Overview

The Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum maintains the world's largest collection of historic aircraft and spacecraft among some 60,000 artifacts that range in size from Saturn V rockets to jetliners to gliders to space helmets to microchips. The museum is a vital center for historical research on aviation and spaceflight and the related science and technology. It is also home to the Center for Earth and Planetary Studies, which performs original research and outreach activities on topics covering planetary science, terrestrial geophysics and the remote sensing of environmental change.

The museum has two public display facilities. The museum on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., which opened in July 1976, houses many of the icons of flight, including the original 1903 Wright Flyer, Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, Chuck Yeager's Bell X-1, John Glenn's Friendship 7 spacecraft, the Apollo 11 command module and a lunar rock sample that visitors can touch. Since opening, the building in Washington, DC has been one of the most visited museum facility in the world, attracting on average more than nine million people annually. The museum's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center in Chantilly, Va., which opened in December 2003, permits the display of many more artifacts in an open, hangar-like setting, including a Lockheed SR-71 Blackbird, a Concorde, the Boeing B-29 Superfortress Enola Gay, the "Dash 80" prototype for the 707, the sole-surviving Boeing 307 Stratoliner and Space Shuttle Discovery.

Work on the museum's artifacts takes place in the newly constructed Mary Baker Engen Restoration Hangar at the Udvar-Hazy Center. From a glassed-in mezzanine, visitors are able to view behind-the-scenes work rarely seen by the public. Museum staff members are currently moving the majority of the Museum’s collection items from the Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility in Suitland, MD to the Udvar-Hazy Center.

With the two facilities, comprising the largest air and space history complex in the world, the museum can display most of its collection.

Mission Statement

The National Air and Space Museum shall commemorate the national development of aviation and spaceflight, and will educate and inspire the nation by:

- Preserving and displaying aeronautical and spaceflight equipment and data of historical interest and significance to the progress of aviation and spaceflight
- Developing educational materials and conducting programs to increase the public's understanding of, and involvement in, the development of aviation and spaceflight
- Conducting and disseminating new research in the study of aviation and spaceflight and their related technologies.
History

The Smithsonian's aeronautical collection began in 1876 when a group of kites was acquired from the Chinese Imperial Commission. Aeronautical artifacts were displayed in the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building and later in a nearby shed.

As the collection grew much larger after World War II, President Harry S. Truman signed in 1946 Public Law 722 in 1946, establishing the Smithsonian's National Air Museum to memorialize the development of aviation; collect, preserve and display aeronautical equipment; and provide educational material for the study of aviation.

In 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed Public Law 89-509, which changed the name of the National Air Museum to the National Air and Space Museum to memorialize the development of both aviation and spaceflight. The museum's collection expanded to include missiles and rockets, some of which were displayed outdoors near the Arts and Industries Building. The law signed by Johnson also authorized the construction of a new museum building.

Since its opening, the National Air and Space Museum's building in Washington, DC has been limited by size to the display of only about ten percent of the collection of aircraft and large space artifacts. With another ten percent on loan, it was necessary to keep roughly 80 percent of the collection in storage. In 1980 the Smithsonian's Board of Regents proposed that the National Air and Space Museum establish a second facility in the Washington area and located near a major airport to allow some artifacts to be flown in.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed Public Law 103-57 establishing an extension for the museum at Washington Dulles International Airport in Virginia. Three years later he signed Public Law 104-222, which authorized the museum to construct the new companion facility using only privately raised funds—a first for the Smithsonian. The future Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center would also be the largest construction project in Smithsonian history.

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