

Guide to the Aviation Collection

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See also:

General Photo Collection – A5- Airport; B10- Aviation; B11- Military Pilot Training
Chamber of Commerce Collection V-10-1-5
Bliss Collection V-1-6-6
“Chuck” Smith Ithaca Aviation Collection V-64-8-7
Morse Chain-Born Warner Collection V-6-5-4
Borg Warner/Morse Collection V-64-1-1
Morse Family Collection V-64-8-1
Thomas Morse/Consolidated Aircraft Photograph Collection FBO-0105

COLLECTION DESCRIPTION

This collection documents the many chapters of local aviation history and its impact on Tompkins County, with particular emphasis on Thomas Brothers Aeroplane Company Inc. and Thomas-Morse Aircraft Corp years (1914-1929).

The story begins in the early 20th century when engineer William T. Thomas emigrated from London to the United States to work on aircraft engines for Glenn Curtiss in Hammondsport, NY. Soon after, his brother Oliver Thomas joined him. Following their successful development of their own biplane, the brothers founded the Thomas Brothers Aeroplane Company Inc. in Bath, NY in 1910, and they were later joined by B. Douglas Thomas, (no relation) who became their chief engineer and designer. In 1914, Ithaca’s Board of Trade invited the brothers to move their plant to Ithaca, close to Cayuga Lake. During World War I, the Thomas Brothers sold their first order of 24 two-seat Thomas T-2 planes to Britain’s Royal Naval Air Service in 1915. That same year they expanded their company to include a flying school, one of the first in the nation. The Thomas Brothers’ success was bolstered when they merged with Morse Chain Company of Ithaca in 1917, becoming Thomas-Morse Aircraft Corp; it was this union that allowed them to expand operations to a larger factory on Ithaca’s South Hill. This was also the year that the company developed the noteworthy S-4C model (also known as the Tommy Scout), used by the US War Dept. for aerobatic training of pilots in preparation for the war. The Tommy Scout's critical role in the war brought the company great fame.

The post-war years marked a transition in design, shifting from Scout and trainer planes to pursuit fighters. Due to a decline in sales, Thomas-Morse Aircraft Corp was sold to Consolidated Aircraft in Buffalo, NY in 1929. Though the Thomas-Morse years span just over a decade, they are foundational to the history and development of aviation in Tompkins County.

During the Depression Era Herbert M Peters, former pilot, local aviation advocate, and later manager of the airport from 1928-1958, spearheaded the reconstruction of the airport and hangar, generating crucial jobs in the county. Though initially used for flight training and aerial photography, the airport shifted its role in the 1940s under the administration of Cornell University, who used it initially for military aircraft research. Also during this time, Tompkins County businesses began to rely heavily on air travel for the movement of people and goods. A traffic study report conducted in 1944 to survey the demand for an airline revealed the United States Postal Service as one of the many interested stakeholders. A year later, Robinson Airlines was founded, which began using the airport in 1948. One of its primary purposes was transporting airmail, hearkening back to Ithaca’s early aviation years when aviator Frank Burnside completed the first airmail flight in United States history, dropping a mail pouch from a Thomas airplane on October 13, 1916. In 1952, Robinson Airlines bought the airport from Cornell and also changed its name to Mohawk Airlines. (The airline records often display its logo, a caricature of an Indigenous man, which is now understood as cultural appropriation.) Ruth Taylor is also an important figure in the airline’s history, as she was one the first Black stewardesses in the country, illustrating the deplorable lack of diversity in the aviation industry at that time.

The legacy of Tompkins County’s aviation history, particularly the Thomas-Morse years, is reflected throughout this collection in retrospective articles and profiles, covering the impact on aviation both nationally and on Tompkins County. It is further illustrated by the newsletters documenting the “Tommy Come Home” effort, wherein a S-4C was reconstructed and now lives at The History Center in Tompkins County as a permanent feature of the exhibition space.

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