



Eastern Air Lines: A History, 1926-1991

David Lee Russell

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Eastern Air Lines began in 1926 when aviation pioneer Harold Pitcairn started the first carrier air mail route from New York to Atlanta under his company, Pitcairn Aviation. Clement Keys of National Air Transport bought the company in 1929, changed the name to Eastern Air Transport and began passenger service the next year on daily round trips between New York and Richmond. The growing airline was purchased by General Motors and became Eastern Air Lines in 1934. World War I flying ace Edward V. Rickenbacker purchased the airline four years later and led it to become by the 1950s the most profitable airline in the United States. Former astronaut Frank Borman became president of Eastern in 1975 and tried to manage the airline through deregulation, labor union conflict, and heavy debt, ending with the sale of Eastern to Frank Lorenzo and Texas Air in 1986. The airline entered bankruptcy in March 1989 and ended service in less than two years.

This detailed history follows Eastern from start to finish, studying such corporate decision-making as aircraft purchases and route expansions, as well as the personalities that shaped the airline throughout its history.

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