



# The Virginia Aviation History Project Report

Norm Crabill



The College of William and Mary operated a Flight School to train civilian pilots in the early 1930s; it's a story I wanted to bring to you since we did the book on Virginia Airports. B. J. Pryor brings it to life in our first story – its creation, activities, and sudden demise.

Next, Bill Corbett contributes a newspaper article on the “New Shannon Airport” of 1950, and Jimmy Doman’s role in making it go. Bill gave us his story of life at Old Gloucester Airport last time. Bill is a fishspotter based out of Newport News, flying for Omega Protein of Reedville, Virginia. A menhaden spotter since 1978, he has made a living flying light planes since 1972 when he was the youngest licensed crop duster in the state. An A&P mechanic, Corbett spends his winters working on his well-worn Cessna 172, getting it ready for the 1200 hour season that runs from April to January. He has 30,000+ total hours in his 39 years of flying.

Did you know the story about Douglas B-18s from Langley Field using Ft. Eustis as a practice bombing range from 1936 to 1944? Dick Ivy, deceased, of the Fort Eustis Historical & Archaeological Association, tells that story with not too surprising results. See the third story.

There is a winner for last time’s Mystery Plane, and a new one is offered up. This one should be easy. And check out the Acronomions, too.



## Here Today, Gone Tomorrow: The Remarkable History of the First College Flight School

by B.J. Pryor

**‘We** had a flying school,” she told me, with some pride in her voice. “Really?” I said. It seemed strange to me than my college should have had a flight school when the little old lady I was talking to had been a coed there. Of course, this conversation took place twenty years ago

when I was a callow youth not long out of college, and still thought in categories like “little old lady.”

She was a visitor to Williamsburg and we got to talking; I told her that I was a recent graduate of the College of William and Mary and she told me that she had been a student there herself. “The college was a lot smaller then,” I said. “Yes,” she admitted, “but – *we* had a flying school.”

“I was a student here in the early ’30s,” she told me.

“The college had its own airport, and several airplanes: you know, the kind with one wing above the other and open cockpits. I never took flying lessons myself, but I dated someone who did.

“I remember after one of the big dances, several of us, the flight students and their dates, drove out to the airfield and took the planes up: the boys still in their tuxedos and the girls in their evening gowns. It was very late, and there were no lights anywhere. A lot of the area had no electricity yet, and anyway, just about everyone was in bed by that hour; but we could see long lines of headlights, of all the cars driving east or west on Route 60, heading away from the dance. It was great fun, and very exciting. The school was taught by a gentleman who had flown in World War I.”

That little story always stayed with me. So, last September, when my wife Jodi said she had to write a paper for one of her graduate school classes on the history of higher education, I suggested she write about the William and Mary Flight School. And so she did, and in fact that paper is likely to be published in a scholarly journal in the near future. I was sorry to see that she had to leave out of it some of the most interesting bits, because they were irrelevant to her thesis or, like the story I have just related, she could not document the source. In fact, she found the history of that flight school very hard to reconstruct, and the facts hard to confirm.

Nevertheless, I thought I would try my hand at a different sort of account of the school, hitting some high spots. In truth, you could write a book about it.

It all started in 1929 with Professor Floyd J. Bailey of the Department of Mathematics. In those days, even college professors took summer jobs, and Professor Bailey, in the summer of 1929, took a job at the Goodyear Rubber Co. in Akron, Ohio. There he met Dr. Wolfgang Klemperer, the pioneer glider pilot who had broken the Wright brothers’ 10-year-old record for unpowered flight in 1921. Bailey devoted his free time that summer to the new sport of gliding. (The National Glider Association was founded that year.) That autumn, back in Williamsburg, he gave a series of illustrated lectures about gliders and gliding that were well attended and enthusiastically received. Two years after Lindbergh’s most famous flight, aviation was “taking off” all over the country, and William and Mary was about to catch the fever.

One of the undergraduates had already made a stir. The story is told that when Hughes E. Kistler, Class of ’31, was admitted to the college, he resented the fact that he was forbidden to bring his car to campus. So, according to the student newspaper, he brought his plane instead, “a racing ship, powered with a 220-horsepower Wright Whirlwind motor. The plane is capable of a speed of 180 miles per hour and has accommodation for a pilot and two passengers.” He flew his Waco Taperwing NC5777M all the way from Colorado.

On February 7, 1930, twenty-five students organized the William and Mary Glider club, and chose their officers. By the end of the month the club had recruited enough members, some of them women, and collected enough money to order their first sailplane from a firm in Akron (the name of the manufacturer does not appear): 207 pounds, 18 feet long, and with a 37-foot wingspan.

On Friday, March 28, four students set out for Akron to claim their glider. It was a 24-hour drive in those days, but they still managed to return with their prize by Monday, April 1. The ship was tested April 5, and the first exhibition flight made on April 19, with the help of Mel Gough, an assistant test pilot from Langley Field [see story on Gough in *Eagles* Oct/Nov/Dec 2003] and with representatives of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics in attendance. The college newspaper proudly boasted the club as the first glider club south of the Mason-Dixon line. “The official flights will be made by shock-cord, which is a heavy rubber

cable used in much the same way as a boy's sling-shot." In May the club members traveled to Kitty Hawk to be tested for 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> class licenses.

In the fall of 1930 a new opportunity opened up. The college was contacted by the Raymond Riordan School, a preparatory school for boys in Highland, New York. The Riordan School had chartered a steamship, the *Southland*, which would be sailing into the James River in January carrying students and teachers from the school on a special excursion. The Riordan School wanted permission to use the college laboratories for some of its classes: in return, one of the instructors, Lieutenant Colonel Earl Charles Popp, offered to provide free flying lessons to a limited number, probably five, of the college's students, and as many others as were willing to pay for the course: \$300 for ground school, and twenty hours in the air, ten dual and ten solo. No small sum in an America sliding into the Great Depression.

The scheme was a huge success. By December 5, a total of 27 students had signed up, including the son and namesake of the college's president, Julian Chandler. The flight training was conducted at Riordan Field, otherwise known as the farm of A. E. Harwood, of Grove, Virginia. Mr. Harwood provided a field 1800 feet square for the use of the school. [Does this mean that Scott Field was actually the second airport for Williamsburg or should we count as first Court House Green, the site of Virginia's first balloon ascension in 1801? See *Virginia Airports* by Rollo and Crabill, page 90] The lessons were given in January, February, and March of 1931. Three planes belonging to the Riordan School were used: a Fleet Trainer, a Travelaire biplane, and a Curtiss Jenny. On April 2, the top three students, Lt. Yelverton Kent, Class of 1931, and Julian Chandler and Colin Vince, both Class of 1933, earned their pilot's licenses. Young Chandler bought the Travelaire from the school for himself. At 30, Kent was considerably older than his classmates, having served in the army.

That spring the whole thing really got off the ground. President Julian Chandler was delighted with the whole experiment. He was delighted that it had kept his sometimes difficult son out of trouble for an entire semester. Chandler was a visionary and innovative college president for whom, truly, the sky was the limit. In a single decade he had transformed the College of William and Mary. When he took office in 1919, the college could boast no more than 131 students, but in September of 1931 some 1682 students would be starting classes. New buildings were going up. The restoration of Colonial Williamsburg was beginning, and soon thousands of people would be coming to see the restored town. Some would certainly want to arrive by air. It was said that air travel would soon break down national boundaries and tie the world together in ever closer bonds of friendship and understanding. Aviation was the Next Big Thing, and why shouldn't his college be part of it? The hard financial times wouldn't last long, surely, and wouldn't an aviation program be just the thing to really put William and Mary on the map? The money could be found somewhere.

And so it was that the fall of 1931 saw William and Mary become the first college in America to offer flying lessons in its regular course catalogue. Col. Popp was lured away from the Riordan School to become the college's flight instructor. Land was leased a mile from campus, not far from the fairgrounds where the glider club operated. Planes were purchased, and a \$10,000 hanger (with offices and workshop) was built at the new airport, now christened Scott Field after the owner of the land.

Thus began the "golden age" of William and Mary's flight school. For the next two years, hardly an issue of Williamsburg's *Virginia Gazette* or of the college's *Flat Hat* appeared without articles on the flight school, the airport, or aviation. "The importance of the fact that aviation has been incorporated in the curriculum of the college has received national acclaim in no less than five leading aeronautical publications and more than thirty metropolitan newspapers," boasted *The Flat Hat* in September of 1931. Two of the dormitories, Old Dominion and Monroe were decorated with air navigation aides: the roof of Old Dominion was "marked with the name WILLIAMSBURG printed in yellow paint on a black background with letters 19' high," while Monroe carried two arrows: one pointed north and marked with a large N, and the other indicating the direction of Scott Field. One student began a newspaper column called "Aerialities" in the *Flat Hat*. Three

airplanes were acquired by the college: the Fleet Trainer and a Kitty Hawk that had belonged to the Riordan School, and a Curtiss Robin, which may have been donated [by Noland Co. of Newport News, Virginia. See *Eagles*, Oct/Nov/Dec 2001]. The records show \$500 was paid for the Curtiss, but as it is mentioned as a donation also, perhaps the \$500 was for refurbishing. Young Chandler made his own Travelaire available to the school as well. By February the college paper was proudly announcing that the first eight students had earned their private pilot licenses, including the first, and probably only, woman to have earned her license at William and Mary: Minnie Cole Savage, License #24165, issued January 26, 1932.

One of the more peculiar stores from 1931 is that of John D. Battle and his roommate. Battle was a student at Washington and Lee University in Lexington. Battle and his roommate traveled down to Norfolk to attend a game between Washington & Lee and William & Mary. While in Norfolk, the roommate “died suddenly.” Battle wanted to return to Lexington in time to meet the parents of his late roommate when they arrived. Young Julian Chandler offered to fly him as far as Charlottesville if he could get to Williamsburg, which he did by taxi. Neither the name of the roommate nor the cause of his death appears in the story, nor the reason the two universities were playing in Norfolk.

A full page of the college newspaper, the *Flat Hat*, was devoted to AERONAUTICS on May 12, 1932. That the college had an ancient history was trumpeted the article headlined: FIRST BALLOON CLUB ORGANIZED AT W&M COLLEGE IN 1786: W&M AVIATION EXAMPLE TO AMERICAN EDUCATION. A photograph shows “Aviation’s ‘Big Three’ at W&M”: Col Popp and his fellow instructors Julian Chandler and Yelverton Kent. Other articles announced: “Aerodynamics & Flight Equipment Rated High at William & Mary College,” “Dawn Patrol Instituted,” “College Airport May Be Transatlantic Air Base,” “Aviation Officials Laud Air Project,” and “More Than 30 Students Receive Flight Training During Its First Season.” The names of thirteen licensed pilots are listed, as well as one who had received his limited commercial pilot’s license and was working on a transport pilot’s rating. Also listed are the names of eleven more students who would be receiving their licenses before the end of the academic year: these included one Barton Travers Hulse. More about him later. (This last list proved to be a little too optimistic. Not all eleven were in fact licensed that year.)

1932 *Colonial Echo*



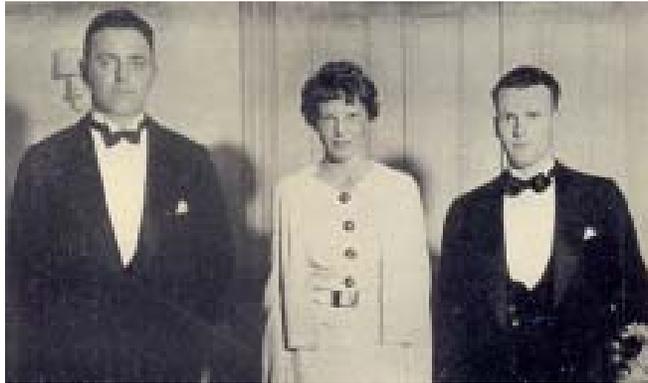
L to R: Julian Chandler, Jr., Earl Popp, and Yelverton Kent

The college yearbook for 1932, *The Colonial Echo*, devoted a page to “The School of Aviation” with photographs of the planes, the students, and of course “Chandler, Popp, and Kent, three reasons for the success of the air school.” The Flight School of the College of William and Mary ended its first year riding high. The rest of the country, alas, was sinking deeper into the morass of the Great Depression.

The second year of the flight school was apparently even more successful than the first, though some of the novelty of the thing was wearing off. The 1933 *Colonial Echo* carried a three-page spread devoted to the Flight School and the newly-formed Flight Club. The article was titled: AMONG THE AIR-MINDED.

Below a photograph of Colonel Popp, Amelia Earhart, and William and Mary Flight Club president Travers Hulse, the student author speaks rapturously of the program:

1933 *Colonial Echo*



L to R: Earl Popp, Amelia Earhart,  
Barton Travers "Red" Hulse

“Flying, and the practical science of flying, are not the only air-educational functions of the School of Aviation. Through co-operation of the Aeronautics Department and the Flight Club a number of nationally important aviation personalities have lectured at William and Mary in the past year. Amelia Earhart, who has crossed the Atlantic twice by air; Senator Hiram Bingham, president of the National Aeronautic Association; and Mr. H.J.E. Reid, Engineer-in-Charge, National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, at Langley Field, have found occasion to share their aerial wisdoms with the College.

“... The Air Program at William and Mary is still near its beginning, but it is doing a splendid work ... The College of William and Mary created the first Flying School ever to be incorporated into the curriculum of an institute of higher learning. In this latest priority, the College provided equipment and opportunity for the student enthusiast to acquire a theoretical and practical flight education along with his or her college degree, and forecasted in practice one of the most important trends of future teaching.

“For a number of years modern educators have evaded the issue of student flying, although a number of our colleges and universities offer theoretical courses in Aeronautics. There is a slight responsibility attached to the official sanction of Flight Courses on the part of a college president, in view of the erroneous public impression of the physical danger in flying. Aviation, in other schools, had to take its problems to student-formed clubs. At William and Mary, Dr. Chandler’s air-minded views found expression in the installment of a School of Aeronautics.

“... In the two years that the Flight School has been here, approximately seventy students have received flight training and forty have qualified for government flight licenses of various degrees.

“Colonel Popp’s method, which stresses a psychological observance of the student and his reactions to flying, plus the safety factor of quality equipment, is largely responsible for the fact that there has not been an accident in Flight work in the two years that it has been taught. A thorough mechanical inspection of aircraft, parachutes, and student application of practical aeronautics theory learned in Ground School, go to increase the factors of safety in flying.

“Out of the Department of Aeronautics grew the William and Mary Flight Club, which was awarded third place and prize in the Loening Inter-Collegiate Flight Competition in 1932. ... The outstanding event of the year was the advent of Miss Amelia Earhart, an honorary member of the Club, who addressed the College on modern aviation.

“... There is an aura of mistaken impressions existing in the opinions of the American public that must be overcome before this nation can realize the real benefits of modern aviation. There is a vast field of business and industry to be exploited by pioneer bird men. There are a thousand ways to apply aeronautics to modern and future efficiency in all arts and sciences, and above all there is a practical psychological value that adds an advantage to the art of living life.”

Not everything of note that happened in 1932-33 got into the article. It does not mention Gen. Billy Mitchell’s visit to Scott Field in October of 1932, or the use of one of the college’s planes to carry a man to a hospital in Norfolk for an emergency operation. It is a pity that a better account is not given of Amelia

Earhart's visit in March, 1933, or the dinner at which she shared her table with Travers Hulse, Colonel Popp, Yelverton Kent, Julian Chandler, and others, including the college's sole aviatrix, Minnie Cole Savage. Was it that event that prompted Minnie Savage to join the famous "99s" in May of 1933?

And what about the lady who told me of her midnight flight after a college dance? One *Flat Hat* article from November of 1932 recommended fencing as a proper avocation for pilots. Perhaps a sword seemed the proper accoutrement to go with so romantic a costume as leather flying helmet and jacket, silk scarf, and jodhpurs.

Not everything was high-minded idealism, or romantic and swashbuckling bravado. Some former flight students remembered a popular trick employed by some of the fledgling bird men. On midday or afternoon practice flights on warm sunny days, it was considered great fun to fly out south toward Jamestown, and then return flying directly over the campus: the trick was to cut your engine before you came too close to the college, so that you could glide silently over the girls' dormitories: on the rooftops of which it was known that some girls like to sunbathe – in the nude.

I can't help wondering if the flying students knew when they left for the summer in 1933, just how much trouble their School of Aviation was in. William and Mary was in debt, and though Dr. Chandler was moving heaven and earth to raise funds, with student enrollment dropping and the donors Chandler had counted upon failing to appear, the flight school was appearing ever more a liability to the college. In fact, Dr. Chandler had even written at the end of the first year that he feared there just wasn't any money to carry it forward. Col. Popp offered to run Scott Field as a commercial enterprise and relieve the college of some of the burden of keeping it, but that had not been entirely successful. The first group of enthusiastic students was graduating out, and incoming students did not view the Flight School in the same way. And now, even the continued use of Scott Field seemed impossible.

For those who know Williamsburg, Scott Field was located approximately where the Kingsgate Shopping Center now stands with its big K-Mart store. [See map page 18]. The north-south runway was roughly where Waller Miller Road is today. At the same time that the college and, evidently, the town were hoping to see Scott Field grow into Williamsburg's own municipal airport, other development was underway that would render that impossible. Bypass Road was being built in 1933, to carry the main flow of traffic around the restored part of town. Well, Bypass Road as finished would pass within 40 feet of the south end of the north-south runway, effectively closing it off. Why no one noticed this before a \$10,000 hangar and other facilities were built at Scott Field remains something of a mystery. A new airport was going to be needed.

Another mystery is what became of Colonel Popp. In the summer of 1933, he left the college, heading for California. No article tells of his leaving, but by September he is gone. (In fact, we have never been able to figure out where he came from, how old he was, exactly where he went after he left the college, or what became of him.)

In spite of the loss of Col. Popp, the new academic year began on a high note in September of 1933, with the college Flight Club winning the Loening Trophy, coming in ahead of every other college program in the country. It was the high-water mark. Still, few realized how close to its end the Flight School was.

In November of 1933 a lengthy article on "The William and Mary Flight Club" appeared in *The National Aeronautic Magazine*, written by G. Louis Carner, the president of the Club. He writes of the formation of the Club and the creation of the Flying School.

"The flight equipment of the new school was a Fleet trainer, a two place biplane powered with a 100 h.p. Kinner engine, a Viking K5 with another Kinner, and a Curtiss Robin, a three place cabin monoplane with a 165 h.p. Challenger motor. All these ships were painted with the colors of the College of William and Mary: green, gold, and silver. The fuselage was green with the silver college seal on both sides; the wings of gold with the identifying Department of Commerce license numerals in black, and W M painted in green on the other wing to complete the use of the three colors. The Fleet and Kitty Hawk were bought from the Riordan School and a Mr. Nolan of Newport News, donated the Robin for the work of the school."

The article goes on to speak of the School's many accomplishments, special guests, and awards, as well as the day-to-day operations.

"Of actual flight work itself, some 744 hours of flight were recorded by the members of the Club in the school year of 1932-33. ... The Loening Trophy Competition has been a most important stimulus to longer hours of flight among the members of the Club ...

"... The Club certainly performed a real service to the College of William and Mary in winning this Trophy, and there is no organization on the campus that rates higher in the opinion of the college than the Flight Club.

"Meanwhile the work of the Club and the Department of Aeronautics goes forward. The Department is under the leadership of Mr. Otto Johnson, who was the chief mechanic when the school started. Julian Chandler is his assistant. Owing to the drop in the enrollment of the student body of the college as a whole, there are not as many taking either the flight or the ground school as in the two previous years, but the spirit is still high, and the hum of motors is still heard above the ancient College. Indeed, there is a great deal of advanced flight work this year. Cross-country flight, aerobatics, night flight, and work leading to higher Department of Commerce licenses are all being given. The Club is still in a rather exalted mood over its winning of the Trophy, and it is determined to make a valiant effort to keep it, knowing that flight and the spirit of flight are firmly entrenched on the campus of William and Mary."

Wishful thinking. When the *Colonial Echo* for 1934 was printed, each page was decorated with a flight of aircraft in the upper margin, but there is no mention of Flying School, and the Flight Club now has but a single page, with a single photograph, and a bare eight active members, including the two instructors, Chandler and Johnson, the four club officers, and two other active members. Colonel Popp, Amelia Earhart, and Dr. Chandler, the president of the college, are all listed as honorary members, while Yelverton Kent appears only as an inactive member, along with three others.

Otto Johnson flipped the Kitty Hawk while trying to rush a pregnant woman to a hospital. Fortunately, no one was hurt. President Chandler died in May of 1934, and with him died the last hope of preserving the Flight School. Scott Field was closed, and work began to open a new "college airport" on what is now Airport Road east of Williamsburg. It remained the town's airport in occasional use until the 1960s. In fact, few remember that there ever was another college airport or where it was located. Many people, writing years afterward, have confused the two and have assumed that the Flight School used the Airport Road field. But, in fact, the new field was never used by the Department of Aeronautics, because the Department of Aeronautics ceased to exist at the end of the 1933-34 academic year.

The Flight Club continued in existence for another year: but what happened to the college's aircraft? A letter survives dated June 8, 1934, from Driskell & Barclay Flying Service [of the Newport News Airport. See *Eagles* Apr/May/June 2002] to the college's Board of Visitors: "We understand that the airplanes of the Dept. of Aeronautics ... are to be offered for sale ... and this firm desires to submit the following bid: \$750 for Robin Challenger, Fleet biplane, Kitty Hawk (recently wrecked on a flight to Richmond, good for parts)." Perhaps another buyer was found, but no records appear of any other bids. This \$750 was a small fraction of the \$6,330 the college had paid for the airplanes three years earlier.

There is a Flight Club page in the 1935 yearbook, now with only three officers and no instructors listed, and while thirteen members appear, no distinction is made between active and inactive members, and the list includes all the inactive members of the year before. And after that, there is only silence. No article ever appeared in the college or the town newspapers announcing the demise of the Flight School. The last articles to appear in the papers don't even hint there are problems with the program. The Department of Aeronautics went without an obituary.

## Epilogue

While I haven't been able to find out anything more about Earl Popp or, more surprisingly, Julian Chandler, Jr., there is a little more about some of the other notables:

Yelverton Kent went west after the Flight School closed and barnstormed for a year or two before settling permanently in Williamsburg, spending many years as the manager of the college bookstore, and eventually served as a city councilman.

Minnie Cole Savage saw her pilot's license revoked in October of 1933 for her failure to log enough hours under the Air Commerce Regulations as amended on August 10, 1933. By the time she was issued a new student permit in January of 1934, she had become Minnie Cole Kistler, presumably the wife of William and Mary's first licensed pilot, Hughes Kistler. Later she married another of the Flight School students, Duncan Cocke, who was one of the four who drove to Akron to pick up the Glider Club's first sailplane.

Travers Hulse stayed in aviation. You will find his picture in full color on the back cover of the *Life* magazine for February 22, 1943. "There's just one cigarette for me – Camel – they suit my throat and my taste to a 'T'" says 'Red' Hulse, Veteran Navy Fighter Pilot and Chief Test Pilot of the Navy's New Curtiss Dive-Bomber."

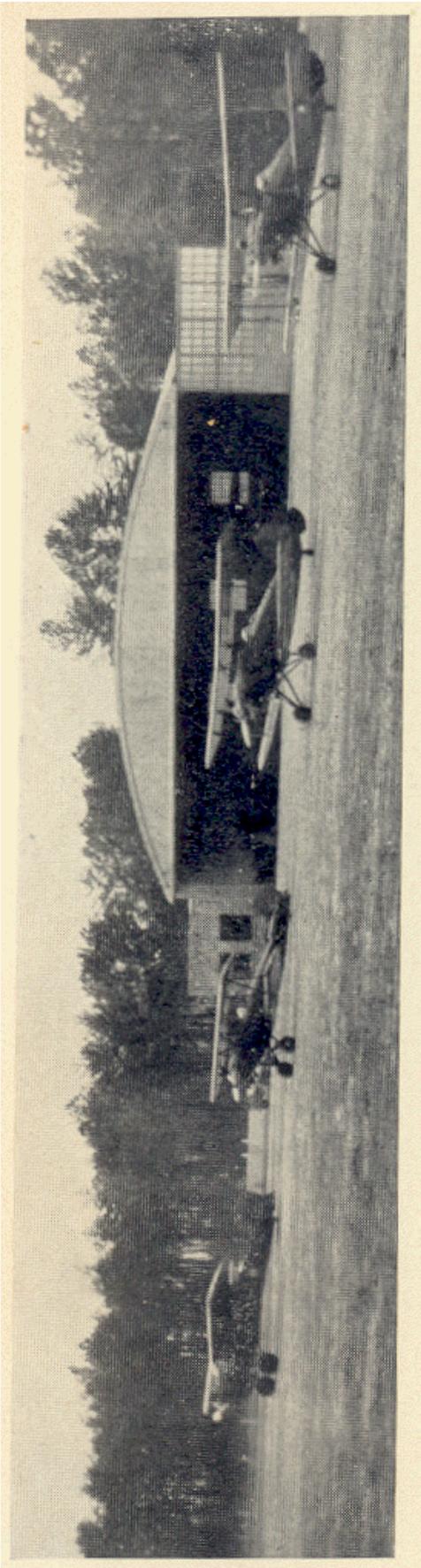
*Colonial Echo*



Air-to-Air shot of Yel Kent in the Fleet, 1932

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B. J. Pryor was born in 1956 in Tacoma Park, Maryland, the son of a licensed private pilot. Gaithersburg was his boyhood home. He never learned to fly himself, but came closest when he made a few parachute jumps. History, rather than flight, has been his thing. He earned his degree in history at William and Mary in 1978, and has spent the last 25 years working for Colonial Williamsburg. He and his wife Jodi Fisler, who did nearly all the research for this article, live with their two cats in Williamsburg.



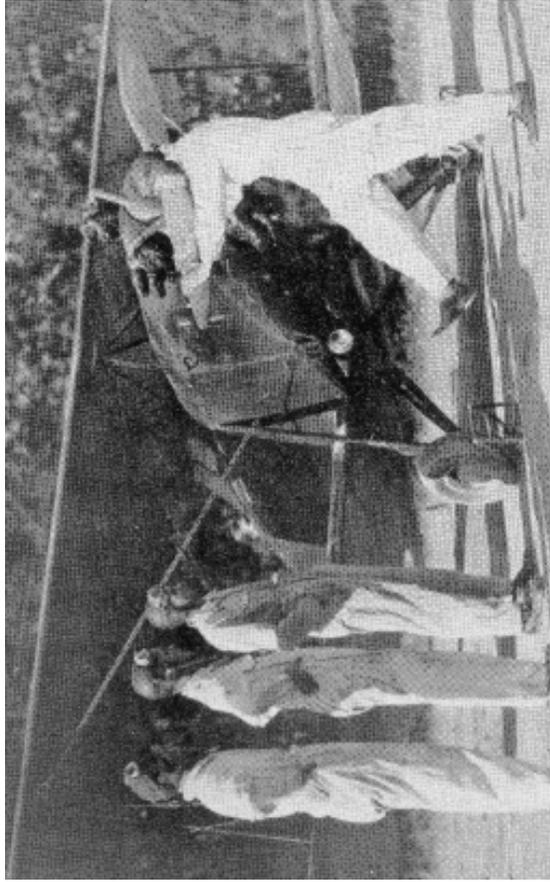
1933 Colonial Echo

The William & Mary Flight School operation at Williamsburg's first airport, Scott Field. Note the Curtiss Robin, which may be the one donated to the school by the Noland Company. (See VAHS *Eagles* Oct/Nov/Dec 2001).



Colonial Echo, 1933

Minnie Cole Savage, the lone woman to earn her flying license through the William and Mary Flight School



1932 - Hulse props the Viking K-5 Kitty Hawk

Colonial Echo



Norm Crabill Archives

From the US Coast & Geodetic Survey Norfolk Sectional Aeronautical Chart dated Jan. 17, 1952 showing both Scott and College Airports