) and other devices. He was keenly interested in aviation and was a sponsor of the Washington Aeroplane Company that had been based at the airfield since 1912. However, his real interest was in solving the problems of vertical flight, which he had been working on since as early as 1908. The Berliners moved their experimental operation to College Park in 1920.

Their initial invention had two contra-rotating propellers, a four-wheeled chassis, engine, shutter-like vanes, rudder, a seat for the pilot, and little else. It easily rose from the ground, but there was still a need for more lateral control as well as a more powerful engine.

Subsequent machines built in 1922-1924 incorporated the fuselage of a Nieuport 23 bi-plane, and had more powerful engines provided by the U.S. Navy, which was taking a keen interest in the Berliners’ experiments. Tri-plane wings were added to increase lift when moving forward. On 24 February 1924, Berliner Helicopter No. 5 achieved an altitude of 15 feet with a maneuvering radius of 150 feet while maintaining a speed of about 40 mph. This flight, with Navy officials and media in attendance, is considered to be the first controlled helicopter flight.

In 1930, Henry Berliner founded Engineering and Research Corporation and served as President and Chief Executive Officer. He bought land nearby in 1937 and built the ERCO factory and airstrip. One of the company’s most significant achievements was the development of the Ercoupe.

The first experimental Ercoupe model flew at College Park in February of that year. Photo courtesy of College Park Aviation Museum, Gene Trenton Collection.

The 1922 version of the Berliner helicopter, shown here hovering across the airfield, utilized a Nieuport fuselage and one set of wings with lateral vanes before the tri-plane wings were added in 1923. Photo courtesy of College Park Aviation Museum.

The 1924 Berliner helicopter that made the first controlled helicopter flight at College Park in February of that year. Photo courtesy of College Park Aviation Museum, Gene Trenton Collection.

The Ercoupe included many innovative design features that produced an aircraft that was safe, easy to fly, and certified by the Civil Aeronautics Administration (CAA) as “characteristically incapable of spinning.” The Ercoupe designer, Fred Weick, had previously worked for the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics (NACA), a precursor of NASA.

The first experimental Ercoupe model flew at College Park Airport in 1937; and was later certified for flight. The
first Ercoupe, owned by George Brinckerhoff, now belongs to the National Air and Space Museum.

During World War II, the ERCO factory produced several items for the U.S. government, including gun turrets. In 1947, Berliner left the aviation industry and sold the drawings, tools, parts, materials and distribution rights of the Ercoupe to Sanders Aviation. In all, over 5,000 Ercoupes were sold.

Radio Navigation Aids

An early recognized challenge to flying an airplane was achieving the ability to fly a plane with little or no visibility. The passage of the Air Commerce Act in 1926 generated renewed interest in aircraft navigation systems and led to the creation of the Aeronautics Branch in the Department of Commerce. It designated the National Bureau of Standards (NBS) to take the lead in specific areas of aeronautical research, including developing radio aids to navigation.

Using College Park for its aeronautical activities, the NBS built a 70-foot tower supporting two antennas and a 500-watt radio transmitter. A Fairchild FC-1 airplane, provided by the Department of Commerce, was used for early radio beam tests. The aircraft was equipped with the newly developed “vibrating reed” visual radio beacon indicator, which enabled the pilot to monitor the radio signal but still maintain voice radio communications. In 1931, the NBS acquired a Fledgling J-1 special, and although it was an open cockpit biplane trainer, it had a collapsible hood that could cover the pilot’s cockpit for blind flying tests without obstructing the view of the second pilot, who was used as backup and to monitor the test. The first blind landing at College Park took place on 5 September 1931, by Marshall Boggs.

The Depression caused a lack of funding in the NBS, which curtailed its aeronautical program. However, several former NBS employees established the Washington Institute of Technology (WIT), which continued to develop radio navigation aids under government contract. However, by 1934, the developmental program between the NBS and Department of Commerce was phased out, and the equipment removed from College Park.

In 1959, George Brinckerhoff fell ill and his son Jeff took over the Brinckerhoff Flying Service, which operated out of the old Air Mail hangar. Executive Aviation Service Inc. took over the general management of the airport.

The field was beginning to deteriorate, however, and word spread that the owner was looking to sell. In 1966 loyal supporters of College Park formed a “Save the Airport” campaign, joined by the National Educational Memorial Center, a group focused on creating a lasting memorial and museum here. They enlisted the help of such notable aviation pioneers as Frank Lahm, Paul Garber (then head of the National Air Museum), and Henry Berliner.

As a result of these efforts, in 1973 the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission purchased the airport to keep it as an operating airfield as well as to preserve it as a historic site. In 1977 the Park Service added it to the National Register of Historic Places, acknowledging College Park Airport as the world's oldest continuously operating airport. In 1981 funds were secured for a museum, and a new and updated museum opened in 1998.

Most of the above text is from the College Park Aviation Museum Web site at www.collegeparkaviationmuseum.com

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The instrument panel of the Fledgling shows the airplane equipped with the world's first complete system for the blind landing of aircraft.

A Curtiss Fledgling was outfitted with the first radio navigational aides developed from 1927-34 by the Bureau of Standards to test the ability to fly in blind or zero visibility weather.
THE “FIELD OF FIRSTS”

1909: First woman passenger to fly in the United States
On 27 October Mrs. Ralph Van Deman, wife of Capt. Van Deman, became the first woman in the U.S. to go aloft in an airplane when she flew at College Park as the passenger of Wilbur Wright. Mrs. Van Deman was a good friend of Katherine Wright, the sister of the Orville and Wilbur.

1909: First officer to fly a military airplane
Lt. Frederic Humphreys was the first military pilot to solo in a military airplane. He, Lt. Frank Lahm, and Lt. Benjamin received their flight instruction at College Park from Wilbur Wright.

1909: First U.S. Naval officer to fly in a heavier-than-air machine

1911: First Army Aviation School
The U.S. Army leased some 200 acres, extending north along the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad property to a series of goldfish ponds and east to the Paint Branch of the Anacostia River, with a maximum cleared runway of 2,376 feet in an east-west direction. Four temporary wooden hangars 45 feet square, built on plans furnished by the Wright Company, were erected along the railroad track, with a small headquarters building next to them. One of the hangars was used to quarter a detachment of enlisted men; a tent served as an emergency hospital.

1911: First testing of a bomb aiming device from an airplane
Inert bombs were dropped into the goldfish ponds at the end of the airfield using a bombsight developed by Riley E. Scott.

1912: First testing of a machine gun from an airplane
On 7 June, Capt. Chandler fired a Lewis Machine Gun from a Wright B airplane.

1912: First mile-high flight by a military aviator
Lt. Henry “Hap” Arnold set the first army altitude record at College Park.

1918–21: First U.S. Postal Air Mail Service
The regular U.S. Postal Air Mail flights were inaugurated on 12 August from College Park to Philadelphia to New York.

1924: First controlled helicopter flight
Emile and Henry Berliner based their flight experiments at College Park from 1920 to 1924. After their success at College Park, they moved to the Naval Air Station in Anacostia, where they continued their experiments.

1927–35: First radio navigation aids developed and tested by the Bureau of Standards
These first radio navigational aids were the forerunners of the modern Instrument Landing System used today.
IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO READ MORE ABOUT
College Park Airport

Crouch, Tom. The Bishops Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright. Norton

Chandler, Charles, and Frank Lahm. How Our Army Grew Wings. The Ronald
Press Co., 1943.

Series, 1972.

Air Power History: Centennial of Flight Issue, “Wright Military Training at
College Park in 1909” by Catherine Allen, Winter 2002, Vol. # 49 #4, Air Force
Historical Foundation.

SUGGESTED BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

A Wish for Wings that Work
Berkeley Breathed (K-3)
Airport
Byron Barton (K-3)
Amelia Earhart: First Lady of Flight
Jan Parr (4-7)
Aviation and Space Science Projects
Ben Millspaugh (K-3)
Chuck Yeager Breaks the Sound Barrier
Conrad Stein (K-3)
Finding Out About Rockets and Space
Lynn Myring (K-3)
First Guide to the Universe
Myring Chisholm (K-3)
Fishing for Angels: The Magic of Kites
David Evans (4-7)
Flying Machine
Andrew Nahum (K-7)
Flight
Kim Taylor (K-3)
Into the Wild Blue Yonder
Karl Aron (K-3)
Let’s Build Airplanes and Rockets
Ben Millspaugh (K-7)
Science Fair Projects: Flight, Space & Astronomy
Dan Keen (4-7)
Simple Science Fair Projects for Model Rocketry
Timothy Van Milligam
The Fantastic Cutaway Book of Flight
Jon Richards (4-7)
The AIAA Historic Aerospace Sites Program

For over 65 years, the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) has served as the principal society of the aerospace engineer and scientist. Formed in 1963 through a merger of the American Rocket Society (ARS) and the Institute of Aerospace Sciences (IAS), the purpose was, and still is, “to advance the arts, sciences, and technology of aeronautics and astronautics, and to promote the professionalism of those engaged in these pursuits.” Today, AIAA has more than 31,000 professional and 5500 student members.

In addition, AIAA sponsors many technical conferences, seminars, and short courses per year, and publishes *Aerospace America*, the *AIAA Student Journal*, and six archival technical journals. The Institute also publishes conference papers and proceedings, technology assessments, position papers, audiovisual information packages, many books, and a variety of career-related educational materials. The Institute conducts a rigorous public policy program and works closely with other societies and governments in broad areas of mutual concern.

AIAA established the Historic Aerospace Sites Program in January 2000 to promote the preservation of and to disseminate information about significant accomplishments made in the aerospace profession. In addition to College Park Airport, other sites recognized by the committee in 2003 include the Boeing Red Barn, Seattle; North Island Naval Air Station, San Diego; Huffman Prairie, Ohio; and Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

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