



*The museum that moves you!*

## **News Release**

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### **N.C. Transportation Museum is ‘untying the apron strings’**

SPENCER, N.C.— North Carolina Transportation Museum staff members were starting from scratch when they decided to do an exhibit featuring the role of women in transportation.

“When we first started, we really didn’t know what we were getting into,” admits Walter Turner, museum historian and one of the coordinators for “Untying the Apron Strings: North Carolina Women in Transportation,” a temporary exhibit opening Aug. 27. “None of us knew much about women in transportation.”

And learning about the topic proved to be difficult, because the available recorded history is very limited, Exhibits Coordinator Bob Hopkins said.

“Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, recorded history of women in transportation is pretty much non-existent,” Hopkins said. “This exhibit stands out because we have initiated most of the research, developed most of the history and collected most of the artifacts from scratch.”

“Untying the Apron Strings” focuses on transportation progress by women during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when new opportunities for women began to emerge, primarily in the field of aviation.

“Aviation didn’t embrace women at first, but there were breakthroughs along the way,” Turner says, pointing to the accomplishments of Mary Webb Nicholson and the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), both stories that are highlighted in the exhibit.

Nicholson, a Greensboro native, was the state’s first licensed female pilot, and ferried planes with the British Air Transport Auxiliary during World War II, until she was killed when her plane’s engine failed.

But she was not the only woman to serve as a pilot during the war. More than 1,000 women served as WASPs in a program that lasted only two years during World War II and, according to Turner, has been largely forgotten.

These pilots ferried warplanes, towed targets for training anti-aircraft gunners and had to learn to fly many different kinds of planes. After the war ended, though, many had trouble finding jobs in aviation. Other aviation opportunities didn’t begin to emerge until the 1970s, when the Air Force and commercial airlines began to accept women as pilots, Turner said. This advancement is detailed in the exhibit through the story of the first female pilots and flight attendants for North Carolina’s Piedmont Airlines.

One barrier to women working in the transportation industry was perhaps the strength often required in such jobs. In aviation, for example, “it was traditionally thought that women weren’t strong enough to handle the landing gear,” Turner said.

While many women proved they had the physical ability to handle such jobs, other women worked behind the scenes, lobbying for improved roads, safer transportation and even starting transportation businesses.

The exhibit also tells the stories of these women, including Elizabeth Dole, who, as secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation, was instrumental in expanding the use of seat belts and air bags; Harriet Berry, who worked for state highway improvements; and Pat Long, who co-founded healthcare transport company Longistics with husband Duane.

“Untying the Apron Strings” is sponsored by Bonnie McElveen-Hunter and Pace Communications, North Carolina’s Touchstone Energy cooperatives, Spencer High Class of 1943 and the Spencer Woman’s Club.

The exhibit, featuring rare photographs, aviation uniforms, other artifacts and props, and an orientation video, will be on display in the museum’s Wagons, Wheels and exhibit hall. It is slated to stay at the museum until December 31, 2005. For information, call 704-636-2889 or visit [www.nctrans.org](http://www.nctrans.org).

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*The North Carolina Transportation Museum, located in historic Spencer Shops, the former Southern Railway repair facility for steam locomotives, is part of the Division of State Historic Sites, a division of the Department of Cultural Resources. The museum offers free admission and is conveniently located just a few minutes off I-85 in Spencer, N.C., and about an hour from Charlotte, Greensboro or Winston-Salem.*