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## Windham Airport and Willimantic's First Air Mail Flight

Windham's first ever Air Mail flight takes off from the unfinished Windham Airport on May 19, 1938.  
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF MRS. W. BARDEN.



I'd like to dedicate this article to the memory of Dave Philips, who died earlier this month. For a retired English professor, Dave had a wonderful sense of history! He was a passionate advocate of Windham, and his contribution to its history and heritage will be preserved in the new bridge

shortly to be built in Willimantic. We had worked together on several projects over the years, and Dave had long been an advocate and supporter of the Windham Textile & History Museum. But his eternal legacy is the book, *Legendary Connecticut*. Bon Voyage Dave, it was an honor to know you and work with you.

Probably one of the most pleasant summer walks in the region is atop the Mansfield Hollow Dam. Walkers get a wonderful view of the surrounding countryside, and of Windham Airport. The Dam was controversially built after World War Two, but the airport is a little older. It celebrates its 60th birthday this year, being completed in December 1938. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), a New Deal organization, which gave much needed work to many local unemployed men, provided the labor to build the airport, which has been the scene of two momentous events: Windham's first airmail flight took place there in 1938, and in 1946 the stars literally fell out of the sky. This week and next, we'll take a brief look at the history of Windham airport, and that famous airmail flight. Air Mail Service first came to Windham on Thursday, May 19, 1938, to celebrate National Air Mail Week. Construction of the airport had not been completed, but one runway was ready so it was decided to utilize, "the public airport at Phelps Crossing" to carry the mail of 28 towns in northeastern Connecticut for the first time by air. The town of Windham purchased the 250 acres land on which Windham airport is located in 1923, from George Kirby of Mansfield. Willimantic City engineer John Collins was instrumental in the development of the airport, working closely with the WPA airport engineer, Charles Nott, and three New Deal Federal agencies; the Connecticut Works Administration, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administration. The town of Windham provided \$1,500 for the project which officially commenced in January 1934, and the New Deal organizations provided more than \$75,000 to build two landing strips, one projected to be 2,300 feet by 300 feet, and one 1,700 feet by 300 feet. However, the New Deal agencies, notorious for their bureaucracy, did not release the monies until December 1937. Within a week,

more than 150 CCC workers were on the job.

The entire airport project cost almost \$140,000 to complete. The area was cleared of trees and brush, and three runways were subsequently built, two measuring 3,000 by 500 feet, and a smaller one. On completion, the Westinghouse Company were asked to supply \$6,500 worth of beacons, marker lights, wind indicating apparatus, apron floodlights and a control panel. But this lighting scheme was abandoned. The first lighting system was not installed until 1955.

Wartime requirements led to Windham airport being expanded in 1942/43, and almost \$700,000 was spent to upgrade the runways, and landscape the area. In 1946 a transatlantic Constellation airliner carrying Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, crash-landed at Windham Airport. The following year Alfred Card inaugurated Card Flying Services at the airport, and built a large hangar. The town of Windham financed another hangar, and Card was appointed airport manager in 1951. A post he held until his 1966 death.

The airport's facilities were upgraded in 1954/55. Lights were installed, the runways were resurfaced, taxiways were installed, and ramps were constructed in front of the hangars. Red warning lights were affixed atop the telephone poles on route 6, and on the Mansfield Hollow Dam, which had been completed in 1951.

Next week - Windham's First Flight.