COLUMBUS
REGIONAL AIRPORT AUTHORITY

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Our History

Port Columbus & Bolton Field Airports | Rickenbacker International Airport

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The history of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority is a story about two entities coming together to deliver superior aviation services for Central Ohio.

The Rickenbacker Port Authority was formed in 1979 to redevelop land the military released from the closure of the Rickenbacker Air Force Base and in 1990 took over the operations of the airport. The following year the operation of Port Columbus International Airport and Bolton Field Airport was transferred from the City of Columbus to the Columbus Airport Authority to provide greater latitude and more focused attention to the business of aviation.

In 2003 the Columbus Airport Authority and the Rickenbacker Port Authority were merged to create the Columbus Regional Airport Authority to provide for the strategic operation and development of Port Columbus, Rickenbacker and Bolton Field airports.

Port Columbus & Bolton Field Milestones

Since its opening in 1929, Port Columbus has been on the cutting edge of the air transportation industry. Follow our journey step by step, as we evolved from humble beginnings to become one of the premier airports in the Midwest.

1929
Port Columbus opens as a stop on the first transcontinental air/rail service from New York to the West coast.

At 7:35 a.m. on July 8, 1929, thousands of spectators watch as passengers arrive at the Columbus railroad station across from the Fifth Avenue, Port Columbus terminal where two Ford Tri-Motor aircraft await the inaugural flight. By 8:17 a.m. 19 passengers, including famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart, are airborne aboard two Ford Tri-Motor aircraft destined for Oklahoma, the next stop in the transcontinental trip operated by Transcontinental Air Transport. Average price for a one-way ticket: $351.94.

Reaching up to 50 miles, a high-intensity beacon light, reportedly the first of its kind in the U.S., sits atop the Port Columbus tower and flashes the initials "PC" in Morse Code to pinpoint the airport's location.

1930
With the advent of instruments for night flying, the train-plane operation is greatly reduced with the introduction of all air coast-to-coast service made possible by the merged company of Transcontinental Air Transport and Western Air, Inc. (TWA). For a number of years, the Port Columbus railroad station is used by airline passengers stranded by bad weather.

Over 11,000 people travel through Port Columbus in its first full year of operation.

1936
In the midst of the Great Depression, nearly 40,000 men labor for the Public Works Administration on airport projects in 42 states. At Port Columbus these men build an east-west runway.

1939
A total of 15 scheduled flights leave Port Columbus every day. Meanwhile, the world is on the brink of World War II.

1940
As one of only 31 non-military fields in the U.S. capable of handling the era's military aircraft, in October Curtiss-Wright Corporation leases 83 acres of airport property on behalf of the government and produces planes that make the first attack on Rabual during World War II. About 6,000 aircraft will be produced at the Curtis-Wright facility during the war.

1941
To furtherbus war efforts, the federal government assumes operation of Port Columbus and the Civil Aeronautics Authority appropriates $1.5 million to make airport improvements, including lengthening the runways.

1942
The federal government takes over operation of the Curtiss-Wright plant in May and establishes a Naval Air Facility at Port Columbus.

1944
Port Columbus shows a profit for the first time: $4,329.10.

1945
World War II ends.

1946
The U.S. Navy relinquishes control of Port Columbus in March and Mayor James A. Rhodes forms a metropolitan airport commission headed by John P. Biehn with Francis A. "Jack" Bolton as Superintendent. Bolton, fresh out of the Navy, was the youngest, large-city airport manager in the country at the age of 26.

1950
North Korea invades South Korea, starting the Korean War. North American Aviation leases the former Curtiss-Wright plant at Port Columbus and employs 18,000. The U.S. remains involved until the war ends in mid-1953.

1952
Larger airplanes are able to land at Port Columbus after the east-west runway, today known as the south runway, was extended from 4,500 to 8,000 feet with parallel taxiways.

1953
To be better positioned for future growth, the decision was made to move Port Columbus operations from the original Fifth Avenue terminal to a site more centrally located on airport property. In preparation for this move, construction begins on a new 10-story control tower located in the middle of airport property. This control tower operates for 50 years until a new tower opens in 2004.

1954
The Navy's Blue Angels and the Air Force's thunderbirds performs at a July air show celebrating Port Columbus' 25th anniversary

1958
An estimated 130,000 people attend celebration and dedication activities September 21 for Port Columbus' $12 million upgrade including a new terminal building. At this time, Port Columbus ranks as the nation's 16th busiest airport.

1961
Trans World Airlines inaugurats the first full jet service at Port Columbus in September utilizing Convair 880 aircraft.

1964
Beginning and ending her historic flight at Port Columbus, Bexley housewife Jerrie Mock complets in 29.5 days the first round-the-world solo flight by a woman on April 17.

1965
Following the establishment of a U.S. Customs facility, the airport becomes known as Port Columbus International Airport.

1970
Long-time Port Columbus Superintendent Francis "Jack" Bolton was honored posthumously October 24 when the City dedicates Bolton Field Airport in southwest Columbus. Bolton Field was constructed to handle general aviation, such as personal aircraft and business aviation, allowing Port Columbus to focus on commercial traffic.

1972
Continental Airlines lands the first scheduled 747 at Port Columbus in December to transport The Ohio State University marching band to Los Angeles for the Rose Bowl. This was not the first 747 to grace the Port Columbus runways. A TWA Boeing 747 touched down in March 1970 during a training flight from New York.

1978
On January 26 volumes of snow and ferocious winds during the blizzard of '78 damage several Port Columbus and Bolton Field buildings. Though Port Columbus remains open, only one Florida-bound Eastern Airlines flight departs. All others are cancelled.

1979
Port Columbus celebrates its 50th anniversary and the original terminal building is added to the National Register of

Historic Places. Approximately 2.5 million passengers annually pass through Port Columbus, which becomes a "model of passenger convenience" following a $70 million airport renovation, including enclosed jetways at every gate.

1982
Bolton Field establishes a niche by hosting local air shows, and on October 16 Astronaut and Senator John Glenn serves as honorary chairman of an air show benefiting the League Against Child Abuse. As is common with these events the show includes skydivers, aerobatics, wingwalkers and more.

1989
The City renames 17th Avenue, which leads to the front door of Port Columbus, International Gateway in July. Later this same year a new 7-gate $15.5 million concourse built by US Airways will open. This area is now commonly referred to as Concourse A.

1991
To provide greater latitude and more focused attention to the business of aviation, the oversight of Port Columbus and Bolton Field transfer from the City of Columbus to the independent Columbus Municipal Airport Authority.

1996
Concourse C opened at Port Columbus with four gates to be used by Delta and Southwest airlines.

1997
Completion of the $20 million north runway extension from 6,000 feet to 8,000 feet increases the airport's capacity for aircraft operations.

2000
The largest Port Columbus capital project to date is completed in February. The $92 million project includes a new six-level parking garage, extensive car rental and roadway improvements in addition to a stunning atrium.

2002
The Bolton Field Master Plan Update is completed in November, identifying ways the airport can play a larger role in the local aviation system. Timely, phased development and additional services beneficial to the general aviation community will be key to the airport's growth.

2003
In late 2002, the City of Columbus, Franklin County and the Columbus Airport Authority approve the merger of the Columbus Airport Authority and Rickenbacker Port Authority, forming the new Columbus Regional Airport Authority effective January 1, 2003.

2004
A new Airport Traffic Control Tower is operational in April at Port Columbus. The 221-foot tall, 20-story tower is strategically positioned to provide for future expansion of Port Columbus International Airport.

In July Port Columbus celebrates its 75th anniversary.

2008
A realigned International Gateway opens in May, facilitating access from Interstate 670 to airport parking and the terminal. Passing under a new aircraft crossover taxiway which opened months earlier, the roadway project includes a new cell phone waiting lot. The realignment is one of several major projects that the Airport Authority will undertake over the next several years to position Port Columbus for future growth.

2009
Completion of the I670/Stelzer Road overpass provides even quicker and easier access to Port Columbus by eliminating traffic lights at the former intersection of Stelzer and International Gateway.

2011
The first of two inline baggage systems becomes operational in November, accelerating the passenger check-in process and enhancing baggage screening capabilities by the Transportation Security Administration. The new automated system relocates the massive luggage scanning process from in front of the ticket counters to an area behind the scenes, reducing congestion in the ticket lobby.

2012
The second inline baggage system comes online in January with all airlines now being served by the efficient, automated baggage handling process. In the spring, the large baggage screening equipment exits the terminal, restoring the spaciousness to Port Columbus' ticket lobby.

2013

Federal Aviation Administrator Michael P. Huerta commissions Port Columbus' new $140 million South Runway at an August 22 event commemorating the largest capital project in the airport's 85-year history. Funded jointly by the FAA and the Airport Authority, the relocated runway creates sufficient distance from the north runway to accommodate simultaneous aircraft arrivals and departures.

Moving the runway also creates more airfield space for a second terminal to be built when passenger growth demands. The old south runway is being converted into a taxiway and is scheduled for completion in 2014.

In September, Port Columbus completes renovation of Concourse A, the first phase of an $80 million Terminal Modernization Program designed to upgrade the 1958 terminal to improve the airport experience for passengers and ensure the efficient handling of millions of travelers, until increased demand requires the building of a new terminal. Work will continue through 2015.

Rickenbacker International Airport Milestones

The international logistics hub known as the Rickenbacker Inland Port is the result of a strategic initiative launched to redevelop the former Rickenbacker Air Force Base.

1941-1949
On December 8, 1941, the day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Army announced that a $7.5 million airbase would be built just east of the Village of Lockbourne. The Lockbourne Army Air Base opened in June 1942 as a glider and B-17 training facility.

After the war the base was used as a development and testing facility for all-weather military flight operations. The primary unit at the base was the all-Black 447th Composite Group, also known as the Tuskegee Airmen. This unit merged with the 477th Composite Group in 1947, becoming the 332nd Fighter wing, one of the first all-Black flying units in the newly created United States Air Force. In June 1949, the 332nd was reassigned, the base was deactivated and control transferred to the Ohio Air National Guard. For the next 18 months, the Air National Guard used the base for training.

1950 - 1959
With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the base was reactivated as Lockbourne Air Force Base in January 1951 and placed under the control of the Strategic Air Command. Throughout the 1950s, the Strategic Air Command used the base as a training facility and stationed aircraft on full-time alert duty for national defense.

In 1955 major construction is completed at Lockbourne Air Force Base that nearly doubles the land area and includes the addition of a second, longer runway; several large hangars; and a permanent air traffic control tower, which remained in use for 60 years.

1960 - 1969
The base population grew further during the Vietnam War years of 1964-72, reaching an all-time peak of more than 18,000 service people in 1967.

1970 - 1979
In 1974 the base was renamed Rickenbacker Air Force Base in honor of World War I flying ace and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Eddie Rickenbacker, a Columbus native.

With the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam and the ending of the military draft, the number of Armed Forces personnel declined sharply, resulting in downsizing and closures of military bases around the country. In April 1978 the Air Force announced plans to transfer Strategic Air Command functions elsewhere, leading to the eventual loss of 12,000 jobs.

1980 - 1990
In April 1980, Rickenbacker Air Force Base officially closed and the facility was turned over to the Ohio Air National Guard and renamed Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base.

Two months later Franklin County Commissioners activated the Rickenbacker Port Authority, which entered into a joint-use agreement with the Air Force to share responsibility for operating the airport. The Authority's mission also included receiving and redeveloping airport land released for civilian use, with the idea that the property would be a

good location for an industrial site.

1991-2001
Throughout the 1990s Rickenbacker developed into an international logistics hub starting with Spiegel/Eddie Bauer and Siemens locating in the area in 1992. A few years later U.S. Customs relocated their offices to Rickenbacker.

2003
In late 2002, the City of Columbus, Franklin County and the Columbus Airport Authority approved the merger of the Columbus Airport Authority and Rickenbacker Port Authority, forming the new Columbus Regional Airport Authority effective January 1, 2003.

On July 12 the Rickenbacker Charter Terminal opened with Southeast Airlines providing the first passenger charter service at Rickenbacker International Airport. The first flight, #777, flew to Las Vegas.

2007
Rickenbacker International Airport celebrated 65 years of rich aviation history and hosted the Gathering of Mustangs & Legends, a once-in-a-lifetime aviation event that shared the history of the P-51 Mustang aircraft and honored the heroes of World War II. The four-day event attracted more than 150,000 guests from around the world and allowed the Columbus Regional Airport Authority to highlight the history of Rickenbacker, including the contributions of the Tuskegee Airmen.

2008
The Columbus Regional Airport Authority collaborated with Norfolk Southern Corporation to build and open the Rickenbacker Intermodal Terminal adjacent to Rickenbacker International Airport.

The $68.5 million terminal is situated in the Rickenbacker Global Logistics Park, one of the largest integrated logistics complexes in the U.S., enabling Norfolk Southern to significantly expand its intermodal business in Central Ohio.

2010
The Heartland Corridor opened, thereby significantly increasing the speed of containerized freight moving in double-stack trains between the East Coast and the Midwest. The Heartland Corridor goes across Virginia, through southern West Virginia and north through the Rickenbacker Intermodal Terminal to Chicago.

Considering Rickenbacker's existence as a low-cost, high-speed multimodal logistics hub with access to customers throughout North America, the term "Rickenbacker Inland Port" emerges as an overarching brand name for Rickenbacker. Thousands are employed by prominent companies in the area's warehouse and distribution centers. At the heart of the evolving inland port is Rickenbacker International Airport, one of the few cargo-dedicated airports in the world. Foreign Trade-Zone #138, the Rickenbacker Charter Terminal and the Rickenbacker Global Logistics Park comprise the modern, global gateway.

2012
Record-setting volumes of goods passed through Rickenbacker's Foreign-Trade Zone #138 - $2.75 billion in goods to be exact, 20 percent more than the last record set in 2010. International goods most commonly admitted to FTZ #138 include pharmaceuticals and textiles such as clothing and footwear.

In early March a three-mile stretch of Rickenbacker Parkway opened to accommodate four lanes of traffic and provide a more efficient route for moving freight to and from nearby Norfolk Southern Rickenbacker Intermodal Facility, improving the flow of truck traffic surrounding Rickenbacker International Airport. The project was a joint effort of the Columbus Regional Airport Authority, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission, the Ohio Department of Transportation and the city of Columbus.

Allegiant Air, a low-cost air carrier entered the Columbus passenger service market in early November providing direct flights from Rickenbacker Charter Terminal to Orlando-Sanford International Airport. Allegiant is the first scheduled carrier to operate from the airport.

2013
Cargolux Airlines International S.A. initiated the first scheduled air cargo service from Rickenbacker June 16. Operating twice-weekly flights from Hong Kong to Columbus on advanced 747-8 freighters, making it easier for the region's fashion and apparel companies to reliably reach global markets. Cargolux became the sixth cargo airline to operate from Rickenbacker, joining FedEx, UPS, Kalitta Air, Evergree, Atlas Air and AirNet.

In late November Allegiant Air added year-round, nonstop service from Rickenbacker Charter Terminal to St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport and announced plans to begin service to Punta Gorda, Florida in the spring of 2014.

Rickenbacker Aviation was formed by the Columbus Regional Airport Authority to operate as the airport's primary Fixed Base Operator. Bringing the FBO operations completely in-house increased Rickenbacker's revenue stream for these airport services.