



Mesa Airlines – Farmington, New Mexico

Note: This column will only cover Mesa's operation at Farmington, New Mexico. For Mesa's coverage at Albuquerque and all other cities in New Mexico, see the main column titled "Mesa Airlines".

Mesa Airlines began in Farmington, New Mexico on October 12, 1980 where the local fixed base operator at the Farmington Four Corners Regional Airport created the airline with one 5-seat Piper Saratoga aircraft and a route to Albuquerque. A few months later a second aircraft was obtained, a Piper Navajo, and new routes were started from Farmington to Denver and also to Grand Junction, CO then continuing to Vernal, Utah. As the airline was struggling, the new routes were soon discontinued and the company was sold in 1982 to Larry Risley, an aircraft mechanic at the Farmington airport. Risley and his wife Janie quickly grew the airline first by obtaining a larger 14-seat Beechcraft 99 in May, 1983. They began shuttle flights to Albuquerque operating seven round trips per day, a flight in one direction every hour. The Piper Navajo was then used between Farmington and Durango, CO so that passengers could fly from Albuquerque to Durango with a quick change of planes in Farmington. Mesa was competing with two other commuter airlines in the Albuquerque market, Air Midwest and Sun West, and during the summer of 1983 a fourth carrier, Pioneer Airlines, entered the picture flooding the

market with six more flights bringing the total number among the four carriers to 21 flights per day each way. Pioneer's service only lasted a couple months however. More Beech 99's were soon added to grow the airline with new destinations from Albuquerque and service at Farmington was expanded in November, 1985 when new flights to Phoenix, Arizona began with a stop in Gallup, New Mexico. The other two competing carriers, Air Midwest and Sun West, had both ended their Farmington service by early 1986 leaving Mesa as the only carrier serving the Albuquerque and Phoenix markets from Farmington. Mesa introduced the 19-seat Beech 1900C in late 1985 which operated new service to Telluride, Colorado as well as several flights to Albuquerque. Nonstop flights from Farmington to Phoenix began by summer 1986 with the Beech 1900C and more flights were added to Albuquerque bringing the total to 14 roundtrips per day, one every hour on the hour. In 1987 a pair of smaller 9-seat Cessna Caravans were obtained and first used on shuttles from Farmington to Durango, Cortez, and Telluride so that passengers could fly into Farmington from Albuquerque and Phoenix and connect to the smaller cities essentially making Farmington a small hub. These shuttles operated for about six months until the Caravans were reassigned to other routes out of Albuquerque. Another carrier, Trans-Colorado Airlines, came to Farmington in early 1986 with service to Albuquerque and Denver but had the upper hand as they were operating as a Continental Express feeder carrier on behalf of Continental Airlines (Continental was a major airline in the U.S. which merged with United Airlines in 2012). Mesa prevailed however as Trans-Colorado left Farmington by mid-summer 1987 leaving Mesa once again as the only carrier flying from Farmington to Albuquerque. More Beech 1900C's were obtained and new nonstop service from Farmington to Denver began in April 1988. This route competed up against Aspen Airways which was operating as a United Express feeder carrier on behalf of United Airlines using 86-seat regional jets. Mesa's Denver flights were dropped after two months and replaced with two daily nonstop flights to Salt Lake City which only operated for about four months, ending in October 1988. In August, 1989 new service to Cortez, Colorado began with three daily flights that continued to Denver. This service was successful as Cortez was subsidized through the federal governments' Essential Air Service program, or EAS. Ten pressurized Beech 1300 aircraft with 13 seats were brought on line and performed much better than the unpressurized Beech 99's which were retired by 1991.



Mesa Beech 1900D at the Farmington Four Corners Regional Airport.

Mesa took a big leap forward on April 1, 1990 when a new contract began with United Airlines to become a United Express feeder with service to Denver. Aspen Airways, the previous United Express operator at Farmington, had been liquidated and Mesa took over most of Aspen's routes at Denver. This service began with four flights per day and, as Farmington was the maintenance base for Mesa, many new flights were soon added to other southern Colorado cities that continued onto Denver. These flights were extensions off flights from Denver to Cortez, Durango, Grand Junction, Gunnison, and Montrose, that would be flown onto Farmington at night for maintenance work on the aircraft and then return to Denver via the same routing the next morning. By the mid 1990's there were up to 13 flights per day between Farmington and Denver, seven of them departing by 8am, and all would make a stop at a city in southwest Colorado. Beech 1300's and 1900C's were initially used for the United Express operations and most were painted in the colors of United Airlines. "Stand-up cabin" Beech 1900D's replaced the 1900C's in the early 1990s and larger, 30-seat, Embraer-120 Brasilia's were added in mid-1990 which were also used on several of Mesa's Farmington-Albuquerque flights for a short time in 1992. Another Continental Express carrier, Rocky Mountain Airways, also began service from Farmington to Denver one month after Mesa began its United Express service but Rocky Mountain soon ended their flights by September, 1991. Mesa then began operating slightly larger 37-seat De Havilland Dash-8's in early 1995 to replace the Brasilia's. After eight years of operating as United Express, Mesa's service slipped below the standards required by United Airlines and the United Express designation along with all Denver flights ended on April 22, 1998. Great Lakes Airlines, the United Express affiliate in Chicago, then took over all the Denver routes and began four daily flights from Farmington.



Mesa Embraer 120 Brasilia parked on the ramp at Farmington in the colors of United Express.



Mesa flew DeHavilland Dash-8's through Farmington as United Express during the mid-1990's.

In September, 1992 Mesa began another major airline contract with America West Airlines to serve as the America West Express feeder carrier at the airlines' Phoenix hub. Several Beech 1900's and Dash-8's were repainted in the colors of America West Airlines and all flights at Phoenix began operating as America West Express. Some flights from Farmington to Phoenix were nonstop while others made a stop in either Gallup, New Mexico, Durango, Colorado, or Flagstaff, Arizona. By late 1996, seven daily flights were operated. A few of the Embraer Brasilia aircraft were also used in the America West operation but remained in the standard paint scheme of Mesa Airlines. America West Express flights to Las Vegas were operated in 1994 through 1995 in a competitive response to American Eagle, an affiliate for American Airlines, which provided service in the market during the same time frame. For a short time in 2001, Mesa flew a Dash-8 on one flight between Farmington and Phoenix.



Mesa Beech 1900D at Farmington in the livery for America West Express.



Mesa DeHavilland Dash-8 briefly operated for America West Express at Farmington in 2001.

In mid-1993 Mesa's three divisions, United Express, America West Express, and the independent operation, were flying up to 31 daily departures from the small Farmington airport. By the late 1990's, traffic on commuter airlines nationwide, including Mesa, began to decline and the carrier was forced to reduce flights on its remaining routes from Farmington to Albuquerque and Phoenix. Meanwhile Mesa began adding regional jets to its fleet and flying to larger cities from Phoenix as well as securing code-share feeder contracts with other major airlines. The carriers' corporate offices were moved from Farmington to Phoenix in 1998.

In 1991 Mesa purchased its former competitor, Air Midwest, and in 2001, transferred all routes still flown from Farmington with the Beech 1900D aircraft to fly under the Air Midwest operating certificate. The aircraft remained painted as Mesa Airlines however and all flights still carried Mesa Airlines or America West Express flight designations.

During the 2000's, the Air Midwest subdivision acquired federally subsidized Essential Air Service (EAS) contracts to serve a few markets that were slightly outside of the normal route system. In 2004/2005 the route from Denver to Pueblo, CO was obtained which had to be linked onto Farmington for aircraft maintenance on two days per week. This route was operated as "Mesa Airlines". In 2007 and 2008 routes from Las Vegas to Ely, Nevada and Cedar City, Utah as well as from Salt Lake City to Moab and Vernal, Utah were awarded to Mesa. The carrier began Farmington-Cedar City-Las Vegas, Farmington-Vernal-Salt Lake City, and Phoenix-Farmington-Moab routes operated as America West Express. After their brief operations, these EAS routes were then awarded to other carriers.

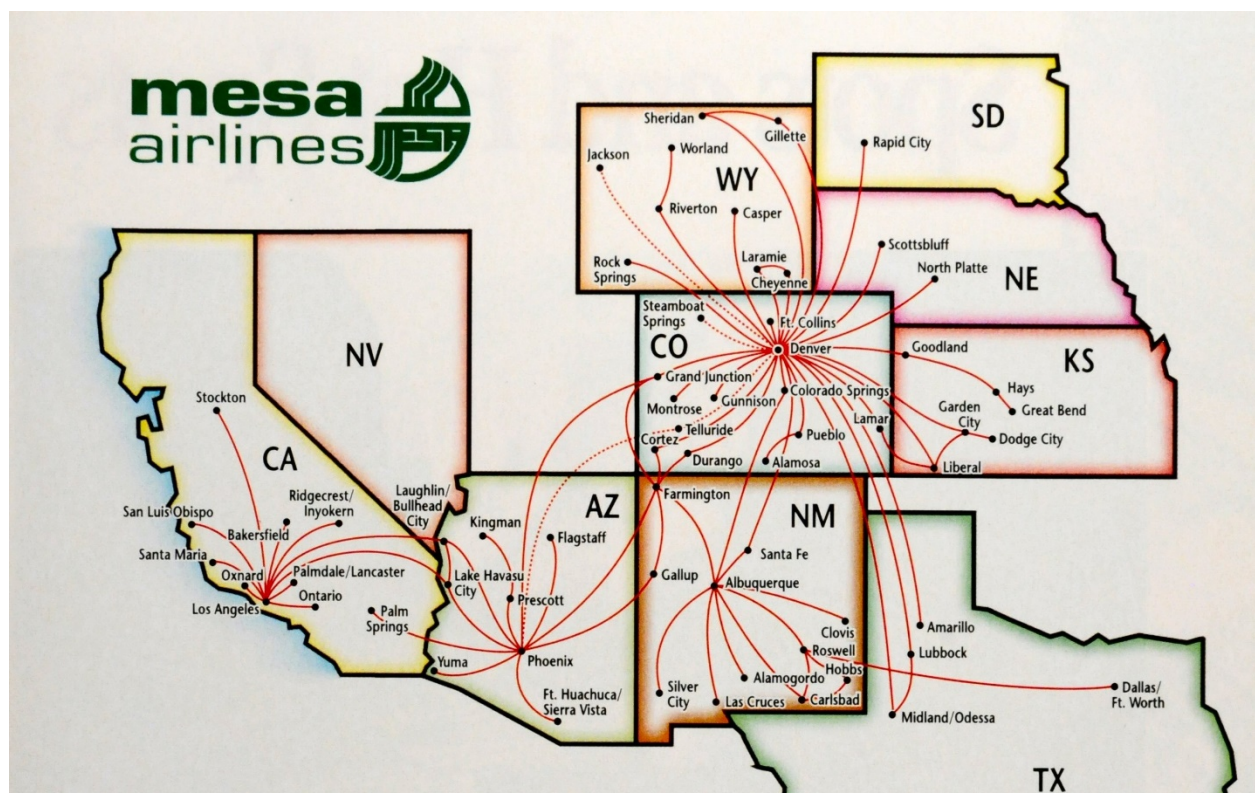
As traffic continued to decline on routes operated by smaller aircraft, flight frequency was reduced and the Beech 1900D's began retirement. The independent operation to Albuquerque slowly dissolved until the last flight was flown on December 31, 2007. America West Airlines merged with US Airways earlier in 2007 which changed the Phoenix flights to US Airways Express. With the Beech 1900D retirements it was expected that the Phoenix-Farmington flights would upgrade to Dash-8 aircraft, the only other prop aircraft left in the system. Instead, the flights were discontinued on May 30, 2008 ending nearly 28 years of service by Mesa Airlines at Farmington. Service from Phoenix to nearby Durango, 39 miles from Farmington, continued with Dash-8's and, as those aircraft were retired, 50-seat Canadair CRJ-200 and 76-seat CRJ-900 regional jets were then flown on the route. US Airways then merged into American Airlines in late 2015 which switched the Mesa Airlines contract flying to American Eagle. Durango had lengthened their runway to accommodate jets however Farmington was not able to do so as the airport is located on top of a plateau where the runways drop off at both ends. Although Frontier and Aspen Airways did fly jets to Farmington in the 1980's, all of their flights could only take off with minimal fuel and had to be flown to Durango where they could be further fueled and then take off again with the weight of enough fuel to be flown onto Denver. This practice was found to be very uneconomical and has never been done again.



Mesa's Beech 1900D's briefly flew the Farmington - Phoenix route as US Airways Express in 2007-2008.

Since 2008, Farmington was only been served by Great Lakes Airlines, a carrier which had been struggling to operate a handful of flights there with ageing Beech 1900D's and Embraer Brasilia's. Great Lakes finally ended all Farmington service on October 30, 2017, leaving the airport with no commercial air service. The carrier went out of business a few months later. Durango, meanwhile, has seen a major spike in air traffic and has two major carrier affiliates, American Eagle and United Express, operating up to twelve daily to Dallas/Fort Worth, Denver, and Phoenix, all on regional jets. It would appear that most of the potential traffic from Farmington now uses the Durango airport. Mesa had been operating many of the American Eagle flights from Durango to Dallas/Fort Worth and Phoenix using CRJ-900 regional jets however their contract with American ended in 2023 leaving no presence of Mesa Airlines remaining in the four corners region. SkyWest Airlines is now the primary carrier at Durango, also operating for both American Eagle and United Express.

Mesa grew up very well in Farmington for its first 28 years. The carrier tried pretty much every route it possibly could at Farmington serving five major destinations and having two major airline affiliations. Mesa brought out the full potential of what Farmington could produce in commercial air travel.



Mesa Airlines route map in March of 1994 near the peak of its service as America West Express (routes from Phoenix), as United Express (routes from Denver and Los Angeles), and as Mesa Airlines (routes from Albuquerque). Farmington was the headquarters for Mesa as well as the central hub point for all three divisions.