

History of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport

An Historic Landmark of the Nation's Capital Serving the People Who Make History for More than 60 Years...

The National Airport (now Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport) site is rich in historical significance dating back to colonial days.

The area, known as Gravelly Point, is where Captain John Alexander built a home called "Abingdon" in 1746. A descendent, Philip Alexander, donated most of the land on which the City of Alexandria was built, and it was so named in his honor. Abingdon was purchased in 1778 by John Parke Custis, the adopted stepson of President George Washington, and was the birthplace of Washington's beloved granddaughter, Eleanor "Nelly" Parke Custis. Abingdon was destroyed by fire in 1930 and the ruins stabilized. In 1998, the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority preserved the site and created an exhibit of artifacts found there in the Exhibit Hall, located in Terminal A.



Throughout the early 20th century, airport facilities in Washington, D.C. were seriously inadequate. Hoover Field, located near the present site of the Pentagon, was the first major terminal to be developed in the National Capital area, opening its doors in 1926. The following year, Washington Airport, another privately operated field, began service next door. In 1930, the economics of the Great Depression caused the two terminals to merge to form Washington-Hoover Airport. Bordered on the east by Highway One—with its accompanying high-tension electrical wires, and obstructed by a high smokestack on one approach and a dump nearby—the field was less than adequate. Incredibly, the airport's one runway was intersected by a busy street, Military Road, which had guards posted to flag down traffic during takeoffs and landings.

THE BEGINNING

Between 1926 and 1938, Congress produced reams of debate transcripts and 37 committee reports on the need for a new airport, but no action was taken. In the Fall of 1938, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced at a press conference that he was "tired of waiting for Congress" to select a site for the new airport, and said that it would be built on mudflats on a bend of the Potomac River at Gravelly Point, 4 ½ miles south of Washington, D.C. Two months later, on November 21, 1938, the first ceremonial shovelful of dirt was moved to signal the start of construction.

Before the final site selection, flights were made over the area with representatives of airline pilots, and year-round studies of weather conditions were made by the U.S. Weather Bureau. It was found that the approaches to proposed runways from eight directions were clear for such distances as to provide flight angles of 40 to one. Several government agencies cooperated with the newly formed Civil Aeronautics Board, predecessor agency to the Federal Aviation Administration, in the construction of Washington National Airport. Additional assistance came from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Army Corps of Engineers, the Department of the Interior's National Park Service and the Fine Arts Commission.

BUILDING

Most of the proposed airfield site was underwater. Between November 1938 and December 1939, almost 20 million cubic yards of sand and gravel were moved onto the site. The first step in construction was to erect a dike around the riverside perimeter of the site. The second task was to clear the runway locations of silt so that sand and gravel could be pumped on top of a stable base, eliminating the possibility of settling. Four hydraulic dredges, among the largest and most powerful at that time, cleared 11 feet of silt from the future runway locations to a width of 200 feet. Next, sand and gravel were pumped from the riverbed into the canals which formed the runways up to a height of 20 feet above the river level. By this method, the runway base was so stabilized that paving could be laid within six months after the fill was completed.

AIRFIELD:



The Airport was originally designed with four runways: the main north-south runway at 6,855 feet; a northwest-southeast runway at 5,210 feet; a northeast-southwest runway at 4,892 feet; and an east-west runway at 4,100 feet.

THE TERMINAL BUILDING:

On September 28, 1940, two years to the day of the site selection, President Roosevelt laid the cornerstone of the terminal building at the dedication ceremony. National Airport's designers faced a difficult problem. How would they create the most modern of facilities while honoring the spirit of classic architecture of the Nation's Capital and the colonial history of the site? The design, reminiscent of nearby Mount


Vernon, represented a unique attempt to create a "modern" structure while still integrating architectural references to the Colonial and Neoclassical style. An observation terrace allowed visitors a spectacular view of the airfield. Over 2 million people visited the airport during the first year, including 344,257 actual passengers.

National Airport opened for business on June 16, 1941. President Roosevelt attended a ceremony and observed the first official landing. The airlines drew straws to determine who could land at National Airport first, and American Airlines won the honor. The plane was piloted by Bennett H. Griffin, who later became the manager of National

Airport in 1947. The second inaugural landing was made by Eastern Airlines. On opening day, just one hangar was completed and in operation. Five hangars were under construction with a seventh in the planning stage.

When it opened, National Airport was considered the “last word” in airports – a concentration of the ultramodern developments in design of buildings, handling of planes, air traffic and field traffic control, field lighting, facilities for public comfort and convenience, and surface vehicle traffic control.

Airlines at National in 1941:

American  Eastern



NATIONAL OVER THE YEARS:

National Airport became a success, but a controversy over legal jurisdiction began to brew. Was the airport located in Virginia or the District of Columbia? The District “owned” the Potomac River to Virginia, claiming the boundary had been set in 1846 at the high water mark along the shoreline. But since the airport was built on a fill, a new eastern shoreline was created. The question arose as to whether the District’s authority ended at the new shore or the original one.

The problem went unresolved until 1945 when Congress approved a bill that fixed the airport boundary at the mean high water mark, regardless of changes, which placed the airport in Virginia. However, the Congress established exclusive federal jurisdiction over National Airport.

The first major expansion was completed in November 1950 when a 297-foot extension to the south end of the main terminal added 25,110 square feet of space. Five years later, in 1955, the 587 by 17 foot “south finger” was added increasing the square footage by 9,979 square feet, and also providing badly needed aircraft gates and loading positions. Over the years, the runways have changed only slightly in length, except for the east-west runway which was closed in 1956, and used as a taxiway and for aircraft parking. Today, the airfield contains three runways. Runway 1/19, the main north-south runway, is 6,869 feet. In the 1980’s, overruns were added to each end of this runway. The other two runways are Runway 15/33 at 5,204 feet, and Runway 4/22 at 4,911 feet.

As flying became an increasingly popular form of travel, the need for more space for passengers and aircraft became necessary. In October 1958, the North Terminal was opened, adding an additional 7,264 square feet of usable space. In 1961, the 772-foot long passageway between the Main and the North Terminals was enclosed.

With 344,257 passengers in 1941, and the first million in 1946, the annual number of passengers grew steadily until the late 1980’s when the number reached 16 million. Airport passenger numbers remained between 15 and 16 million throughout the 1990’s, dipping slightly in the years immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In 2005, Reagan National reached a new record of 17.8 million annual passengers.

A TIME FOR RENEWAL

The federal government relinquished direct control of National and Dulles Airports when President Ronald Reagan signed the transfer bill that authorized the creation of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority in 1987.

The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority is an independent interstate agency created by legislation enacted by the Commonwealth of Virginia and the District of Columbia, with the consent of the United States Congress, for the purpose of operating Washington Dulles International and Ronald Reagan Washington National Airports.

The Airports Authority operates this two airport system, which provides domestic and international air service for the Metropolitan Washington region. The Airports Authority is a financially self-sustaining agency. In addition to operating both Dulles and Reagan National, the Airports Authority is responsible for capital improvements at both airports.

On February 6, 1998, President William Jefferson Clinton signed into law the bill introduced and passed in Congress that changed the name of Washington National Airport to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

THE “NEW” NATIONAL



On July 27, 1997, National Airport was transformed by the official opening of the new Terminal which offers modern, efficient facilities that include direct connections to Metrorail and new parking garages via enclosed pedestrian bridges. The three-level, one million square foot terminal houses 35 aircraft gates and “National Hall”, a main street for shops and eateries on the concourse level.

The terminal provides 100 ticket counters, 12 baggage claims, three piers where airline gates are located and a passenger connector the Terminal A. To enhance the spacious, passenger friendly environment, the terminal offers an unparalleled view of the Nation’s Capital and works of art from 30 artists are incorporated into the structure of the terminal using various designs –glass, marble, mosaic, terrazzo, murals, balustrades and sculpture.

Renowned architect Cesar Pelli designed a Washington landmark that is both functional and aesthetically pleasing. Pelli's design included a large window overlooking airport operations and the Washington, D.C. skyline, and the building is adorned with 54 "Jeffersonian" domes that establish a connection with the architecture of the region.

HOLDING ONTO HISTORY

The modernization of National Airport, with the opening of the new terminal in 1997, has not deterred the Airports Authority from ensuring that the legacy of the airport and its environs is preserved.

In the future, Historic Terminal A will undergo a renovation project to restore the terminal to its 1941 design and architecture. The Historic Terminal will continue to serve passengers and provide airline gates, ticket counters, and concessions – all within the framework of what the airport originally looked like.



In 1998, the Airports Authority took considerable care to preserve and stabilize an archaeological site on airport grounds. Abingdon was a colonial plantation and the birthplace President George Washington's granddaughter, Eleanor Parke Custis. It was destroyed by fire in 1930, and the ruins stabilized. During the Airports Authority's preservation effort, there were numerous archaeological finds. These artifacts, along with a detailed history of the airport and the surrounding area, can be viewed in the Exhibit Hall, located in Terminal A.



HIGHLIGHTS IN THE HISTORY OF NATIONAL

- 1938 President Roosevelt selected the site for the new Washington National Airport.
- 1940 Dedication of the Washington National Airport by President Roosevelt.
- 1941 Airport opened for business June 16th with one hangar completed and five under construction.
- 1949 First fixed-based operator (private aircraft service business) opened for general aviation business.
- 1950 South extension of Main Terminal completed.
- 1956 Runway 9/27 closed, became taxiway Alpha.
- 1958 North Terminal opened. Pan American Airlines first jet (Boeing 707) christened at National Airport.
- 1964 Construction of air cargo building.
- 1965 Construction of United Airlines holdrooms and ticketing facilities completed.
- 1966 Jet aircraft began operating at National Airport.
- 1968 Opened new American Airlines' facility and gates.
- 1970 Commuter Terminal Opened. NW/TWA facilities opened.
- 1973 Start of Metrorail construction on the airport.
- 1977 One-way road system placed into operation. Metrorail service to the airport began.

- 1982 Nighttime noise level limitations policy put into effect.
- 1986 Bill transferring the operation of National and Dulles to a new regional Airports Authority was signed by President Reagan.
- 1987 The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority began operations.
- 1989 Interim Terminal (Hangar 11) opened. Commuter Terminal closed.
- 1991 First parking garage opened on the airport.
- 1993 Construction of the New Terminal started.
- 1996 Parking garage B/C opened.
- 1997 The New Terminal opened.
- 1998 Abingdon Plantation site restored and Exhibit Hall opened.
- 1999 Completed improvements to Mt. Vernon Bridge Trail.
- 2001 Reagan National Airport reopens to commercial aircraft operations on October 4 after being closed for 23 days following September 11th terrorist attacks.
- 2004 The airside façade (facing the runways) of Historic Terminal A is restored.
- 2005 With many new restrictions in place, the federal government allowed General Aviation to return to Reagan National for the first time since September 11, 2001.
- 2007 18.7 million passengers travel at Reagan National Airport - a new record.
- 2008 The landside façade (facing the roadways) of Historic Terminal A is restored.

