



From a Grass Runway to a Busy Modern Enterprise

reprinted with permission of the Winchester Star

Winchester — Winchester Regional Airport had a grass runway when Paul Anderson first learned to fly there. The soft grass was much more pleasant for landings than asphalt, said Anderson, who now serves as the Airport Authority chairman.

As the airport soars into its 70th year of operation this month, it's obvious that much has changed.

“We’ve developed into a major airport for corporate traffic,” Anderson said.

Known as Winchester Municipal Airport until the late 1980s, the facility was first recognized by the state government as a licensed commercial airport on Dec. 2, 1937.

Fewer than 10 aircraft were based there when it opened, said 89-year-old Art Belt, a long-time pilot. It wasn't the area's first airport, though. From 1927 until 1931, 35 acres known as Bowles Field served budding pilots who joined the newly established Winchester Aero Club.



This view of the original Winchester Municipal Airport terminal was probably made in the 1950s. The structure, including some additions made later, was destroyed by fire in the early 1990s.



**Winchester Regional Airport
Executive Director Serena R.
“Renny” Manuel**

The Bowles Field landing area was west of the present-day Interstate 81 intersection with U.S. 522 and U.S. 50, according to Winchester resident Bob Noyer, who has written extensively about the airport for *Aviation Digest* magazine.

By 1931, Bowles Field gave way to Winchester's first official airport — Admiral Byrd Field, near the site now occupied by the Cracker Barrel restaurant on Front Royal Pike.

Eventually, this facility was deemed too small to accommodate larger aircraft, said Noyer. That's when Winchester Municipal Airport came on the scene, nearly two miles southeast of the Byrd Field site.

Before the early 1960s, Noyer said, the airport only had well-drained sod runways. But then-manager Donald Patton pushed for a 3,600-foot paved runway.

Around the mid-1970s, Anderson said, a commuter airline service attempted to offer flights — and it survived for about five years until a major aircraft accident sealed its fate.

Before recent changes, said Anderson, the airport's operations were continually housed in the same facility from 1937 until 1985.

In his view, the airport's greatest changes have taken place in the past 20 years, largely after the Airport Authority formed in the mid-1980s.

Before the authority took over operations, Anderson said, business leaders were threatening to leave the area because they felt the city wasn't keeping up with their airport needs.



These men have a long history with the Winchester Regional Airport (from left): retired air traffic controller Rudy Rodgers; veteran pilot Art Belt; Bob Noyer, who has written extensively about the facility for Aviation Digest magazine; and Paul Anderson, chairman of the Airport Authority. (Rick Foster)

such as service and economic impact.

“Aviation is a major determining factor in where corporations are going to locate,” said Anderson.

Serena R. “Renny” Manuel, executive director of the airport, has seen numerous changes since her arrival in 1987.

The airport now has a 5,500-foot asphalt runway, dozens of new hangar units, and a terminal building that was dedicated in 1989. The property covers about 400 acres, said Anderson.

About \$17 million has been spent on capital improvements since Manuel's arrival — and the operation has expanded from a weekday operation to seven-day, around-the-clock staffing. The customer base has also grown from 40 aircraft to more than 130, she said, and the number of full-time employees has increased from three to 11.

Fuel sales have also gone up — from 100,000 gallons in 1982 to 478,000 gallons in 2006.

In the mid-1990s, the state government recognized Winchester Regional Airport as a First Class Aviation Facility, based on factors

The airport can accommodate large corporate jets, said Manuel, noting that about 15 corporate flights take off there each day.

It is also part of the Emergency Transportation System and has all-weather capabilities, said Manuel. “A lot of people will come here rather than go through the red tape [of Washington Dulles International],” said Rudy Rodgers, 74, a retired air traffic controller who once worked at Dulles.

More improvements are expected at Winchester Regional Airport over the next 10 years, Anderson said. Changes will include developing the north side of the property for large jets, continuing to develop the south side with hangars, moving the taxiway on the south side, and placing a new taxiway on the north side. “This is the front door to the community, and we make a very good impression,” said Manuel.