

**State Historic Preservation Office
Michigan State Housing Development Authority**

Staff Comments, April 14, 2016

Detroit City Airport/Coleman A. Young International Airport Local Historic District, Detroit

While the airport's significance is on-going, the cut off would be the general fifty year rule adopted by the National Register. In addition, there appears to be an early period of significance that should be noted--1929 to 1946, from construction to the end of the airport's operation as a commercial airport.

The report must include a list of resources and major features that indicate the year built and the determination of whether each resource is contributing or non-contributing to the district. It is not acceptable to rely on a general statement like "Ancillary buildings such as T-hangars and service facilities, also occupy the site, as do runways."

The report should include a site map with the location of each resource indicated--preferably keyed to photographs. It would also be good to include a map which shows the location of the site within the broader context of the city. All maps should be labeled with the name of the district, city, county and date.

The report must include a statement of significance that explains how the resource meets the National Register eligibility criteria.

This is a well-researched report but we noted a few minor things:

- Page 5, paragraph 2 the sentence "With the passage of the Civil Aeronautics Act in 1938, the prohibition on airport-building by the federal government was finally lifted." Prior to that statement, the report does not clearly indicate a prohibition was in place.
- Page 5, paragraph 3, was it really suburbanization that caused airports to move to locations further outside the city or was it the increase in air travel and development of new, large capacity planes that needed larger runways? There would be a need to locate new airports in areas where large areas of inexpensive land were available--rural areas. Don't think suburbanization played a major factor in airport location.
- Page 12, paragraph 3, the discussion on airport furniture should note that the Eames Tandem Sling Seating was designed by Charles Eames for the Herman Miller Furniture Company of Zeeland, MI and was first introduced at Chicago's O'Hare airport in 1962. It is incorrectly identified in the report as the "Nelson chair."

City of Detroit

CITY COUNCIL

Historic Designation Advisory Board

218 Coleman A. Young Municipal Center, Detroit, Michigan 48226

Phone: (313) 224-3487 Fax: (313) 224-4336

e-mail: historic@detroitmi.gov

Preliminary Report

Detroit City Airport/Coleman A. Young International Airport Local Historic District



Detroit City Airport, HDAB 2015

By a resolution dated November 24, 2015, the Detroit City Council charged the Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB), a study committee, with the official study of the proposed Detroit City Airport Historic District in accordance with Chapter 25 of the 1984 Detroit City Code and the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act.

The proposed Detroit City Airport Historic District is composed of three major structures - the main hangar, terminal and control tower - located at 11499 Conner Street, north of Gratiot Avenue, just west of the Conner Creek Greenway. Ancillary buildings, such as T-hangars and service facilities, also occupy the site, as do runways. The proposed district is between five and six miles northeast of the foot of Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit

Boundaries:

The boundaries of the proposed Detroit City Airport Historic District, shown in bold lines on the attached map, are generally as follows:

On the east, the centerline of Conner;
on the west, the centerlines of Erwin, Lynch, and French roads (closed);
on the south, the Detroit Toledo Rail Road and Gethsemane Cemetery; and
on the north, McNichols Avenue.

Legal Description: Land in the City of Detroit, Wayne County, Michigan lying within the following boundary: Beginning at the intersection of the westerly line of Gratiot Avenue, 124 feet wide, and the westerly line of Conner Avenue, 200 feet wide; thence southerly along the westerly line of Gratiot Avenue, to the easterly property line of Gethsemane Cemetery; thence northerly along said easterly property line of Gethsemane Cemetery to the northerly property line of Gethsemane Cemetery; thence westerly along said northerly property line of Gethsemane Cemetery extended to the westerly line of French Road, 86 feet wide; thence southerly along the westerly line of French Road to the northerly line of the Detroit Terminal Railroad Right-of-way; thence westerly along said northerly line of the Detroit Terminal Railroad Right-of-way to a point being 122.76 feet (more or less) from the easterly line of Erwin Avenue, 66 feet wide; thence northerly to a point in the southerly line of Lynch Road, 66 feet wide, said point being 125.51 feet (more or less) from the easterly line of Erwin Avenue; thence easterly along the southerly line of Lynch Road, 66 and 56 feet wide to the easterly line of French Road; thence northerly along the easterly line of French Road to the southerly line of McNichols Road, 93 feet wide; thence easterly along the southerly line of McNichols Road to the westerly line of Conner Avenue; thence southerly along the westerly line of Conner Avenue to the westerly line of Gratiot Avenue and the Point of Beginning.

Boundary Justification: The boundaries encompass all of the airport property owned by the City of Detroit.

HISTORY

Detroit City Airport began as nothing more than a landing strip in 1927 and evolved into one of the busiest commercial airports in the nation and the area's principal passenger terminal until the end of WWII. Its early history closely paralleled the development of municipal airports in the United States. Its decline as a commercial airport followed patterns of suburbanization and its physical limitations to expand in order to remain competitive in a field of larger and heavier aircraft. Its period of significance is from 1927, when the landing strip was opened, to 1969, when the control tower was completed.

History of Municipal Airports

The history of municipal airports in the United States is a unique one. European airports were originated by their national governments, while in this country, the responsibility for airports was that of local governments since their inception. Local interest, both public and private, joined together to build airfields for the U.S. Post Office's air mail service and the military, encouraged by the federal government but not funded by it.

The nation's first landing field was outside of Dayton, Ohio (now within the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base), called Huffman Prairie Flying Field (1904). It had the first regular flights with passengers from its open level field, with take offs and landings of Wright flyers. The term "Air Port" was first used in 1919 in reference to the municipal facility in Atlantic City (established 1910). It had an aviation field, an aerial mail station and an aerial police station, but its more extensive plans were not fulfilled. The city of Tucson, Arizona claims to have the first municipal airport in the

United States; its City Council, in cooperation with the Tucson Chamber of Commerce, established and constructed its airport in 1919. Cleveland's Burke Lakefront Airport (1925), makes a similar claim, as does Albany, New York for what is now the Albany International Airport, established in 1928. Before the end of the 1920s most airports had a field for arrivals and departures, a hangar, perhaps some refueling supplies and equipment, but by the end of the decade, city-owned and operated airports that made accommodations for passengers were truly airports as we know them today.

The United States Post Office Department initiated air mail service in 1918. The Airmail Act of 1925 (Kelly Act) required competitive bidding by private companies for air mail routes, causing greater competition between cities for this lucrative business. The Air Commerce Act, passed in 1926, created the Aeronautics Branch in the Department of Commerce "to foster and regulate air commerce."¹ Under Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge, national safety rules and regulations were instituted, reassuring investors and passengers alike in the government's stake in this new transportation mode.

City boosters were convinced that airports were necessary for cities to grow into the future and they, partnered with local governments, were determined to not be left behind. This arrangement - local responsibility for airports - was codified in the Air Commerce Act of 1926. Between that year and the late 1930s, public ownership and operation of the nation's major airports grew. Public enthusiasm for flight was fueled by Charles Lindbergh's historic non-stop Trans-Atlantic flight in 1927 and *urban boosterism* - the effort to promote the growth and develop one's city - often included a sense of competition with rival cities. Municipal airports were symbolic of civic progressiveness and pride. Cities large and small, all over the country, built airports consisting mostly of intermediate landing fields with no facilities for discharging and receiving passengers, to take advantage of the booming air mail business. Between 1926 and 1933, commercial aviation grew rapidly in the United States; just between 1927 and 1929 the number of municipal airports almost doubled, from 240 to 453.²

Detroit was no exception when it came to the flying craze, with at least ten fields in the tri-county area in this early period of commercial aviation.³ The first airplane took off from the State Fairgrounds in Detroit on July 14, 1910. Selfridge Army Field in Mount Clemens began operations as a training base in 1917 during World War I, and Ford Field between Oakwood Boulevard and the Rouge River was built in Dearborn in 1924. Still, in 1928, most airports in the nation had no air terminals; most were landing fields with not very sophisticated equipment.

Henry Ford was instrumental in establishing modern airports. At his Dearborn airport in 1925, he flew the first scheduled freight service, sending auto parts to a car factory in Chicago. In 1926 Ford

¹ Janet Rose Daly Bednarek, *America's Airports: Airfield Development, 1918-47*, 7.

² Janna Eggebeen, "Airport Age: Architecture and Modernity in America." 2007, 29.

³ These included Packard Field/Gratiot Airport/Hartung Field/Roseville Airport, Roseville (1914); Utica; the National Airways Airport, southwest corner of Plymouth Road and Middlebelt Road (1916); Morrow Airport, Detroit (1918); Haggerty Airport, Wyoming/Ford Road, Dearborn (ca. 1920); Stinson Aircraft Corp. Airfield, Wayne (ca. 1920) Packard Proving Grounds Airport, Utica (1927); Wayne County Airport (later renamed Detroit Metropolitan Airport), Romulus (1929); R Airport, near Big Beaver Road in Troy (ca. 1929); Burns Landing Field/Burns Airport, Redford, (1933); Triangle Airport in Plymouth, (pre-1936). Paul Freeman, airfields-freeman.com, updated 9/9/2015.

Airport operated the world's first flight of a commercial airliner guided by radio, using a system developed by the Ford Motor Company. The first viable passenger transport was the Ford Tri-Motor, of which 199 were manufactured at the Ford Motor Company Airplane Division between 1926 and 1933. The first scheduled passenger flight in the United States took off on November 2, 1927 from Ford Airport to Cleveland. Ford's airport also had the distinction of having the first concrete runway in the nation, 75 feet wide by 2500 feet long, laid in 1929. And Ford's long association with the architect, Albert Kahn, led to one of the first architect-designed airline terminals (1927).

Henry Ford and his close friend, Charles Lindbergh, did much to encourage commercial airplane usage. Ford sponsored airplane reliability tours to assure the public of the usefulness and safety of air travel, and he began the first national aviation advertising campaign in 1927. After Lindbergh made his first solo flight across the Atlantic in that same year, he embarked on a three month, forty-eight state tour around the country, greeted by throngs of people that came out to see him. On all of his stops, he lobbied for public support of the issuance of public bonds for airport construction.

It was almost natural for automobile companies, such as Ford and Packard, to enter into airplane manufacturing. Ford's advertising of the Model T, for "a car in every garage, ..." was co-opted by Eugene Vidal, the director of the Aeronautics Branch of the Commerce Department, who promoted "an airplane in every garage" to encourage the design and manufacture of airplanes inexpensively. Yet Ford found airplane manufacturing a losing endeavor, and by the early 1930s lost money and interest in it until called upon to prepare for the wartime economy at the end of the decade. By 1928, twenty-three companies in Detroit alone manufactured airplanes, engines, or aircraft supplies.⁴

The invention of airplanes and the associated development of airports aided cities in the 1920s and 1930s, just as the new technology that brought streetcars and associated infrastructure of the preceding century enabled growth and mobility. Airport management was usually within existing city departments, such as the Department of Public Works or the Recreation Department, as airstrips were sometimes sited on parkland and airplanes thought of as amusements. Within the departments, they often formed separate aviation commissions.

Between 1926 and 1933, the federal government took the first steps at imposing policies and programs for aviation. The Federal Aviation Bureau operated within the Department of Commerce (Aeronautics Branch) in 1926 and offered only limited assistance to cities building airports, mainly in advice and recommendations. The Bureau sought standardization in airports through its published series of bulletins offering guidance on how to construct and manage airports, although "as being within the province of the municipality."⁵ Initially inexpensive airfields, the rapidly expanding cities like Detroit bore the burden of paying for the modern airports. Although a romance with aviation and the sense of pride that came with airport building did not generally translate to operating at a profit, the business edge was incalculable. With lighting, radio and navigational requirements, paved landing surfaces and comfort facilities for passengers, interest in commercial flight grew. In 1933, airlines had carried just under 500,000 passengers. More than 200 of the 2000 airports had regularly scheduled commercial service.

⁴ *Michigan Aviation*, 2003. vol 36 no 4, 6.

⁵ Bednarek, 45.

During the Great Depression, many of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal agencies were involved in the expansion of airfields and the building of airports, providing direct and indirect assistance to commercial aviation. The first federal financial aid to cities came indirectly as labor in the early days of the New Deal. Relief policies further reinforced public ownership and operation by mandating that public ownership was required to receive relief funding. The types of the improvements funded included light beacons for night flying and the erection of air traffic control towers.

With the passage of the Civil Aeronautics Act in 1938, the prohibition on airport-building by the federal government was finally lifted. Aid came directly, with the federal government calling for a national airport plan and program for civilian airport improvement. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) expanded many larger airports with commercial aviation to accommodate larger and heavier aircraft, such as the DC3s, necessitating runway improvement. The first major aid for airports came with air preparedness required to fight a war, in early 1940.

The trend towards suburbanization after World War II ultimately led to the growth of major regional airports further out from the cities' boundaries. It wasn't until 1946 that Congress passed the Federal Airport Act of 1946 which established a long-term program for federal aid to municipal airports as more and more federal regulations for a growing airways system required more oversight for safety, coordination, compliance with federal guidelines. The Federal Aid Airport Program led to the improvement of runways and taxiways by granting funds to eligible projects. Terminals were not considered essential to airport safety and operation and, consequently, received no federal funding under the program

History of Detroit City Airport

On June 13, 1919 the City Council tasked its new City Plan Commission to find sites for a permanent municipal airfield, so as not to be outdone by other cities, particularly Cleveland. The Morrow Field, also known as the United States Army Acceptance Field, was Detroit's first airfield, located at Warren and Miller Roads in 1918. The Plan Commission was to submit its final recommendation to the council, with Morrow Field specifically excluded from consideration. Mayor Cousins was intent on an expeditious process. Alvan Macauley, of Packard Motor Car Co., told the council that the airport should be located

as close to the business heart of Detroit as might be practicable.... The machines that will carry freight and passengers to and from Detroit—even Paris and all parts of the world—are surely coming, so get it as close as possible to the business district of Detroit. I predict this with the utmost confidence, and it should be larger than you now can conceive. It should be not less than one-half by one mile in size....⁶

Locales within the city considered for the airport included the recently filled-in end of Belle Isle, Chandler Park, Rouge Park, and, the ultimately selected undeveloped land at the Conner Creek Park and the Detroit City Workhouse Grounds at the Conner Creek/Gratiot area.⁷

⁶ "Selecting Detroit's New Aviation Field." *Michigan Architect & Engineer*, 1919, July, 1919: 68.

⁷ *Baist Atlas*, Plate 25, 1922

Voters approved the purchase of land at Conner Creek in 1922, and work began in earnest on August 31, 1927. Opening on October 24th of that year with the landing of a Ford *Tin Goose* (Trimotor), the airfield was dedicated on November 5, 1927. Captain Edward Rickenbacker, World War I ace, dedicated the field's opening. In August 1928 the City Council authorized the expenditures for a hangar, and on November 28 of that year, voters passed a bond issue for \$5 million for further construction of a new hangar, which began July 29, 1929, but not without controversy.

Mayor Cousins and the City Council wanted the hangar built in time for the All-American Aircraft Show, scheduled to be held on April 6, 1929, so they could use its grandiosity to permanently clinch the national event for Detroit. City Council called for the expenditure of \$1 million on the new hangar and they chose Louis Kamper, an accomplished local architect responsible for the Beaux Arts Washington Boulevard buildings for the Book brothers, for the commission. Kamper, reasoning that the city wanted a "beautiful building," came in with his first bid of \$2.5 million in January, 1929. His hangar design had a stone exterior similar in material to his design for the Detroit Water Board, a marble-lined waiting room, and a giant rotunda on the roof.

Albert Kahn, Detroit architect who had built airports for the United States government during World War I and Henry Ford, also bid on the project and was a vocal critic of Kamper's plans. When Kahn offered to do the job for \$1 million, Kamper reduced his bid to \$1,416,471, but could not guarantee completion by the American Aircraft Show. The new design, approved by city council, called for a single story structure throughout, with no basement except for boiler; a rotunda section strong enough to carry two additional stories that could be built as some later time; a face brick and stone-trimmed exterior with no decorative embellishments; cement floors; interior walls of brick or similar material; exposed plumbing and heating; composition roof surfaces; and hangar doors and other doors and windows of standard steel construction. Although Kamper had reduced the cost by over \$1 million, the hangar would still contain the specified 240,000 square feet of space.

Opposition to awarding the contract to Kahn even if he could have the structure completed in time and at cost arose due to his not heeding a plan proposed to the City Council by the City Plan Commission to widen Woodward Avenue in his placement of the Maccabees Building closer to the roadway. Kamper would ultimately reduce the cost further, to \$1,010,000, but without water, heat or light systems. But it was too little, too late as controversy swirled and Councilman John A. Kronk finally compelled a new deal for the hangar.

Kamper voluntarily offered to release the city from its contract with him, on condition that the city pay him the actual cost and overhead to date of preparing the plans. In a letter, he stated that, "In view of the present confusion and realizing that the hangar delay is jeopardizing Detroit's chance to be the center of aviation, and to terminate the present deluge of petty jealousies and grudge fights, the firm of Louis Kamper, Inc., voluntarily will withdraw and release...."⁸ All plans were to be turned over to city so they can be used without hiring another architect.

Mr. John W. Reid, Commissioner of Public Works, was then directed by a resolution to authorize himself to proceed immediately to take the next steps to build the hangar. Reid, along with Perry

⁸ "Kamper Ready to Withdraw" *Detroit News*, 11 March, 1929

A. Fellows, City Engineer, prepared plans for eight different types of buildings, graduated in quality and cost. On July 23, 1929, Reid entered into a contract with W. E. Wood Company for the construction of the hangar, with the winning bid of \$883,755. Ground was finally broken on July 29, 1929. It would be completed by December 1, 1929, and “will be a better building than any of those previously offered to the Council,” Mr. Reid said.⁹ The winning bid included a face brick exterior, cut stone trim, an interior of glazed tile, a two-course floor and a roof deck of concrete. Kamper had already ordered steel fabricated by Whitehead and Kales, which was used in the construction since it was paid for.

When completed, the exhibition hall and hangar was an impressive 1,014 ft long, instantly becoming the largest building of its kind in the United States. It was forty-four feet at its height with a sixty-six foot high observation station above its roof at its northern entrance. Detroit was able to show off its modern new hangar and exhibition hall at the American Aircraft Show in July, 1930.

The Civil Aeronautics Administration identified Detroit as a large airport hub in the mid-1930s. Its Conner location was served by buses, streetcars and taxies, and residential and industrial areas sprouted up around it, the latter particularly on Grinnell Avenue. In the meantime, the Wayne County Road Commission opened the Wayne County Airport eighteen miles southwest of Detroit (1927) in open land not yet reached by suburbanization, so it was three times as large in area, an advantage to its later development.

Weather information was vital to air flight since its inception. In the Detroit area, pilot balloon observations started at Ford Field in 1919 and the Weather Bureau gained specific responsibilities from the Air Commerce Act of 1926. A full time Weather Bureau Airport Station (WBAS) was established at Ford Field in 1928, moved to Wayne County Airport in 1930, and moved again to Detroit City Airport in 1933. On January 1, 1934, all weather observations were transferred to the Weather Bureau Airport Station at Detroit City Airport, while administration and forecast functions stayed at the Federal Building in downtown Detroit. Thus, Detroit City Airport became the first in the United States to be the official weather observation site for its city. By the late 1930s, the forecast functions were gradually transferred to Detroit City Airport as well. Functions at Detroit City Airport included forecasting, map preparation, public service and aviation briefings. Aviation support grew to other area airports during WWII and by 1958, half the weather staff at Detroit City Airport, along with most of the forecasting, was transferred to the Detroit Metro Weather Bureau Office. When Metro became the “official” weather station for Detroit in 1966, the Weather Bureau Airport Station at Detroit City Airport was closed.¹⁰

As with other municipal airports throughout the nation, Detroit City Airport received indirect and direct funding through New Deal programs during the Depression years. In 1933-34, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), a short-lived jobs creation program under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA, 1933-35), spent over \$258,000 improving the facilities. The Works Progress Administration (WPA, 1935-39) invested \$365,000 on general airport improvements, field grading, building a hangar, runway drainage, and building a new runway. The majority of the 22,000 passengers who deplaned in Detroit in September 1940 used Detroit City Airport, making it the fourth busiest scheduled passenger air terminal in the United States. Under federal oversight but a voluntary measure nonetheless, plans to link Detroit City Airport with the national system of

⁹ “City Approves Bid for Hanger,” 24 July 1929.

¹⁰ “History of the NOAA, National Weather Service.” Web

traffic control in 1936 resulted in the construction of a control tower in 1937, operated by the United States Bureau of Air Commerce.

Major C. V. Burnett, then general manager of the airport, urged federal assistance in the airport expansion, and Mayor Frank Couzens (1933, 1934-38) went to bat for Detroit City Airport in Washington, D.C. Couzens stated plainly “that the federal government should also share in the cost of providing a general national system of airports.”¹¹ He equated direct aid to airports with federal aid to highway construction and harbor improvement. The airport problem, he declared, was a national problem. At the 1937 meeting of the United States Conference of Mayors, a resolution was adapted in support of federal aid to airports, stating that cities could no longer bear the burden. With the 1938 Civil Aeronautics Act, the ban on direct federal aid to airports was eliminated. The Civil Aeronautics Administration was charged with conducting a survey of the nation’s public airports to identify where public aid would augment a national airport system, resulting in the National Airport Plan of 1939.

Already by 1940, the need to expand the airport in Detroit in order to accommodate the city’s post-war industrialization was recognized. With newer and larger planes, such as the Douglas DC-3 fixed wing propeller plane, a greater number of passengers (approximately twenty-two) could be transported further distances. The airport was running at full capacity, with fifty-six flights coming and going daily. A WPA project had already been approved for construction of a fourth runway.

Leading the expansion drive was Mayor Jeffries (1940-48), who was appointed to the Civil Aeronautics Authority, with Edward S. Evans (president of Evans Products Company), reappointed as chair. The mayor named the following leaders of Detroit’s manufacturing community to this airport group: William Stout (airplane manufacturer); Col. J.G. Vincent (vice president of engineering at Packard Motor Company); Gar Wood (founder, Garwood Industries); Phil Huber (president of Ex-Cello Tool Company), Wm Murray (president of American Twist Drill Company); John J. Ross (president of the Detrola Corporation); Ernest R Breech (vice-president of General Motors Corporation in charge of aviation); A. Lott (president of Motor Products Corporation), George W. Mason (president of Nash-Kelvinator Corporation), and Raymond J. Meurer (attorney and professor of labor law at Detroit College of Law).¹²

After considering other sites just beyond the city’s borders and commissioning more studies in the 1940s and 50s, the Detroit City Airport expansion plan called for the removal of the thirty foot high gas holder standing at the intersection of field’s principal runways, construction of a new passenger terminal building, an addition of sixty acres to the airport property, and building four 4500 foot long runways.

Detroit City Airport served as the principal commercial airport until 1946 when, due to lack of space, commercial operations were transferred to Willow Run Airport as an interim solution. Still, Detroit City Airport was the second busiest airport in the United States in 1948, ranked by the Civil Aeronautics Administration, with a total of 44,331 takeoffs and landings, only to be outdone by Cleveland, at 54,542.¹³ Although speedy action was called for, it took many years and many

¹¹ Bednarek, 120

¹² “Mayor Names Airport Group,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 24, 1940

¹³ “City Airport second in US in Traffic,” *Detroit Free Press*, 10 Aug 1948

aborted recommendations before an actual expansion took place. In the meantime, “In 1949, Detroit City Airport was the busiest of all control tower airports in the US in total airport traffic.”¹⁴

The Doolittle Report, a federal document issued from the Aviation Commission under the chairmanship of General James H. Doolittle, recommended that all major airports have one-directional runways, clearance zones within airport boundaries of 1000 feet wide and 2500 feet long at ends of each principal runway, among other safety measures. Yet another plan released in 1952 called for the replacement of the over-congested Detroit City Airport, which was deemed inadequate in size and capacity, and impossible to expand in an economically feasible way. It concluded that a second major airport (second to Detroit Metropolitan Airport) was needed in the region to meet new requirements for space and facilities to properly satisfy new requirements and provide improved and convenient service to an estimated 65% of the Detroit region.¹⁵ The new facility, to be located northeast of Detroit in Warren, would accommodate intercontinental flight and have parallel, one way runways by 1960.

Finally, a larger airport on the Detroit City Airport site, with increased safety measures that would qualify it for federal aid, was approved on May 20, 1963. In 1964, a \$4 million expansion was begun. A new terminal, runway work, and the elimination of hazards —particularly the 362’ gas storage tank which had been an area landmark with its *Gas is Best!* sign, was to finally be torn down by end of 1964. Detroit City Airport then ranked eighth in the nation in takeoffs/landings, more than the larger Detroit Metropolitan Airport¹⁶

Half the cost of the \$7 million modernization, including \$2 million for the terminal, came from the Federal Accelerated Public Works Program; the rest from the sale of airport revenue bonds by the city. Aviation Commissioner Jack A. Tomkins said the modernization program will give Detroit the “finest all-purpose, near-in airport of any city in the country.”¹⁷

Dedicated on September 10, 1966, the two-story glass and concrete terminal building opened to the public. The terminal building won an honorable mention award for its architect, Albert Kahn Associates.¹⁸ Although it was only the ninth largest municipal airport in country, it was the “first in uniqueness,” as touted by the airport manager, Chester W. Beaman.¹⁹ The airport profits, gathered from landing fees and gas sales, were anticipated to rise with the desirability of the facilities. Based there at the time were 240 private and corporate planes, their pilots accommodated in a \$10,000 pilots’ lounge featuring showers and color television. The terminal also housed a restaurant, coffee shop, cocktail lounge, passenger waiting room, an amber shop, taxi service, sundry store, car rental, and a conference room. Upstairs, a \$1million office was laid out to accommodate the FAA (Flight Aviation Agency) flight service station, which moved from Detroit Metropolitan

¹⁴ "City Airport Busiest in US." *Detroit Free Press*. Oct. 8, 1951.

¹⁵“Report to the Detroit Aviation Commission” (Detroit, 1952) “A plan for the development of the proposed Detroit-Northeast Airport “ prepared for the Detroit Aviation Commission, Harold R. Boyer, Chairman... by Smith Hinchman & Grylls, Inc., arch & engineers; Detroit Leigh Fisher Associates, consultants, South Bend, IN

¹⁶ “Big City Airport Builds for Future,” *Detroit Daily Press* 15 Oct. 1964, 12B

¹⁷ “Boom at Unbuilt Terminal,” *Detroit Free Press*, 7 March 1964

¹⁸ “Architects Win Awards,” *Detroit Free Press*, 26 Nov 1966, 7A

¹⁹ “Strike Spotlights New City Airport,” *Detroit Free Press*, 30 Jul 1966. 32

Airport. Three small intercity airlines then flew out of the airport, those being Commuter Airlines which flew to Meigs Field in Chicago; and TAG and Wright Airlines to Lakefront Airport in Cleveland. New flights to Pittsburgh were said to follow.

The concrete, steel and glass, sixty foot high, \$1 million pentagon-shaped control tower was completed in 1969. It then ranked as the number one general aviation airport in the State of Michigan, handling more than 235,000 aircraft movements in 1967, with over 300 corporate and private planes owned by more than 100 Detroit-area companies based there. The old terminal in the north end of the hangar was renovated for use as office facilities for plane owners. With a new parking lot for 347 cars, new T-hangers for eighty planes, and more jets expected, "Detroit will have an airport in tune with the jet age."²⁰

Although no commercial passenger flights arrived or departed from the airport since 1947, it remained an active facility for up to twenty-seven flight schools, St. Nick's Hangar Restaurant, and charter flights. Mayor Coleman A. Young's vision for Detroit City Airport was to turn it into a gateway into the city and the east side. In 1987, in preparation for its return to commercial passenger travel, the airport underwent a \$25 million renovation, mostly in runway and taxiway improvements, and jet bridges. The two longest runways, both 100 feet wide and asphalt-paved, were extended to 5,090 feet long and 4,025 feet long. An addition of fifty new small-plane "T" hangars helped to keep Detroit City Airport one of the busiest installations in the nation, and the remodeling of the inside of the terminal brought it up to contemporary standards for air travelers.

Southwest Airlines began flying in and out of Detroit City Airport on July 6, 1988, with thirteen departures a day from three gates. However, in 1993, when sufficient runway expansion did not materialize, Southwest stopped service. Chautauqua Airlines/US Air Express began in 1994 and Midway Connection began flights to Chicago in the spring of 1994. With commitment to further runway expansion that would allow jets to take-off and land without the limitations on weight, the low-cost airline ProAir began flying in and out of Detroit as its hub in 1998 but went bankrupt two years later. Renamed in 2003 the Coleman A. Young International Airport after the former mayor, the airport has had no commercial passenger service since 2000, and now serves mainly corporate and general aviation clients.

Whether Coleman A. Young International Airport is used for commercial passenger flight in the future or not, its potential for other air-related industries, such as drone technology, has been realized. The second floor of the terminal is leased by the Detroit Aircraft Corporation, "a company that designs, contract manufactures and distributes small, unmanned aerial systems for military, commercial and civilian use. It has a contract with aerospace giant Lockheed Martin."²¹ It converted the former baggage claim area into a machine shop. In the works is a plan to bring a high-tech learning lab to two hangar bays, which will be renovated and outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment. Davis Aerospace students will be able to take classes at Base 11, as the program is called.

Davis Aerospace Technical High School, founded in 1943 as Aero Mechanics High School to train aspiring airplane mechanics, was named after Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. in 1982. Davis (1912-2002)

²⁰ "Detroit's New close-In Air Terminal," *Detroit News*, 28 June, 1966

²¹ <http://detroitaircraft.com/history/>

was commander of the Tuskegee Airmen in World War II and first African American general officer in the United States Air Force, rising to the rank of 4-star general in 1998.²² The public high school was originally located at the edge of the airport but was relocated to the Golightly Career and Technical Center as a cost-cutting measure in 2013. Its mission is to provide students with a rigorous academic curriculum while preparing them for careers in the aviation and aerospace industry, according to its website.

The Tuskegee Airman National Historical Museum is located in Historic Fort Wayne and stores and operates four aircraft at the main hangar at Coleman A. Young International Airport, aptly so named posthumously, as Mayor Young was a Tuskegee airman.

The Friends of Detroit City Airport Community Development Corporation is a non-profit city-wide community organization that was founded in 1990 in an effort to realize and actualize the potential economic value of the airport to the surrounding community. In 1992 the organization was granted tax-exempt status. “The main mission and passion of the Friends of Detroit City Airport (FDCA) is to expose young people to the fields of aerospace, aviation, engineering, life skills, math, project management, science and technology.”²³

Airport Architecture

The *airport* is a twentieth century building type. It had to be a functional work of engineering, subject to frequent alterations and accretions that required a large expanse of unimpeded land. It evolved from a simple airfield to a complex of multiple ancillary structures, such as hangars, control tower, terminal, administrative and service buildings, and runways and access roads. The earliest airports were not discrete, in that they were not yet part of a network. But by the end of the 1930s, beginning with LaGuardia Airport in New York City, airports required comprehensive and organizational planning by federal regulation and passenger needs.

Detroit architect Albert Kahn saw airports as utilitarian structures much in the same way he saw automobile factories - without architectural precedence, and designed them accordingly. He was hired by the U.S. Army in 1917 to design a generic airport that could be rapidly built at a low cost and be easily replicated. He produced the design in only ten days, having taken it directly from the Canadian Royal Flying Corps. This model design specified a one-to-two mile square field with adjacent hangars, equipment maintenance shops, a land-side administration building and barracks, and an unpaved airfield -- all of which could be constructed in sixty days. Kahn went on to design buildings for Henry Ford's airport in Dearborn and many others. Kahn's work on automobile factories and the open, trussed spaces of hangars built for pure utility were greatly admired by modern architects such as Mies van der Rohe, LeCorbusier and Edward Durrell Stone.²⁴ Kahn's River Rouge Glass Plant (1922) in Detroit and the Warren Tank Arsenal (1940) are cited as inspiring Modernism. After Kahn's death in 1942, the firm Albert Kahn Associates, now AKA, continued designing some of the Detroit area's outstanding Modern buildings. Albert Kahn Associates was the architect of the Detroit City Airport terminal, completed in 1966.

²² The fourth star awarded by President Clinton in 1998, twenty-eight years after Davis' retirement from active service.

²³ <http://friendsofdetroitcityairport.com>

²⁴ Eggebeen, 20.

On the other hand, Delano & Aldrich, a New York firm that also developed a specialty in airport design, fell back on Beaux Arts models for a more conventional design. The application of historic and regional styles of architecture applied to some early airports aligned them with existing civic architecture in that they exhibited monumental architecture of public character.

Airports in the 1930s and 40s had a single building serving arrivals and departures on one level. This arrangement followed the precedent of the railroad station, with its wide open waiting room. Passengers would exit through a turnstile to an apron to access their airplane. La Guardia Airport was said to have “heralded a new era in American Aviation.”²⁵ Designed by Delano & Aldrich and funded largely by the WPA, LaGuardia was the first to separate departing and arriving passengers in the terminal building when it reopened in 1939.

The style of terminals was out of sync with what was happening with aircraft design which, by the 1940s, was becoming sleek and streamlined. While European airports were much more progressive, American airports were of nationalistic or traditional styles. Fear of flying was somehow calmed by a symbolic, conservative architectural expression. The Beaux Arts would dominate airport facilities until the end of WWII. *Classic Modern* (or restrained Art Deco), a stripped down classicism with nods to modernity in flat decorative panels or spandrels containing touches of Cubist, Futurist, and Expressionist ornament, as seen at New Orleans’ Shushan Airport (1934) and Washington National Airport (1941), could be accommodated by architects from the Beaux Arts tradition.

Gradually, new modern designs for airport terminals emerged in the United States as European Modernism took hold. Midway Airport (1932) in Chicago has the distinction of being the first municipal airport designed in the International Style. Designed by city architect Paul Gerhardt, Jr., he also designed the first linear terminal with multiple gates at Midway in 1947. The expressionistic Dulles Airport (1962) by Eero Saarinen was one of the country’s first jetports; his futuristic TWA terminal at JFK (1962), then Idlewild Airport, was one of the first with enclosed passenger jetways. To accentuate the modernity of its architecture, the latest in design elements were incorporated, such as the Yamasaki metal-framed seating at Lambert - St Louis Airport (Yamasaki, 1956)) and the *Nelson Chair*, the tandem sling seating specifically designed for airport terminals by Charles and Ray Eames, first used in O’Hare and Dulles in 1962.

The change from *city airport* to *terminal city* had important implications for the growth of cities. Coinciding with the shift from rural to urban population and the spread of suburbia, new and improved airports had components of major transportation systems that linked cities with regions and beyond. Airports became expressions of this new *Jet Age*.

DESCRIPTION:

Detroit City Airport is located north of the intersection of Gratiot Avenue and Conner Street, on the west side of Conner along the Conner Creek Greenway. The area of the airport is 270 acres, with an L-shaped field. It has two 100 foot wide asphalt runways, 4025 and 5,090 feet in length. Three parking lots are also located on the site.

Main Hangar

The Detroit City Airport of 1930 can still be seen in the main hangar building of the airport today. Its style can be categorized as *industrial art deco* or *Classic modern*, a style well-suited to large,

²⁵Ibid. 56.

utilitarian structures on a budget. Simple lines and lack of architectural embellishment on its reinforced concrete frame, large openings fenestrated with accordion-style doors and industrial wire windows, and an open, metal truss system allowing for large expanses of unencumbered space met the engineering requirements of hangars to house large planes.

The main municipal hangar, referred to as the Storage and Exhibition Building in contemporary articles, is an impressive structure located in the southern section of the site, with a floor area of 205,000 square feet, extending 1,014 feet in length in a north-south direction parallel to Conner Avenue. Its width measures 250 feet wide at the south end, 204 feet wide for 786 feet, and 127 and one-half feet wide for the 114 foot long north bay. The two-story structure sits on a concrete pile foundation. Constructed of yellow brick with concrete trim and reinforced with steel beams, the interior height of the hangar is one tall space. “The roof,” according to the HAER study, “is supported by steel, upside-down Baltimore (Petit) trusses and is covered with over a one-half inch insulation of asbestos felt laid on pre-cast tile,” assuming that it has not changed since the date of publication, 1976. A glass enclosed observation tower extends upward from the north end of the roof at the field end of the building, extending upward.

The north façade of the main hangar and exhibition hall served as its public entrance. A projecting, central, full height pavilion forms the central bay of this three bay façade. It contains a one-story central portico with two sets of double-doors, enframed with stepped back pilasters... with stepped brick at its upper center, with details towards top, more stepped pilasters. Corners also stepped parapet. Between piers (pilasters) are window walls glazed in industrial-type (wired) glass. Once inside, the double-doors originally led into a vestibule, beyond which the manager’s office, weather and radio rooms, and a pilots’ room were to the right; the Department of Commerce, a ticket room, and concessions were to the left. The staircase leading to the rooftop eight-sided observation room centered over the entrance was also to the left. A spiral staircase led up to the platform and observation room, which had clear glass in its dome.

This hallway led into the large rectangular general waiting room that ran side to side, parallel to the front of the building; women’s lounges and toilets, more concessions, customs and immigration offices, distribution and transformer rooms were off of a hallway on the left after the waiting room; men’s smoking room and toilet, baggage, and mail rooms were to the right. The waiting room had a plastered ceiling, according to its plans.

A secondary entrance, now labeled Executive Entrance in 1960's style lettering, exists on the east elevation of the north section of the hangar, leading to the waiting room. Commemoration and dedication plaques flank the entrance: *A Tribute to Captain Lionel Woolson and his achievements in the development of aviation 1888 -1930*; and the dedication plaque, bearing the words, *Erected 1929-1930 Detroit City Airport Hangar Administration of Mayors John C. Lodge and Charles Bowles*, followed by a listing of the Common Council members, and concluding with *Designed by Department of Public Works W.E. Wood Co., General Contractor*.



The rest of the main hangar structure, on its east side paralleling Conner Road, was divided into sections by two-story pavilions with stepped back pilasters and small tile details and carved stone in running triangular pattern at their upper levels. This elevation is mostly characterized by long expanses of airport hangar doors made by Fenestra and Detroit Steel Products Company. Two openings have a clear span of 80 feet and are 20 feet high; ten doors have a clear span of 100', also 20' high; and two openings with a clear span of 150', 25' and 30' high, all motor operated. The structure had a capacity of 175 to 200 airplanes when completed. Each leaf of the accordion style door is almost 10 feet wide. A continuous, horizontal row of steel sash windows with steel frames lights the interior of the hangars from above the tall hangar doors. All other doors in the structure had metal covered wood cores to protect from danger of fire, manufactured by Thorp Fireproof Door Company.

Stretching along Conner Street north of the parking lot and parallel with runway 15-33 are four long, metal T-hangars; more T-hangars are located at the southern end of the airport site near French Road and Gethsemane Cemetery, parallel with runway 7-25. A service hangar, located near these T-hangars, features the same buff-brick color of the main hangar and similar industrial sash window walls and hangar doors. Its main entrance features a stone cartouche centered in the parapet above each end bay.

Terminal

The decisively modern-style terminal, opened in 1966, consists of a 53,000 square foot, rectangular shaped, two-story reinforced concrete and glass structure significantly north of the main hangar, also paralleling Conner. Sited in front (east) of it is a parking lot with original twin, curved-mast arm lighting. Landscaping exists along Conner, mainly focusing on the south entrance to the parking lot, where there is an informational marker and benches.

A one-story car canopy is supported on long, upside-down steel triangles painted off-white, their pointed end embedded in a steel frame bolted to concrete piers. Regularly placed off-white painted steel beams lie cross-wise along the underside of the corrugated metal roof, which is painted black.

The roof rests on two parallel beams running horizontally in two sections the length of the roof span. This roof stands independent of the terminal building, except where it meets the main entrance. There, supported on three piers, a glass vestibule extends outward from the building, with newer modern automatic doors leading out under a concrete canopy with three recessed lights reflecting downward. Above this light-feeling canopy is a black metal canopy extending further out from the face of the building to meet the car canopy roof, creating shelter from the elements when entering the building.



Space is created between the car canopy and the face of the building by a solid concrete wall that slopes towards the bottom level the terminal. It stops short of the building, meeting a level dirt and grassy area that abuts the wall below grade. This area serves as a moat between the passengers arriving and departing the building. A low steel picket fence bolted to a concrete curb that slopes outward from its bottom runs along the inside perimeter of the sidewalk below the canopy, separating and protecting the passenger activity from the steep drop. It curves around the corners at the entrance section, its polished railing creating a smooth transition. At the south end of the front façade, instead of the moat, a metal grill covers the space, most likely housing mechanical equipment. At the southeast corner of the terminal is a long set of stairs leading down into the moat. Both stories, the below grade and first story, are fenestrated with large square windows of dark glass and are faced in beige concrete aggregate panels. A raking view from beneath the canopy displays pronounced repetition of vertical elements contrasting with the horizontal elements on the underside of the canopy, as well as contrasting light and dark.

The second story is a glass window wall that slopes outward from the bottom, with frames of thin aluminum. Its slope is such that this window wall looks out over the canopy to reflect the cars and landscape beyond. Above the reflective glass is a frieze of solid black panels.

The south side and rear of the terminal building are functional in appearance, with jetways, gates and service garages. A separate service building to the south of the terminal has plain walls of the same concrete aggregate material and same black window panels of the terminal, beneath a flat roof.

Another major element of the airport is the sixty foot tall control tower located north of the terminal. The concrete and steel, pentagon-shaped tower shaft is faced with the same concrete aggregate as the lower portion of the terminal, with the sloped and dark glass of the observation room mimicking the slope of the second story of the terminal. The glass in the traffic control facility was slanted to minimize reflection. The metal railing of the balcony outside the observation room emphasizes the verticality of the structure by its narrow members. An associated building is north of the tower's base.

Today, Coleman A. Young International Airport, as it is officially named, retains all of the elements of a modern municipal airport of the late 1960s. There were a few substantial private hangars, such as one belonging to Lawrence Fisher, that are no longer on the site. Many of the steel T-hangers are in a dangerous condition. But the main hanger (1930), terminal building (1966) and control tower (1968) are still intact and in use, as are the two runways.

Criteria

The proposed historic district meets the first criteria contained in section 25-2-2:

(1) Sites, buildings, structures, or archeological sites where cultural, social, spiritual, economic, political or architectural history of the community, city, state or nation is particularly reflected or exemplified.

Composition of the Historic Designation Advisory Board

The Historic Designation Advisory Board has nine appointed members and three *ex-officio* members, all residents of Detroit. The appointed members are: Kwaku Atara, Melanie A. Bazil, Keith A. Dye, Zené Fogel-Gibson, Edward Francis, Calvin Jackson, Harriet Johnson and Victoria Byrd-Olivier. The *ex-officio* members who may be represented by members of their staff, are Director of Historical Department, the Director of the City Planning Commission, and the director of the Planning and Development Department.

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