

A Look Back...

THE EARLY BEGINNINGS OF WRIGHT FIELD



EDITED BY: MAYA CORBELL
HQ AFMC HISTORY OFFICE

WRIGHT FIELD

On April 13, 1926 groundbreaking began on land recently donated to the United States Government from the city of Dayton, Ohio. However, acquiring this land was not the beginning of Dayton's critical role in the history of aviation rather, it was a concerted effort by citizens of Dayton to maintain the city's title as "the birthplace of aviation."

McCook Field, signed into existence October 13, 1917, and located in Dayton, OH, was the epicenter of United States aviation development and production during World War I. It was the home of the Airplane Engineering Department (later Division) along with other key institutions like the Air Service School of Application (now the Air Force Institute of Technology [AFIT]). By the end of the War, the Engineering Division had outgrown its wartime residence and it lacked the runway space, land, and stability to continue its innovation and research at McCook Field. Thus, the Air Service began the hunt to find where the Division would move. In 1922, the problem had yet to be resolved, and it became clear that the Division might have to leave Dayton due to a lack of military funds to buy the land it needed. In response, John H. Patterson, founder of the National Cash Register Company took the lead to find the land and the funds necessary to keep the Division in Dayton. He worked on this alongside his son, Lieutenant Frederick B. Patterson, who continued the effort after John Patterson's death in May 1922.

Frederick Patterson created and lead an organization called the Dayton Air Service Committee which rallied the support of influential Daytonians to find and procure the land that became Wright Field. This land included McCook Field, Wilbur Wright Flying Field, the Fairfield Air Depot, parts of the Miami Conservancy District (which was formed to prevent flooding in the Dayton area), and seven parcels of privately owned property. Once Patterson received word on Oct 25, 1922 that the Air Service would accept this land over other offers, the Dayton Air Service Committee began fundraising to purchase it. By November 10th, the Committee had raised over \$425,000 (well over its 400,000 goal) to purchase the land. On August 9, 1924 the deed was gifted to the United States government by the Dayton Air Service, on behalf of the City of Dayton. This gift ensured the Air Service had the land it needed to give the Engineering Division (later reorganized into the Materials Division) a permanent home in Ohio, Wright Field.

Wright Field has changed names multiple times over the last 100 years. A portion of the Field, east of Huffman Dam, was redesignated Patterson Field in 1931 to memorialize the death of Lieutenant Frank S. Patterson, pilot and nephew of John H. Patterson, who was killed in a DH-4 test flight crash in June 1918. January 13, 1948 the fields were combined and given the name Wright-Patterson Air Force Base under the newly founded United States Air Force. Today, 100 years from when the land was donated, Wright-Patterson AFB is the largest single site employer in the state of Ohio, and remains on the forefront of United States aviation development and innovation.

Images From: HQ AFMC/HO Digital Image Collection.

Sources: Aeronautical Systems Center History Office, *Splendid Vision, Unswerving Purpose: Developing Air Power For the United States Air Force During the First Century of Powered Flight* (Wright Patterson AFB, OH: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2002).

"Wright-Patterson Air Force Base: The First Century," *Air Force Life Cycle Management History Office*, 2015, [A CENTURY OF GROWTH: \(af.mil\)](#).

Office Constructing Quartermaster Dayton, OH, *Completion Report: Wright Field Dayton, OH Volume I* (circa July 1927).

Additional Reading: A Look Back... Fairfield Air Depot, [A Look Back...Fairfield Air Depot \(defense.gov\)](#).

WRIGHT FIELD



Above: Main Entrance to Engineering Division, McCook Field. During and after World War I, the Engineering Division designed aircraft and engines, tested, and experimented with different concepts and innovations, like the synchronization of machine guns on aircraft.

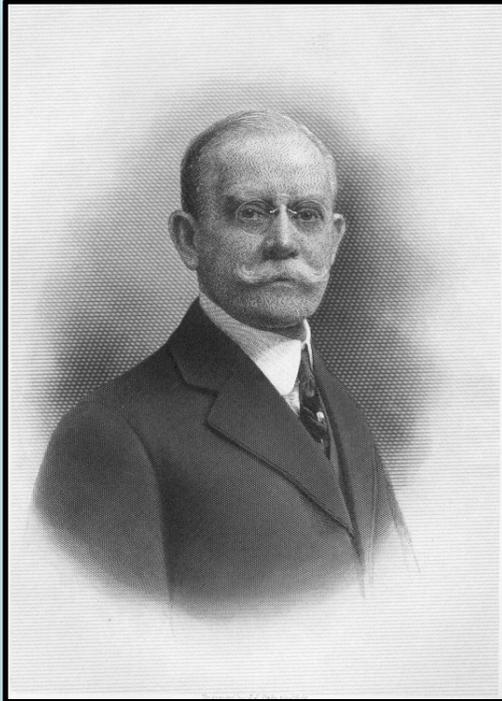


Below: Main Street of McCook Field, 1918. "This Field is Small- Use it All" became McCook Field's motto and served as a warning to pilots during take-off about the shortness of the runway.

Below: Photo of Engineering Division Staff including 750 employees, taken 10 Sept. 1925.

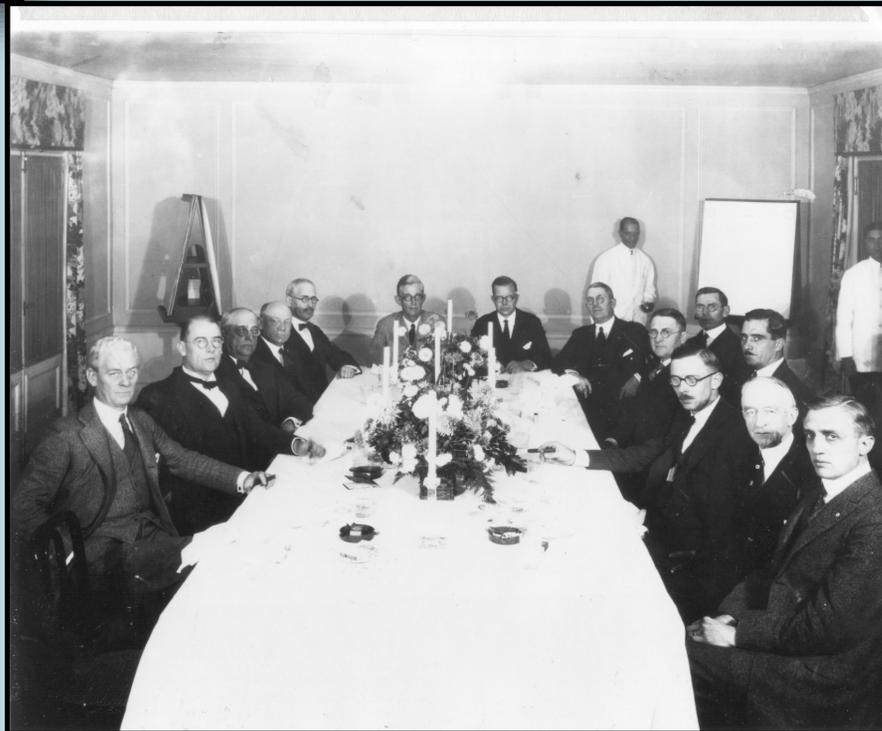


WRIGHT FIELD



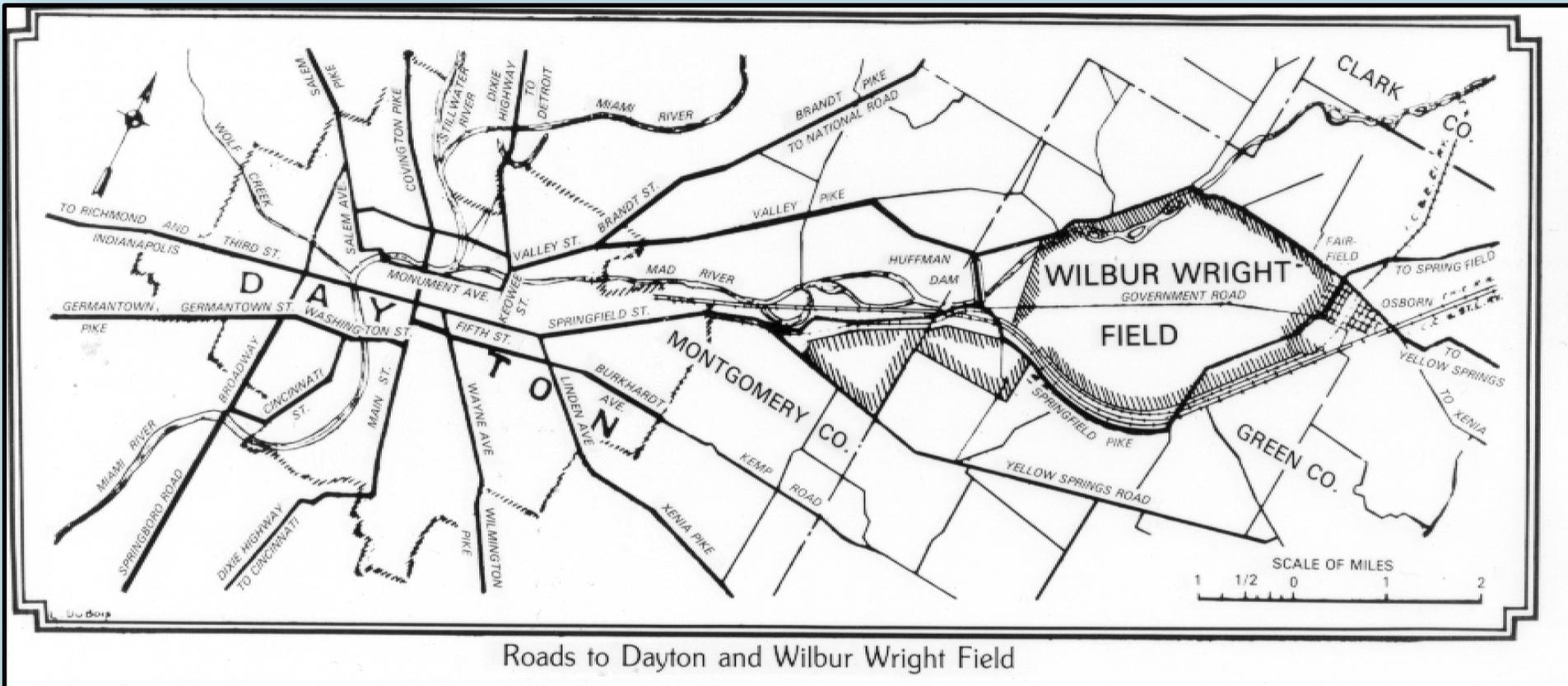
Above: Portrait of John H. Patterson, Dayton entrepreneur and founder of the National Cash Register Company. Patterson was a strong believer in the importance of aviation and a driving force in helping keep the Engineering Division in Dayton.

Right: Picture of John H. Patterson (right) and his son Frederick B. Patterson. Frederick, a pilot and veteran of World War I, took on the challenge of acquiring land necessary to keep the Engineering Division and McCook Field in Dayton after the death of his father in 1922.



Left: First meeting of the Dayton Air Service Committee Oct 25, 1922. Founded and headed by Frederick Patterson, the Committee brought together a number of prominent citizens of Dayton to find and purchase land for the Engineering Division. Just 15 days after this first meeting, the Committee had raised all the money it needed to purchase the land.

WRIGHT FIELD



Roads to Dayton and Wilbur Wright Field

Above: Map of the land purchased by the Dayton Air Service Committee. This land, spanning 3 counties, was given to the United States government on August 9, 1924.



Left: Dayton Daily News issue from August 17, 1924 commemorating the gift of Air Field land to the U.S. Government.

WRIGHT FIELD

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

August 14, 1924.

My dear Mr. Patterson:

It was a genuine pleasure to receive this morning the call of yourself and your associates of the Dayton Air Service Committee, who were brought in by General Mitchell to tell me about the conclusion of the transactions which make the McCook Field at Dayton the property of the United States Government. In making this splendid gift to their country, the citizens of Dayton have been inspired alike by motives of high patriotism and also of pride in the fact that Dayton was the home of the Wright brothers, and that there, through their talents and tireless efforts, aviation had its birth.

McCook Field will always be famous as the first of those training fields and terminals for aviation which now are scattered throughout the entire world. Upon it is reflected a full share of the glory won by thousands of American and other aviators who were trained there. It has been the scene of splendid services alike to the cause of science and to the national defense. The people of Dayton, in presenting this historic tract of 4500 acres to the National Government have insured that it will always be maintained for the service that has won it fame. You have enabled the creation of McCook field into a perpetual monument to the men who first realized the full possibilities of navigating the air, and to that great first generation of inventors and aviators whose services and sacrifices in the war and in the works of peace have made their list a roll of heroes. You have informed me that the transactions incident to transferring McCook field to the National

Government are now completed. I am writing you because I want in this formal manner to record the Government's appreciation of this fine act, and to set down the assurance of my personal congratulations to the people of Dayton and my gratification at having had a small part in it.

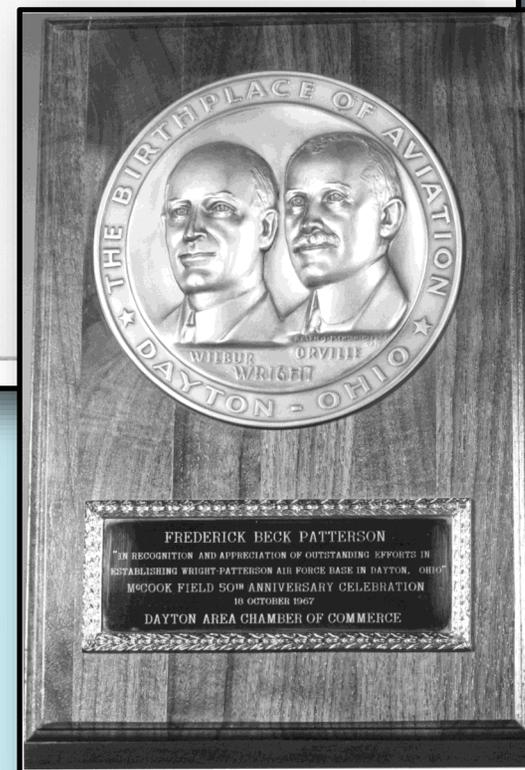
Most sincerely yours,

Calvin Coolidge

Mr. Frederick Patterson, Chairman,
The Dayton Air Service Committee,
Dayton, Ohio.

Above: Letter from President Calvin Coolidge to Frederick Patterson written August 14, 1924 to commemorate both Patterson and the Dayton Air Service Committee for their donation of the Air Field land. Patterson met with President Coolidge in person after the transfer of the deed.

Right: Plaque awarded to Frederick Patterson by the Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce as part of the McCook Field 50th Anniversary Celebration, Oct. 1967.



WRIGHT FIELD



Left: Picture of the Wright Field Constructing Quartermaster's Office. The original team worked in the two-story brick farmhouse. Most of the staff arrived by July 1925 and began work on the project. On April 30, 1926, the two large barns burned down in a hay fire.

Right: Aftermath of the 1926 fire.



Finance

[G. O. 20]

GENERAL ORDERS,
No. 20.

WAR DEPARTMENT,
WASHINGTON, August 21, 1925.

Designation of site of Air Service activities.....	I
Announcement of relief and assignments.....	II
Allotments of grades and specialists' ratings for enlisted men.....	III
Rescission of certain War Department general orders.....	IV

I. Designation of site of Air Service activities.—The designation "Wilbur Wright Field," which field is located at Fairfield, Ohio, is hereby discontinued, and the site of the said field together with the site of the Air Service Engineering Division adjacent thereto will hereafter be known as "Wright Field" in honor of the Wright Brothers, pioneers in aeronautical engineering development.

[A. G. 680.9 (6-29-25).]

II. Announcement of relief and assignments.—1. Major General *Robert L. Howze*, United States Army, has been assigned to the command of the Fifth Corps Area, vice Major General *Omar Bundy*, United States Army, retired.

2. Major General *Douglas MacArthur*, United States Army, has been relieved from the command of the Fourth Corps Area, and assigned to the command of the Third Corps Area, vice Major General *Samuel D. Sturgis*, United States Army, retired.

3. Major General *William S. Graves*, United States Army, has been assigned to the command of the Sixth Corps Area, vice Major General *Harry C. Hale*, United States Army, retired.

[A. G. 210.311 (8-21-25).]

III. Allotments of grades and specialists' ratings for enlisted men.—General Orders, No. 19, War Department, 1924, as amended by Section V, General Orders, No. 24; Section IV, General Orders, No. 29; Section V, General Orders, No. 31; Section III, General Orders, No. 33; and Section IV, General Orders, No. 36, War Department, 1924, and by Section III, General Orders, No. 8; Section IV, General Orders, No. 9; Section III, General Orders, No. 13; and Section IV, General Orders, No. 15, War Department, 1925, is further amended as follows:

1. Paragraph 5a is amended by decreasing the number of privates from 4,086 to 4,084 and increasing the number of flying cadets from 194 to 196.

60355*—25†

Left: General Orders No. 20, written Aug. 21, 1925 which officially designated the land donated by the Dayton Air Service Committee as Wright Field.

WRIGHT FIELD



All: Official groundbreaking ceremony for first building at Wright Field held April 13, 1926. Many distinguished guests were in attendance including Frederick Patterson (left).



Below: Distinguished guests left to right, Constructing Quartermaster Captain E. M. George, Frederick Patterson, Katherine Wright, Orville Wright, Maj. John F. Curry, and Maj. Augustine Warner Robins, Commander of the Fairfield Air Depot.

Below: Maj. John F. Curry, Commander of McCook Field.



WRIGHT FIELD



28463

All: Beginnings of construction at Wright Field.

Left: Sites for the future Wright Field Administration and Laboratory buildings. April 21, 1926.

Right: Site for Administration building April 21, 1926.

These buildings were the first two constructed at Wright Field. The Administration building would later house the Headquarters for the Air Corps Materiel Division. Today it is known as Building 11 and the Laboratory as Building 16 in Area B.



30482

Below: Administration building construction April 21, 1926



30483

Below: Roadwork to beginning grading center road.



30484

WRIGHT FIELD

Right: Road Grading for East Road and (far right) West Road May 14, 1926.



30683



30688



30684



30685

Left: Administration Building construction, May 14, 1926.

Far Left: Excavation of footings for Laboratory Building, May 14, 1926.

WRIGHT FIELD



Above: Administration Building construction June 24, 1926.

Center Right: Laboratory Building Construction June 24, 1926.

Top and Bottom Right: Laboratory Building Construction.



WRIGHT FIELD



Above: View of Laboratory Building from the roof of the Administration Building Aug 25, 1926.



Above: View of the Laboratory Building from the Administration Building on Aug 25, 1926.



Right: Pouring the last of the top wall on the Laboratory Building Aug 25-26, 1926.

WRIGHT FIELD

Right: North and East sides of the Laboratory Building, Jan 11, 1927.



32406



Left: South and East sides of the Laboratory Building March 10, 1927.

WRIGHT FIELD



Left: Interior of the Laboratory Building, Jan. 11, 1927.

Below: Completed Administration Building, 1927.



WRIGHT FIELD

All: Dismantling of McCook Field beginning on March 25, 1927. By this time, there was sufficient enough headway at Wright Field to begin moving some McCook Field operations over to the new buildings. Some buildings, like the dynamometer lab and wind tunnels, were not completed until 1929, so those operations remained at McCook Field until that time.



WRIGHT FIELD



Aerial view of Wright Field under construction, including the Administration and Laboratory Buildings, Oct. 1, 1926.

WRIGHT FIELD



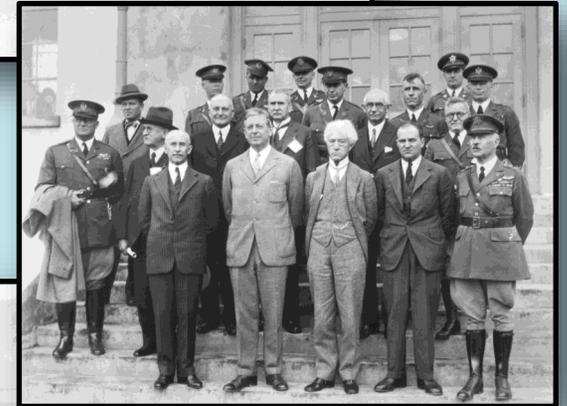
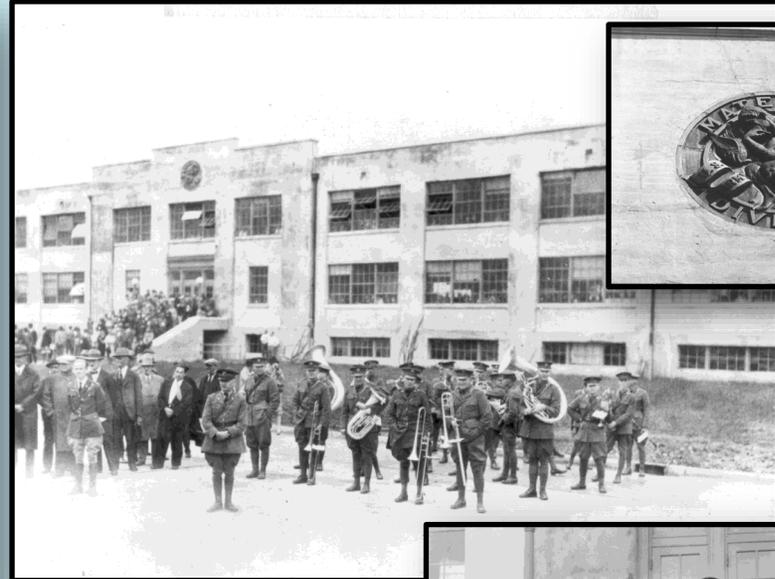
Aerial view of Wright Field under construction in 1927. There is noticeably more progress compared to the 1926 photo including, the completion of the Administration and Laboratory Buildings (front), the Final Assembly (center right), the Garage, Foundry, and Radio buildings (center left), Boiler House and Maintenance (far left), and Warehouses (Back Center).

WRIGHT FIELD



Aerial view of Wright Field under construction June 3, 1927. Including, in the top right of the photo, a view of 10 ft. Wind Tunnel and 40 Ton Craneway

WRIGHT FIELD



All: Ceremony for the Dedication of Wright Field held Oct. 12, 1927.

Above: Ceremonial raising of the first flag flown at Wright Field. Civilian police secure the flag after it was raised by Orville Wright.

Top Right: Ohio National Guard, 10 infantry Band performing in front of the Administration Building (now Building 11). Emblem in the top center of the building features the Materials Division logo.

Center Right: Distinguished guests of the ceremony including Orville Wright (front row left), Secretary of War Dwight Davis (front row next to Orville Wright), Assistant Secretary of War F. Trubee Davison (front row second to right), Chief of the Air Corps Major General Mason M. Patrick (front row right), and Chief of the Air Corps Materiel Division Brigadier General William E. Gillmore (second row, left).

Bottom Right: Photo of the Dedication Ceremony held in the auditorium of the Administration Building.



Message from the Assistant Secretary of War

In providing the site for the new Wright Field, residents of Dayton have once more demonstrated their air-mindedness and aviation enthusiasm.

Dayton—the home of the Wright brothers—can truly be called the cradle of aviation as it was through the intrepid, patient and intelligent efforts of Wilbur and Orville Wright that man attained his long cherished dream of conquering the air.

To be the cradle of one of the greatest branches of transportation man has ever known is, in itself, glory enough for any community but Dayton has not rested on its laurels. Instead, it has from time to time contributed in the most lasting and practical fashion to aviation development and progress.

The people of this country and the government itself owe a great debt of gratitude to the residents of your community for the part they have played in making possible a large share of the aviation advancement made in this country during recent years. The facilities and support offered the government by Dayton in the operation of the now abandoned McCook Field, enabled the War Department to conduct aviation research that has been of limitless benefit not alone to military aviation but to commercial aviation as well.

Many important chapters in air advancement have been written at McCook Field and all signs indicate that even more startling chapters of progress are to be penned at Wright Field. It gives promise of becoming one of the most important aviation proving grounds in the world. Due to the support they have given aviation in the past, and due to their latest magnificent contribution, the residents of Dayton are entitled to feel a great measure of pride in their valuable gift to air progress in America, and the people of this country have all reason to appreciate the public spirit which prompted Dayton once more to come to the fore in aviation support.

F. TRUBEE DAVISON,
Assistant Secretary of War.

"The real conquest of the air was begun by those Americans who brought the skill of science to the aid of the spirit of adventure. In order that this conquest may be constant and might more and more spread to the world, the partnership of the scientific and the adventurous spirit must be continued."

—Henry Van Dyke.

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Message from the Chief of Air Corps



Ever since the Engineering Division of the Air Corps was established at McCook Field, its work has been handicapped by virtue of inadequacy of space. The area of the flying field was too limited to permit of any extended experimental work in flight-testing airplanes and, in addition, its proximity to congested residential areas of Dayton rendered this work somewhat hazardous. Furthermore, the limited area of McCook Field reservation precluded possibilities of expansion which naturally come with almost every enterprise possessing such further promise a aviation does.

It was foreseen for some time past that the Air Corps would require a larger area for conducting its experimental engineering work and that McCook Field would eventually have to be abandoned. The enterprising citizens of Dayton, through their generosity and patriotic spirit, have come to the aid of the Army Air Corps at a most opportune time. Their donation of the large tract of land, some five miles from Dayton, for the site of the new Wright Field has afforded the Army Air Corps the foundation on which to build an experimental aviation field in keeping with its needs. This site should certainly afford adequate facilities for all the aeronautical development and experimental work contemplated by the Air Corps for the present and for some time to come.

Just now the new field is in an unfinished state and it will be several years yet before it will be the completed project planned. When that time comes, Wright Field will be the largest and finest experimental aviation plant in the world, a fitting monument to those two pioneer airmen of Dayton, the Wright Brothers, whose ingenuity and perseverance made heavier-than-air flight possible. It will be a field which both the Army Air Corps and the citizens of Dayton can point to with considerable pride.

GEN. MASON M. PATRICK
Major General Air Corps
Chief of Air Corps.

"I believe that any conflict in the future will be largely decided in favor of that nation that has the most thoroughly developed air service, and the largest world's organization of airmen."

—Gifford Pinchot.

Page Five

Message from the Secretary of War

Permit me to express to the citizens of Dayton my sincere appreciation of their generosity and patriotic motives in donating to the Government the large tract of land for the site of the new Wilbur Wright Field which makes possible the dedication of this field on October 12th.

As the home of the Wright Brothers, it is only just and proper that Dayton should be the logical place for the site of one of the important sub-divisions of the Army Air Corps—the Materiel Division.

The experimental and research work performed in the past by the Engineering Division of the Air Corps at McCook Field, despite its limited area and consequent curtailment of experimental flying, has had a tremendous influence in the development of aircraft and its accessories to their present high state of efficiency. The new Wright Field will afford facilities for carrying on the experimental and research work of the Air Corps on a considerably larger scale than heretofore. Established at a time when the Air Corps is undergoing the expansion program authorized by a recent act of Congress, the field will supply a very urgent need and enable the Materiel Division to conduct its enlarged functions without the handicaps with which it was encumbered in the past.

I realize that at the present time the field is in a comparatively unfinished state, and that many new projects contemplated for it have not yet been started, but I venture to say that when the field reaches its complete state, the citizens of Dayton may well be proud of claiming the largest and finest experimental aircraft station in the world.

Very truly yours,

(Signed) DWIGHT F. DAVIS
Secretary of War.

Message from the Chief Materiel Division



The establishment of a permanent home for the headquarters of the Materiel Division, and suitable laboratories for prosecuting the engineering and scientific work necessary in procuring satisfactory flying and fighting equipment for our Air Corps, is a matter that should react with general pride and satisfaction to all the people of our great country, and in particular to the people of Dayton, who through their generosity and understanding cooperation have helped to make these plans possible.

It is a fortuitous circumstance that the magnificent tract of land given to the government by the citizens of Dayton, should also be the scene of the first flying experiments of Wilbur and Orville Wright.

It is particularly fitting that this historic site should for all time be devoted to further experimentation in aviation, and maintained as an active and useful monument to their great gift to mankind. The dedication of this field in honor of the Wright brothers, and of the people of Dayton who presented the site to the Government, should be a splendid inspiration to the men who must carry on this important work, which in spite of the wonderful progress made in the near past, is but in its infancy.

It is pleasing to think, that the name of Wright, in addition to the glory already won, will hereafter be directly associated with the future developments in aviation.

WM. E. GILLMORE,
Brigadier General, Air Corps,
Chief, Materiel Division.

"The way of thinking—and the observation is based on first-hand experience as a correspondent in Europe in 1914 and again in 1917-18—that nation which is best equipped in the aviation arm will have the most promising future. I expect to live long enough to fly around the world. The Wrights have made Jules Verne's trip look like a coast-traveling."

—Ervin S. Cadd.

Page Six

Message from the Chairman,
Dayton Air Service Committee



The year nineteen hundred and twenty-seven in aeronautics, so far as the United States is concerned, may be considered a period of impressive advancement along scientific lines. Enough has been accomplished in aviation to warrant the suggestion that much more ground work has been done and enlarged foundations constructed for the future of this science.

Not least among the contributions to this subject is the progress that has been made at Wright Field. Within the past twelve months a vast program has been set in motion and much of it already has been carried into effect. We are not assuming too much to speculate upon another year bringing this gigantic undertaking pretty close to a complete conclusion—providing, of course, that Congress provides sufficient appropriations to enable the work so ably started to continue to a successful completion.

When one takes into consideration the tremendous opportunities that are offered to the subject of aviation through the operation of Wright Field, it is little wonder that the average person becomes somewhat suspicious of claims that are being made. And yet results will tell the story, better than prophecies.

Research work in all lines is essential to progress. Industry understands that principle and uses it. Aviation needs to be guided by the same ideas. No individual airplane manufacturing company could afford to engage in the wide spread of expensive research that is possible with the government. The government on the other hand needs to encourage this industry as well as strengthen, at the same time, its own position along national defense lines.

Wright Field will offer abundant and practical co-operation between the manufacturers and the government and when we stop to reflect upon what the engineering, experimental and research departments at the old McCook Field have accomplished for the science of aeronautics, it requires no great stretch of the imagination to see this work greatly increased in the newly completed Wright Field.

FREDERICK B. PATTERSON,
Chairman, Dayton Air Service
Committee, Inc.

"Dayton honors itself and helps in the greatest development in our day in honoring the Wrights and advancing aviation. I expect to live long enough to fly around the world. The Wrights have made Jules Verne's trip look like a coast-traveling."

—Joseph Daniels.

Page Seven

PROGRAM
DEDICATION of WRIGHT FIELD



IN HONOR of
WILBUR WRIGHT
ORVILLE WRIGHT
and
The Citizens of Dayton who presented the
Wright Field site to the Government

DAYTON, OHIO
October 12, 1927

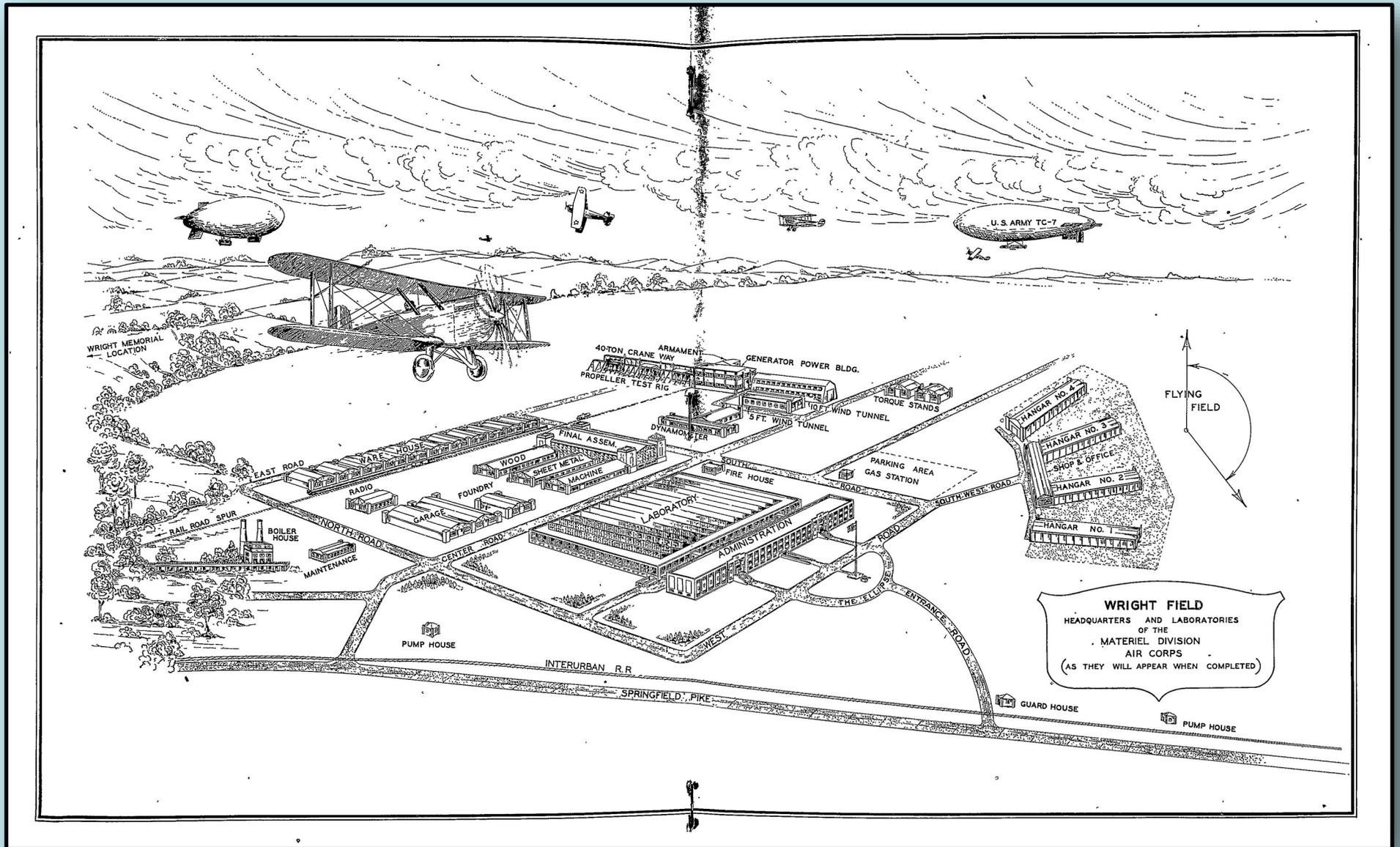
...become a strong arm of National defense and a vital instrument of

—Vic Donahay.

Page Three

All: Excerpts from the Program for the Wright Field Dedication Ceremony held Oct. 12, 1927.

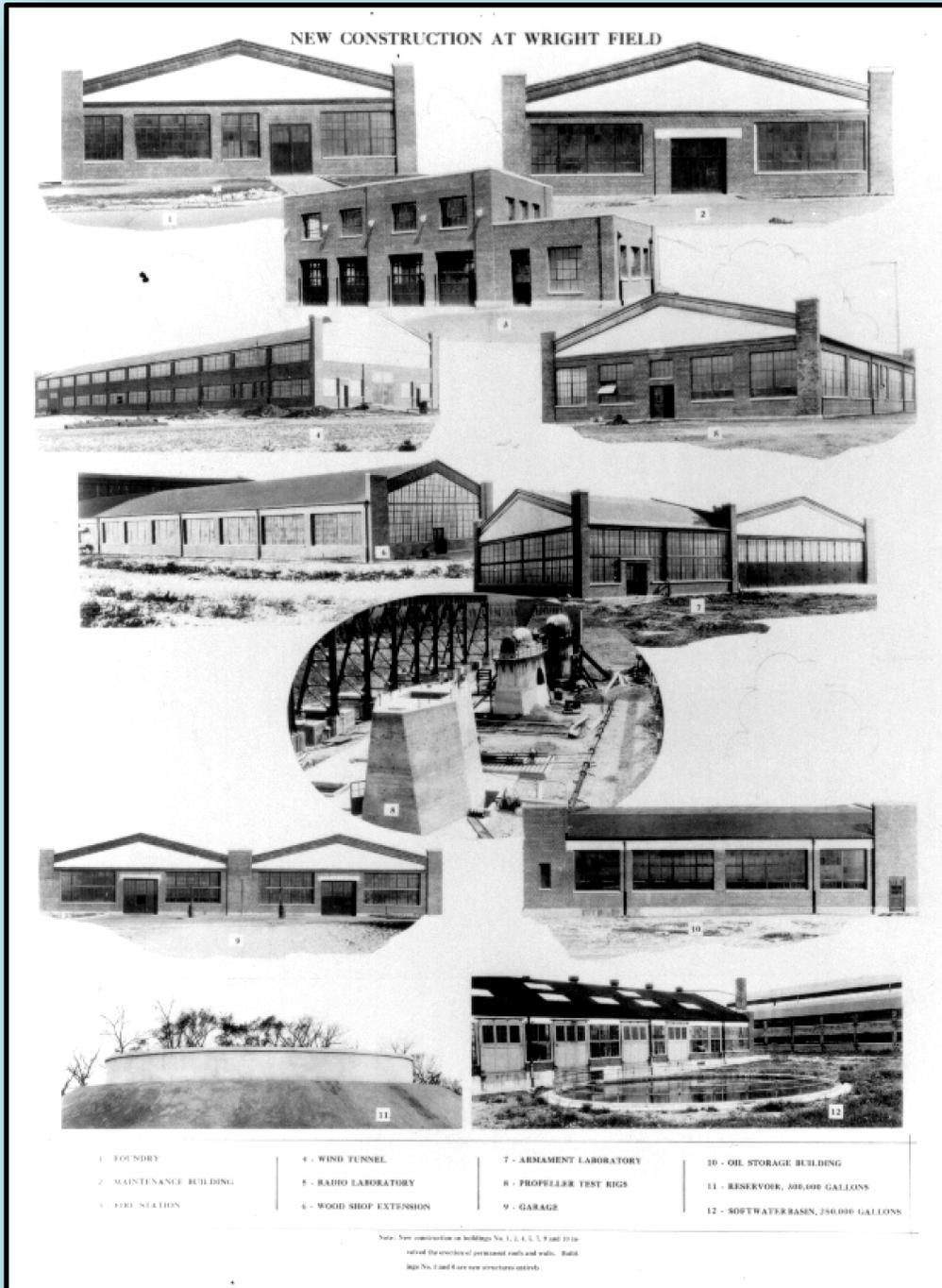
WRIGHT FIELD



WRIGHT FIELD
 HEADQUARTERS AND LABORATORIES
 OF THE
 MATERIEL DIVISION
 AIR CORPS
 (AS THEY WILL APPEAR WHEN COMPLETED)

Future layout of Wright Field, as depicted in the Wright Field Dedication Ceremony Program, Oct. 12, 1927.

WRIGHT FIELD

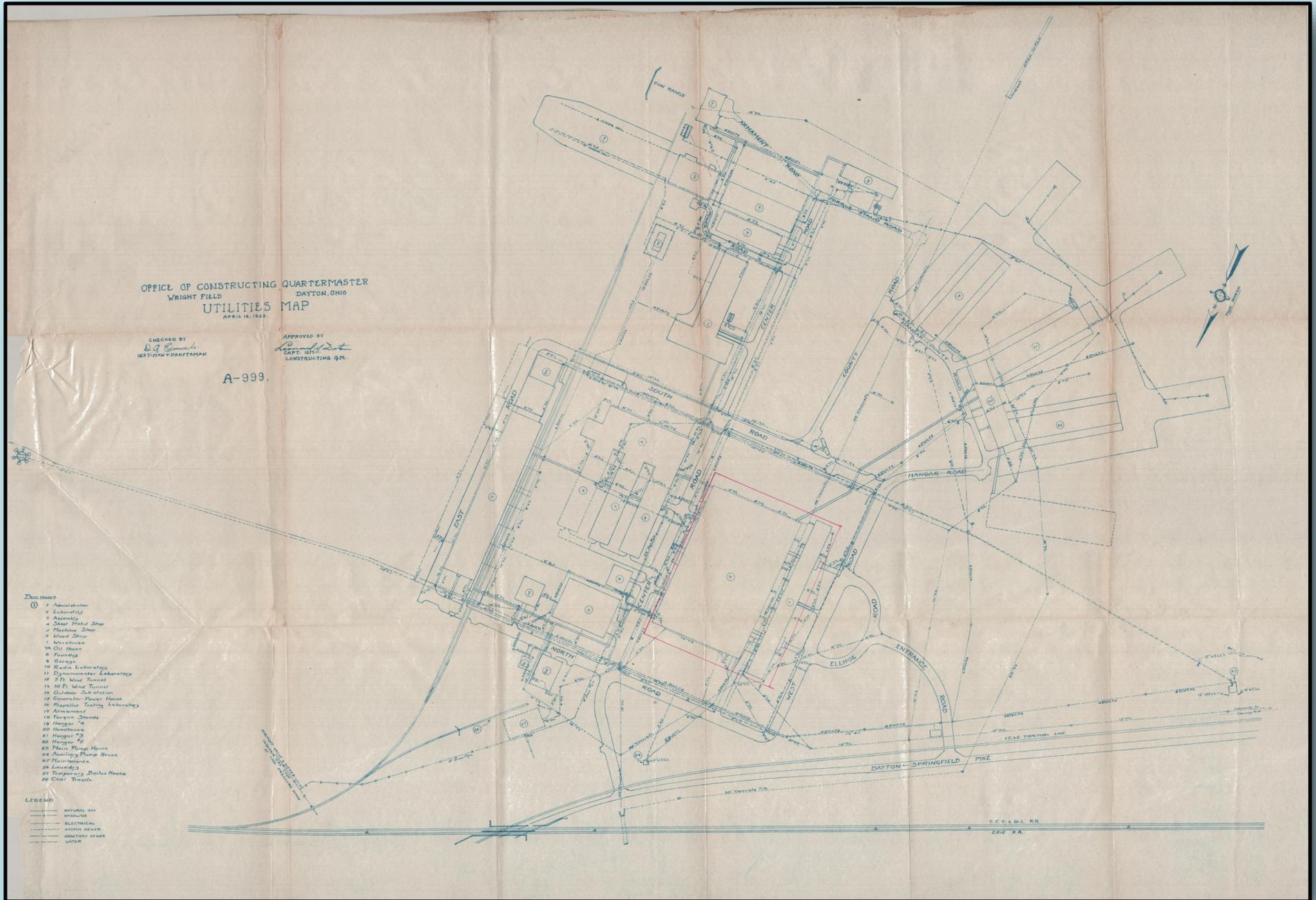


Left: Major facilities completed at Wright Field by 1929.

Below: Main Entrance to Wright Field, Oct. 1932.



WRIGHT FIELD



Map of Wright Field Utilities, April 18, 1929.

WRIGHT FIELD



Aerial view of Wright Field, 1930. By this time, the Dynamometer Lab, 5-foot Wind Tunnel, and Generator Power Buildings were completed, all of which are located in the top right of photo.



AFMC History & Heritage Program

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