

**Black-Owned Firm**

# Wheeler Airlines Serves Four State Area

By Warren D. Blackshear  
 "Wheeler Airlines... now with Jet-Prop Service to Augusta" reads the red, white and blue flight schedule published by the nation's only black-owned airline with regularly scheduled flights. This statement is a good indication of the latest development of the busiest commuter airline at Raleigh-Durham Airport.

From its inception in 1969, the relatively new airline has grown to where it employs ten pilots and has eight flying machines. The latest additions to its air force includes two, 15-passenger Beech 99 prop-jet aircraft. It provides regular service between seven airports in Georgia, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia.

Last month, a slow month

for air carriers, Wheeler Airlines transported 2000 passengers to their destinations. Although this hardly compares with the major carriers, it represents tremendous growth from the 208 passengers carried the first month it started carrying them in 1973. It also marks a major accomplishment for the airline's 33 year old president, Warren H. Wheeler, a native of Durham.

While the public hears a lot about supersonic jets and huge passenger carrying capacity aircraft, the future looks bright for the commuter airlines such as Wheeler's. "There will be an increasing need for commuter airlines," says James Weaver, RDU Airport Manager, as the major and local airlines get more sophisticated.

Rather than competing, the commuter is in tune with

inbound and outbound flights of the major airlines and can pick up or deliver passengers to outlying areas with a minimum of delay. Weaver said that in such areas the major aircraft carriers cannot provide regular service on an economical basis.

The commuter also provides rapid transportation for business persons where time is at a premium. This is the case of Burroughs-Wellcome Company, a large Wheeler customer with home offices and laboratories in Research Triangle Park and a manufacturing facility in Greenville.

The Airport Manager said that the new airline fits a image and has good growth potential. The public, Weaver continued, "has confidence in Wheeler Airlines."

Headquartered in a 11,500 square foot, two-story office building and hanger at RDU, Wheeler employs 29 persons to conduct the airlines diversified operations. In addition to the passenger service which used the largest number of persons as pilots, ticket agents and reservationists, Wheeler offers air freight, charter flight and maintenance services.

Under a contract with the Financial Courier Corporation, the airline transports cancelled checks for banks in a tri-state area. This operation uses the smaller aircraft and accounts for about 30% of their overall business.

Groups or firms can charter Wheeler's planes to any airport in the nation. A five-man aircraft maintenance department, headed by Linzie Farmer, supervisor, maintains the fleet of aircraft and the planes of other clients.

Having undergone a rapid growth, Wheeler indicated that the future emphasis will be placed on consolidating the commuter passenger service. Together with 31 year old Wayne Watson, general manager, the airline has taken steps to improve the quality of service on the scheduled flights.

"The new Beech 99 prop-jets will afford us more uniform scheduling and greater

capacity on the regular flights," Watson said, "and it will help maintain passenger confidence in our service."

Admitting that confidence was a major factor with a smaller airline, Watson said that he was proud of Wheeler Airlines' "no accident" safety record. While they must adhere to certain minimum requirements, the general manager reported that they subject themselves to more stringent standards than those set by the Federal Aviation Authority.

When thinking in terms of the major carriers, a trip with Wheeler Airlines is very deceptive because the same efficient services are provided by a much smaller group of workers who are seen hustling about doing a variety of chores. Pilots are seen loading luggage and checking tickets; the general manager helps coordinate reservations, works with the ticket agent and transports luggage to the gate; and the president himself is at the terminal to check with pilots on incoming flights. All are going about their tasks in a cheerful, professional manner.

Wheeler is not spared the normal problems of the major carriers, but the solutions can come much quicker. When a passenger's baggage didn't get to the right location, a quickly called conference identified the cause as the major carrier which booked the flight didn't have the proper markers. The next flight out had an adequate supply of luggage markers to eliminate any future mishaps.

The fledgling airlines also has had its share of training, for the major airlines. Last year it reported having a crew of four black pilots. Since then the number has been reduced with one going to American and another to Piedmont.

The longest run for the commuter airline is from Asheville to Norfolk, Va. Wheeler's planes fly the 365 mile trip in three hours which includes stops in Charlotte, Greenville and Raleigh-Durham. The cost is \$58. The non-

stop flight from Raleigh to Augusta, Ga., (260 miles) takes one hour and 55 minutes for \$40. The 140 miles non-stop trip from Raleigh to Charlotte takes 45 minutes for \$27.

Warren Wheeler first became acquainted with airplanes as a youth when he was given a ride with his sister who was taking flying lessons at the time. He began his own lessons at 14 and had his private license when he reached 17.

After graduating from Hillside High School, he entered A&T State University. A year later he left to pursue a career in flying - his first love. Wheeler entered the American Flyers School in Oklahoma where he obtained his multi-engine ratings and commercial license.

Back in North Carolina, Wheeler began a small flight school in Chapel Hill training college students to fly. He became the first black pilot and one of the youngest pilots to be hired by Piedmont Airlines at the age of 22. He still flies for Piedmont as Senior Co-Pilot.

His entry into the airlines business came about when another private pilot disclosed plans to begin a commuter airlines but later backed out. The Coastal Plains Regional Commission, a federal agency, was interested in the plan and decided to subsidize the service in an attempt to stimulate commerce and industry in the smaller eastern shore communities.

The CPRC backed Wheeler Airlines with \$150,000 which was used to offset the carrier's operating losses. The business was also aided by a loan from the Small Business Administration. The CPRC subsidies ended after three years and now the fledgling airlines is making a go of it on its own.

Interesingly enougH. Warren, son of John H.

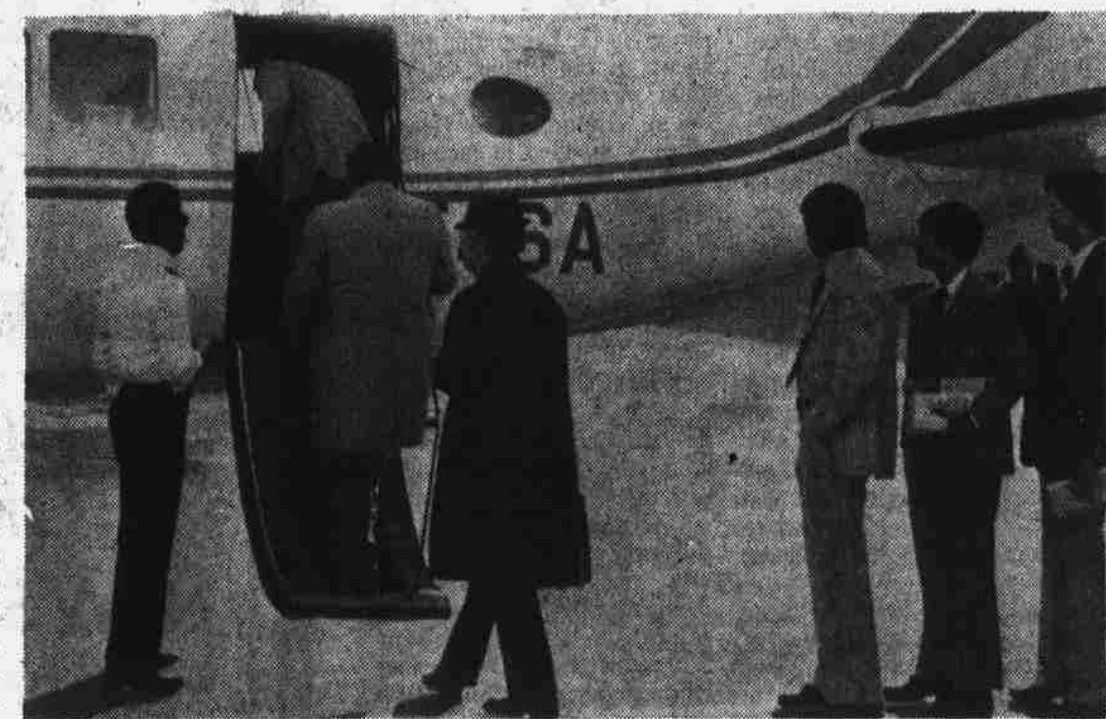
Wheeler, president of Mechanics and Farmers Bank, was introduced to the air by his sister, Julia who followed in her father's footsteps with a career in banking and his mother is now handling a variety of chores at Wheeler Airlines.



**CONFIRMS RESERVATION** - Judy Lucas records necessary information to confirm passenger reservation at Wheeler ticket counter in Raleigh-Durham Airport terminal.



**CHECK OUT** - (Above) After checking details of last flight, Wheeler and pilot Bob Brady leave aircraft. (Below) Passengers enter Wheeler Airlines 15 passenger Beech 99 jet prop on way to Charlotte while co-pilot Sidney Clark Assists at left. (The Carolina Times Photos by Blackshear).



**SPONTANEOUS CONFERENCE** - Wheeler Airlines President Warren H. Wheeler holds a spontaneous conference with Wayne Watson, general manager while awaiting the arrival of Flight 303 from Charlotte, N. C.

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