The Aero Club of New England (ACONE) was the first aeronautical club to be formed in America and dates from the ninth day of January, 1902, when eleven well known Boston men, meeting socially at the Massachusetts Automobile Club, signed an agreement to associate as a club and to indulge in the sport of ballooning. Nearly six years later, on November 21, 1907, on the 124th anniversary of the first ascent of man into the air, the club was formally incorporated with some forty members and has since has played an active and important role in New England and American aviation.

First Aeronautical Club in the Country

The honor of having formed the first aeronautical club in the country belongs unquestionably to Mr. Charles J. Glidden, one of the founders of the Bell Telephone System and the founder of the automobile tours bearing his name. During the early years of the Aero Club, Glidden and other members received instruction as balloon pilots in the United States and in Europe. Glidden was a balloonist of note in this and other countries, and during World War I was an officer in the Balloon Corps of the United States Army. It was Mr. Glidden who formulated the terms of the organization of the Club in 1902 at the Massachusetts Automobile Club located at 441 Boylston Street, near Copley Square in Boston. The signers of the agreement to establish an aero club were Charles J. Glidden, Dr. W. A. Rolfe, Dr. J. S. Stedman, Dr. F. L. D. Rust, Royal R. Sheldon, Arthur W. Stedman, George E. McQuesten, Newton Crane, J. Ransom Bridge, Ernest L. Renter, and Henry Howard. Two of these signers, the first and last, were still active members of the Club in 1918.

The Aero Club of New England Receives its Charter and Elects a President and Board of Directors

Prof. A. Lawrence Rotch of Harvard University, founder and director of the Blue Hill Observatory, was elected the first President of the Aero Club at the first Board of Directors meeting at Young’s Hotel, Court Square, Boston on November 21, 1907, the Club existing without a formal organization or election of officers up to that time. Members attending this Board of Directors meeting included: Timothy E. Byrnes, former head of the New Haven Railroad; Frank R. Frapee of Lowell; Harry G. Pollard of Lowell, elected ACONE Treasurer; Charles J. Glidden of Boston, leading spirit in both automobiling and flying in the United States; George E. McQuesten of Boston, Lt. Robert Henderson, Alfred R. Shrigley of Boston; elected ACONE Secretary; W. E. Eldredge, R. R. Sheldon, Francis E. Stanley of Newton, automobile manufacturer; Henry Howard, chemical engineer of Brookline and William Henry Pickering, noted Harvard astronomer. Thomas G. Washburn, well-known Boston
realtor; Henry H. Cummings, Leo Stevens, who later made the Club’s first balloon; George J. Altham of Fall River; A. C. Wilson, Frank H. Comins, Luke J. Minahan of Pittsfield and Joseph Wattles.

Similar clubs were shortly afterward formed in North Adams, Pittsfield, Springfield, Worcester and other cities and at Williams, Amherst, Harvard, Dartmouth and other colleges. The Aero Club of New England purchased a balloon, of 35,000 cubic feet capacity, called the "Boston," and similar purchases were made at North Adams, Pittsfield and Springfield, the latter securing a balloon of 50,000 cubic feet capacity. Up to 1915 the New England Club constantly maintained another balloon of the "Boston" capacity, and bearing the same name, and for a time owned and had in service the balloon "Massachusetts," of 65,000 cubic feet. In addition to these balloons others were owned by members of the New England and allied clubs so that for some years six or eight balloons were constantly available to the club members.

Interest in the sport was aroused to such extent that New England and Massachusetts easily became the center of aeronautical activity for the entire country and for a number of years more ascensions were made annually in Massachusetts under the auspices of the Aero Club of New England than were credited to all other states combined. Prominent New Yorkers quickly caught the fascination and novelty of the sport and balloons larger than any of those owned in New England were transported to Pittsfield and North Adams for flights over New England.

Interest in the sport was accelerated by the inauguration of races and other contests, for which cups were offered by leading members of the club, Boston and Montreal newspapers, various clubs and organizations in the New England states and in Canada, many of the flights at that time extending over the Canadian border.

The Early Years of the Gas Balloon

The history of the development of the Club naturally divides itself into two periods, the earlier period covering the years when the study of aeronautics was limited to gas ballooning, and the second, or more recent years, when aeronautics has been concerned more especially with the aeroplane. The periods overlap somewhat, for while interest in aviation began to take serious hold of the club as early as 1910, with the holding of aviation meets and expositions in Boston, active participation in ballooning was carried on by many of the members until as late as 1915, when the Club gas balloons: the “Boston” of 35 thousand cubic feet capacity and the “Massachusetts” nearly twice as large of 65,000 cubic feet capacity became unfit for further use and were not replaced.

Two Hundred and Forty-two Ascensions with No Accidents

In the period from 1907 to 1915 inclusive, 242 ascensions were made in New England under the auspices of the Club in which 640 passengers were carried into the air and some 9,700 miles traveled. The balloons were in the air for a total of 435 hours. Participation in the sport reached its greatest interest in 1909 when 87 flights were made. Sixty-eight flights were made in 1908, 30 in 1910 and 20 in 1911. Considerably fewer flights were made in the earlier and later years.

It is a very gratifying record that throughout the entire history of the sport as conducted by the Aero Club of New England no serious accidents occurred. The wrenching of an ankle by one Club member through alighting too quickly from his balloon basket constituted virtually the only mishap through the many years.

Five early members of the Club qualified as balloon pilots and received their licenses as such. Charles J. Glidden received license number one, issued by the Aero Club of America, in August 1908, and the others in order were H. Helm Clayton, long director of Blue Hill Observatory, Henry N. Arnold of North Adams,

With these pilots as a nucleus there was formed through the Aero Club of New England in November, 1909, the first Association of International Aeronautical Pilots, with Charles J. Glidden as president, and the membership included a large number of those throughout the country who had received balloon pilot's licenses.

**Novel Balloon Experiences in the Air**

It would take many pages to chronicle the unique experiences and thrilling events which characterized the sport during the years from 1907 to 1915. There were day flights over long distances, extending as far as Montreal, deep into the Maine forests and down the Hudson, even to New York City and Long Island, and these were varied by night trips to catch the beauties of dawning day. A prominent Boston sculptor and his bride took their honeymoon trip on one of these night voyages and had their breakfast coffee served above the clouds at sunrise. One member of the Club met his mate, proposed and was accepted by his lady companion while in the air. Three members of the Club, all 32 degree Masons, formed Aerial Lodge No. 1 of Master Masons and for several years made annual pilgrimages to their "temple above" for observance of their secret rites. In 1911 the first intercollegiate balloon race was held, which was won by the University of Pennsylvania over Dartmouth and Williams. There were pursuit races and "point to point" races. In the latter the attempt being made to land nearest some point designated before the start of the race. Nor were all the events of a sporting character. Professor Clayton made a serious study of upper air currents in his numerous flights; some of the first experiments made in "bomb" dropping were with the use of eggs by pilots of the New England Club balloons, and Prof. and Mrs. David Todd of Amherst College made a night ascension, carrying along a large sized telescope, for a special study and observation of Mars, which resulted in some interesting data being secured.

These activities of the New England Club and its members were watched and followed with eager interest by newspapers all over the country and The Associated Press at that time recorded the ascensions and flights of the Club members as closely as the activities of the U.S. Congress and the New York Stock exchange.

The annual meeting and dinner was held, whenever possible, on the 21st day of November, that day being the anniversary of the first ascent of man, Francois Pilatre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlandes, in Paris, in the first untethered balloon flight. Ben Franklin witnessed the ascension and wrote an interesting sketch of the event.

Men prominent in the aeronautical world were heard at these Aero Club dinners. Walter Wellman here related the story of his attempt to reach the North Pole by balloon; Melvin Vaniman outlined his plans for crossing the ocean by dirigible. Holland Forbes, Augustus Post, Samuel F. Perkins, Clifford B. Harmon, H. H. Clayton and H. N. Arnold related their experiences in international balloon races here and abroad. Samuel F. Perkins during his early years in the club, perfected the man lifting and observation kites which have rendered the Government excellent service. Professor Clayton, with Josiah B. Millet, are the inventors of the Blue Hill box kite, which Perkins uses and which has since become so popular.

**Sponsored the First American Aeronautical Exposition.**

The Club was instrumental in holding the first aeronautical exposition in the country at Mechanics Hall in Boston in February 1910 and again in 1911. Mr. Glidden projected a plan for the organization of a line of commercial dirigibles between Boston and New York and a company was incorporated. Some of the first experiments of the State Guard with balloons for military observation purposes were made in Massachusetts with the assistance of the Club balloons.
Complete detailed records of all the balloon flights made in New England were kept by William Carroll Hill of the Club, who furnished Boston papers for many years with annual full page stories of the years' activities. Lectures on ballooning, illustrated with lanternslides, recording personal experiences, were also frequently given for a number of years by various members of the Club, including Charles J. Glidden, Jay B. Benton, J. J. Van Valkenburgh, J. W. Flagg, H. Helm Clayton and Wm. Carroll Hill.

Prof. W. H. Pickering, the Harvard astronomer, became the second president of the Club and was followed by Mr. Glidden and later by H. Helm Clayton and Godfrey Cabot. All of these early presidents of the Club were sincerely and deeply interested in the study of the upper atmosphere and the meetings of the Club reflected a serious and instructive study of aeronautics.

Development of Interest in Aeroplanes

The second period of the Club's activities that, which concerns itself more especially with aeroplanes, may be said to have begun in 1910 when the Aero Club of New England and its members cooperated with the Harvard Aeronautical Society in the holding of one of the first aviation meets in the country at Squantum. Similar aero meets were held in 1911 and 1912, the unfortunate deaths of Miss Harriet Quimby and Mr. W. A. P. Willard in the latter year putting an end to early aviation meets for Boston. The rapid development and interest in the aeroplane lessened the followers of the balloon, and interest in the Club's earlier line of sport lagged.

The American Civilian Preparedness Program and the Role of the Aero Club of New England

The election of Mr. Godfrey L. Cabot as president of the Club in 1915 revived the organization and established it more firmly upon a basis of aviation. Mr. Cabot was keenly interested in aviation, a flier himself and the Club became more and more identified with the development of aviation matters.

Through the efforts of Mr. Cabot, funds were raised for the purchase of a Burgess Model U hydro-aeroplane, which was presented the state on November 8, 1916 and largely by his efforts a bill was passed through the Massachusetts legislature appropriating $2500 for the maintenance of the machine. It was the first aeroplane owned by the Commonwealth.

About the same time First Lieutenant Cyrus H. Stowell, a member of the Club, was detailed by the commanding officer of the Massachusetts National Guard to form an aero company in Massachusetts in connection with the Coast Artillery, select a flying field and develop a flying corps. Assistance was rendered Lieutenant Stowell by Lieutenant Godfrey L. Cabot, Lieutenant Greeley S. Curtis, Warren A. Lord, and C. C. Galloupe, all members of the Club, and others, but the state declined to finance the steps suggested and nothing definite toward the formation of a flying corps was consummated. The work and investigation did result, however, in the purchase of the Saugus Aviation Field, which had been recommended by Lieutenant, now Captain, Stowell as the best available, by Lieutenant Cabot, who later offered its use to either the Commonwealth or Federal governments.

One of the first suggestions to the Governor of Massachusetts for the formation of a Committee of Public Safety came from the Aero Club of New England and special interest lies in this fact for the Club, inasmuch as one of the early developments of the Public Safety Committee was the establishment of an aviation training camp at Squantum, later taken over by the Government. The commonwealth appropriated, through the Public Safety Committee, $45,000 for the development of the Squantum Field. George R. Fearing Jr. and Brooks Frothingham, both members of the Club were members of the Naval Forces sub-committee of the Public Safety committee which had the matter of the training station in charge. When the Naval authorities took the Squantum field over with Lieutenant E. W. Spencer Jr. in charge, Mr. Fearing was made his aide. Phillips W. Page, an aviator and member of the Club, was selected as one of the three regular instructors and Norman W. Cabot,
another member of the Club, served as attendant and instructor at the camp. Over 300 applications from prospective filers were received at the station, the men being given first training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The school was opened in April 1917 and taken over by the Naval authorities on May 9 and continued until October 18th when it was closed by the Government. Twenty eight men were fully qualified as fliers at the school, among the number being Humphrey T. Redfield son of Secretary of Commerce William C. Redfield, who visited the camp once during the year.

From April to August 1917 an aviation camp was maintained by the Navy Department at Marblehead and Lieutenant Godfrey L. Cabot, president of the Club, who had received his commission in the United States Naval Reserve Flying Corps, was appointed commandant in charge.

Activities of Aero Club Members in World War One

As a result of their work at Squantum, Ensign George R. Fearing Jr., and Ensign Norman W. Cabot went overseas and have since been active in service abroad. Phillips W. Page joined the English Flying Corps early and was the first aviator in the Club to meet death in service, being drowned off the coast of England in December 1917. William H. Cheney was killed in a collision of aeroplanes over the American flying field in Italy on January 20, 1918. Dr. George P. Howe, another member of the Club, first lieutenant in the American Medical Officers Reserve Corps, was killed in action in Flanders September 28, 1917, and through orders of General Pershing was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary service. Charles J. Glidden early entered service as first lieutenant in the United States Army Balloon School at Fort Omaha, Neb. and was for a time a recruiting officer in Boston. Henry Howard, long a director of the Club, is Director of the Recruiting Service for the United States Shipping Board for the Northeastern District and Parker H. Kemble fills an important position in the same department. Capt. Chester L. Dane is serving aboard a United States vessel in service, as is Lieutenant John B. Blood. Howard Elliot is on the Railroad War Board, Clifford L. Webster an instructor in the U.S. N. R. F.; Captain Cyrus H. Stowell is stationed at the Watertown Arsenal; Edward Bowditch is in service in France; H. H. Brown entered service early, and Herbert M. Sears is with the Red Cross in France. Nelson H. Smith is one of the Club's aviators, and others in service are W. E. Doherty, Paul C. Warner and Francis J. Emery.

Norman W. Cabot entered the service as an ensign and was at Marblehead during April and May 1917 and at Squantum until the fall of 1917 when he sailed for France where he has been an instructor in flying and in charge of construction. G. Richmond Fearing Jr., as well as being instrumental in starting the flying school at Squantum, became an ensign and executive officer and went to France late in the year where he practiced flying and was later quartered in Paris in charge of aviation matters.

A notable and generous contribution by the president of the Club which should not be unnoticced was the contribution of some $31,000 in September 1917 by Lieutenant Godfrey L. Cabot, which he placed at the disposal of Rear Admiral Bradley A. Fiske, U. S. N. (retired) for the development of Admiral Fiske's torpedo carrying airplane.

President Cabot was enrolled as a lieutenant in the United States Naval Reserve Flying Corps on March 20, 1917 and was in charge of the aviation camp at Marblehead from April 16 to June 18 as junior to the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant J. O. Porter and from June 18 until the camp was dissolved August 15, as Commanding Officer. He has done airplane patrol duty over Massachusetts Bay since April 12, 1918, to date and is aviation aide for the First Naval District.

Mr. Kemble has taken many very excellent military photographs from Lieutenant Cabot's seaplane and has exhibited some of them at a number of lectures on aviation given conjointly by him and Lieutenant Cabot. The photographs were taken at heights varying from 1300 to 4500 feet.
Mention should also be made of the contribution made to aviation by three members, W. Starling Burgess, Greeley S. Curtis and Frank H. Russell, who early began the manufacture of airplanes at Marblehead and have furnished the Government with many machines.

Looking Forward: the Aero Club and Aviation’s expanded role in the 20th Century

The Aero Club of New England has kept pace with the successive steps in the development of aeronautics during the early years of the Twentieth Century and may well be said to have had an important part in its progress. Its membership has included a great number of the most prominent names in business and social circles in Boston and New England. Although not generally known, the governors of each of the New England states, are by virtue of the constitution of the Club, honorary members ex-officio of the Club. Its membership in 1918 is forty active members and is constantly growing and the influence of the Club, long and favorably exerted in the interest of aeronautical matters, is bound to be of great and far reaching importance as greater possibilities develop in the field of aviation.

Source: Sketch of the Aero Club of New England 1902-1918 by William Carroll Hill, Secretary, Boston 1918
Website: www.acone.org