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Newark Airport – a Love Affair



A long look at Newark Airport from its early beginnings to today, by John Sharkey. See story **on next page.**

My love affair with Newark Airport began in the early 1950s, when several of my friends and I would ride our bikes over to Newark Airport from our homes on the Elizabeth-Hillside border. Using back streets to get down to Route 1-9, it was an easy ride. Once there we would visit the old terminal and the newly opened North Terminal. We watched the planes take off and land from the observation decks; no security check points or boarding passes required. Each airline had its own counter, with colorful timetables there for the taking; which we did. Mohawk Airlines, TWA, Allegheny, Eastern, National, American, United; all gone except for American and United. I will relate my story below, using some of the covers that I have collected for important events at the airport. Although most of these covers are "philatelic," the story is an integral part of the history of the movement of mail in the United States.

While other localities had municipal airports, New York City had a multitude of private airfields, and thus did not see the need for a municipal airport until the late 1920s. Flushing Airport opened in 1927, quickly becoming the city's busiest airport; it closed in 1984. Newark Liberty International Airport opened in 1928 as Newark Metropolitan Airport. It was followed by Floyd Bennett Field in 1930, New York City's first municipal airport, built largely in response to the growth of commercial aviation after World War I. LaGuardia Airport was opened in 1939, and Floyd Bennett Field was closed for general aviation two years later. John F. Kennedy International Airport opened as Idlewild Airport in 1948.¹

The 1920s

Airmail was in operation in New Jersey almost a decade before the opening of Newark Metropolitan Airport. Heller Field, a small first airstrip in Newark's North Ward, began receiving and shipping mail in December 1919, but because of hazardous flying conditions in the center of Newark, closed in May of 1921. Hadley Field, about 26 miles southwest from Newark near New Brunswick, served as the eastern terminus for airmail starting in 1921. By 1927, Hadley had four airlines and the Railway Express Agency, with the first express and mail flights going coast to coast. However, because of its distance from New York City, and also because of enthusiasm generated by Charles Lindbergh's successful transatlantic flight to Paris in 1927, Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover formed a fact-finding commission to draw up plans for an airport in the Meadowlands of Newark. By Fall 1928 the City of Newark built a municipal hanger, which became the operations center for Transcontinental and Western Air.²

The official opening of Newark Metropolitan Airport took place on October 1, 1928. Soon Canadian Colonial Airways (later American Airlines) was operating out of the airport and on October 17, 1928, the first international passengers arrived from Montreal on a Canadian Colonial Airways Ford Tri-Motor.

Figure 1, dated February 17, 1929, shows a cachet celebrating the opening of the airport, although the airport had opened on October 1, 1928. The postmark date was the day the United States Post Office department (USPOD) made the airport at Newark the airfield for all air mail contractors instead of Hadley Field. The cachet reads "Airport Newark, the most important airport in the world," with an outlined New Jersey state map.

The cover was mailed to Cleveland, Ohio, and had the correct rate of up to one ounce, a 5 cent air mail Scott C11. On back is a rubber hand stamp in blue "First Mail-Flight, Newark Metropolitan Airport, Chamber of Commerce." The cachet on the front is by Albert C. Roessler, a stamp dealer who was best known for his cacheted covers.



Fig.1. Albert C. Roessler cover celebrating the opening of Newark Metropolitan Airport.

The 1930s

Once it became the East Coast terminus of the air mail, Newark Metropolitan Airport was the busiest landing strip in the U.S. in the late '20s and early '30s. Not long after it opened, the airport quickly became the world's busiest, serving 90,000 passengers in 1931 and 350,000 seven years later. By fall 1930 Transcontinental and Western Air (later Trans World Airlines or TWA), National Air Transport (later United Airlines), and Pitcairn Aviation (later Eastern Air Transport and then Eastern Airlines) were operating commercial services out of Newark.

Newark Airport's primary mission was transporting mail, not flying people. "Air mail started the whole thing," said William DeCota, the Port Authority's aviation director in 2003. During the 1930s, mail was trucked from Manhattan across the Pulaski Skyway to Newark Airport. By 1938, planes there were hauling five million pounds of mail a year. Among the earliest planes to use the airport were Ford Tri-Motors and Curtiss Condors. Then came the all-metal DC-3, which held 21 passengers.³

Air taxi service from Newark Airport.

As the airport grew, so did its auxiliary services. I believe the light green cachet shown in *Figure 2* was produced by A. C. Roessler for air taxi service in honor of aviation pioneers Floyd Bennett, the pilot for Admiral Byrd on his polar flights, and Glen Curtis, an early inventor and manufacturer of aircraft. The postmark is a duplex cancel from the Air Mail Field at Newark, NJ on September 3, 1931. The stamp is a 6 cent Garfield Scott 558 (although the current rate was five cents).



Fig.2. Newark Metropolitan Airport inauguration of air taxi service, September 3, 1931.

The Newark airfield was an ideal location for all sorts of events, including first flights, visitation of important people, beginning or terminus of airmail flight routes and various other celebrations. It was the main airfield for New York City at this time because most airfields in New York City were quite small.⁴

George Washington Bicentennial Airplane Flight.

The year 1932 was the Bicentennial of the birth of George Washington in 1732 and also the 157th Anniversary of the USPOD. To draw national attention to these events, the post office, in cooperation with Shell Petroleum Corporation, had Major James H. Doolittle fly from dawn to dusk over the routes traveled by George Washington and drop mail at historic locations. *Figure 3* commemorates the last stop on the flight. The rubber stamp cachet shows "Washington Flight by Jimmy Doolittle, Post Office Day, Chamber of Commerce of the City of Newark, NJ." Cancelled are two George Washington 4 cent stamps, Scott 709, with the postmark showing "Air Mail Field, Newark NJ, July 26, 1932."



Courtesy Don Chafetz

Fig. 3. George Washington bicentennial airmail flight, July 26, 1932.

Record Breaking Pilots

In February 1934, Eddie Rickenbacker and Jack Frye, flying a DC-1, landed at Newark Airport, setting the new transcontinental passenger transport speed record from Los Angeles of 13 hours and 2 minutes. In 1935, Howard Hughes established a new record by flying his H-1 experimental airplane nonstop from Burbank, California to Newark in 7 hours and 28 minutes. During this period, record-setting pilots such as Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh, Richard Byrd, Wiley Post, Amelia Earhart and others flew into Newark Airport on a regular basis. All of these pilots, except Anne Lindbergh and Howard Hughes, have appeared on U. S. postage stamps.

1934 Airmail Scandal

The Airmail Act of 1930 gave Walter Brown, Postmaster General under Herbert Hoover, broad authority to reshape airmail contracts and routes - authority he was later charged with exceeding. On February 9, 1934, James Farley, Postmaster General under Franklin Roosevelt, cancelled all subsidy airmail contracts awarded by Postmaster Brown. Accusations of graft, collusion, and favoritism in parceling out airmail contracts promoted this action. On the same day, President Roosevelt ordered the Army to provide airmail service. For several months the Army flew the mail. Unfortunately, the Army had inadequate equipment and took over during a period of severe weather, leading to dozens of crashes and 12 pilots killed.⁵

Shown in *Figure 4* is an envelope with the cachet inaugurating Army Air Mail Service from "*The Busiest Airport in the World*," Newark, N.J. The Air Mail Service (AMS) duplex cancel is from Air Mail Field, Newark, N.J. dated Feb. 19, 1934.



Courtesy Daniel Piazza, Smithsonian Postal Museum. Fig. 4. Inauguration of Army Air Mail Service from "The Busiest Airport in the World."

Building 1

In May 1935 the new administration building, Building 1 (known as Building 51), was completed. Some 50,000 people attended the terminal's dedication on May 15, 1935, and Amelia Earhart dedicated a new seaplane. The Works Progress Administration-style art deco structure had a terminal with a contemporary control tower and an observation deck where you could watch the planes take off and land. It had a central waiting room and six smaller waiting rooms for use by commercial airlines, which used it as a passenger terminal. It played a pivotal role in the development of air transportation: For metropolitan New York, Building 1 served as the first passenger terminal, airmail center, administration building, air traffic control tower and meteorological bureau.⁶



Fig. 5: Postcard showing the new Administration Building/Terminal; opened May 15, 1935.

Figure 5 above shows the new Administration Building and an American Airlines Douglas DC-3-178. The plane shown would fly until 1943, when it crashed in bad weather in Centerville TN. The postcard was printed by Star Stationery Co., Newark, N.J.

The 1930s style terminal still stands, having been moved in 2000 from its original spot and restored to most of its former glory. It now houses the Port Authority police and some other security. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.⁷

The postal card shown in *Figure 6* (UXC 24, 36-cents) commemorates perhaps the most successful airplane of all time, the Douglas DC-3. The aircraft represented a near flawless culmination of early aeronautic engineering and a sleekly beautiful bridge to the modern era of commercial aviation.⁸ The DC-3 was a propeller-driven airliner which had a lasting effect on the airline industry in the 1930s/1940s and World War II.



Fig. 6. Airmail postal card Scott UXC 24, showing the iconic Douglas DC-3. airplane.

Figures 7 and 8 show the front and back of the Administration building shortly before its move in 2000.



Photos by the author

Figs. 7 and 8: The administration building/terminal shortly before its move to a new location.

The DC-3 was followed by the Douglas DC-4, produced from 1942 to 1947, the first Douglas four-engine transport. *Figure 9* shows the DC4 on these 5 cent Scott C32 airmail stamps cancelled in Newark, N. J. The stamp was issued September 25, 1946.



Fig.9: The Douglas DC-4 stamp shown with a Newark, N.J. cancellation.

Seaplane Airport

The cachet shown in *Figure 10* commemorates the dedication of the Seaplane Airport, Port of Newark, Newark, N.J. The cachet was produced by the Washington Stamp Exchange, formed by Leo and Samuel August, the forerunner of ArtCraft cachets. In the early days of aviation, seaplanes were tricky to land and take off, so they appeared later than the land-based aircraft. The pair of 3-cent Boulder Dam stamps have a duplex cancel and are postmarked October 1, 1936, Newark N.J. A.M.F. (Air Mail Field) at right in circle) and A.M.S. (Air Mail Service) at bottom.



Fig. 10. Washington Stamp Exchange cachet celebrating the Newark Seaplane Airport.

Post Office Dedication

Air Mail Service was moved from its eastern base at Hadley Field to Newark Airport in 1930. A post office dedication took place at the airport on April 18, 1936 at the Eastern Air-Mail terminal. A commemorative cover for this event is shown in *Figure 11*.



Courtesy D'Avino NJ Post Offices on Post Cards galley⁹ Fig. 11. A significant cover as it shows an airmail facility, Eastern Air-mail Terminal, at Newark Airport.

Before we enter another decade, I do have one cover which is non-philatelic. *Figure 12* shows a cover mailed December 22, 1938 postmarked at Air Mail Field, Newark N.J. Although the envelope was empty, the shape and size suggests a Christmas card, mailed at the airport three days before Christmas. The 1 1/2 cent postage was acceptable for third class mail for up to 2 oz.

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Courtesy Robert G. Rose

Fig.12. A non-philatelic item mailed from Newark Air Mail Field three days before Christmas.

The 1940s

The decade of the Forties did not start out well for the airport. In a dispute with the airlines regarding subsidies, the Mayor of Newark closed the control tower to commercial traffic. On May 31, 1940, the Civil Aeronautics Authority declared the airport unsafe, and the airlines moved all operations to LaGuardia Airport. By late 1941 the dispute had been resolved, thanks in part to a new airport general manager. The "big four" airlines were back.¹⁰ Eastern Air Transport, started as Pitcairn Aviation in 1926, would last until its liquidation in 1991. TWA, started in 1930, would be acquired by American Airlines in 2001. American Airlines, begun in 1930 with a merger of more than eighty small airlines. Today it is the world's largest airline when measured by fleet size, scheduled passengers carried, and revenue passenger miles. United, which started as Varney Air Lines in 1926, still exists and is reported to be the third largest airline in the world. The airport reopened with a dedication ceremony on September 14, 1941. *Figure 13* shows a cachet of the administration building and the "big four" airlines which re-started commercial service. The stamp is Scott 901, the 3-cent Torch of Enlightenment, with the slogan cancel "Buy defense Savings Bonds and Stamps."



Fig. 13. Cachet shows the "re-dedication" of the administration building/terminal and the return of the "big four" airlines to Newark Airport. Cachet by Bill Schneider of Rahway N.J.

In early spring of 1942, the U. S. Department of War assumed control of Newark Airport for exclusive military use. Called the Newark Army Airfield, it was listed as the Air Technical Service Command and included the 438th Army Air Force Base Unit.¹¹ Located next to Port Newark, the airport had strategic and logistical significance. Thousands of military planes were flown from manufacturing plants to the airport. Once they arrived, the fighter planes were partially disassembled and shipped overseas on cargo ships. The bombers departed from Newark Airport for Europe. During the war, the army extensively upgraded Newark Airport. In 1946, the City of Newark resumed control of the airport.¹²

During this time, LaGuardia Airport and New York International Airport competed for Newark Airport's passengers, and Newark fell on hard times. In 1948, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey leased the airport from the City of Newark, and took over airport operations. Shown in *Figure 14* is a dedication cover for New York International Airport (more commonly known as Idlewild Airport, and now John F. Kennedy International Airport) and a dedication flight to San Francisco dated July 31, 1948 with Scott 939, commemorating the U.S. Merchant Marine.



Fig. 14. This cover is by the Jack Knight Air Mail Society, and shows an aerial view of New York International Airport.

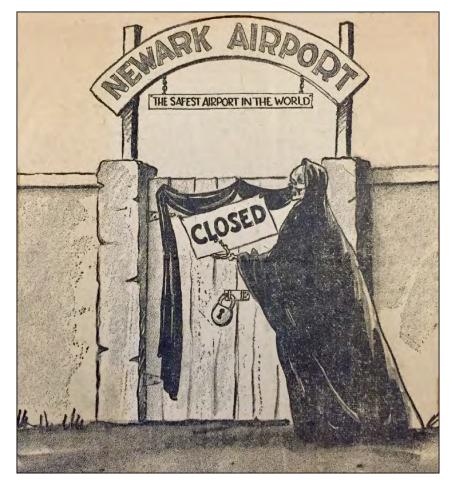
Figure 15 shows an experimental service to New York, the Experimental Helicopter Service. The airmail envelope, Scott UC10-13 (depending on die) 3-cents revalued to 5 cents, is cancelled January 6, 1947 at 9 am, Air Mail Field, Newark, N.J. and back-stamped New York, N.Y., at 12 pm.



Fig. 15. Inauguration of experimental helicopter service from Newark Airport.

The 1950s

Troubled times returned to the airport in the early 1950s. Three accidents in nearby Elizabeth within six months of each other led to the closure of the airport in 1952. On December 16, 1951, a Miami Airlines Curtiss C-46 Commando airliner crashed in the town of Elizabeth shortly after takeoff from Newark Airport.¹³ All 56 people on board were killed. I remember riding my bike to the scene of the accident. It was a dreary rainy afternoon and it was difficult to even recognize that a plane was there. On January 22, 1952, American Airlines Flight 6780, a Convair 240, crashed on its final approach to runway 6 at Newark.¹⁴ All 23 occupants on board plus 7 people on the ground were killed in the crash and ensuing fire. National Airlines Flight 101 was a scheduled flight on a Douglas DC-6, Newark to Miami, that on February 11, 1952, crashed on takeoff, narrowly missing an orphanage.¹⁵ Of the 63 people on board, 29 perished as well as four residents in an apartment building. In the wake of this third accident in Elizabeth, mounting public concern led to a lengthy closure of Newark Airport and a nationwide review of the safety of airport operations. The airport reopened on November 15, 1952, but only after a new runway was built. The runway directed at the city of Elizabeth was closed forever. *Figure 16* shows an artist's conception of the closing from the Newark Evening News.



Newark Evening News, author's collection. *Fig. 16.* An artist's rendering of the closing of Newark Airport.

A new passenger terminal opened in July 1953. Known as the North Terminal, it handled 1,471,030 passengers in its first full year of its operation in 1954. I was there as a teenager for opening day, and made many more trips to the terminal. *Figure 17* shows photographs of the front and back of the terminal on the opening weekend.



Figure 18 shows a cachet commemorating the 25th anniversary of Eastern Air Lines and the 50th anniversary of powered flight, celebrated at Newark Airport July 31 - August 1-2, 1953 at the opening of the North Terminal. Cancelled at Newark, N.J. are four 6-cent C39 airmail stamps.



The seller of this cover indicated that the cachet is not listed in the American Airmail Catalog, probably because it was not considered an important souvenir event

Late Twentieth Century

Within a decade, the North Terminal was becoming obsolete and the Port Authority began planning for a new facility. Two new terminals (A and B) opened in 1973. The North Terminal continued to serve international passengers until 1988, when Terminal C opened. The North Terminal was demolished in 1997. *Figure 19* shows a postcard picturing terminals A, B, and C.



Fig. 19. Postcard circa 1973 showing an aerial view of terminals A, B, and C at Newark Airport. Postcard made by the Scheller Co., Hackettstown, N.J.

Another commemorative item is postal card UXC 17 (*Figure 20*) with a cachet celebrating the 50th anniversary of Newark International Airport, 1928-1978, cancelled October 2, 1978 at Airport Station, Newark, N.J.



Fig. 20. Postal card celebrating the 50th anniversary of Newark Airport, 1928-1978. Shown is the famous Curtiss Jenny, which also appeared on the first three U.S. airmail stamps, Scott C1 - C3.

Even in the 1990s the airport was still relatively welcome to visitors. I remember going on several ramp tours sponsored by a local aviation club. Shown in *Figure 21* is a ramp tour pass dated September 9, 1995 and a photo, *Figure 22*, of the group near the runway. All of that ended on September 11, 2001, when terrorists hijacked United Airlines Flight 93, which had departed from Terminal A en route to San Francisco. The plane, which authorities said was likely being diverted to crash into a Washington, D.C. landmark, plummeted into a Pennsylvania field after passengers stormed the cockpit (*Figure 23*). The name Newark Liberty International Airport was chosen in memory of the events of September 11, 2001 and its proximity to the Statue of Liberty.

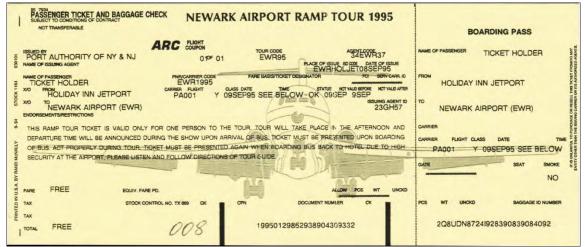


Fig. 21: Ramp tour pass from 1995, when aviation fans were allowed on the runways.



Fig. 22. Photographing planes on the field. Photo shows a group of enthusiasts taken by the author.



Fig. 23. Photo of the Flight 93 Memorial, Shanksville, PA, taken by the author in April 2013.

Newark Airport in the Twenty-First Century

Over the years, Newark Liberty International Airport's role as a major Air Mail Facility has greatly declined. Unlike the 1920s, its major role now is to transport people, not mail. There are many reasons for this change. Changes started as early as 1957, when some mail-handling activities were being moved from Newark Airport to the Newark post office, with the goal of increasing efficiency.¹⁶ A former USPS employee and NJPHS member said that "the Newark AMF, as it was once known, was downsized out of business, when the USPS went to ISCs (International Service Centers). This happened in 1996." Mail is now handled through Network Distribution Centers (NDC), such as the one in Kearny, NJ, and Sectional Center Facilities (SCF), such as Teterboro and Kearny. International mail is now mainly handled at JFK at its International Service Center (ISC), which recently underwent a multi-million-dollar renovation.¹⁷

Handling increasing numbers of passengers has always been a problem at Newark, because of the geographic size of the airport and the age of its terminals. Terminal A, which opened in 1973, has been described as "outdated, congested and inconvenient." The Port Authority's solution: replace the old Terminal A with Terminal One, a gleaming, 1-million-square-foot building now under construction just south of Terminal A. The terminal will be operated as Terminal One LLC by Munich Airport International, a subsidiary of Munich Airport. The price tag: \$2.78 billion. Expected to open in two phases in late 2021 and late 2022, Terminal One is the Port Authority's largest project ever in New Jersey.¹⁸

It is ironic that Terminal One is being built on a site once occupied by the USPS and UPS buildings. There is currently no post office at the airport and one cannot even find a single mailbox. No postal facilities are planned for Terminal One. More than ninety years of handling the U.S. mail at Newark Airport is at an end. However, the airport continues to provide the air cargo industry with a multitude of transportations options to many domestic and international destinations. EWR is a major hub for passenger carrier United Airlines and for express carriers such as FedEx and UPS. Bordering Port Newark and the Elizabeth-Port Authority Marine terminal, EWR also provides fast and efficient air-sea connections.¹⁹ The future for Newark Liberty International Airport looks bright, and I can't wait to visit the new Terminal One.²⁰

My sincere thanks to Jean R. Walton, John Trosky, and my son Brian Sharkey for their assistance with this article.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Aviation in the New York metropolitan area from Wikipedia at <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aviation</u> in the New York metropolitan area.

² Henry M. Holden, *Images of Aviation, Newark Airport, Arcadia Publishing, Charleston SC, 2009, p. 7.*

³ "Newark Airport Keeps Rolling", Newark Star Ledger, Oct. 1, 2003.

⁴ M. Douglas Parks, "A History of Leo and Sam August and their Company," First Days, Vol. 59 #2, 2014, p.17.

⁵ Air Mail Scandal from Wikipedia at <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_Mail_Scandal</u>.

⁶ The New York Times, Metro Section, April 26, 2002.

⁷ "The History and Romance of Newark Airport," <u>http://www.hiddennj.com/</u>, June 6, 2011.

⁸ Postal Bulletin, USPS, April 21, 1988.

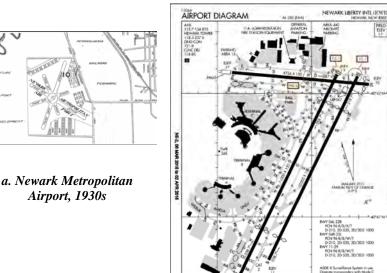
⁹ Post Offices of New Jersey: A History Told Through Postcards Gallery by Doug D'Avino at <u>https://www.njpostalhistory.org/post-offices-of-nj.html</u>.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey_World_War_II_Army_Airfields.

- ¹⁵ National Airlines Flight 101 from Wikipedia at <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Airlines_Flight_101</u>.
- ¹⁶ "Report to the Post office and Civil Service Committee on the Transfer of Certain Mail-Handling Activities from the Newark Airfield to the City Post Office." United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1957. (See Google Books at

https://books.google.com/books?id=RjVh2_5Y3G8C&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&dq=newark+air+mail+facilit y&source=gbs_navlinks_s) Accessed May 3, 2021.

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- ¹⁸ Kathleen Lynn, "Preparing for Takeoff: A Sneak Peek at Newark Airport's New Terminal." New Jersey Monthly, <u>https://njmonthly.com/articles/jersey-living/newark-airport-new-terminal/</u> December 17, 2019.
- ¹⁹ "Get Started Sending and Receiving Cargo at Newark" at <u>https://www.panynj.gov/airports/en/air-cargo/newark.html</u>. Accessed May 1, 2021
- ²⁰ Terminal One has recently (April 2021) been redesignated as "New Terminal A." <u>https://www.ewrredevelopment.com/terminal-one/</u>



AIRPORT DIAGRAM





c. Construction plan for Terminal One 2021-22 – now called New Terminal A, which it replaces.

b. 2017 Newark Liberty airport diagram

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¹⁰ Op cit., Henry M. Holden, p.9.

¹¹ New Jersey World War II Army Airfields from Wikipedia at

¹² Op cit., Henry M. Holden, p.9.

¹³ 1951 Miami Airlines C-46 Crash from Wikipedia at <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1951_Miami_Airlines_C-46_crash</u>

¹⁴ American Airlines Flight 6780 from Wikipedia at <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Airlines_Flight_6780</u>