Onslow Takes Flight

Flight is popular in Onslow County both for travel as well as a recreational sport. Early pilots flew private aircraft from grass landing strips. The first paved landing strips came with the military during World War Two, when Camp Davis in Holly Ridge was used for Anti Aircraft training. Constructed just after the end of World War Two Onslow's first large non-military landing strip served the city of Jacksonville and its surrounding area. Privately run and not open to the general public until the late 1960s, the airport provided training to many of Onslow's early private pilots. By 1962 the need for a regional public airport prompted the County Commissioners to create the Airport Commission, which planned for a new larger landing field to serve the local and military communities. Albert J. Ellis Airport opened its runways in 1971 and remains one of the most important modes of transportation to and from Onslow County. Nearly 300,000 passengers pass through OAJ each year.

Passengers flying through Albert J. Ellis Airport

1971	48265
1972	79698
1973	90877
1974	98717
1975	99448
1976	102640
1977	109571
1978	112430
1979	109085
1980	89299
1981	101991
1982	114489
1983	165317
1984	197111
1985	200645
1986	205548
1987	215012
1988	216516
1989	197619
1990	208430
1991	205416
1992	172900
1993	169667
1994	195962
1995	141233
1996	139245
1997	145202
1998	136188
1999	116143
2000	76342
2001	62454
2002	65210
2003	87814
2004	87814
2005	191194
2006	179878
2007	242817
2008	262178
2009	249563
2010	314884
2011	344467
2012	347868
2013	344710
2014	321642
2015	302608
2016*	291585

Air Excitement in Richlands

Photographs courtesy of the Raleigh News and Observer and NC Division of Archives and History

In March 1938 an American Airlines passenger plane traveling from Washington DC made an emergency landing outside of Richlands. On its way to the West Coast, the plane was re-routed through Atlanta to avoid bad weather. The pilot got lost in fog and circled for three hours before he could see well enough to put the plane down in an unplowed field, damaging a line of fence posts. Ten passengers, including three crew, were un-injured. Locals gathered around the large aircraft, certainly an unexpected sight in a rural town.

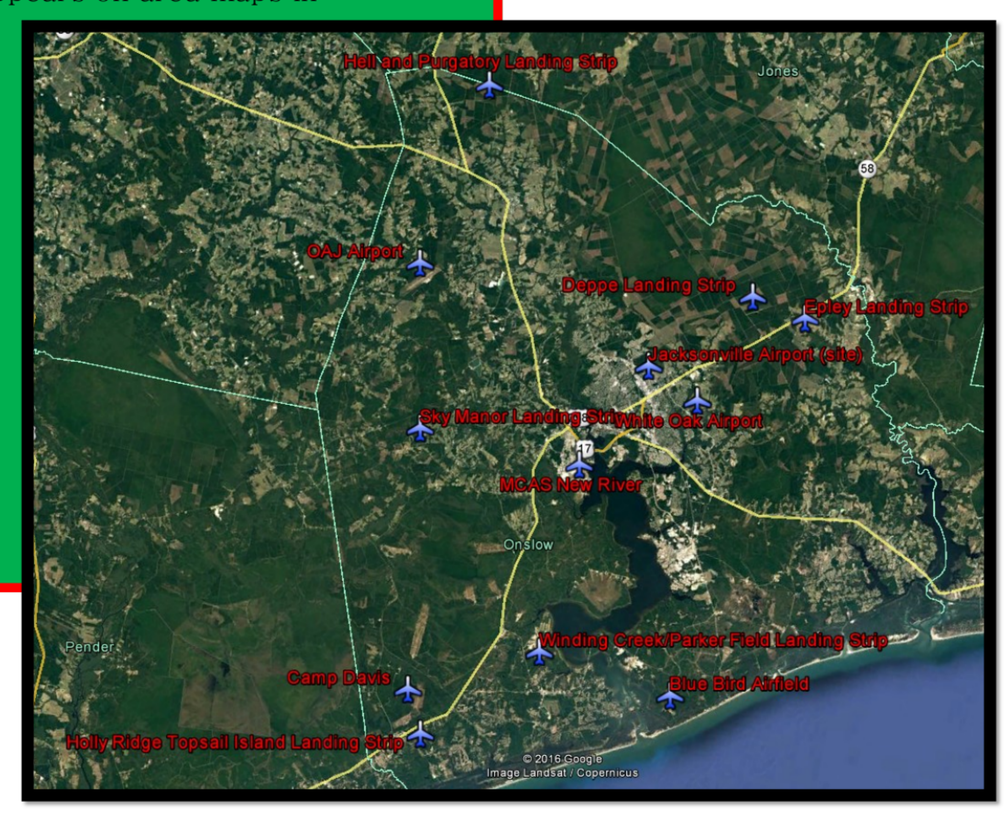
Did you know that there are 2,378,500 square feet of pavement at Albert J. Ellis Airport? That is the same as 37.5 miles of roadway.

Private Flight

Onslow County is currently home to twenty private planes, many hangered at Ellis Airport. Several more are hangered at smaller private air strips, such as Epley Airfield near Maysville and Sky Manor near Maple Hill. Private flight picked up in the 1960s and 1970s as commercial air travel increased. Private flight has experienced a downturn over the last fifteen years and fewer private air strips are operated in the county.

Alice Brown, above center, and Dee Swinson, above right, were Onslow residents and members of the Petticoat Pilots, a North Carolina female aviators organization. Brown, who began flying in 1967, became the first woman to land at Ellis Airport shortly after it opened.

Photos courtesy of Alice Brown

Airfields

This map shows the sites of currently operational landing strips as well as several that have been abandoned or no longer exist. Sites such as White Oak Airport, also known as Piney Green International, were used by private recreational pilots and crop dusters serving the area. It was constructed sometime in the 1960s and appears on area maps in the 1970s. Onslow's oldest non-military airfield is located in the center of the image, labeled Jacksonville Airport (site). It is no longer visible off of Western Boulevard, having been developed and is now the site of Sam's Club. Other abandoned air strips, like Winding Creek/Parker Field, now owned by the Coastal Land Trust, are slowly returning to nature. Winding Creek originally belonged to land subdivided into a neighborhood with the landing strip at it's center, intended to be an aviation community.