PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: A CASE FOR AIRPORT HISTORY
Janet Bednarek

Sometimes I feel my career has been filled with conversation stoppers (or at least stumpers). In graduate school: "I'm writing my dissertation on city planning -- in Omaha, Nebraska." With the textbook sales people who come to my office: "I teach a class on the History of American Aviation." And it doesn't seem to matter what kind of history conference I'm at: "I research the history of American airports." But, especially with the last example, if people can get beyond their initial reaction – and it varies from "Really???" to "How… interesting…" – my enthusiasm for the topic can sometimes carry the conversation. Most people primarily want to know exactly how I came to such a topic as US airports. So today, I want to talk to you about American airports, how I came to make airports the focus of my research, and why you might also find them interesting.

I trained as an urban historian at the University of Pittsburgh – Scott Martin was one of my graduate school classmates. We both studied with Sam Hays and I came out of graduate school anticipating that I would spend my career researching and teaching urban history. Well, life has a way of changing the best laid plans. As it turned out, my first full-time-with-benefits job out of graduate school was not with a college or university, but with the United States Air Force History and Museum program where I found myself taking a crash course – if you want to hear that as a pun, be my guest – in the history of US military aviation. I never dreamed I would find aviation technology interesting, but life can surprise you. And at that point, I anticipated a career as a public historian working for the federal government.

Well, a month after I started work for the Air Force, the Berlin Wall came down and over the next couple of years, the Air Force History program witnessed significant budget cuts. I also married an Air Force officer who wanted to spend as much of his career as possible at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio. Lo and behold, in late 1991, the University of Dayton advertised for a new tenure-track position. They wanted someone who

could teach urban, aviation and/or sports history. Long story short – I got the job. So now I actually had to figure out how to combine my formal training in urban history with my on-the-job training in aviation history. Where do the two come together? Airports.

Even before that, however, I had become curious about something I was seeing every time I flew home to Omaha. More often than not, back in the 1990s, my flights took me through the St. Louis airport. Being someone for whom leg room is not an issue, I usually found myself in the window seat. On final approach, I'd look out the window at the landscape below. What I first saw were what looked like boarded up apartment buildings – maybe being renovated? Maybe public housing? Over the course of a few years, the buildings disappeared but I could still see the streets and sidewalks left behind. And I began to wonder what had happened to that community. As I flew into other airports around the country, I began to notice similar sites – the concrete skeletons of abandoned neighborhoods. Since then Google Earth has allowed me to investigate the landscape around airports all over the country where similar sights – evidence of neighborhoods now gone – are fairly common.

Historians have focused a good deal of attention on lost urban communities – especially communities lost to highway construction or urban renewal. It occurred to me that the automobile was not the only transportation technology that transformed the metropolitan landscape. Though on a lesser scale, the airplane had also had an impact which brings me back to St. Louis.

Loss of Communities: St. Louis, Missouri

Commercial jet aircraft were introduced at St. Louis's airport, Lambert International, in the early 1960s. By 1963 noise complaints had already reached officials at City Hall and in response they were in the process of purchasing land within a half mile of the ends of its main runways for expansion, clear zones and noise abatement. Noise complaints, though came from as far away as four and a half miles. As the city's Director of Public Works

Walter T. Malloy wrote a disgruntled resident, the City was limited in the actions it could take as the FAA controlled aircraft in flight. He noted that the FAA was directing pilots to fly as high as possible for as long as possible in the vicinity of the airport to help with the noise. However, he concluded the noise problem was "a complex one and not easy to solve." He included in his letter a copy of the FAA's pamphlet on jet aircraft noise, *Sounds of the Twentieth Century,* distributed in the belief that if people understood the benefits of jet air travel they would be more tolerant of the noise.[1] (The pamphlet did not work.)

The land acquisition program initiated in 1963 continued throughout the decade, but as air traffic increased at the airport, so too did the noise complaints. By 1970, the situation was becoming acute especially in the nearby community of Berkeley, Missouri, after the extension of one of the runways toward a residential subdivision known as Doddles Dale. The chairman of St. Louis's airport commission, David E. Leigh, in responding to the increase in complaints, made note of the actions taken to address the noise issue. These included the purchase of over 100 acres in the communities of Bridgeton and Berkeley, the clearance of all houses, and "the transfer back to the communities of this land to be used for public parks." The airport also had policies about nighttime engine run-ups. In response to the "serious citizen unrest," the airport commission and the City of Berkeley formed a committee to discuss the noise problem in the hopes of avoiding a major lawsuit. Following the discussion, the commission voted to acquire the property within the Doodles Dale subdivision, "by purchase, or condemnation if necessary." Approximately seventy homes were purchased and demolished.[2]

---

[1] Walter T. Malloy, Director of Public Works, to Mrs. Fred Schrier, Maryland, Heights, Missouri, October 1, 1963, Raymond Tucker Papers, Series 3, Box 36, File: Lambert-St. Louis Municipal Airport, (Washington University, University Archives, St. Louis, hereafter University Archives).

[2] Minutes, St. Louis Airport Commission, Thursday, September 24th, 1970; Minutes, St. Louis Airport Commission, Thursday, November 19, 1970, Cervantes Papers, Series Two, Box 11, File: Airport Commission, (University Archives).

Noise complaints did not cease but, for much of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the City of St. Louis, under the leadership of Mayor Alfonso J. Cervantes, pushed for the construction of a new airport to serve the St. Louis region. That airport, to be built in Southern Illinois, would effectively solve the noise issue as it would result in the closure of Lambert-St. Louis. However, in 1977, Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams cancelled the project. Following that decision the City of St. Louis then embarked on a major campaign, the first of two between the late 1970s and the late 1990s, to expand the existing airport.[3]

Before beginning the first expansion project, as required by federal law, the City submitted an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EIS gave rise to a plan to deal with aircraft noise, the St. Louis Airport Environs Plan. Central to the plan were major land purchases in the communities of Berkeley and Kinloch, bordering the south and southeast ends of the airport, respectively. Although there was hope that some neighborhoods might be preserved through sound-proofing, the noise abatement program generally resulted in the clearance of purchased properties. This was especially true in Kinloch.[4]

Kinloch, Missouri, is a historically black community. It began as part of a commuter suburb of St. Louis in 1890. Once an African American family purchased property in the southern part of the suburban tract, the white families in the area moved out and more African American families moved in. The northern part of the development, on the other hand, remained white. In the late 1930s, in a dispute involving schools, the development split into the independent cities of Berkeley and Kinloch. In 1980, Kinloch had a population of 4,455. The St. Louis Environs Plan called for the clearance of much of the

---

[3] See Bednarek, Janet R. Daly "Layer Upon Layer: Public Authorities and Airport Ownership and Management in St. Louis, 1947-1980," *Journal of Planning History* 8 (November 2009).

[4] St. Louis Airport Environs Plan, Press Release: Environs Plan Completes First Year, January 9, 1981, Robert Young Papers, Box 42, File 900, (Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Thomas Jefferson Library, University of Missouri-St. Louis, hereafter WHMC).

southwest section of the city. In exchange, Kinloch officials and the airport commission agreed to cooperate on a development plan for the city known as the "Kinloch Tomorrow Plan."[5]

Soon, however, it became apparent that the clearance project would proceed far more quickly than any plan for economic redevelopment of the community. By 1984, members of the Kinloch Merchant's Association were protesting the effect of the clearance program on businesses in the city. They argued that "acquisition of homes in the city of Kinloch by the Lambert-St. Louis International Airport has affected the merchants in Kinloch in the most adverse financial manner, leaving us unable to function economically as minority businesses."[6] The following year the airport agreed to a buy-out of Kinloch businesses negatively affected by the noise abatement purchases, but little was done to realize the goals of the "Kinloch Tomorrow Plan" which had promised "a sound tax base, commercial industrial development and jobs."[7] As the airport began a new round of expansion in the early 1990s, the City and the airport commission once again entered an agreement with the City of Kinloch on the redevelopment of land purchased for noise abatement.[8] However, another two decades passed before a development plan would actually be in place for the land acquired and cleared. In the meantime, the population of the town plummeted. It fell to 449 by 2000 and decreased further to 229 by 2010.

---

[5] Prepared by Brown and Associates Public Relations for the Missouri-St. Louis Metropolitan Airport Authority, St. Louis Airport Authority, and Citizens for Lambert Committee, "Lambert: For the Future" (1983), 13, Robert Young Papers, Box 42, File 901, (WHMC).

[6] Harold Gaskin, President, Kinloch Merchant's Association to Congressman Robert Young, June 20, 1984, Robert Young Papers, Box 51, File 1036, (WHMC).

[7] Janice Borgschulte, "Airport Group Oks Buyout of Business," *County Star-Journal*, April 3, 1985, Clipping in Robert Young Papers, Box 42, File 903, (WHMC); Charlton D. Clay, Mayor, Kinloch to Hon. Vincent C. Schoemehl, Mayor, City of St. Louis, November 16, 1990, Schoemehl Papers, Third Term, Box 8, File: Airport 1990, (WHMC).

[8] Charlton D. Clay, Mayor, Kinloch, to Mr. Milt Svetanics, Mayor's Office, City of St. Louis, February 14, 1991, Schoemehl Papers, Third Term, Box 8, Airport 1991 (WHMC).

Kinloch was not the only community to suffer from the expansion plans of the airport. Officials in the City of Bridgeton, at the northwest end of the airport, complained to Congressman Robert Young (D-MO) in 1985 that land purchased by St. Louis for noise abatement in Bridgeton hurt its tax base. Once purchased, the land was no longer on the tax rolls as it belonged to the City of St. Louis.[9] While the expansion and noise abatement program of the 1980s was significant, Bridgeton was much more at the center of the expansion program begun in the 1990s which involved the construction of a new runway. The two original main runways at the airport were too close together to allow for simultaneous use during poor weather conditions. Also, planes often had to cross the runways while active in order to taxi for departure or to the terminal. The solution was construction of a second runway north and west of the existing runways to provide the airport with two parallel all-weather runways. Officials in the city of Bridgeton reacted to the proposal even before the master plan had been completed. They demanded that the City of St. Louis offer fair and full value to those homeowners who would be forced to sell. They also wanted the City to offer options to homeowners that would allow for the preservation of remaining neighborhoods.[10]

As Lambert-St. Louis embarked on its expansion program in the 1990s, its noise abatement program – described by the mayor as "one of the largest and more effective noise mitigation acquisition programs in the country" – had already purchased over 2,000 parcels of land and anticipated purchasing an

---

[9] E. W. (Bill) Abram, Mayor, City of Bridgeton, to Congressman Robert A. Young, U.S. House of Representatives, December 30, 1985, Robert Young Papers, Box 35, Folder 779, (WHMC).

[10] "'No Runways in Bridgeton'," *Bridgeton Air Defense News* 2 (January 1990): 1; Conrad W. Bowers, Mayor, City of Bridgeton to Bridgeton Residents, January 16, 1990, Schoemehl, Third Term, Box 9, File: Airport Misc.-Jan. 1990, (WHMC); Typewritten mss. "Statement from Vincent Schoemehl, Mayor of the City of St. Louis, (regarding the Lambert Airport Master Plan) Delivered by: Marie Boykin, Spokesperson for the Mayor," September 25, 1991, Henry VIII Hotel (North Lindbergh), Schoelmehl Papers, Third Term, Box 7, File: Airport 1991, (WHMC).

additional 1200 parcels by 1998 for construction of the new runway which opened in 2006.[11] The expansion plan anticipated that air traffic at Lambert-St. Louis would increase to 40 million passengers by 2010, up from 20 million in the early 1990s. Instead, passenger traffic grew unevenly in the 1990s and peaked in 2000 at 30,558,991. Following the merger of TWA and American Airlines and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, both in 2001, Lambert-St. Louis ceased to operate as a major hub airport and traffic has steadily declined, falling to 12,331,426 in 2010. [12] While the expansion plans had not worked to preserve air traffic in the St. Louis region hard-hit by the deindustrialization, the land acquisition programs associated with them had dramatically altered the landscape around the airport at an often high cost to nearby communities.

Broader Significance

At this point you might be thinking, "So the airport expansion caused the loss of some homes and businesses in the St. Louis suburbs" and "Yes, it is interesting that one of those communities was a historically black city." Let me add one more piece of information – Kinloch is just west of another St. Louis suburb, a town with which Americans became very familiar in 2014 – Ferguson, Missouri.

African American Kinloch and white Ferguson had a long history of racial tension. Long-time residents of Kinloch and Ferguson remember the gate that crossed the major road connecting the two cities starting in the 1940s. Residents of Kinloch could cross into Ferguson during the day to work, but at night they had to return to Kinloch before the gate was closed. A local Ferguson ordinance – known as the sundown law – enforced the curfew well into the 1950s and although use of the gate ended thus ended, it remained in place. In 1968, the mayor of Ferguson finally called for the elimination of the

---

[11] Vincent Schoemehl, Jr., Mayor, City of St. Louis to Congresswoman Joan Kelly Horn, Washington, D.C., October 1, 1992, Schoemehl, Third Term, Box 19, File: Airport 1992, (WHMC).

[12] Passenger Statistics, Lambert-St. Louis International Airport http://www.lambert-stlouis.com/flystl/media-newsroom/stats/ (accessed July 21, 2011).

gate. That was the same year the first black family purchased a home in Ferguson. In 1975, a local councilman, who had opposed the removal of the gate, called for the construction of a 10-foot fence to separate a neighborhood in Ferguson from Kinloch. This came the same year a court ordered the merger of the Kinloch-Berkeley School district with the Ferguson-Florissant District. The council voted 4-3 to kill the proposal but not before it had received national press attention. The press dubbed it the "Berlin Wall" or the "crime wall" and Councilman Carl Kersting continued to press the issue, asking that the City provide low-interest loans to homeowners so that they could build individual fences in lieu of the city-built fence.[13] The city's fence was never built but the message that Kinloch residents were responsible for crime in Ferguson was clear.

Then in the 1980s, the St. Louis Airport Authority began to purchase land in Kinloch – both to deal with the noise issue and to allow for the construction of a new runway (one that was never built). As often happens, the displaced residents of Kinloch moved to the closest nearby community – Ferguson. Between 1980 and 2010, the population of Ferguson remained relatively stable at about 21,000. As late as 1990, the population remained 2/3 white and 1/3 black. However, by 2010 that ratio had reversed. The government in Ferguson, however, remained white. Not all the African Americans moving to Ferguson during this time came from Kinloch but a significant number of African Americans living Michael Brown's neighborhood did. The violence that erupted in the wake of that August 2014 shooting had

---

[13] Matthew Teague, "Long History of Racial Tension Set the Stage for Ferguson Protest," http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-ferguson-tensions-20141130-story.html (accessed 20 January 2017);Ryan Schuessler, "Kinloch Connection: Ferguson Fueled by Razing of Historic Black Town," http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/8/20/kinloch-town-blackmissouri.html (accessed 20 January 2017); Mary Delach Leonard, "Ferguson's Yesterdays Offer Clues to the Troubled City of Today," http://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/fergusons-yesterdays-offer-clues-troubled-city-today#stream/0 (accessed 20 January 2017).

roots deep in the intertwined histories of Kinloch, Ferguson, and the St. Louis airport.

I can't promise that all tales dealing with communities lost to airport expansion have as great a contemporary resonance as that of Kinloch. However, there is an interesting story involving a working class community in southwest Cleveland pressured due to several expansions of Hopkins International Airport. So many homes were lost in that particular neighborhood that the Catholic Archdiocese of Cleveland decided, as part of a general downsizing that resulted in the closure of 50 churches, to close the local Catholic Church. So strong was the sense place and of community connection to that church, St. Patrick's, that remaining as well as dispersed community members protested, taking their case all the way to the Vatican. Though the Vatican rarely overturns such actions, in this case the Vatican overruled the Archbishop. St. Patrick's (as well as 10 other churches shuttered at the same time) reopened. And, though it doesn't directly involved lost communities, there is the interesting story of how the Cincinnati airport ended up in Northern Kentucky. So, maybe airport history shouldn't be such a conversation stumper after all.

.