

Paton Field Centennial Moment—December

Paton Field Improvements

The history of Paton Field reveals a constant struggle to obtain funding for needed facility improvements. The ongoing viability of the airport depended on regular maintenance and capital projects. Lack of funding often delayed airport upgrades for decades. Here are several examples.

Night Lighting

Stow Field in the 1920s lacked night lighting. To become a stop for airmail, which would boost revenue, an airport had to support night flying. Airfield operator Hugh Robbins approached a tri-city group representing Stow, Kent, and Cuyahoga Falls in 1928 for funding. He unsuccessfully argued that their investment would develop Stow Field as a community airport to the benefit of all. Forty years later, as a Kent State property, the airport received the needed funding from the university to install runway lighting. Until then, pilots flying into 1G3 relied on a smudge pot marking the runway.

Runway Paving and Extension

As an airport owner, Kent State faced both maintenance and capital needs. The sod runways at Paton Field made the airfield unusable from February to May and raised safety concerns. There had been keen interest in the 1950s to pave the 3,000-ft. main runway. It was not until 1965 that the Board of Trustees allocated the necessary funds, establishing the airport as a year-round facility. Lengthening the runway to 4,000 feet to meet minimum FAA requirements necessitated buying land for both the extension and the needed obstruction-free zone at each end. This would not be achieved until 1992 with the aid of federal funding.



Airport aerial showing paved runway. 1972. Kent State University Libraries Special Collections and Archives

Federal Funding

The airport, designated an auxiliary service in the 1960s, was expected to be self-supporting. Revenue from flight fees was insufficient to fund improvements. The university also had difficult financial issues, particularly after the May 4 shootings. Finally, in 1973, President Olds decided to pursue federal funding through the FAA for airport improvements. The master plan approved in 1975 resulted in \$4 million in improvements to be made over a twenty-year period. Execution of the plan did not begin until 1982 and would bring the last major improvements at the airport until the FAA approved the latest master plan in 2016.

Importantly, accepting FAA funding obligated Kent State to maintain Paton Field into the future—an important provision for the airport’s long-term survival when later threatened by two university administrations.

Aeronautics Education Building

The year 2019 was marked by the dedication of the FedEx Aeronautics Academic Center, fulfilling the long-held wish for aeronautics education to be co-located with flight training. The first request for a building was in the university’s capital request to the State in 1960. In 1964, the Board of Trustees approved the airport study committee’s recommendation for an education building. Plans were developed in 1967, but scrapped in 1970 due to financial pressures. A trailer was installed as a stop-gap measure. In 1976, the university again included an aerospace technology building in its capital request to the State. Now, sixty years from the first request and going into the airport’s second century, a successful donor campaign led by a substantial gift from FedEx made Paton’s vision of an education building at the airport a reality.

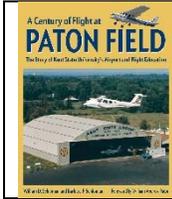


FedEx Aeronautics Academic Center, 2020. Photo by William D. Schloman

DID YOU KNOW?

One idea in 1973 to deal with deteriorating airport facilities and the lack of instructional space was to replace the main hangar with a geodesic dome. The idea was probably fueled by Buckminster Fuller’s visit to campus in 1971. The airport dome would be multilevel and

accommodate classrooms and other services--“with translucent panels it would shine like a cut gem and be visible for miles to thousands of people.”



Excerpted from *A Century of Flight at Paton Field: The Story of Kent State University's Airport and Flight Education* by William D. Schloman and Barbara F. Schloman. (Kent State University Press, 2019). Used by permission. Available at the Kent State University Airport, from the [Kent State University Press](https://www.kent.edu/press/), and wherever books are sold.