

# Floyd Bennett Field

## The Municipal Airport 1931 - 1941

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Gateway National Recreation Area  
Jamaica Bay Unit



### Gateway to Aviation's "Golden Age"



Jacqueline Cochran

Floyd Bennett Field is one of world aviation history's most notable sites. Throughout the 1930's at Floyd Bennett Field, many of aviation's earliest and best-known pioneers, either began, or ended their historic flights on the runways of Floyd Bennett Field. During what has been called aviation's "Golden Age," pilots such as Wiley Post, Jacqueline Cochran, Roscoe Turner, Amelia Earhart, and Howard Hughes made significant contributions to aviation through their vision and courage. Each of these record flights served to further the advancement of human flight, and had profound effects on the history of aviation, and of the United States.

Today, as a part Gateway National Recreation Area, the aviation history of Floyd Bennett Field is being told and preserved by the National Park Service.

### Heroes of the Air and the Search for a Site



Floyd Bennett, (L.) and Richard Byrd

In May of 1927, an unknown airmail pilot named Charles Lindbergh flew non-stop from Roosevelt Field, Long Island to Le Bourget Airport in Paris, France. His solo flight captured the imagination of the world. Billed as the New York - Paris flight, the fact that it began outside of the city in Nassau County embarrassed New York City's government. A panel was established, headed by noted aviator Clarence Chamberlain to find a site to build a state-of-the-art airport within the city limits.

It had been decided that New York City's first municipal airport would be named in honor of Floyd Bennett. Bennett, a naval aviator and Brooklyn resident, had been the pilot for Commander Richard E. Byrd's flight over the North Pole in 1926. Both Bennett and Byrd were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for their feat.



Clarence Chamberlain

The panel settled on a site on Barren Island, off of the southern shore of Brooklyn in Jamaica Bay. The site of a small community, a horse rendering plant, and a flying field operated by Paul Rizzo called "Barren Island Airport." it provided good flying conditions, and room to expand. The shores of Jamaica Bay had been popular with flyers because of its steady winds and lack of fog.

While preparing for a flight over the South Pole in 1928, Bennett crashed on a test flight, breaking several ribs and puncturing a lung. Though not fully recovered from his injuries, he joined in the rescue efforts to find two downed transatlantic flyers in Quebec, Canada. The weakened Bennett contracted pneumonia in the cold climate, and died at age 38, despite the efforts of Charles Lindbergh to fly a serum to the stricken aviator.

### Municipal Airport Number One



Floyd Bennett Field and Flatbush Avenue near completion, 1931

Work began on New York City's first municipal airport on October 29, 1929. This proved to be ominous because this was also the same day that the stock market crashed, bringing on the Great Depression, which lasted through the 1930's. This was to affect New York's new airport throughout the years to come.

Barren Island was expanded and connected to Brooklyn by landfill, and Flatbush Avenue was extended to provide access to the new airport.

Floyd Bennett Field was built to be the most modern airport in the world. In an age when most runways were grass or dirt, Floyd Bennett Field had paved concrete. Its four hangars could house and service the largest airplanes of the day. Facilities were built for seaplanes and flying boats. The Administration Building also served as the terminal, and provided for the comfort of pilots and passengers. The entire airport was meant as an impressive gateway from the air to enter into the nation's largest city.

## Classification "A - 1 - A"



Administration Building, 1933



Floyd Bennett Field was dedicated as New York City's first municipal airport on May 23, 1931, and received the Civil Aeronautics Board's highest airport rating of A - 1 - A. Almost immediately, Floyd Bennett Field became an extremely popular site with aviators, especially those seeking to set speed and distance records. Twenty - six around the world or transatlantic flights originated or terminated at the field between 1931 and 1939. In addition there were ten notable cross-country flights began or ended at the field during this time. The Bendix Trophy and Annette Gipson All-Women Air Races both started at Floyd Bennett Field in 1933. These were two of the most prestigious air races

during the 1930's, and put Floyd Bennett Field at the center of aviation's "Golden Age."

There are several reasons why New York's new municipal airport became a favorite of pioneering aviators. First, its location (on the Atlantic sea board of the United States) set it up as a perfect jump-off site for transatlantic, cross country, and around the world flights. Also, the field had superb facilities, including one of the finest sets of runways in the world. The runways were perfect for long distance or speed flights that required a heavy fuel load. Floyd Bennett Field was ideally suited for the record - breaking flights of the 1930's, and pilots were quick to extol its advantages and make use of them.

## Record - Setters and Record - Breakers



There were many notable flights at Floyd Bennett Field throughout the 1930's. Each flight, and the pilots that made them helped to advance the science of aviation. Among these were:

July 28, 1931. Russell Boardman and John Polando established a distance record of 5011.8 miles, without refueling to Istanbul, Turkey, in 49 hours 20 minutes. They were the first to fly over 5000 miles without refueling.

August 29, 1932. James C. Haizlip set a transcontinental record from Burbank, Ca. to Floyd Bennett Field in 10 hours 19 minutes.

December 3, 1937. Both Jacqueline Cochran and Major Alexander de Seversky set separate speed records flying in Seversky aircraft. Cochran set a record flying to Miami, Fl. And Seversky set a record flying to Havana, Cuba. Both flights were non-stop.

July 10, 1938. Howard Hughes, piloting his Lockheed Super Electra *New York World's Fair -1939*, shattered Wiley Post's around the world record, making the trip in 3 days, 19 hours, and 17 minutes. A crowd of over 25,000 people greeted Hughes and his crew upon their return to Floyd Bennett Field.



Wiley Post, (top,) and Howard Hughes on their returns to Floyd Bennett Field following their around the world flights.

July 15, 1933. Wiley Post in his Lockheed Vega *Winnie Mae*, set out on the first solo, around the world flight from Floyd Bennett Field, covering 15,957 miles in 7 days 18 hours 45 minutes and 5 seconds. A crowd estimated to be in excess of 50,000 people greeted Post on his return.

January 15, 1935. Major James Doolittle set a transcontinental record from Burbank, Ca. to Floyd Bennett Field for passenger aircraft in a Vultee Experimental aircraft in 11 hours 59 minutes.

July 17, 1938. Douglas Corrigan departed for San Diego, Ca. in a 1927 Curtiss Robin. He landed 28 hours, 13 minutes later in Dublin, Ireland. He claimed that his compass malfunctioned so that he flew the wrong way.

September 3, 1938. Jacqueline Cochran arrived at Floyd Bennett Field from Burbank, Ca., making the trip in 10 hours, 27 minutes, and 55 seconds, setting the transcontinental west to east speed record for women. This was the last of many women's records set at the field.

## Competition and Hard Times



Federal Artists Project poster for New York City's Airports, 1940.

Floyd Bennett Field, for all the popularity it had enjoyed with the pioneering aviators of the 1930's, proved to be a financial burden to New York City. This was due to three major factors. First, throughout its life as a municipal airport, the only way to reach Floyd Bennett Field was by driving along Flatbush Avenue. There were no highways nearby, and mass transit bus service had to travel the same crowded route as automobiles and trucks. This meant that it was inconvenient for most potential passengers to use Floyd Bennett Field.

Also, despite its facilities, which were unrivalled by any airport in the world, Floyd Bennett Field was unable to lure the lucrative airmail contract away from Newark Airport, in New Jersey. Newark held the primary contract for the New York metropolitan area. Although Floyd Bennett Field was within the boundary of New York City, it was designated a secondary airmail field, and was only used when Newark Airport was not accessible. This meant that Floyd Bennett Field was destined to lose money.

In October 1939, Municipal Airport Number 2 was opened at North Beach in Queens. Later renamed LaGuardia Airport, this new facility had the advantage of being much closer to the business and population center in Manhattan, and was reachable by new highways and bridges.

Lastly, for most people air travel was far beyond their means. In the 1930's, nearly 25 percent of workers were unemployed, and the average salary for those with jobs was less than \$1,400 per year. Therefore, very few people could afford the expense of flying.

These factors, plus the obvious war clouds gathering around the world, led New York City to sell Floyd Bennett Field to the U. S. Navy in 1941. The navy, which had been a permanent tenant since the field opened, was looking to expand its aviation capabilities in New York. The final civilian flight departed on May 26, 1941, and Naval Air Station - New York was dedicated on June 2.

## For More Information:



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