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

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

Eight years after the Wright Brothers’ success at Kitty Hawk in 1903, a plane soars over the Mineola Fairgrounds.
woman to pilot an airplane—
to name just a few.

Speed, altitude, and endur-
ance 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
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
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.”

“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
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 news-
paper 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.

Glenn Curtiss of Hammondsport, New York developed the flying boat (top photo), and is often called the “father” of naval aviation. 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
At age nineteen, Elinor Smith was named the best female pilot in the country.

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.

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

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.oldrhinebeck.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); 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.