

From the Hempstead Plains to the surface of the moon, Long Island was the place where aviation got off the ground and soared to the skies.

Island *of the*

BY GEORGE DEWAN



Eight years after the Wright Brothers' success at Kitty Hawk in 1903, a plane soars over the Mineola Fairgrounds.

If aviation was born on a wind-blown, sandy hill near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, it was raised and nurtured on the flatlands of Long Island's Hempstead Plains. Not to take anything away from Orville and Wilbur Wright's magnificent flying adventure just 100 years ago this December 17. (Or from an amazed teenage witness named Johnny Moore, who raced into town shouting, "They done it! Damned if they ain't flew!"). Or from the multitude of adventurous, seat-of-the-pants fliers from around the world who took to the air over the next three decades to push aviation from infancy to adulthood.

But in the early days of manned flight, Long Island was where much of the action was. It was the scene of a number of firsts—the first air mail; the first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean; the first "blind" flight, in which the pilot took

off and landed by instruments; the first non-stop flight across the United States; the first American-designed and -built monoplane; the first wireless radio transmission from an aircraft; the first American

later at Hazelhurst Field in Mineola, Nassau County. He was hooked. Once he got his own pilot's license, Harris became a barnstormer himself in the heady days of the 1920s. "We would fly around until

"You Will Fly Tomorrow..."

Those were the days when an impromptu airplane ride was irresistible for the strong of heart. In the late '20s, summertime motorists in their Model A Fords heading south on Cross Bay Boulevard in search of sun and sand at

Skies

woman to pilot an airplane—to name just a few.

Speed, altitude, and endurance records were routinely set and broken. Pioneering flights regularly began or ended on Long Island, the most memorable one being the 1927 flight to Paris of Charles Lindbergh in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. Starry-eyed airplane builders set up shop and tested new designs. Daring young barnstorming pilots in their fragile flying machines thrilled huge crowds with their aerial exploits.

Fiery crashes were always part of the story. On hand to document the excitement with graphic photos and blaring headlines were the circulation-hungry New York newspapers.

The Magical Kingdom of the Air

Many a youngster who got a \$10 plane ride was converted for life into a true believer in the magical kingdom of the air. Frank Harris, born in Jamaica, Queens in 1906, got his first airplane ride a dozen years

we found a lot big enough to fly out of," Harris later told an interviewer. "We would land there and start carrying passengers for \$10. If we couldn't get \$10 we would take \$5. That is, if we were hungry enough...We went all over the Island."

Then there was Elinor Smith, who grew up in Freeport, five miles south of Mineola. In the summer of 1917, when she was six, she took the first of many \$5 plane rides with a hotshot French flyer named Louis Gaubert, who had parked his Farman biplane in an abandoned Hicksville potato field. Smith, who thirteen years later would be named the best female pilot in the country, described her first flight in her autobiography *Aviatrix*: "That never-to-be-forgotten summer of flying with Gaubert shaped my life. I remember so vividly my first time aloft that I can still hear the wind sing in the wires as we glided down...I knew my future in airplanes and flying was as inevitable as the freckles on my nose."

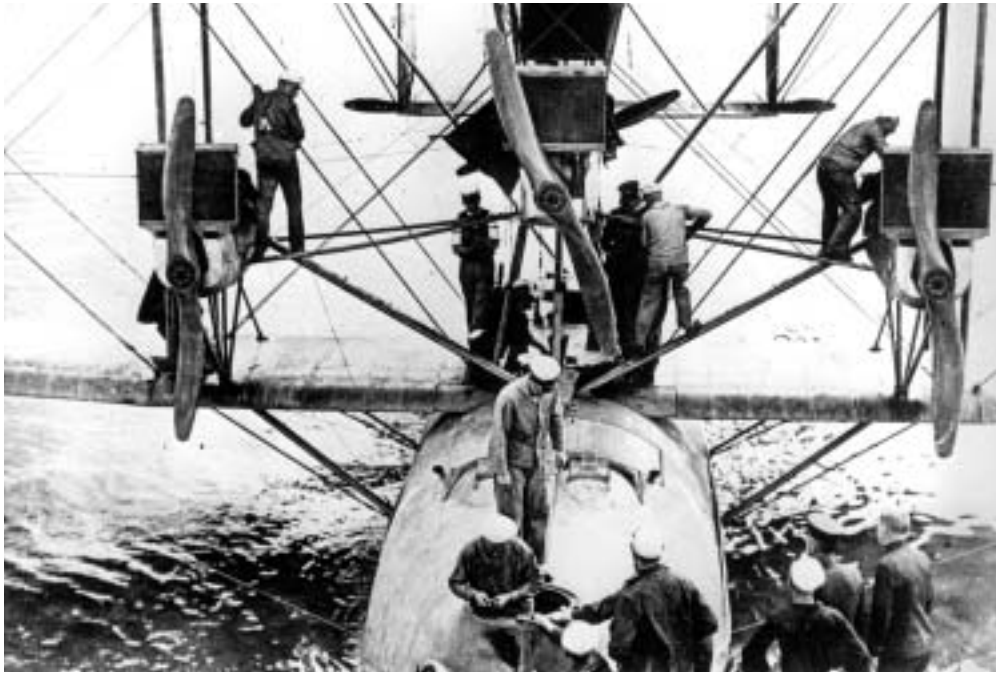


THE CRADLE OF AVIATION MUSEUM

Rockaway Beach were enticed by a large sign painted on the side of a roadside airplane hangar at the end of a sandy airstrip: YOU WILL FLY TOMORROW—WHY NOT TODAY? Jammed into the sand was another sign: PASSENGER RIDES \$5. OVER N.Y. CITY AND THE STATUE OF LIBERTY \$10 AND \$15.

An unidentified local newspaper writer later reported: "Anyone who has not taken his first airplane ride has something in store for him... Passengers are not strapped in their seats, nor are parachutes fastened to their backs, any more than they would be if the ride was being taken in an

Charles Lindbergh's historic non-stop flight to Paris began at Roosevelt Field on Long Island. He flew the 3,610 miles in thirty-three hours, thirty minutes.



This NC-4 flying boat (“N” for U.S. Navy; “C” for Curtiss Engineering Company) took off from Rockaway to become the first airplane to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Carrying a crew of six, the plane was guided by a line of U.S. destroyers strung across the ocean firing star shells at night to keep the plane on track.

automobile. As far as the actual flying is concerned, it is different from any other sensation. There is nothing of the roller coaster’s breathtaking dive. It is more like soaring and the only sensation of speed is that caused by the wind whistling by.”

Flying was more than just a show, however, and more than just a thrilling ride in the sky. As Joshua Stoff, curator of the Cradle of Aviation Museum at Mitchel Field, has written, Long Island was a natural airfield, especially the area in central Nassau County known historically as the Hempstead Plains, a flat, treeless prairie formed by the outwash of the glacier that sculpted Long Island. Running from Queens almost to the Suffolk County border, the 60,000-acre plain is the only true prairie east of the Mississippi River, ideal in colonial days for cattle grazing. But by the beginning of the twentieth century, the cattle were gone and airfields covered the landscape. The

roaring engines, combined with the smell of oil, gasoline, and the pungent odor of banana oil lacquer, or “dope”—which was applied to tighten and strengthen airplane fabric—was a heady mixture for young people who dreamed of flying.

Pilots and Plane-Makers

One of these was a teenager named George Dade, who arrived from Wisconsin in 1921 with his father, Jesse, a woodworker attracted to a job with the new Curtiss Engineering Co. in Garden City. Dade was overwhelmed with what he saw, as he later wrote (with journalist George Vecsey) in *Getting Off the Ground*: “In our way, we were joining the brigade of pioneers—the inventors, mechanics, kids off the farm, veterans from World War I, people willing to risk their lives to be pilots.” In 1929, at age seventeen, Dade became one of the youngest people in the country to earn a pilot’s license. “They were

flocking to an airfield Glenn Curtiss had developed on the Hempstead Plains. He came down to New York City, looking for a flat place, and when he came to Long Island he must have felt like Brigham Young when he crossed the last mountain and said, ‘This is the place.’”

Not for nothing has Long Island become known as the “cradle of aviation.” The great Hammondsport, New York plane-maker Glenn Curtiss—whose Buffalo plant produced the World War I workhorse Jenny biplane—moved downstate in 1917 to Garden City, a new town built on the barren flatlands of central Nassau County. His company was the first facility devoted solely to airplane research and development, and he bought the western section of nearby Roosevelt Field, re-christening it Curtiss Field. Out of this venture came the first flying boat, and in 1919 the Curtiss-built NC-4 became the first airplane to cross the Atlantic.

Museum director Stoff refers to the period through the mid-’30s as Long Island’s “Golden Age of Aviation.” “During the Golden Age,” Stoff wrote in his book *The Aerospace Heritage of Long Island*, “there were more aviation manufacturers on Long Island than in any other area of the country.”

Fields of Dreams

There have been at least eighty airfields, large and small, scattered about Long Island, from Queens County in the west to Montauk Point in the



Glenn Curtiss of Hammondsport, New York developed the flying boat (top photo), and is often called the “father” of naval aviation.

At age nineteen, Elinor Smith was named the best female pilot in the country.



THE CRADLE OF AVIATION MUSEUM

east. The 1910 International Aviation Meet was held at Belmont Park in nearby Elmont; a year later, a second meet was held in Garden City. At this meet, pilot Earle Ovington, designated as U.S. Mail Pilot #1, made the nation's first official air mail flight, a six-mile jaunt to Mineola, where he dropped a mailbag onto the small Mineola airfield.

But one airfield stands out in historical memory: Roosevelt Field, once the largest aviation field in the world. Originally called the Hempstead Plains Aerodrome (1911–1917), the airfield was renamed Hazelhurst Field, then in 1919 renamed again, this time for Theodore Roosevelt's youngest son, Quentin, who had died in France as a World War I aviator.

Roosevelt Field: where historic flights began or ended, where new planes were tested, where the country's first civilian flying school opened in 1911, where fliers looking for prize money or fame came to attack the record book, and where thousands of spectators would gather to watch the latest in

daredevil aerobatics. (And where, half a century later, tens of thousands of shoppers would gather for the opening of a Macy's branch in the fabulous new shrine to consumerism, the Roosevelt Field Shopping Center.)

But a new era was beginning as the "Golden Age" was dying. The 1930s saw the groundwork being laid for development of the airplanes that would help win World War II: the Wildcat and Hellcat, built by the Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation in Bethpage, and the P-47 Thunderbolt, built by the Republic Aviation Corporation in Farmingdale.

Fast-forward to July 20, 1969. That is when astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped off the spidery, Grumman-built lunar module and took "one giant leap for mankind" onto the moon. Although the Hempstead Plains was by then a distant memory, Long Island proudly roared its approval of another splendid moment in its aviation history. ■

The lunar module that carried men to the moon was built by the Grumman Corporation of Bethpage.

THE CRADLE OF AVIATION MUSEUM



Women Pilots

Acting on a dare on a quiet Sunday morning in the fall of 1928, just three months after getting her pilot's license, seventeen-year-old Elinor Smith screwed up her courage and did something no one had ever done before (or since): she flew an airplane under all four East River bridges in New York. By nightfall, newsreels of the stunt were in all the Broadway theaters, and the next day's newspapers were hysterical in their coverage of this teenage wonder.

Women fliers were unusual in the early days of aviation. But Amelia Earhart was not alone. Smith, who grew up in Freeport, Long Island, was named Female Pilot of the Year in 1929 (beating out Earhart!). More important, that year also marked the formation of The Ninety-Nines at Curtiss Field in Valley Stream, a group of ninety-nine women (including Smith and Earhart, the first president) devoted to promoting women in aviation.

In 1911, the year Smith was born, a strikingly beautiful New York theater critic and photojournalist named Harriet Quimby flashed across the firmament. She learned to fly at the Hempstead Plains Aerodrome, became the first American woman to get a pilot's license, and later was the first woman to fly the English Channel. But within a year of that achievement, Quimby was dead at age thirty-seven, thrown from a plane near Boston.

In 1910, Bessica Raiche of Mineola was the first American woman to fly solo. Many years later, in the midst of World War II, Grumman employed three female test pilots: Barbara Jayne, Elizabeth Hooker, and Cecil (Teddy) Kenyon. The latter, who got her pilot's license at Roosevelt Field in 1929, once said that flying was the "sanest, safest and most comfortable way to travel."

AVIATION ATTRACTIONS IN NEW YORK STATE

American Airpower Museum

7150 Republic Airport
East Farmingdale, NY 11735-3930
(631) 293-6398
www.americanairpowermuseum.com/

Cradle of Aviation Museum

Mitchel Field
Garden City, NY 11530
(516) 572-0411
www.cradleofaviation.org

Dart Airport Aviation Museum

P.O. Box 211
Mayville, NY 14757
(716) 753-2111

Discover the Airport! Exhibit

Syracuse Hancock International Airport
Syracuse, NY 13212
(315) 454-4330
www.syrairport.org/services/exhibition

Empire State Aerosciences Museum

250 Rudy Chase Drive
Glenville, NY 12302
(518) 377-2191
www.esam.org

Floyd Bennett Field

Gateway National Recreation Area
Headquarters Building 69
Brooklyn, NY 11234
(718) 338-3687

Glenn Curtiss Museum

8419 Route 54
Hammondsport, NY 14840
(607) 569-2160
www.linkny.com/curtissmuseum/

Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum

Pier 86 at 12th Avenue and 46th Street
New York, NY 10036
(212) 245-0072
www.intrepidmuseum.org



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Lucille M. Wright Air Museum

Jamestown, NY 14701
(616) 664-9500

National Soaring Museum

51 Soaring Hill Drive
Elmira, NY 14903
(607) 734-3128
www.soaringmuseum.org

National Warplane Museum

17 Aviation Drive
Horseheads, NY 14845
(607) 739-8200
www.warplane.org

Niagara Aerospace Museum

Niagara Falls, NY
www.niagaramuseum.org/

Parker O'Malley Air Museum

1571 Route 66
Ghent, NY 12075
(518) 392-7200

Rhinebeck Aerodrome Museum

P.O. Box 229
Stone Church Road
Rhinebeck, NY 12572
www.olderhinebeck.org

1941 Historical Aircraft Group Museum

P.O. Box 185
Geneseo, NY 14454
(585) 243-2100
www.1941hag.org

The Republic P-47 Thunderbolt was widely used in both the European and Pacific theaters in World War II. It could reach speeds of 430 miles per hour, and carried more firepower than any other fighter plane of the time.

SOURCES

The story of aviation on Long Island has developed piecemeal over the past century; primary sources and archival materials are rare. Contemporary newspaper accounts, often thought of as the “first draft of history,” are in this case the *only* draft of history. In the past two or three decades, personal interviews with many of the early fliers found their way into daily newspapers like *Newsday* and the now-defunct *Long Island Press*, as well as the weeklies.

A variety of books on Long Island aviation have also been published. Some of these include *The Aerospace Heritage of Long Island* by Joshua Stoff, curator of the Cradle of Aviation Museum (Heart of the Lakes Publishing, 1989); *Picture History of Aviation on Long Island: 1908–1938* by George C. Dade and Frank Strnad (Dover Publications Inc.,

1989); and *Takeoff! How Long Island Inspired America to Fly* by the *Newsday* staff (*Newsday, Inc.*, 2000). Elinor Smith published a first-rate account of her own experiences in her autobiography *Aviatrix* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

The Northrop Grumman History Center in Bethpage, a volunteer operation open two days a week by appointment only (phone (516) 349-5941), has an extensive aviation photography collection, as well as technical documentation of the company's aircraft.