

Wheeler Airlines: An American First

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In North Carolina, aviation experienced important developments in the late 1920s. In 1928 the state's first airmail flight landed at Lindley Field in Greensboro. By 1929 Raleigh introduced commercial air passenger service. Shortly thereafter, flights began to serve Greensboro and Charlotte. At the beginning of the 1930s, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh were served by the recently founded Eastern Airlines.

White Americans controlled all flying services. In fact, because of high fares, few African Americans took flights. However, by the end of the 1960s, more middle-class Americans could afford to fly. Because of this, all Americans began viewing airplanes as an economical way to travel. Yet not until 1969 did an African American own an airline. That person was Warren Hervey Wheeler.

Wheeler was born in 1943 in Durham. His father, John H. Wheeler, was a well-known businessman and civil rights leader. Wheeler's mother, Selena Warren Wheeler, was a well-respected businesswoman and librarian. Having a distinguished economic and social heritage, Warren Wheeler began his pursuit of a special dream.

Wheeler became interested in flying in the mid-1950s. According to his mother, "From the very beginning, I could see that flying was in Warren's blood." The year was 1957, and Wheeler was fourteen years old.

At the beginning of the 1960s, Wheeler received two very important items: a diploma from Durham's Hillside High School and a private pilot's license. After high school, Wheeler entered North Carolina A&T State College (now University) in Greensboro. There he studied electrical engineering; however, after his first year, he became bored and chose to continue his aviation training to receive a commercial pilot's license. Because of racial segregation, earning a commercial pilot's license was not possible for Wheeler in North Carolina or any of the other southern states. In order to realize his dream, he had to leave the South.

The first commercial pilot training center to accept Wheeler was the American Flyers School in Ardmore, Oklahoma. According to Wheeler's mother, a school official stated: "We have never had [an African American], but if you send him, we will see what we can do." Wheeler's studies at school were successful, and in 1962 he achieved a major part of his dream: He was fully accredited and licensed to fly multiengine planes—at the age of nineteen! In fact, Wheeler obtained both his multiengine rating and his commercial license from the American Flyers School. He was the school's first African American graduate.

With credentials in hand, Wheeler returned to North Carolina in 1962, only to find that job opportunities for African American pilots were few and that he lacked adequate hours of flying experience. He learned that certification by one of the top domestic flight training schools was not enough to obtain a position with a major airline. Realizing this, Wheeler, with financial backing from his family, opened his own flying school in 1962 at the Horace Williams Airport in Chapel Hill. His rationale behind starting the school was to obtain enough flight hours to meet the requirements for employment by the major commercial airlines. To do this, Wheeler purchased his first small aircraft and began instructing white students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to the school, Wheeler also began a charter service “to gain more flight experience.”

After three years of operating a flying school and charter service successfully, Wheeler accumulated enough flight hours to qualify for employment by a major airline. His race continued to be a factor, however. None of the large airlines was willing to consider his application, until former governor Terry Sanford recommended him to Piedmont Airlines.

While governor (1961–1965), Sanford had flown on charter flights with Wheeler as pilot. Because of his confidence in Wheeler, Sanford recommended him to the president of Piedmont Airlines, Tom Davis. Out of respect for Sanford, Davis allowed Wheeler to take Piedmont’s pilot examination. Wheeler met all of the qualifications, and in March 1966, at the age of twenty-two, became the first African American and one of the youngest pilots that Piedmont Airlines hired.

Although Wheeler was proud of integrating the pilot ranks at Piedmont, he was not through making history. He became the first African American to own a commercial air carrier when he founded Wheeler Flying Service in 1969.

Wheeler advertised his company as a charter, air cargo, and aircraft maintenance service. As president, he developed it to include eleven single- and twin-engine propeller aircraft. In its early years, the flying service averaged 8,000 passengers annually.

From 1973 to 1976, Wheeler Flying Service grew from a part-time charter air carrier into an important transportation link between several North Carolina towns. By 1973 the charter service was capable of going anywhere in the United States. From 208 passengers a month in that year, the company grew to carry more than 1,000 passengers each month by 1976. In response to a constantly increasing number of passengers, Wheeler changed the company’s name to Wheeler Airlines. By 1976 the carrier had established regularly scheduled flights from Raleigh-Durham to Greenville and Charlotte, North Carolina; Newport News, Virginia; Richmond, Virginia; and New York’s LaGuardia Airport. The company also served smaller eastern North Carolina towns such as Kinston, New Bern, Nag’s Head, and Wilson.

On some air routes, Wheeler’s flights competed directly with Piedmont—and won. With the increased revenue, Wheeler was able to purchase a building, computerized facilities,

and an aircraft maintenance hangar. His business grossed \$380,000 in 1975. Wheeler had secured very profitable contracts from companies throughout the Raleigh-Durham and Research Triangle Park area. The Flying Service was the parent company of Wheeler Airlines, and by 1976 Wheeler's business was considered a reliable operation. The spring of 1976 saw another milestone in the history of the airline—air service to Asheville began. This made Wheeler a trans-North Carolina air carrier.

Such growth made it necessary for Wheeler to employ workers who were flexible and could quickly adapt to unexpected changes. On several occasions, the person who sold tickets would also be the pilot and the baggage handler. As economic conditions improved, so did the company's ability to hire additional employees. Wheeler had long felt that there were too few African Americans training for aviation careers. While interviewing prospective workers, he observed that African Americans were not accustomed to flying and had limited knowledge of careers in the flight industry. He also concluded that "flying any style [remained] a lofty phenomenon in black culture." Therefore, Wheeler had a difficult time finding African American pilots. The shortage was so great that in 1976 the Air Line Pilots Association reported that of an estimated 37,000 airline pilots, fewer than one hundred were black.

Throughout the mid-1970s and early 1980s, Wheeler Airlines enjoyed the distinction of being the only minority-owned airline in the nation. Warren Wheeler continued to work as a Piedmont Airlines pilot and also advanced in civic life. Between 1977 and 1980, he received appointments to North Carolina's Commission on Transportation and the Governor's Commission on Travel and Tourism, and the Organization of Black Airline Pilots presented him with a plaque for outstanding achievement.

In addition, Wheeler administered a minority pilot training program through the state Division of Community Employment as part of the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) Title III. The first year, 1979, ten people participated in Wheeler's training. The CETA contract allowed him to train eight people as copilots and two as aircraft mechanics. Wheeler also negotiated with Eastern, United, and Piedmont Airlines to secure job placement for his students.

By the 1980s, Wheeler Airlines averaged more than 40,000 passengers a year and had expanded scheduled service to include additional cities in North Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York. To provide that service, Wheeler increased his fleet to include several fifteen-passenger Beech 99 jet props and a larger, forty-passenger Fairchild F-27 turboprop. Warren Wheeler had achieved his goal of working for a major airline as well as his ambition of operating a successful commuter airline that offered career opportunities to African American and white men and women.

In response to the company's growth, Wheeler began another business—Wheeler Regional Airlines. It flew passengers from Richmond to Greensboro, chartered flights anywhere in America, and transported checks to Federal Reserve banks.

In 1989 Captain Wheeler became a pilot for Piedmont's successor, USAir. The same year he was appointed to Virginia's aviation board. Two years later, Wheeler became chair of the aviation board.

Because of an unstable economy during the 1980s, Wheeler Airlines had to close its doors. When Wheeler terminated the company in 1991, its fleet consisted of nine aircraft manned by seventeen pilots. In all, Wheeler's organization had employed approximately forty-five people. But from 1969 to 1991, Warren Wheeler had provided career training for more than one hundred men and women.

For twenty-two years, Wheeler lived his dream of owning the nation's first African American airline. Today he makes his home in the Virgin Islands and continues to fly.

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