

Tom Davis Entrepreneur of the Air

Series: Aviation



Tom Davis, founder and president of Piedmont Airlines, boards Piedmont's inaugural flight from Wilmington to Cincinnati, Ohio, on February 20, 1948. *Courtesy Piedmont Aviation Historical Society*

In May 1927 Charles Lindbergh flew the airplane *Spirit of St. Louis* from New York to France. It was the first time anyone had flown solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Lindbergh's historic flight showed the world that aviation was the way of the future. In the 1910s and 1920s, visionary businessmen had formed aviation companies that transported goods and offered charter flights. Lindbergh's achievement convinced the public that planes were a reliable means of travel for everyone. As a result, commercial airline service took off!

One North Carolinian who proved himself a leader in commercial aviation was Thomas H. Davis of Winston-Salem. Inspired by Lindbergh, Davis earned his pilot's license in 1935 at the age of sixteen. Fourteen years later he launched Piedmont Airlines, one of twenty-three regional, or feeder, airlines established in the 1930s and 1940s. Piedmont became North Carolina's most successful home-based passenger airline.

In 1940 Davis bought a struggling aviation company called Camel City Flying Service from Dick Reynolds, son of the founder of R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company. Davis changed the name to Piedmont Aviation but continued operating out of Miller Municipal Airport in Winston-Salem. Instead of offering regularly scheduled passenger flights, the company offered flight instruction and acted as a dealership for Piper Cub airplanes.

Davis's love of aviation and solid business skills made Piedmont Aviation a success. The company began making a profit three years after he purchased it. During World War II, Piedmont Aviation was one of fourteen civilian training centers in the nation to offer flight instruction to military pilots. In 1947 the Civil Aeronautics Board authorized Piedmont to begin passenger, mail, and freight service between the Carolinas and Virginia, and the Ohio Valley. Piedmont's first flight, from Wilmington to Cincinnati, took place on February 20, 1948. In the 1960s Piedmont began flying to Atlanta and New York, two major airport hubs where Piedmont passengers could connect to bigger airlines such as Delta and Eastern.

In 1978 the Airline Deregulation Act was passed. Since 1938 the federal government had regulated how airlines in the United States operated. Deregulation ushered in a new era of competition, with the airlines themselves controlling fares, routes, schedules, and other areas of the industry. By 1980 only six of the original twenty-three regional airlines remained. Piedmont was one of the survivors.

Piedmont took advantage of deregulation by expanding operations and setting up a number of hubs, the first at Charlotte/Douglas Airport. By 1987 Piedmont had 177 aircraft, was transporting twenty-three million passengers per year, and had expanded service to 235 destinations, including London, England. The company's success made it a desirable target for takeover or merger, and in 1989 it merged with USAir.

Davis retired from Piedmont Airlines several years before the merger but maintained an office at the company and remained devoted to the employees until his death. In 1999 *Business North Carolina* magazine named Davis one of the twenty most influential businessmen in North Carolina in the twentieth century.