Jane Dulaney Hilbert: Aviator of the Tri-Cities

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by

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Dora Jean Rushing
Woman’s place is in the home, but failing that the aerodrome.

- Lady Mary Heath
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Introduction

‘I’m looking for a job. Do you know of any good secretarial work that is open?’ A well-known woman flyer was speaking. Her name had made front page news. And as she asked that question, Betty slide the door of the hangar at Roosevelt Field. She locked behind those doors her plane and her profession and earnestly discussed the everyday matter of earning a living.

- *New York Woman*, March 1937

The Joseph Louis and Jane Dulaney Hilbert Papers preserved in the Archives of Appalachia contains flight logs, diaries, correspondence, newspaper and magazine materials, photographs, and film that document the Hilberts’ personal and professional lives as pilots and operators of the Appalachian Flying Service. The Hilbert Papers were donated to the archives between 1982 and 2004. ¹ Originally, Louis and Jane’s materials consisted of separate collections but were later combined. According to the online collection notes,

Jane Dulaney Hilbert donated photographic negatives, contact prints, and slides, as well as a 1936 aeronautic map of Tennessee, on June 30, 1982. Lewis Dulaney, brother of Jane Dulaney Hilbert, donated additional Hilbert materials on July 15, 2004. Part of the Jane Dulaney Hilbert donation was stored in the Appalachian Photographic Archives. In 1991, it was processed as a separate collection by Marie Tedesco. In 2005, Timothy Vasser processed the Lewis Dulaney donation and wrote a finding aid for the collection. The two donations were combined in 2006.²

This writer believes that the combination did not obscure Jane’s accomplishments. Furthermore, her story as a pilot and instructor intertwines with her husband’s. Placing the two in the same collection provides essential context.

Hilbert’s everyday experiences as pilot and manager can be studied in light of the movement in historical study towards an emphasis on the lives of everyday people, especially women. D. Jean Rushing argues that archival theory has followed suit, as “when the curtain rose on the stage of postmodern archiving in the late 1990s, everyday life became fodder for archival

memory as archivists began moving the documentation of ordinary, everyday experiences of women…from the wings of the theater onto center stage.” ³ In Catherine Hobbs’ view, archives have shifted from solely preserving and making available officially created documents to exploring the possibilities offered by personal archival collections accumulated during a person’s life.

Catherine Hobbs advocates that archivists pay greater attention to personal archives, because they “contain the personal view of life’s experiences; they represent a departure from the collective formality and systemic organization found in other types of records. There is an intimacy in the personal archive not present in the collective, corporate, formalized record-keeping system.” ⁴ These personal records preserve information invisible or nonexistent within more official documents. They contain clues about character and temperament. Hobbs observes that personal archives reflect not only what a person does or thinks, but who they are, how they envision and experience their lives. An individual creates records to serve his or her needs or predilections or personality, not because some law, statute, regulation, or corporate policy says so. Of course, there are exceptions, like personal income tax forms and so on, but these records reflect the individual’s public persona and official interactions, not his or her inner soul and private personality. ⁵

Jane Dulaney Hilbert forged her own career path despite traditional boundaries between men and women’s work evident in the aviation industry and thus her personal papers deserve a greater degree of recognition through an exhibit in cooperation with the Archives of Appalachia.

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³ D. Jean Rushing, “‘A Drop of Red Ink’: Creating the Archival Memory of Aubry Faulkner Jennings from Her Ordinary Personal Papers” (culminating project research paper, East Tennessee State University, 2016), 3.
⁵ Ibid., 128.
A Different View of Appalachian Women

This Appalachian woman’s life as an educated, professional woman working in a brand-new industry during the early decades of the twentieth-century demonstrates that the region was not isolated from the rest of the nation. Not all women in Appalachia were rural farm women; Jane Dulaney hailed from a middle-class background in Northeast Tennessee. Douglas Reichert Powell in his work *Critical Regionalism: Connecting Politics and Culture in the American Landscape* articulates this different view of Appalachia through the lens of regionalism that contradicts much Appalachian Studies scholarship promoting the region as exceptional from the rest of the United States. For instance, Henry Shapiro writes about how outsiders grew to think of Appalachia as a distinct entity. He explains, “Between 1870 and 1900, it became clear to a number of persons that the existence of a strange land and peculiar people in the southern mountains could not be understood in terms of contemporary conceptions of America as a unified and homogeneous national entity.” Scholars of Appalachia described its culture as distinct from the other parts of the country. Writing in 1978, Shapiro speculates that the study of Appalachia should turn away from its conception of the region as strange or isolated. Instead, he suggests

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6 Bristol is in Sullivan County, Tennessee, but has a sister city across the border in Washington County, Virginia. For this paper the term Northeast Tennessee will be used to refer to the region in which Hilbert lived and worked. In the past, the region has been referred to as Upper East Tennessee. It includes Carter, Greene, Hancock, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi and Washington counties.

mountain culture which, if revived among the mountaineers and acknowledged by outsiders, will provide the “Appalachians” with the desirable status of a distinct population in the pluralist American nation. And we have now the opportunity to ask under what circumstances a definition of Appalachia as a strange land inhabited by a peculiar people proves useful in the present, and how, and by whom.\(^8\)

This paper seeks to study Jane Dulaney Hilbert’s career using Shapiro’s suggestion that Appalachia’s isolated otherness can be set aside. She learned to fly in a prosperous city connected to the rest of the nation by rail and airline networks. Her existence as a pilot, trained at a local airport, demonstrates that the region was integrated rather than isolated from the rest of the country. Douglas Reichert Powell’s work reflects this paper’s conception of the Appalachian region as more complex than it has been perceived in previous scholarship. Powell also agrees that a new approach is necessary when he writes that “Regionalism, despite traditionally being used to describe, define, and isolate networks of places and spaces, can provide a rhetorical basis for making claims about how spaces and places are connected to spatially and conceptually broader patterns of meaning.”\(^9\)

Furthermore, an exploration of her career adds to the literature on Appalachian women’s experiences. In their collection of essays entitled *Women of the Mountain South: Identity, Work, and Activism*, Connie Park Rice and Marie Tedesco encourage scholars to diversify the study of Appalachian women. Rice writes in the introduction that “the history of women in the Mountain South is as rich and varied as its people and its regions. Although many women suffered the limitations imposed on them by those who accepted a patriarchal construction of gender, many refused to be constrained and directed their own life experiences, which varied and changed

\(^8\) Ibid., xviii-xix.

according to the social, economic, and political conditions of time and place.” 10 Many women of all classes in the region sought more economic freedom.

Mary Anglin observes that “It is primarily as miners' wives and members of farm households that Appalachian women are known” but the female workforce including Jane Dulaney, participated in diverse occupations.11 For example, some women in Jane Dulaney’s region left farm work for employment in factories to earn steady wages. Northeast Tennessee and neighboring Western North Carolina attracted a host of textile factories that employed women regularly. The factory represented an escape from traditional demarcations of women’s work that tied them to home and land. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall notes that most of these factory workers, many of whom were employed in textile plants dotting the Appalachian region, were young women who “struck out for their own place in a changing world.” 12 However, they met with hardship caused by low pay, oppressive working conditions, stretch out and speed up, and long work hours. Their drive to improve the system culminated in a series of strikes during the 1920s in Elizabethton, Tennessee and across the Blue Ridge Mountains to Gastonia, Marion, and Danville, Virginia among others. 13

Other women living in Appalachia poured their energy into reform movements. Deborah Lynn Blackwell women such as “May Stone of Hindman Settlement School, Katherine Pettit of Hindman and Pine Mountain Settlement Schools, Eleanor Marsh Frost of Berea College, Olive Dame Campbell of the John C. Campbell Folk School, and Mary Breckinridge of the Frontier

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13 Ibid.
Nursing Service” as prominent figures working to better the lives of the residents of the region. These wealthier women used their skills to further their philanthropic interests. Jane Dulaney Hilbert found a vocational calling in the field of aviation. Her unusual choice of career coincides with the continued development of the middle class in Northeast Tennessee.

Apart from a significant section in Jim Fulbright’s *The Aviation History of Tennessee* (1996) and a brief mention in the Washington County Historical Association’s *History of Washington County Tennessee* (2001), Jane Dulaney Hilbert does not specifically appear in the scholarly literature. Most writers have addressed those female pilots who garnered great acclaim on the national or international stage. Hilbert’s career, mostly spent in Northeastern Tennessee and Southwestern Virginia, nevertheless reflects global currents of change as women demanded entry into the aviation profession. Apart from local histories and several magazine and newspaper interviews given from the 1930s through the early 1980s, the collection at the Archives of Appalachia remains the primary source of information about Jane Dulaney Hilbert’s professional life.

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16 Box 11, Hilbert Papers.
Early Life

On March 16, 1911, Jane Dulaney Hilbert was born in Bristol, Tennessee, to Fred and Grace Hayes Dulaney. The Dulaney family was prosperous; *Moody’s Manual of Railroads and Corporation Securities*, an index of United States industrial firms published in 1913, lists Fred Dulaney as Vice President and General Manager of the Bristol Traction Company. Judging from subsequent census data, Fred Dulaney’s business interests were adversely affected by the Great Depression. The 1930 U.S. Census lists his occupation as a coal operator. Ten years later, the U.S. Census lists his occupation as a highway foreman. One can only speculate if her father’s financial situation urged Jane Dulaney to find a gainful occupation. Jane Dulaney spent her childhood in Bristol, attended public elementary school, and graduated from Bristol High School in 1928. In 1930, she received a two-year diploma from Arlington Hall College in Clarendon, Virginia.

As a young girl, Dulaney must have been aware of the fascination with aviation developing in her hometown of Bristol. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Northeast Tennessee hosted air meets where fliers would exhibit their skills. Subsequently, aviation in the state accelerated rapidly after the end of World War One. Numbers of ex-military pilots and the availability of reasonably priced aircraft combined to create an atmosphere of innovation.

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According to Jim Fulbright, “this flying activity meant Tennessee’s rural population began seeing and riding in airplanes more frequently. In the cities, meanwhile, airfields were being developed to service an increasing number of aircraft. Aviation was in transition. More people were being exposed to it; more were taking part in it.” Appalachian Tennessee also took part in this activity. Dulaney grew up in this atmosphere of excitement about the possibilities of flight.

Jane Dulaney Hilbert joined the workforce as the era of the barnstormers from the 1910s through the early 1920s waned and Tennesseans established commercial aviation ventures despite the Great Depression. Male pilots and their business partners established airfields across the state. In the Tri-Cities area, three airports sprang into existence. From 1917 until the early 1930s, the city of Kingsport maintained a clear field north of town and Johnson City a small landing strip on the St. John family’s land. Hilbert learned to fly at Bristol Airport in Bristol, Virginia, the most well-established facility at the time.

In 1923, local newspaper owner Charles J. Harkrader and a business partner established the Bristol Airport. It consisted of “two grass runways and a metal hangar” that serviced about ten aircraft. In a 1981 interview cited in The Aviation History of Tennessee, Jane Dulaney Hilbert recalled the sparseness of the set-up. She noted that “the only other accommodation . . . was a wooden water trough near the hangar so that people working on their planes could at least

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23 Fulbright, 15.
24 Ibid., 25. Johnson City Airport is now a general aviation facility located in Watauga, Tennessee.
26 Fulbright, 25.
wash their hands.” 27 Despite its barely adequate facilities, the Bristol Airport stood as one of the more well-established airports in the area.

The Bristol Airport prospered in the climate of increased interest from the public about aviation and began offering flying lessons around 1930. According to a 1981 *Johnson City Press-Chronicle* article entitled “Pioneers in the Sky,” Jane’s friends who worked at the Bristol Airport encouraged her to take up flying. Owner Charles Harkrader, who the article implies was a family acquaintance, learned of the situation. Jane speculates in the article that Harkrader thought teaching her to fly would generate publicity for the business. She said, “They thought if they had a girl to fly it would be good advertisement.” 28 By 1930 Harkrader had become familiar with the national fascination for the female aviator, as he later wrote in his autobiography “there hangs in our home a photograph of Amelia Earhart, the aviatrix, lost in the Pacific in 1937, with her autograph, signed at Kitty Hawk N.C., Dec. 17, 1928. My wife and I were fortunate enough to be invited to attend the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Wright Brothers famous first flight.” 29 Harkrader’s offer, however sincere, also reflected the use of gender bias to promote the airline business. Serinity Young explains that “paradoxically, the prejudice against women fliers created opportunities for them; the perceived limitations of women pilots fostered the sales pitch that if a woman could fly then anyone could, furthering the perception of flying as safe.” 30

Commercial airlines primarily hired male pilots and so despite earning her pilot’s license in 1932, the first woman in Virginia to do so, Dulaney had to seek alternative positions within the

27 Ibid.
29 Harkrader, 193.
industry. She earned a living as a flight attendant for Eastern Air Transport in 1933 and in 1934 became the first female station manager for American Airlines at the Bristol Airport. According to collection notes by the processing archivist at the Archives of Appalachia, Dulaney was replaced at Bristol Airport by a male manager in 1937.  

Fortunately, she landed a similar position with the Appalachian Flying Service when Tri-Cities Airport opened that same year.

Appalachian Flying Service owner Joseph Louis Hilbert had dreamed of a career in aviation from a young age, having frequently watched airplanes fly into his hometown of Jonesborough.  

According to Fulbright, Louis had watched a plane land and afterwards “was cautioned by his father not to go near the contraption, but that first impression of aviation would last a lifetime.” Louis, however, had a much easier time breaking into the aviation business than did Jane. By the 1920s, he owned his own airplane and operated Appalachian Flying Service from his grandmother’s farmland. He accepted a managerial position at Tri-Cities Airport at the same time Jane took employment there.

The early decades of the twentieth century saw the development of aviation into a viable commercial industry. Although men dominated much of the aviation community, women also strove for success as flyers. In many instances, they remained obscured. Serinity Young notes that “the history of aviation is a history of men; the women who have made significant contributions are too often lost in its hurrahs.” Furthermore, their male counterparts, as well as the press, belittled their professional standing by using certain monikers: “They were almost always called “girls,” no matter what their age, and were frequently referred to as “ladybirds,”

31 “Jane Dulaney Hilbert,” Archives of Appalachia, accessed April 22, 2018,  
http://archives.etsu.edu/agents/people/251.  
32 Fulbright, 116.  
33 Ibid.  
34 Hanlin, 322.  
35 Young, 233.
“angels,” and “sweethearts of the air.” Nevertheless, women fought to enter the field and gain success and recognition.

Historian Eileen Lebow observes that women “climbed into aeroplanes as the logical next step from bicycles and automobiles. As a group, they were remarkably unconcerned about negative attitudes or prejudices that claimed women were unsuited for such activity. Aviation offered excitement, monetary gain, and freedom; joined with their enthusiasm, confidence, and courage, it was a splendid match.” Women in America and Europe with the ingenuity to gain access to planes and instruction eagerly sought employment as pilots. However, monetary concerns and societal obstacles often consigned these women to supporting roles within the aviation industry rather than the pilot’s chair.

Dulaney began her flying career in the 1930s when commercial aviation received significant support from the federal government. In 1938, Congress passed the Civil Aeronautics Act that significantly increased the government’s influence over the industry. According to Lebow, this legislation “put all civil aviation operations under a single government agency, the Civil Aeronautics Authority, and gave full recognition to the air transportation industry by allocating funds for the improvement of airports and airway facilities.” Freight and passenger aviation now enjoyed the same status as railroad transportation. The influx of money from the government enabled both urban and rural areas of Tennessee to improve and expand air service.

The scholarly literature focuses primarily on the major female figures in early aviation, such as Amelia Earhart, Harriet Quimby, and Louise Thaden in America and Hélène Dutrieu in

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36 Ibid.
38 Lebow, 27.
France.\textsuperscript{39} These pioneers challenged the dominance of men in the profession by breaking flying records and publicly advocating for more women in aviation, especially as pilots. However, hundreds of women in regions throughout the United States without as much notoriety also contributed to female participation in flight. Jane Dulaney Hilbert serves as an example of an Appalachian woman who chose an unconventional path for her time and built a successful career. Although her accomplishments are not widely known beyond Tennessee, her materials in the Archives of Appalachia, reflect her deserved status as a prominent figure in regional history.

**Eastern Airlines Air Hostess, 1933-1934**

The air hostess considers herself as much of a hostess in her ship, as if she were in her own drawing room.

- *Washington Herald*, November 27, 1933

Unfortunately, Jane Dulaney Hilbert entered the aviation profession at a time when women’s options for employment were quite limited. 1932 was an early year in the Great Depression. This contributed to a lack of jobs for both women and men in the industry. Furthermore, prejudice against women pilots meant that only a fraction of female aviators made their living by piloting aircraft. Historian Julie Wosk observes that “aside from Helen Richey’s ten months flying for Central Airlines in 1934, it was not until 1973 that American women were given jobs as pilots in commercial aviation (Emily Howell Warner worked for Frontier, a regional airline, and Bonnie Tiburzi, worked for American Airlines).” 40 Most landed support staff positions, especially as stewardesses or “air hostesses” as they were called at the time.

The public perception of flying during the first decades of the twentieth century emphasized the dangers of flight and the adventurous recklessness of flyers who had won fame as First World War aces or barnstormers entertaining crowds with aerial acrobatics. The commercial airline industry was keen to escape these stereotypes and market commercial passenger service as safe and reliable. For instance, Transatlantic Air Transport recruited Amelia

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Earhart as a traveling marketer for their commercial passenger service. Earhart described the situation in her autobiography *The Fun of It: Random Records of My Own Flying and of Women in Aviation*: “Aviation certainly had to be “sold” and the operators leaned to the notion that a luxury service was what the public wanted. Thus, the advertising of the period: ‘Interior decorations and fittings are in soft restful tones with here and there a touch of modern art. For the most part interiors have been designed to harmonize with the natural colors of the country along the route.” 41 Companies designed these early passenger airplanes with their direct competitors, the rail service, in mind; the cabins mimicked the furnishings of railway carriages. Airlines hoped that passengers would equate the cabin with a modern, comfortable living room traveling at high speed but safely through the air. As Earhart phrased it, “By making the trappings of aviation as familiar as possible, timid souls were the more easily persuaded to climb aboard.” 42 The airlines employed another strategy to assuage customers’ fears: providing a guide along the journey who ensured their safety and comfort. Pilots now flew with female support staff, termed “air hostesses.”

The concept of the air hostess emerged earlier in 1930. Historian Claudia M. Oakes relates that “Ellen Church, a registered nurse,” established this new vocation for women when she “visited the Boeing Air Transport office in San Francisco to discuss with the district manager her desire to become a pilot. Although she did not obtain a pilot position, Church did convince Boeing that hiring women as air hostesses would not only free copilots for their regular duties, but also would be a good way to show people that flying was safe.” 43 Boeing’s hiring of the first

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42 Ibid.
eight air hostesses prompted its competitors in the commercial airline industry to follow suit and hire their own for passenger service.

Commercial airlines took company image-making seriously and prospective air hostesses had to comply with strict employment requirements. For example, Oakes notes that the Boeing firm required that applicants “be single, registered nurses, not more than 25 years old, weigh not more than 115 pounds, and not be more than 5 feet 4 inches tall.” 44 The small size and weight distribution on early commercial airplanes necessitated the physical requirements. Airlines also felt that publicizing their choice of registered nurses would attract more passengers who had viewed flying as too dangerous or uncomfortable.45

In addition to caring for the passengers, the airhostesses of the 1930s also assisted with aircraft maintenance before and during the flight. The main cabin was their domain. Before the airplane departed, airhostesses participated in maintenance work. Such tasks included “refueling the aircraft, transferring baggage, mopping the cabin floors, and checking bolts to ensure that all seats were securely fastened to the floor” as passenger transport accommodations were so new.46 An employee manual from the era also listed other essential tasks: “Keep the clock wound up. Correct the time as the aircraft passes through time zones. Keep an eye on passengers when they go to the toilet room to be sure they go through the toilet room door and not through the emergency exit door. Carry a railroad timetable just in case the plane is grounded somewhere.” 47

In the United States during the 1930s, airlines competed with the railroads for dominance. The chance that a plane might be delayed, however, meant that passengers might have to resort to a train to reach their destination. Alarming, too, was the possibility of falling to the earth from

44 Oakes, 20.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 21-22.
thousands of miles aloft by choosing the wrong door. Air hostesses’ responsibility for passenger safety as well as comfort was serious indeed.

Jane Dulaney joined Eastern Air Transport in 1933. According to Fulbright, she signed on as “a hostess on Eastern’s Washington, D.C., to Miami route. Flying the latest version of the Curtiss Condor, powered by Wright-Whirlwind engines, they left Washington at 10:00 a.m. and arrived in Miami by 7:00 p.m. The return trip was made the next day, followed by three days off.” Dulaney kept a diary detailing her experiences on the Washington to Miami passenger run. In it she clipped and saved a newspaper feature from the *Washington Herald* that year interviewing a hiring manager for air hostesses. As M.H. Goodnough, the field manager for the Newark airport and the man in charge of hiring for Western Air Transport explained, “they have to be ‘just right.’ This means about 20 to 25 years of age, well-mannered, unaffected, poised, reliable, wholesome, neat, natural, self-reliant, dignified, tactful, patient, and at all times gracious.” In the beginning of passenger transport, the airlines carefully fashioned the aircrew’s roles to attract new customers. The air hostesses maintained a comfortable cabin with an air of safety, while the pilots “were crafted as consummate professionals and reassuring authoritative fathers – the embodiment of technical, physical, and emotional mastery.” Perhaps these efforts sought to countermand visions of daredevil barnstormers still present in the public consciousness.

Jane Dulaney enjoyed her time as an air hostess for Eastern Air Transport. In 1981, she reflected that “It was fun, during those first days of stewardesses. Eastern only had 14 girls at

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48 Ibid.
49 Fulbright, 117.
that time. We were really pioneers.”  

52 Dulaney’s good fortune in securing an air hostess position reflected the goals of many educated, enterprising 1930s women who hoped to build a satisfying career. For instance, Alice Kessler-Harris writes in her book *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* that

married and unmarried, women with high school diplomas, college training, and graduate degrees came from different social backgrounds and had different expectations than those pushed into wage work by material necessity. A new generation of female wage workers emerged whose job-related hopes extended beyond economic survival, challenging the social organization of women’s work that had once reinforced custom and attitude by exerting control over women’s labor force possibilities.  

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By gaining a small foothold in the aviation industry, Jane Dulaney contributed to the movement of women into a new field of work.

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**American Airlines Station Manager, 1934-1937**

There are more passengers carried every twenty-four hours, as well as mail, in the United States than in all of Europe combined.

- Amelia Earhart, *The Fun of It: Random Records of My Own Flying and of Women in Aviation*

Early air transport companies often vacillated between economic success and struggle that affected their willingness to hire women. During the 1930s, commercial air companies relied primarily on government mail contracts to stay in business and passenger service augmented their earnings. As the federal government figured out how to best regulate this new industry, airlines’ fortunes rose and fell during the economic hardship of the Great Depression. In March of 1934, the *Miami Herald* sought an interview with Jane Dulaney for an upcoming feature article on new careers for women in aviation. But the magazine was too late. *Miami Herald* Editor Hazel Sheddan informed her contact Mrs. H.W. Reynolds in Virginia that “due to the cancelling of the mail contracts and the consequent reduction in earning power of that Company all hostesses have been dropped from the service,” and forwarded the letter to Dulaney in an act
of apology.\textsuperscript{54} Dulaney, like so many other hostesses, was out of a job. According to her surviving correspondence, she decided to move back home to Bristol and await further developments. \textsuperscript{55}

Jane sent letters to friends and colleagues over the next few months inquiring after open positions, mostly for another opportunity as an air hostess. However, her luck changed in May of 1934. She received a letter from Eastern Airlines informing her that “if we bid on the Washington to Nashville run and are awarded this contract that we will be glad to consider you as our representative in Bristol.” \textsuperscript{56} Jane began work at her old base at Bristol Airport as the first female station manager for American Airlines.

Jane’s new level of responsibility and status in the aviation industry attracted attention from her fellow member of the 99s Club and the national press. She appeared in an issue of \textit{The New York Woman} magazine on March 10, 1937. The article, entitled “Grounded by Prejudice: Women Make Fine Fliers but the Business of Flying Still Refuses Them a Fair Living,” featured prominent female aviators and offered them a forum to voice their concerns. Jane featured prominently in the article due to her unique position as a woman who rose to a high level of professional responsibility. Writer Josephine Barber described her as “a competent pilot who has mastered all the technique of weather reporting and is an attractive little station manager for the American Airlines at Bristol, Vermont [sic.]” \textsuperscript{57} Even in this progressive article, some sexist language does remain. In her role as station manager, “she reports the weather several times a day; puts the mail on and takes it off planes; checks passengers; makes reservations; sells tickets and carries a .38 caliber Colt – only when she is handling mail, however. Mary Jane [sic.] has

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\textsuperscript{54} Hazel Sheddan to Mrs. H.W. Reynolds, 10 March 1934, Box 1, Folder 5, Hilbert Papers.
\textsuperscript{55} William Burrell to Jane Dulaney Hilbert, 4 May 1934, Box 1, Folder 5, Hilbert Papers.
\textsuperscript{56} Sara Landrum to Jane Dulaney Hilbert, 19 May 1934, Box 1, Folder 5, Hilbert Papers.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The New York Woman}, March 10, 1937, 16. Box 11, Oversize Folder 2, Hilbert Papers.
\end{flushleft}
found a place where she has permanent employment as near the controls as she can get.” 58 As manager, the tasks Jane completed would be delegated to several departments in the air terminal of today. She served as the face of American Airlines at Bristol and the head of the ground crew behind the scenes. Nonetheless, Dulaney had to persuade the male company leadership that she could do the tasks. According to the official history of the Southeast Section of the Ninety-Nines Club, “a 1936 story in the Bristol Herald Courier read: “Her only difficulty was to persuade airline officials that she was strong enough to load mail and express, in spite of her 120 pounds. For nobody else is permitted to touch the mail pouches.” 59 Jane Dulaney’s inclusion in a nationwide publication demonstrates how inspirational she was to her fellow women in aviation who also had to contend with prejudice and underestimation by their male peers.

Only months away from her disappearance over the Pacific Ocean, Amelia Earhart voiced her opinion in the article about the dearth of professional aviation positions given to women: “This is a subject very close to my heart . . . Not that I think that the prejudice against women flyers is stronger than in any other occupation which women have taken up. But I do believe that statistics can reveal facts which will give this question a scientific basis for discussion.” 60 Earhart was all too familiar with the prejudice that female pilots faced regularly. Serinity Young claims

Despite her piloting abilities and fame, she was always referred to as an “aviatrix” rather than an “aviator”,” the feminine form of the noun emphasizing that the category is male and the female aviator is an exception. When men crashed planes, newspapers reported that the accidents were due to technical problems; when women crashed, it proved they were not fit to fly. Earhart’s earliest experience of this occurred during her first flying

58 Ibid.


lesson, when her male instructor had another male pilot on board just in case her inherent female timidity caused her to panic and jump out. Her next lessons were with one of the leading female pilots of the day, Neta Snook (1896-1979), who taught the financially struggling Earhart on credit.  

Thus, Earhart used the power of her fame to publicly support the advancement of women in aviation. In her review of Susan Ware’s work *Still Missing: Amelia Earhart and the Search for Modern Feminism*, Sara Alpern observes that “ever conscious of the gender boundaries of her day, feminist Amelia Earhart always underscored her own accomplishments as evidence for the possibilities for other women. Earhart epitomized the ideals of personal autonomy of liberal feminists of the 1920s and 1930s.”  

For Earhart, fellow pilots exemplified female independence.

Jane Dulaney enjoyed her time as station manager for American Airlines in Bristol but did miss being in the air. In June of 1934, she wrote to her friend Leland Jamieson, a novelist who wrote about the adventures of fictional aviators. He replied, “You flatter me when you say a story of mine could help you get over homesickness for flying.”  

Nevertheless, the position proved to be a steady source of income in the uncertain economic atmosphere of the mid-1930s. Jane served as station manager for American Airlines at Bristol until 1937, when a new addition to the aviation industry in the Tri-Cities began operation.

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61 Young, 233.
63 Leland Jamieson to Jane Dulaney Hilbert, 29 November 1934, Box 1, Folder 5, Hilbert Papers.
The Appalachian Flying Service and World War II, 1937-1945

It is on the record that women can fly as well as men.
– General Henry H. Arnold,  
Commanding General, Army Air Force, 1944

The success of the Bristol Airport signaled to other cities in Northeast Tennessee the need to establish their own airport facilities. The older airstrips already built in Kingsport and Johnson City, however, were too small to accommodate the large-scale air service the cities envisioned. Fulbright notes that the three cities “were aware that the region’s industrial development, which each city shared in, needed a suitable air transportation system to facilitate growth” and so combined their resources to create one central airport to service the whole region. 64 A committee of project members, including Harry D. Gump, M.T. McArthur, J.W. Cummins, J. Fred Johnson, A.D. Brockman, Robert E. Peters, and E.W. Palmer, convinced Colonel Harry S. Berry of the Works Progress Administration in Tennessee to lend support to the venture. 65

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64 Fulbright, 39.
Senator Kenneth McKellar garnered further support in Congress and the McKellar Tri-City Airport opened for business on November 5, 1937. 66 The facility continues to operate today. 67 Although American Airlines eliminated Jane’s position at the Bristol Airport in 1934, she immediately landed a similar position with the Appalachian Flying Service. According to Fulbright, Jane’s new “job description covered every airport duty known, from parking and fueling planes to flight instruction.” 68 Thus, at AFS Jane could combine her skill as a pilot with her wealth of managerial experience. Her high level of expertise would be needed as war in Europe came closer.

By 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and other government officials began to prepare for America’s possible entry into war in Europe, despite opposition from isolationists, as it observed Hitler’s annexation of Austria on March 12, 1938 and Germany’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. 69 Historian Roger Bilstein notes that “During the hasty build-up of American military forces after 1939, General Arnold persuaded Congress to support private training schools for primary flight instruction, leaving the air force its existing flight training facilities for basic and advanced training.” 70 Airports and flying services in many parts of the United States, including Tri-Cities Airport and the Appalachian Flying Service, joined the mobilization effort by providing flight instruction to local citizens.

66 Fulbright, 40.
67 For simplicity, in this paper the airport will be referred to as the Tri-Cities Airport. However, it has had many names throughout the years. According to Hanlin, “Up to and during construction, the facility was referred to as Central Airport. By the time of the dedication in November of 1937, the facility was officially listed as McKellar Tri-City Airport. It was generally known as Tri-City Airport throughout the next forty years. Thereafter, the name was modified in minor ways, first to Tri-City Regional Airport in 1981 and then to Tri-Cities Regional Airport, TN/VA in 1994 to reflect efforts to identify this area as a regional entity” (Hanlin, 321-322). Currently, as the website notes, Tri-Cities Airport is the name of the facility. See “Welcome to Tri-Cities Airport,” Tri-Cities Airport, last modified 2018, accessed airport's website May 2, 2018, https://triflight.com/about/.
68 Fulbright, 117.
Jane had earned her qualifications as a flight instructor in 1939. According to a June 1941 *Dixie Air News* article, “In July, 1939, she won a limited commercial rating and raised it to a commercial license this past March. Now, most any pretty day, you can see Jane breezing in and out of the field in her 145-horsepower Fairchild.” 71 She also became closer to Appalachian Flying Service on a personal level. As mentioned above, in 1942, she married its owner Joseph Louis Hilbert. Soon after their marriage, Louis enlisted in the Army Air Force. He served in “the 4th Ferrying Group of the Air Transport Command” and gave “transition training to the Army’s newest pilots, checking them out in multi-engine aircraft.” 72 Later he also flew C-46 “Hospital Ships” and completed overseas missions between Brazil and North Africa. 73

Jane Hilbert took over management of the Appalachian Flying Service in her husband’s absence. She thus belonged to a growing minority of married women in the work force. Alice Kessler-Harris observed that “in 1920, less than two million of the eight million wage-earning women were married. By 1930, more than three million of the ten million women who worked for wages were living with husbands – the proportion of married women had jumped from 22.8 percent to 28.8 percent of the female work force – an increase of more than 25 percent.” 74 Jane Hilbert was exceptional in that she was a married woman who exercised her professional skill in a position of great responsibility.

During the war Jane Hilbert gave flight instruction under the auspices of the Civilian Pilot Training Program (CPTP) from 1939 to 1943. The federal government set up the CPTP as

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72 Fulbright, 117.
73 Ibid.
74 Kessler-Harris, 229.
“a cooperative program run by colleges in conjunction with local flying field operators.” 75 Jane, her employees at AFS, and faculty from State Teachers College, Johnson City (later ETSC) taught courses in “aerodynamics, meteorology, navigation, parachutes, air regulations, basic mechanics, and air history” accompanied by “thirty-five to fifty hours of dual instruction and controlled solo flying.” 76 The program trained hundreds of pilots during the war for combat duty.

The war did bring opportunities to women pilots eager to make their contribution, but regulations and the traditional lines of gender demarcation in the aviation industry limited their level of participation. The CPTP welcomed several women as students into its basic flight training courses during its early years. A small number of women also served as flight instructors. However, by 1941 CPTP participation required a legal enlistment contract and by June women were formerly barred from the program. 77 Jane was part of a select number of women able to carry on as flight instructors as “records indicate that not more than fifty were ever employed and that their widespread use in this capacity was never seriously considered.” 78 Apart from the CPTP, women could also try to gain a position ferrying aircraft. According to Serinity Young, the Royal Air Force in Britain allowed women to ferry aircraft earlier than the United States. The U.S. would not adopt the same policy until 1942.79 After the United States government approved the use of women pilots for aircraft ferrying missions, prejudice against them remained in full force: Young explains that

The WAFS (Women’s Auxiliary Ferry Squadron) and a sister group, the Women’s Flying Training Detachment, were merged in August 1943 into the Womens Air Force Service

76 Ibid., 22.
77 Douglas, 22.
78 Ibid., 23.
79 Young, 244.
Pilots (WASPS). WASP pilots began by flying small aircraft to their needed locations… Male civilian pilots could hitch rides on military planes, but women pilots could not because the press tracked almost every move the women pilots made and the army was nervous about the possibility of scandal. In March 1943 the army briefly banned women from being copilots with men and grounded them while menstruating – women were just totally “other” to the male military establishment. Both restrictions, however, were rescinded in April of the same year.  

Female service pilots endured prejudice and danger to transport aircraft across the United States until 1944, when the government decided to eliminate all their positions. Although they sacrificed much for their service, some their lives, female pilots who flew during the Second World War were not considered veterans and did not receive honorable discharges until 1977.

Jane Dulaney Hilbert accomplished a great deal during the war years. Not only did she train pilots for service in the United States and overseas, but she also successfully ran the Appalachian Flying Service’s civilian business operations. Her husband Louis returned home from the war and Jane continued with the company as AFS’s vice-president and manager of the flight school. They sold the business in 1968. Louis passed away in 1975 and Jane survived him until she died in 2004 at the age of 93.

80 Young, 244.
81 Ibid., 245.
Jane Dulaney Hilbert and the Ninety-Nines

Jane Dulaney Hilbert joined the Tennessee Ninety-Nines Chapter in 1932. It possessed a dynamic club culture that carried on its activities through the war years. The official history notes that “the discussion of dues at the first meeting led to the policy of encouraging members to use any money which might have been paid into the chapter treasury as dues to rent aircraft to fly to monthly meetings.” 84 The decision to fly to each meeting proved to be highly popular. For instance, the history records that “in 1940 and 1941, Tennessee Ninety-Nines were taking off at dawn in Cubs, Aeroncas, Luscombes, Taylorcrafts, and Culver Cadets in order to attend a noon meeting somewhere between Tri-Cities and Memphis, a distance of nearly 400 miles. An early newsletter report from the Tennessee chapter read: “Educational programs at monthly meetings? Just getting there and back was an education.” The history also mentions that “while other

84 Ibid., 114.
members were flying at top speeds, Jane Hilbert was cruising at the 100-mile mark in her Fairchild 24.” 85 Hilbert enjoyed membership in an enthusiastic chapter of the Ninety-Nines dedicated to getting as much flying time as possible.

Jane also spent time with fellow club members from the Tri-Cities area. Evelyn Bryan Johnson taught flying from her base at Morristown. Gene Slack “wrote a weekly aviation column for the Johnson City Press, became the aviation editor for the Nashville Tennessean in 1942, one of four such women editors in the United States.” 86 Jane was one of a group paving the way for female aviators in Northeast Tennessee.

Later, the Ninety-Nines recognized her importance with accolades. In 1952, she won recognition for holding the oldest pilot’s license in the chapter. Twenty years later “the chapter honored the three remaining charter members, Pearl Brock, Jane Hilbert, and Ruth Thomas, at the Annual Award for Promotion of General Aviation in Nashville.”87 Hilbert received a life membership in 1979 and the last mention of her participation in the official history occurred in 1981.

Jane Dulaney Hilbert was one of the pioneers in women’s fight for participation in aviation. Although the industry has made great strides, there is still work to be done. Women in Aviation International, a non-profit dedicated to the recognition and support of female aviation professionals, provides current statistics on the numbers of women in the industry. According to

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
WAI, as of December 2017 only 7.01 percent of pilots in the United States are women; 6.38 percent fly for commercial airlines. 88

Jane Dulaney Hilbert: Aviator of the Tri-Cities Exhibit at the Archives of Appalachia

A physical exhibit at the Archives of Appalachia accompanies this written research on Jane Dulaney Hilbert. Displayed are Jane’s flight log, photographs, personal and professional correspondence, ephemera from Eastern Air Transport and Tri-Cities Airport, a 1942 State Teachers College, Johnson City yearbook with a picture of flight students during the Second World War, and magazine articles featuring Jane as station manager for American Airlines at the Bristol Airport and member of the Ninety-Nines Club for women pilots. These items give a broad overview of Hilbert’s accomplishments over nearly four decades in aviation. The exhibit also included a photograph of her husband Louis Hilbert to acknowledge his importance in her personal and professional life.

This exhibit, entitled *Jane Dulaney Hilbert: Aviator of the Tri-Cities*, seeks to bring awareness to a prominent female figure in the history of the Appalachian region. The materials also link Appalachia to national trends and conversations occurring in America during the early to mid-twentieth century. Jane was a woman who in her career traveled beyond usual workplace expectations for women. She became a manager in the 1930s in a business environment in which “84 percent of the nation’s insurance companies, 65 percent of the banks and 63 percent of public utilities had restrictive rules preventing married women from holding any jobs.” 89 She achieved career success despite the Great Depression and the accepted system of gender roles in the aviation industry that primarily gave pilot and instructor roles to male employees. The exhibit adds her perspective as a woman and a professional to our understanding of Appalachia as a region not isolated but integrated into the development of the modern United States.

Exhibition, “an important form of scholarly and creative activity for academic librarians, archivists, and curators,” can bring archival collections to life for the public.90 By curating exhibits, archivists “encourage the participation of individuals and other organizations in their endeavors. This participation is fostered by actively exploiting the richness of archival holdings and by enhancing programs in order that they touch all sectors of [their] constituency.” 91 Exhibition adds to the dynamism of the archive as a place for active learning for diverse types of patrons.

This phenomenon holds especially true for archival collections that focus on local history. Archives preserve collective memory and subsequently their collections become a locus

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for citizens to learn about the origins of their families and communities. Archives and Records Consultant Joanna Newman articulates the importance of archives to the survival of local history and memory in her article “Sustaining Archives.” She explains that “community archives reflect our culture and identity and are therefore an important part of our heritage. Without them, or without appropriate management of them, our ability to understand where we have come from is diminished.” Public programming builds awareness among local residents and can lead to a closer bond between the archive and its community. In this case, creating an exhibit using Jane Dulaney Hilbert’s materials puts a spotlight on her accomplishments. Viewers who would not otherwise have known about her gain an understanding of how one local woman accomplished a great deal in a field that holds so much general fascination. Moreover, Hilbert receives acknowledgement of her skill as a pilot and her professional accomplishments in a setting free from the prejudices of her male contemporaries.

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Figure 1. Left side of exhibit at the Archives of Appalachia, April 2018.
Figure 2. Right side of exhibit at Archives of Appalachia, April 2018.
Figure 3. Jane Dulaney Hilbert’s flight log (1938-1965), Archives of Appalachia.
September 26

Dear Mr. Dulaney,

He will probably take on
several new franchises the
fifteenth, suggest you set
up here as soon as possible.

I can sign you a pass
from here.

Hastily,

[Signature]

Airport Hotel
Archives of Appalachia.
EASTERN AIR LINES INC.

401 HURT BUILDING
ATLANTA, GA.

May 19, 1934

Miss Jane Dulaney,
1402 Windsor Ave.,
Bristol, Tenn.

Dear Miss Dulaney:

Mr. Elliott asked me to reply to your letter of the 15th and advise you that if we bid on the Washington to Nashville run and are awarded this contract that we will be glad to consider you as our representative in Bristol.

Yours very truly,

[Signature]

Secretary to Mr. Elliott
of Appalachia

Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


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