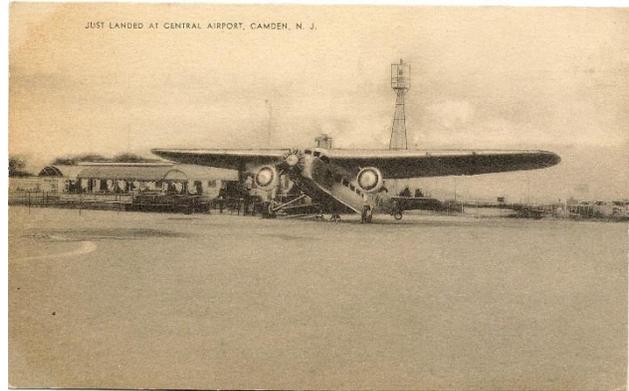


# **A Short History of Camden's Central Airport in Postcards and First Day Covers, 1929 – 1940**

**By Harlan B. Radford, Jr.**

Located just north of the City of Camden, New Jersey, some 200 acres of land was acquired in 1929 and designated for the construction of a modern airport facility for U.S. mail plane and commercial passenger service. The new airport would serve the South Jersey and Greater Philadelphia areas. Popularly known as Camden Central Airport, the airfield opened for operations late in the summer of 1929 and would serve as Philadelphia's major airport for some twelve years until 1940.



Central Airport was actually closer to Philadelphia's main post office than Philadelphia's own airfield. The federal government decided Camden's field was a logical location, since the trip from the New Jersey airport, just across the Delaware River, was only a 12-minute drive to Center City, versus the thirty minutes or more required driving time from the nearest Philadelphia airfield into the city.

Central Airport became one of the most important transport fields in the East, with some 150 arrivals and departures of aircraft daily. The vintage post card image at right illustrates the prominent beacon tower and views of both the waiting rooms and airport hangars, circa 1930.



Boasting four airlines at one point, this modern air terminal facility consisted of steel, brick, and concrete hangars capable of housing 40 airplanes and providing ancillary maintenance. Boundary lights bordered the field, and a million candlepower flood light provided illumination for night landings while a white revolving beacon and a green flashing beacon atop a fifty-foot tower aided navigation. A unique airplane-shaped weather vane mounted on the roof of one of

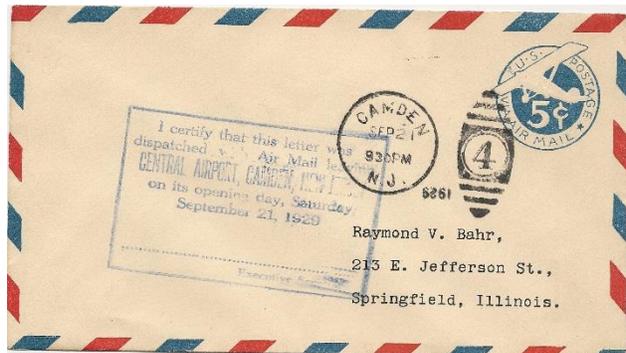
the hangars supplemented by several standard windsocks indicated wind direction on the two unpaved as well as two paved runways.



The post card view depicted at left shows numerous bi-planes and a 32-passenger, multi-engine Fokker F.32 aircraft parked and on display for the large numbers of spectators who were perhaps attending either the official opening day ceremonies or one of the occasional air races held at Central Airport.

Some of Central Airport's most notable events follow in chronological order:

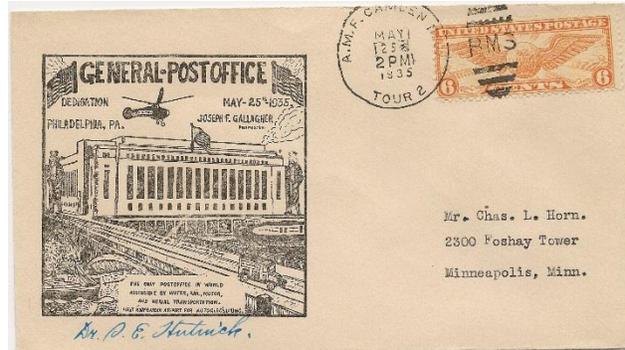
- ➔ Central Airport was designated as an official landing field for U.S. mail planes on August 15, 1929;
- ➔ On August 21, 1929, world famous aviators participated in the dedicatory exercises with some 50,000 eager spectators assembled. Included was Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, noted World War I flying ace, who flew some of the first air mail in and out of Central Airport. He piloted a Fokker tri-motor plane into Central Airport on opening day.



The airmail cover illustrated at right shows a boxed cachet imprint in blue ink stating, "I certify this letter was dispatched via Air Mail leaving CENTRAL AIRPORT, CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY, on its opening day, Saturday, September 21, 1929." The cachet is unsigned but provides space for the signature of the Executive Secretary;

- ➔ Amelia Earhart, famous aviatrix, visited the Central Airport in 1931;
- ➔ Colonel Charles A. Lindbergh and his wife visited the Camden Airport in 1933 while on a 2,700 mile inspection tour for Transcontinental and Western Airways;

→ On May 25, 1935, an experimental autogiro air mail delivery service was tested linking Camden's Airport with Philadelphia's newly opened General Post Office (see illustration of commemorative envelope at right);



→ “Wrong Way” Doug Corrigan landed at Central Airport on August 9, 1938.

Yet another notable and much heralded event occurred in 1939, which would distinguish Central Airport even more. Although experiments had previously been conducted between the two cities, July 6, 1939 saw the inauguration of daily autogiro airmail shuttle service linking Central Airport in New Jersey and the roof of the new General Post Office in Philadelphia at Thirtieth, between Market and Chestnut Streets. This was the first autogiro mail service in the United States and would become known as the “world’s shortest air mail route!” John M. Miller would be the pilot of record flying philatelic mail on this new rotary-wing aircraft service (see illustration of commemorative envelope at left).



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Before long, the introduction of larger airplanes such as the Douglas DC-3 would require longer runways than those at Camden. Since there was no more land for runway expansion to accommodate such larger aircraft at Central, an altogether new and expanded Philadelphia Municipal Airport officially opened on Hog Island, just south of the Quaker City on June 19, 1940 (see illustration of commemorative envelope at right).



The four airlines serving Philadelphia through Central Airport immediately thereafter ended their operations at the then obsolete Camden field and transferred their operations across the Delaware River. The Camden Air Mail Field (AMF) postal facility closed and officially discontinued transport of airmail June 20, 1940, when a new AMF opened at the much larger Philadelphia Airport location. As a result, the innovative and recently instituted autogiro mail shuttle

service between Camden and Philadelphia ceased. These cascading developments now sealed the fate and future of Camden's Airport as business considerably declined.

For a period during World War II, the U.S. Navy Department used Camden Central Airport to train cadets from 1942 to 1946. Private aircraft operations halted at Central Airport sometime in the mid-1950s. Finally, the Camden Airport property was subsequently sold and re-developed as an industrial park, thus ending another interesting chapter in U.S. aviation history and associated airmail fields.

If you care to know more about the Camden Central Airport and the autogiro airmail service check out the following links:

YouTube has an amazing 6min: 31sec video taken from vintage 16 mm color movie film showing Captain John Miller piloting the Eastern Air Lines Kellett KD-1B autogiro as he ferries mail between the Philadelphia Post Office roof and Camden's Central Airport in 1939. See "[The First Air Mail Flight from the roof of 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station in Philadelphia PA to NJ](#)" and read about how this truly historic film footage survived.

Autogiro pilot John McDonald Miller decided at the age of four that he wanted to be a pilot. The pioneering aviator passed away in 2008, at the age of 102. Find out more about this remarkable flier whose career included test pilot, air show dogfighter, transport pilot, barnstormer, airline pilot, and transcontinental flight record-holder at the [Davis-Monthan Airfield Register Web site](#).

Part of Phil Cohen's encyclopedic website on [Camden](#), his section on [Camden Central Airport & the Airport Circle](#) also explains what happened to the area in the aftermath of the airport's demise.

If you have any postcards, commemorative covers, photos, or ephemera that you can contribute to help further illustrate this topic, please contact the Historical Society of Riverton at [rivertonhistory@usa.com](mailto:rivertonhistory@usa.com)