

# FLYING HIGH

Ithaca's airport sees a major overhaul—the latest upgrade to a facility originally built by Cornell

By Beth Saulnier

A half-century after Mike Hall '68 saw his career in aviation take flight on East Hill, it came in for a gentle landing on roughly the exact spot where it began. A member of Air Force ROTC as an undergrad, Hall learned to fly at the Tompkins County Airport—located off Warren Road about four miles from central campus—and earned his private pilot's license his senior year. After graduation, he went on to a distinguished military career—serving as a fighter wing commander during the First Gulf War and rising to the rank of major general—before retiring in 1995 and opening a leadership consulting business. Since 2014, he's been the manager of what's now known as the Ithaca Tompkins International Airport—overseeing a dramatic transformation of the very place where he first took wing.

This winter, the airport completed a \$37 million renovation and expansion that not only increased its capacity and added a host of amenities long lacking at the passenger gates—including a cafe and bar, a lactation room, and a pet relief area—but earned it a designation as a facility capable of accepting international travelers. With some 108,000 people flying out of Ithaca annually, Hall says, it's the busiest small airport in Upstate New York. "Right now," he says, "every flight is leaving Ithaca full." He notes that with about 7,000 feet of runway—longer than Midway in Chicago or John Wayne in California's Orange County—"the airport is capable of taking any size aircraft that this market would support," including airliners that can fly cross-country. "You'd

'You'd be surprised how even the demand is throughout the year,' says airport manager Mike Hall '68. 'It's not just about students, it's about faculty, it's about conferences.'

be surprised how even the demand is throughout the year," Hall observes. "It's not just about students, it's about faculty, it's about conferences. As soon as the students leave in May, the sports camps pop up."

For many Cornellians, the airport is their gateway to campus. While earlier generations of students—many of whom hailed from the Northeast—may have taken the train (which ended service in the early Sixties), these days undergrads and grad students come to East Hill from around the country and the world. Currently, the airport is served by three airlines—American, Delta, and United—that mainly take travelers to and from hubs such as Detroit, Philadelphia, and Dulles in Washington, D.C.; Hall is fond of noting that the airport offers "750 one-stop connections globally." The most frequent domestic destination for travelers flying from Ithaca: San Francisco, not only due to the Bay Area's status as a tech hub relevant to many Cornell faculty and students, but as a connector to the Pacific Rim. If an airline offered a direct flight, Hall says, "we could fill a hundred-seater to San Francisco."

Visitors to the newly renovated airport may be surprised to see that its signage is in English and Mandarin. The rationale, Hall says, is that people from China comprise Tompkins County's largest single group of foreign-born residents. (And according to 2018–19 numbers from Cornell's Office of Global Learning, a significant portion of the University's 5,300 international students—nearly 2,400—come from China.) In terms of international travelers availing themselves of the new customs >

**DEPARTURE LOUNGE:**  
The new terminal features renovated gates and a cafe and bar run by Ithaca Coffee Company.

PHOTO: ROBERT STANTON/STREETER ASSOCIATES



Departures			
Flight	Time	Gate	Airline
101	10:00	101	Delta
102	10:15	102	American
103	10:30	103	United
104	10:45	104	Southwest
105	11:00	105	JetBlue
106	11:15	106	Allegiant
107	11:30	107	Frontier
108	11:45	108	Spirit
109	12:00	109	Allegiant
110	12:15	110	Frontier
111	12:30	111	Spirit
112	12:45	112	Allegiant
113	13:00	113	Frontier
114	13:15	114	Spirit
115	13:30	115	Allegiant
116	13:45	116	Frontier
117	14:00	117	Spirit
118	14:15	118	Allegiant
119	14:30	119	Frontier
120	14:45	120	Spirit

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109	12:00	109	Allegiant
110	12:15	110	Frontier
111	12:30	111	Spirit
112	12:45	112	Allegiant
113	13:00	113	Frontier
114	13:15	114	Spirit
115	13:30	115	Allegiant
116	13:45	116	Frontier
117	14:00	117	Spirit
118	14:15	118	Allegiant
119	14:30	119	Frontier
120	14:45	120	Spirit

Arrivals			
Flight	Time	Gate	Airline
101	10:00	101	Delta
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103	10:30	103	United
104	10:45	104	Southwest
105	11:00	105	JetBlue
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**GAINING ALTITUDE:** Mike Hall (top), the retired Air Force general and Cornell ROTC alum who runs the airport. Bottom: The new exterior by night.

capability, the system is currently set up to handle private planes, though commercial flights—most likely starting with Toronto—could eventually be added. Additionally, Hall says, he's been working with the University to craft a pitch to airlines to offer flights between Ithaca and JFK—not necessarily as a destination but as a global gateway. "You find a lot of people taking a bus to Kennedy," Hall says, "and then getting on an airplane to go half-way around the world."

As Hall points out, the airport and the University have long been intertwined. The current facility traces its roots to a Cornell-owned airport, built in the Forties as an improvement over the city's original one on Cayuga Inlet (now home to the Hangar Theatre). As Morris Bishop 1914, PhD '26, writes in *A History of Cornell*: "[President Edmund Ezra Day] had long been concerned about Ithaca's physical isolation, as Ezra Cornell had been concerned

The author of *A History of Cornell* called the University's purchase of land for an airport on East Hill, 'one of the most fortunate investments in our history.'

years before. The airport in the valley was inadequate and was bounded against expansion by city, lake, and hills. The only place for an airport was the level farmland to the north of the University. But suburban colonists were planting their ranch houses along the roads, and prices were due to rise. The City of Ithaca was eagerly interested, but no mayor could survive a proposal to buy a second airport, outside the city, with taxpayers' money. The only organism free to act was the University."

Trustees authorized the plan in September 1944, and the University bought 1,146 acres for \$202,000—nearly \$3 million in today's funds. As Bishop goes on to note, the purchase was "the most sharply criticized of the [Day] administration's actions in the physical realm" as it led not only to major operating losses but a legal dispute with the local airline. Ultimately, trustees "declined to put another penny in it," and in 1956 the county took it over. "Today, with railroad passenger service to Ithaca ended and with the transfer of the airport to Tompkins County, we must applaud the president's courageous foresight," Bishop writes, going on to call the land purchase "one of the most fortunate investments in our history, ranking not far below Ezra Cornell's assumption of the western pinelands [the Land Grant that helped fund the University's founding]." But, he writes: "At the time, few of the faculty reached any such conclusion. To most of them the purchase of an airport was a monstrous manifestation of presidential caprice. Could not Dr. Day take the sleeper to New York, like anyone else? The president had to defend himself to a hostile faculty meeting, nor did his defense persuade many that he was not wasting our precious funds on a flying chimera."

Travelers coming through the airport in its first half-century may recall an experience out of *Casablanca*: the terminal was modest—more reminiscent of a bus station—and passengers walked out onto the tarmac to board and deplane. A major renovation in 1994 created a larger and more modern facility, with some gates employing jetways (passenger bridges)—but a generation later, Hall says, it was badly in need of an upgrade. "We'd built a new terminal twenty-five years before, and it had run its course," he says, "including straddling the 9/11 event, which radically changed security at airports." For example, there was no space in the back-of-house baggage area to accommodate a screening machine required under post-9/11 regulations—so the metal behemoth was put smack in front of the ticket counter. Among the many advantages of the newly completed terminal, Hall says, is that all airline flights will be accessed by jetways, shielding travelers from Ithaca's famously temperamental weather. "And the bag screening machine," he says, "is now behind the wall."

PHOTOS: THIS PAGE, ROBERT STANTON/STREET ASSOCIATES; OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP, TOMPKINS COUNTY HISTORY CENTER; BOTTOM, PROVIDED

# Up and Away

A sampling of aviation's long history in Ithaca and on the Hill



## Airport on the Inlet

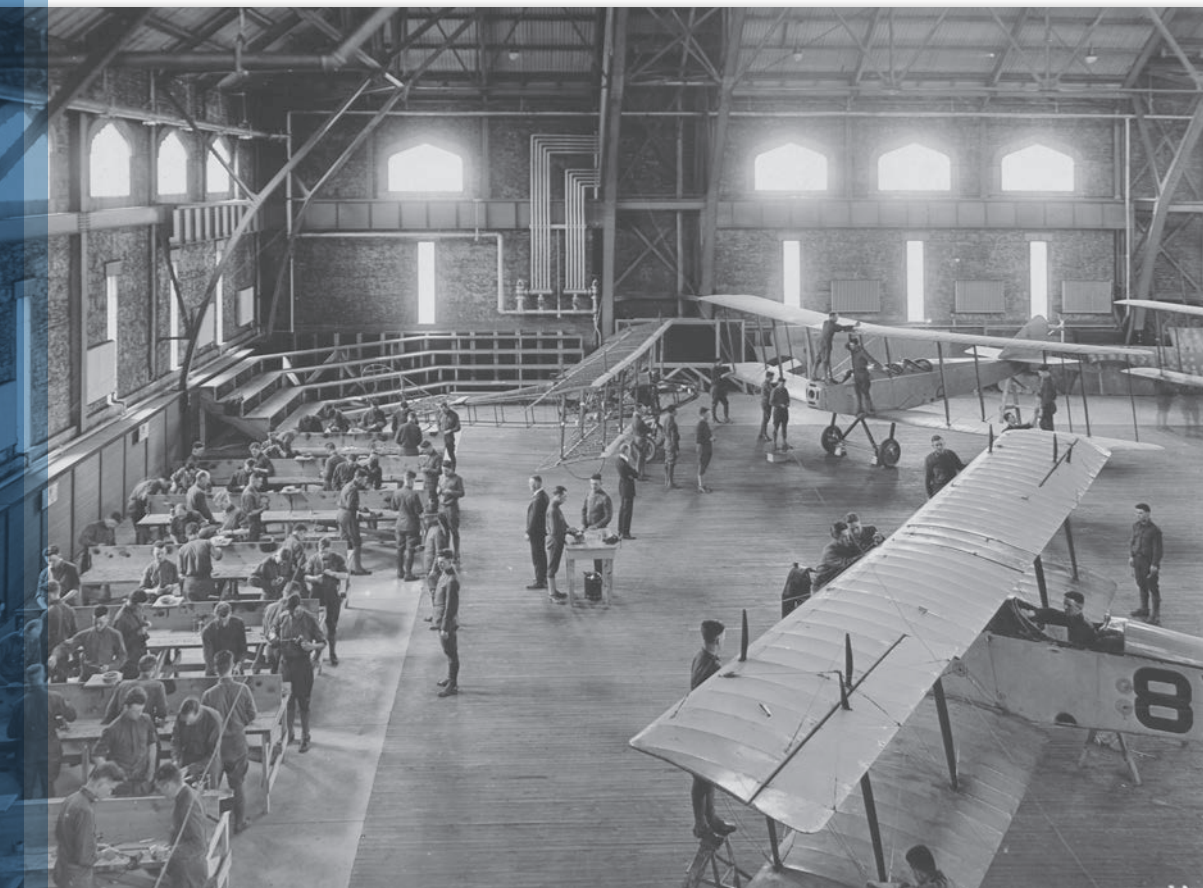
The Hangar Theatre—a venue on Cayuga Inlet that's home to year-round performances as well as a popular Equity summer stock season—comes by its name literally. The facility occupies the site of Ithaca's original municipal airport, opened in 1912 with a single hangar and a landing strip. "During the Depression, a Civil Works Administration project expanded the airport with asphalt runways and a two-story glass, steel, and cinder-block hangar—the foundation of today's theater," the Hangar explains on its website. "Huge crowds attended the September 17, 1934 opening, celebrated with fireworks and parachute jumps."

While the airport was used for the training of more than 4,000 pilots during World War II, its short runways and less-than-ideal location—prone to fog and hemmed in

by the water—made it unwieldy for commercial aviation. "When Cornell opened an airport on the East Hill in 1948, use of the lakeside facility gradually decreased until it closed in July 1966," the theater notes. "The hangar then languished, used for storage of city equipment." The building was renovated into a summer theater in 1975; in 2010, it was winterized to allow for shows in all seasons. And as for the former runways and their environs? They're now home to Cass Park, a city recreation area featuring trails, a swimming pool, and an ice rink. >



**DRAMATIC CHANGE:** Ithaca's original municipal airport on Cayuga Inlet (top) is now home to the Hangar Theatre (above).



**PREPARING FOR BATTLE:** Students and equipment for the U.S. Army School of Military Aeronautics trained in Barton Hall (top and bottom) during World War I.

## The Great War

The vintage photos are striking: during World War I, Barton Hall—then known as Drill Hall—was filled with airplanes. The armory had been transformed into an aviation ground school: the U.S. Army School of Military Aeronautics at Cornell University, one of six such institutions preparing pilots for service. “Cornell’s first class of soon-to-be pilots arrived May 17, 1917,” Elaine Deutsch Engst, MA ’72, the University’s archivist emerita, and a coauthor observed in the *Cornell Chronicle* during the Sesquicentennial celebration. “Buzzers for wireless (radio) practice were installed in the basement of Schoellkopf Hall. The pilots received engine class training in Rand Hall, and physics professor Ernest Blaker, PhD 1901, held classes on flight theory, meteorology, and radio work.”

A precursor to flight training (held elsewhere), the Cornell ground school had about 200 students at any given time; in addition to pilots, it trained aerial photographers, who’d gather intelligence during reconnaissance missions. “For the pilots, final exams required comprehensive and skillful answers,” the *Chronicle* story noted. “In the engines class, students saw questions like,



‘What are the advantages of [a] double ignition system for airplane motors?’ or ‘How many times per second does the interrupter break the primary current of a magneto which is furnishing the ignition for an eight cylinder engine running 1400 rpm?’ or ‘Make a sketch of a two-gear oil pump, showing path of oil and direction of rotation of gears.’ ”

As antique aircraft aficionado Randy Marcus ’82 notes, photographs show that

the students in Barton worked with both the single-seater “Tommy” aircraft—made in Ithaca—and the two-seater “Jenny” planes that accommodated both an instructor and a trainee. The facility, he adds, also provided a state-of-the-art venue for students and faculty interested in the nascent field of aeronautics, which the war had made all the more pressing. “Barton Hall,” he says, “was more or less a living classroom.”

## Join the Club

It was, arguably, the single most memorable event in the history of the Cornell Pilots Club. In March 1948, bad weather—fog, crosswinds, a thunderstorm—forced a small plane carrying four undergrads to make several unplanned landings en route to Ithaca from a conference of collegiate flying clubs in New Haven. “It was pouring rain and lightning,” passenger Janet Armstrong Hamber ’51 recalls of the diceiest segment. “At the time I wasn’t scared, but I realize now that the possibility of us crashing and dying was pretty high.”

The trip was Hamber’s one and only outing with the club—which, she cheerfully admits, she’d only joined because she had a crush on a member. But dozens of other students were enthusiastic participants in the Pilots Club, which was active for about a decade after World War II—drawing a mix of military veterans and civilian aviation buffs. “We had a tremendous hankering to get up there,” says Sabra “Piper” Baker Staley ’51, who was part of the latter group, having earned her private pilot’s license during a gap year after high school. In fact, Staley craved flying so much, she neglected her studies (at least, she says, “that’s what my mother claimed”) and wound up flunking out of mechanical engineering after two years, eventually completing her degree at the University of Maryland.

The Pilots Club wasn’t the first effort of its kind on the Hill; an item in the *Daily Sun* from way back in November 1909 announced the inaugural meeting of the Cornell Aero Club. “If a sufficient number of enthusiastic aviators report this evening,” it said, “communications can at once be opened with New York aeroplanists and a machine procured.” As C.H. Wetzel 1913 observed in the *Cornell Era*, more than 200 students attended that first gathering. Members went on to design and build gliders, launching them “on the hills back of the Ag College.” Wrote Wetzel: “It is the aim and object of the Cornell Aero Club to develop the best gliders the world has ever seen, to train as many men as possible in the use of these gliders, and to put Cornell ahead of all others in the field of intercollegiate aviation.” (A 1939 story in the *Alumni News* noted that despite some early success, interest in gliding “died out in a few years, the members turning to the study of powered flight.”)

An aviation group re-formed after World War I with a different focus, eventually becoming the Cornell Flying Club. As the *Harvard Crimson* reported in November

1918: “Cornell is following the lead of other Eastern universities in the formation of an Aero Club, consisting of all undergraduates who were qualified pilots in the air service of the Allies. . . . The object of the club is to promote interest in aviation by securing the cooperation of men connected with flying, and to secure capital to aid in the commercial and scientific development of the airplane and the dirigible balloon.”

During the post-WWII Pilots Club years, members would generally rent single-engine planes from the old airport on the Inlet, paying \$10 per hour for a craft with an instructor, \$7 without. In 1948, about thirty people chipped in \$30 each to buy a Piper Cub Coupe, which boasted a carnelian red paint job and a cruising speed of 90 mph. “It was fun with friends,” Norm Baker ’49 (no

relation to Staley) reminisced in a 2001 CAM story on the club, “out in the sunlight, with a few cumulous puffs in the sky.”

Among club members, men outnumbered women ten to one; Staley says she was likely

the only female member who was a licensed pilot. She was also on that now-legendary trip from New Haven, along with Hamber, Charles Leavitt ’51, and Lester Davis Jr. ’51, who was at the controls when the weather went south. Among Staley’s other memories from her Pilots Club days:

landing at an Upstate airport where she was guided in not by radio instructions but by a hand-held, color-coded light called a biscuit gun. “They’d aim it at a plane and the pilot would spot it,” Staley explains. “You’d line up at 1,000 feet and wait for a green gun from the tower, and it meant, ‘Come on in.’” ➤

**‘We had a tremendous hankering to get up there,’ says Sabra ‘Piper’ Baker Staley ’51, who already had a pilot’s license when she got to CU.**



**EAGER AVIATORS** (counterclockwise from above): A Pilots Club photo from the late Forties includes Sabra Staley and Norm Baker (in front row on opposite sides of sign); Baker in a Piper Cub; a member of the Aero Club with a glider in 1912.





#### VINTAGE AIRCRAFT:

The Tommy plane during its centennial flight (left) and in production on South Hill

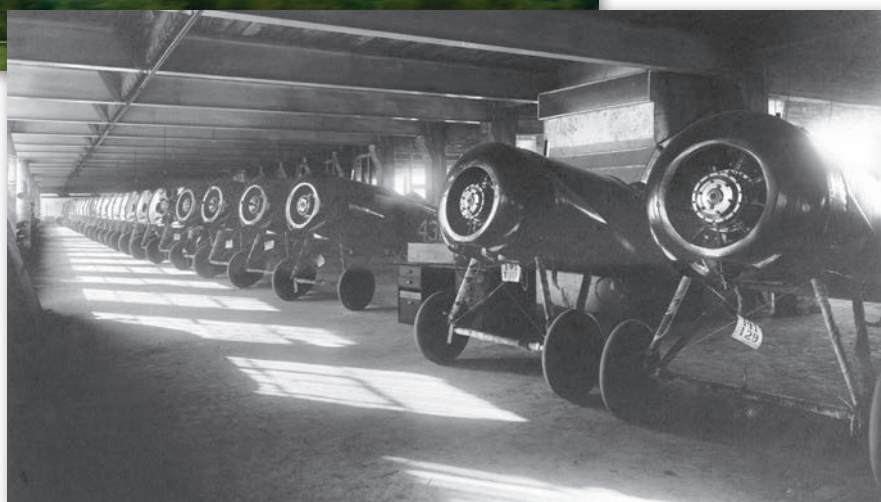
## 'Tommy' Comes Home

On September 29, 2018, a small wooden plane took to the skies over Ithaca, a century after it came off the production line on South Hill. Known as the Thomas-Morse S-4B—"Tommy" for short—the single-seater aircraft was one of about 500 made by a local company as trainers for combat pilots bound for the war in Europe. "Every American pilot who flew in World War I trained on a Tommy," says Marcus, the vintage aviation buff. "Ithaca sent these planes far and wide."

It's a little-remembered fact that, in the early days of aviation, Ithaca was one of the nation's leading centers of aircraft production. The firm that eventually became Thomas-Morse Aviation—which, Marcus says, had no particular connection to Cornell and was lured to Ithaca by local officials eager to capitalize on a new industry—began operations in the city in 1914, in a building along Cayuga Inlet that still bears a sign for the "Thomas Aeroplane Factory." But when it won the U.S.

**'Every American pilot who flew in World War I trained on a Tommy,' says Marcus. 'Ithaca sent these planes far and wide.'**

contract to build the single-seat trainers, it moved up to a new production facility on South Hill. The contract required the company to test-fly every tenth plane that came off the line as government officials observed, so the aircraft would be transported downhill by railcar and launched from



a strip at Ithaca's municipal airport.

After the war, Thomas-Morse won a federal contract to design a next-generation aircraft, but not to build it; that plum went to a small firm in Seattle that was more conveniently located near stands of the Sitka spruce then used to make planes. (That upstart's name? Boeing.) In 1929, Thomas-Morse was taken over and eventually went out of business. For the next couple of decades, the decommissioned Tommy planes were used for activities like barnstorming, aerial acrobatics, and appearances

in movies—including the 1918 silent film *A Romance of the Air*, shot by Ithaca's own Wharton Studios. As of the mid-Aughts—when Marcus, who's an attorney based in Ithaca, and other local aviation fans started working to bring a Tommy back to Ithaca and restore it to flying condition in time for its

centennial—there were only about a dozen still in existence, in varying states of repair.

Happily, news of the quixotic quest reached the owner of one of those rare specimens—factory number 191—who donated it to the nonprofit Ithaca Aviation Heritage Foundation. For nearly a decade, volunteers raised funds and put in thousands of hours of labor to restore it, with some of the work conducted in the very building where it had been manufactured. After its triumphant 2018 flight, the plane became the centerpiece of the new Tompkins Center for History and Culture. "The Tommy represents a spirit of innovation—of course related largely to the University's presence—that has pervaded Ithaca forever," says Marcus. "We felt that symbol would be very compelling to the community—not only to bring awareness of what Ithaca was a hundred-plus years ago, but how that vein has continued to flow, from then through now and into the future."

PHOTOS: THIS PAGE, TOP, LARRY BAUM; BOTTOM, NATIONAL ARCHIVES; OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP, RMC; BOTTOM LEFT, TOMPKINS COUNTY HISTORY CENTER; BOTTOM RIGHT, CORNELL DAILY SUN

## Big Red Bird

It was named, aptly, *The Far Above*. The airplane—a red and white DC-3 capable of carrying twenty-two passengers—was donated to the University in 1957 by trustee Leroy Grumman 1916, founder of Grumman Aerospace (and benefactor of the Engineering college's Grumman Hall). "During its Cornell days, the plane carried high government officials, foreign ambassadors, athletic squads, and special student groups as well as Cornell faculty and staff," said a December 1970 press release from Day Hall announcing that the University was selling the craft due to a decline in usage. As the statement noted, the plane had flown more than 250,000 miles and carried some 30,000 passengers during its Big Red tenure. "Old friends and users of *The Far Above* have been invited to meet at the airport," it said, "to say farewell to the plane."



**WHAT A RIDE:** The University's former plane, a DC-3 called *The Far Above*



**LEGENDARY FLYER:** Amelia Earhart (above) tours the municipal airport during her 1932 visit to Ithaca. Right: The *Daily Sun*'s coverage of her talk in Bailey Hall.

## Aviatrix in Ithaca

Among the countless dignitaries that have graced the Hill over the past century and a half is one of the world's most famous flyers: Amelia Earhart. The legendary aviatrix came to Ithaca in December 1932 for a trip that included a talk on campus (entitled "Flying for Fun") in which she described her recent solo transatlantic flight. "I did it for my own personal satisfaction," she told the crowd in Bailey Hall, as the *Daily Sun* reported the next day. "My flight added little to aviation, as literally hundreds of people have already made the trip by air in airplanes or lighter-than-air craft. But I do hope that it interested women in aviation."

Earhart's brief time in Ithaca also included a tour of the airport, a visit to a facility for disabled children, a stop at the Stewart

Avenue home of Mary Cornell (daughter of Ezra), and a dinner in Willard Straight. In her Bailey lecture—given, as the *Sun* observed, "with the aid of motion pictures"—she expressed high hopes for the future of commercial aviation. "You are safer in the air traveling at the rate of 150 miles per hour," she observed, "than in a car traveling sixty or seventy." ■

