

Commemorating The Main Line Airport

Remembering 50 Years of Local Aviation

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“The living owe it to those who no longer can speak to tell their story for them.”

— Czesław Miłosz, *The Issa Valley*

Background of the Main Line Airport

In 2002, I became a member of a then-small organization known as the Tredyffrin Easttown History Club. Its president, Mr. Herb Fry, told me that, typically, new members would conduct a research project on some local subject, and then present their findings to the membership. He suggested that I do the same, and I was agreeable, but asked for ideas as to a suitable topic. Herb immediately responded, “Knowing how much you love aviation, why not dig into the Main Line Airport—it’s a story that’s never been told.” I stared at him. I’d never even heard of this place.

But Herb provided more details, and the project intrigued me. My investigative hunt became addictive, and would continue as a passion for the next decade and a half.¹ Because no one had previously codified the history and contributions of this aviation center, which existed from the 1920s into the 1970s, I had to conduct far more time-intensive primary research as the means of retrieving and presenting this story, rather than easier and quicker secondary research. Oral histories collected from former aviators at the field, or from the families and acquaintances of deceased pilots, began to expand my understanding of the significant national reputation created in the Great Valley of Chester County, with regard to both fixed and rotary-wing aviation.

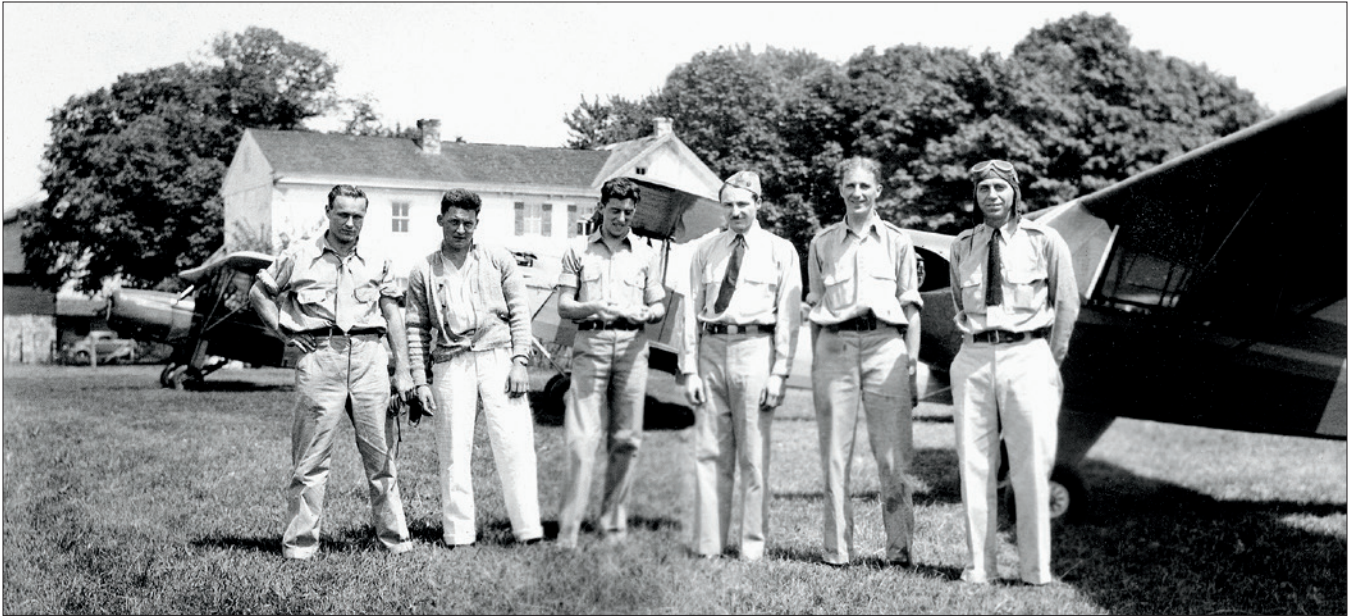
I learned that, in 1920, soon after World War I, the 80-acre dairy farm called “Twin Brook” was owned by William Devaney. His son Charles, a young master mechanic, purchased from the government a war surplus Army flight trainer called a “Jenny,” still in its crate, and constructed the plane in his father’s barn. Once assembled, Charles single-handedly taught himself to fly, a rather risky affair, taking off and landing from his dad’s pastures and thus becoming the first in Chester County to own and fly an aircraft. The Devaney farm became one of Pennsylvania’s earliest country airfields, and was soon a magnet for aviators from across southeast Pennsylvania.

But changes were in the wind. In 1929, a brilliant inventor from Merion, Pa. named E. Burke Wilford bought the Devaney farm and aggressively re-titled the land as the “Philadelphia-Main Line Airport.” Wilford had embarked on a quest to develop a “Gyrocopter,” his version of a predecessor to the helicopter. During Wilford’s three-year development stint in the Great Valley, he created the world’s first rigid rotor gyroplane, and his revolutionary advancements in rotary-wing stability and control were incorporated into the world’s first successful helicopter a decade later—by an aeronautical genius named Arthur Young, living directly across Swedesford Road from the airport.



In December 1930, E. Burke Wilford began ground testing a strange-looking twin-propeller, single-seat, open-cockpit ship called “Configuration No. 1.” Discovering that his four overhead rotating blades were an insufficient substitute for wings, Wilford added wing panels to his “Configuration No. 2,” and on August 5, 1931 that ship completed its maiden flight, becoming the world’s first rigid (or hingeless) rotor gyroplane with cyclic pitch variation. These pioneering developments would have a world-wide influence on rotary-wing flight. *Courtesy of American Helicopter Museum.*

1 Each of my articles on the diverse history of the Main Line Airport first appeared in the *Tredyffrin Easttown History Quarterly*, including: “A History of the Main Line Airport, Paoli, Pennsylvania,” Vol. 40, No. 2 (April 2003); “The Story of Two Main Line Aviators: Matthew Corbin and Charles Anderson,” Vol. 42, No. 1 (Winter 2005); “The Ryan Connection: The Relationship Between the Main Line Airport, Paoli, Pennsylvania, and the Ryan Aeronautical Corporation, San Diego,” Vol. 44, No. 3 (Summer 2007); and “Convergence: A Near-Catastrophe over the Main Line Airport, June 25, 1939,” Vol. 53, No. 4 (June 2017).



Within weeks of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, a Civil Air Patrol (CAP) squadron formed at the Main Line Airport. The CAP had been created on December 1, 1941, and volunteer pilots and mechanics were actively recruited for national defense. For the first year-and-a-half of World War II, the Main Line Airport served as a crucial logistics center supporting Coastal Patrol bases, as the Civil Air Patrol helped America's military spot marauding German submarines along the mid-Atlantic coast. Pennsylvania Squadron 13 (the "Paoli Squadron") also provided flight crews to Coastal Patrol squadrons as far away as Virginia. In this image, taken in the summer of 1942, with the farmhouse/flight operations center of the Main Line Airport in the background, six members of Squadron 13 of the CAP stand ready to carry out their duty. Deputy Squadron Commander Lt. Harvey Berry stands on the right. *Courtesy of Joseph Berry.*

From the 1920s into the early 1950s, the Main Line Airport served as a well-known flight training center for hundreds of aspiring pilots from around the mid-Atlantic states. And in 1940, with the specter of a world at war, some 75 young men from Villanova College and West Chester State Teachers College earned their flight certificates at the Main Line Airport under the aegis of the "Civilian Pilot Training Program," a government course intended to prepare future military pilots if and when America went to war.

Within weeks of the attack on Pearl Harbor, and with America's military not yet prepared for the ceaseless attacks by marauding German U-boats against freighters and tankers along our Atlantic coastline, a Civil Air Patrol squadron was established at the Main Line Airport. Joined by other squadrons, these civilian volunteers provided

desperately needed pilots, mechanics and logistical support to help defeat this scourge. Pennsylvania Squadron 13, the "Paoli Squadron," performed its mission well, but sadly its vital contributions to our nation's defense during 1942-3 were largely forgotten.

Civilian aviation, suspended during World War II, once again surged at war's end as men and women eagerly sought flight instruction at the Main Line Airport. One of those trainees was a teenager from St. David's who would accept any odd job that needed to be done at the field in exchange for a flying lesson. Veteran flight instructor Nicholas "Nick" Morris took the kid under his wing, and thus "Pete" Conrad—who in 1969, as Commander of the Apollo 12 mission, became the third man in history to walk on the moon—learned to fly at the Main Line Airport.



(LEFT) Nick Morris and Charlie Devaney proudly posing with their Ryan STA at the Main Line Airport in April 1937.

(RIGHT) Charles ("Pete") Conrad, a bright kid who loved aircraft and engines, came to the airfield in 1946 and learned to fly from instructor Nick Morris. They remained friends until Nick's death in 1991.

In 1952, Bethlehem Steel purchased the airport property with the intent of eventually creating a massive limestone quarry. They agreed, however, to temporarily lease the empty buildings and hangars to a gifted aeronautical designer named Haig Kurkjian. Haig's dream was to develop and market a small, personal helicopter, and during the 1950s and '60s he designed the world's first helicopter to have all controls in a single wheel. Kurkjian's innovative rotary-wing creations have contributed to the helicopter as we know it today. No limestone quarry was ever dug, and when aviation finally ceased in the Valley in 1978, it opened the way for expansion of the Great Valley Corporate Center. Nothing remains today of the Main Line Airport —except the memories.

Remembering The Main Line Airport

It had long been my strongly-held belief that the Main Line Airport (MLA), and its many contributions to aviation history, should be remembered in a tangible way. Increasingly, my belief was shared by many others. Yet obstacles placed in our way were significant. An earlier request for a commemorative plaque made within the Great Valley Corporate Center was rejected for purely commercial reasons. But what became a more troubling conundrum began in November 2016 when I made formal application to the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC) for approval of an official historical marker commemorating the MLA. Unfortunately, despite the substantial documentation I provided, five months later I was informed that our application had been rejected. The stated reason: the PHMC marker committee's opinion that the old airport lacked adequate historical significance.

The PHMC rejection was surprising, even shocking, and greatly disappointing to all concerned. However, many individuals and groups, including: State Senator Andrew E. Dinniman; the East Whiteland Board of Supervisors and its Township Manager John Nagel; Tim Caban, the Chair of the East Whiteland Historical Commission; and several fellow members of the Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society, felt strongly that the PHMC had made a mistake, and urged me not to abandon the project, but rather to pursue placement of an historical marker without the involvement of the PHMC. The positive energy from this supportive group would lead to a "workaround" whereby a partnership of local government, the private sector, and not-for-profit organizations would create a commemorative event at least



On a frigid morning in January 1958, with the Holland farm in Tredyffrin Township in the distance, Haig Kurkjian pilots his HK-1 to demonstrate the ship's reliability and flight characteristics to a group of potential investors. Kurkjian had successfully created the world's first helicopter to have all the controls in a "steering wheel," enabling the pilot to move up, down, turn, hover, all by means of a single control wheel. It was also the first helicopter to utilize a multi-vee belt drive for both main and tail rotors. Regrettably, Haig-K was unable to raise sufficient capital to certify his ship, and for these financial reasons the aircraft was never produced commercially. *Courtesy of Daniel Kurkjian.*

as powerful as any traditional PHMC marker ceremony, and free of the rigid constraints imposed by official protocol and bureaucracy.

We wanted to place our historical marker close to the middle of the site where the old airport had stood, and which today, within the Great Valley Corporate Center, is owned by Ricoh USA, Inc., the American division of the Ricoh Company, Ltd., a huge Japanese multinational imaging and electronics company. I began working with Emanuel Ball, Ricoh's property manager in Malvern, who I found to be enthusiastic and highly supportive of this initiative, and a joy to work with. The exact placement of the two-sided marker was to be on the west side of

Valley Stream Parkway, within East Whiteland Township’s adjacent right-of-way, and approximately 150’ north of Swedesford Road. The township agreed to handle all permits and zoning issues pertaining to our marker, and their Department of Public Works, under the leadership of Bill Steele, committed to handle its actual installation, all *pro bono*. Further, the East Whiteland Board of Supervisors voted to provide the first financial contribution to our marker fund. The Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society quickly matched that gift.

I contacted Lake Shore Industries (LSI) of Erie, PA, a well-established manufacturer of roadside markers who had worked with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for many decades. With much guidance from LSI, I placed the order for the heavy cast aluminum marker and its 10’ break-away post as mandated by the township, with a dark blue background and gold letters and border. Each marker is “hand-made,” and so the turn-around time for this marker, from order placement to delivery at the East Whiteland Township Complex, was estimated at about two months. Based upon that scheduling, plans for an early October dedication were begun.

The cost of the marker, the creation of promotional materials and many large photographs of the old airport for display, along with rental equipment required for the ceremony, required a budget of several thousand dollars. An appeal for funds was immediately sent out, especially targeting those for whom the recognition of the Main Line Airport was a long-awaited celebration. In no time, sufficient tax-deductible gifts were received, and our budget was covered completely thanks to the generosity of the following:

- Dorothy Devaney
- Richard Devaney
- William Devaney
- East Whiteland Township Board of Supervisors
- Jacques C. Guequierre
- William Keltz
- Dan Kurkjian
- Thomas Kurkjian
- Richard Kurtz
- Eric Lorgus
- Tony Morris
- Michael Morrison
- Virginia Devaney Somers
- John & Penny Stanger
- Roger & Carol Thorne
- Tredyffrin Easttown Historical Society
- Meg Wiederseim
- Priscilla Wellford

In addition, our good neighbor Ricoh USA, Inc. generously provided light food and beverages for the event, and permitted its spacious outdoor patio as the venue for a post-ceremony reception.

Especially during the final two weeks before the ceremony, a Planning Committee—comprising TEHS members President John O. Senior, Treasurer Tim Lander, Board member Michael Morrison, Patron member Meg Wiederseim, and Vice-President and Board chair Roger Thorne—coordinated all the myriad details that differentiate a “great” event from a merely “good” function. Meg was brilliant as our Social Media “guru,” harmonizing the job of “getting the word out” with the media directors for State Senator Andrew E. Dinniman, the Chester County Board of Commissioners, East Whiteland Township, the Pennsylvania Wing of the Civil Air Patrol, and the American Helicopter Museum. John Senior and his wife Nancy Kimmons personally created a unique cover designed to securely conceal the freshly-planted marker until the unveiling, yet would fall away flawlessly at the proper moment. They succeeded so well.

Early on Tuesday morning, October 3, 2017, an East Whiteland Public Works crew arrived at the commemoration site and skillfully installed the marker and pole in preparation for the ceremony in just two days’ time. An array of other details were attended to, and then, with “fingers crossed” for fair weather, all was in readiness.



An East Whiteland Township Public Works crew works to install the new marker at the commemoration site on Valley Stream Parkway in preparation for the dedication ceremony to be held two days later, on October 5, 2017. *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne.*

[Continue to Part 2](#)