

Who Flew First?

Air & Space

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In 1904, Gustave Whitehead was photographed with his 1901 machine — on the ground.

The possibility that someone may have flown a powered airplane before the Wright brothers is back in the news. Over the years a number of candidates have been suggested for first-flight honors. Hiram Maxim, Clement Ader, Karl Jatho, and Augustus Moore Herring, for example, were serious experimenters who bounced for distances of less than 200 feet through the air. Why aren't any of them credited with having made the first flight? Their machines were not capable of either sustaining themselves in the air or operating under the control of the pilot, both of which are generally regarded as necessary qualifications for a genuine flight.

A handful of flight claims have taken deeper root. Many Brazilians credit Alberto Santos-Dumont, who made the first public flight in Europe three years after the Wrights flew at Kitty Hawk, simply because his aircraft sported wheels, while the Wrights took off from a monorail track. Some New Zealanders argue that Richard Pearse made a powered flight as early as the spring of 1903—months before the Wrights' first flight on December 17—even though Pearse himself remarked that he had not begun his experiments until 1904, and then only after being inspired by news accounts of the Wright brothers.

That brings us to the claims of Gustave Whitehead, a German immigrant who settled in Bridgeport, Connecticut, where he claimed to have made some spectacular flights. As an aeronautics curator at the National Air and Space Museum and a historian of early flight, I have studied the various accounts championing Whitehead's assertions. His claims had been rejected and forgotten by 1935, when a researcher found a turn-of-the-century newspaper

article on Whitehead's experiments and decided to take up his cause. Every few decades since then, someone has rediscovered the story and insisted that Whitehead be accorded the honors due him.

The latest round of Whitehead enthusiasm began last March, when the editor of *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* announced that the centennial edition of that reference work would recognize Whitehead's priority. His decision generated a flurry of news stories and led some popular aviation magazines to express interest in the revised history. The legislature of Connecticut, the would-beaviator's home state, passed a provision creating a state Powered Flight Day to honor him.

So, what is the evidence for the Whitehead flights?

On August 18, 1901, a Bridgeport newspaper published an article describing a half-mile flight said to have taken place four days earlier. The story was picked up by press associations and spread around the globe in articles based entirely on the original, without adding any new information. James Dickie, the only "witness" named in the original account who could be interviewed, later branded the story a hoax: "I was not present and did not witness any airplane flight on August 14, 1901. I do not remember...ever hearing of a flight with this particular plane or any other that Whitehead ever built."

In the spring of 1902, Whitehead published an article claiming to have flown seven miles over Long Island Sound. Just days after his article appeared, a Bridgeport paper published a story titled "The Last Flop of the Whitehead Flying Machine," reporting that Whitehead's 1901 and 1902 aircraft had both been failures.

Thirty years after the supposed flights, researchers began gathering contradictory witness testimony regarding the old claims. At least one of those witnesses had been paid to remember a flight. Others had offered memories that were demonstrably false. Whitehead supporters swear by those accounts; the skeptics dismiss them.

Here is why I am one of the skeptics: There are no original documents supporting the Whitehead claim. Unlike the Wright brothers, the inventor left no letters, diaries, notebooks, calculations, or drawings recording his experiments, his thoughts, or the details of his craft. While there are a handful of photographs of the 1901 machine, there is not a single verifiable photo of the aircraft in which Whitehead claimed to have flown seven miles in 1902. There is no creditable photo of any powered Whitehead aircraft in flight.

Family members reported that they had never seen Whitehead fly. The individuals most closely associated with him, including those funding his effort, universally doubted that he had ever flown. Bostonian Samuel Cabot, who employed Whitehead in 1897, described him as "a pure romancer and a supreme master of the gentle art of lying." John Dvorak, a Washington University instructor who visited Whitehead in 1904, reported that he "did not meet a single individual who had ever seen Whitehead make a flight." Stanley Yale Beach, who supported Whitehead's work for years, agreed: "I do not believe that any of his machines ever left the ground...."

Step back from the details and consider the subsequent events. Whitehead continued to build powered flying machines under contract for other experimenters as late as 1908; not one of these ever flew. Had the man who claimed to have flown seven miles in 1902 forgotten the secret of flight just six years later? Moreover, not one of those later craft bears any resemblance to his supposedly successful machine of 1901. Why did he abandon a successful design in favor of very different ones?

Yet the Whitehead claim continues to exercise an appeal. People are attracted to the possibility that history may have gotten it wrong—that Shakespeare may not have written the plays, that Bell may not have invented the telephone, that someone might have made a real powered flight before Wilbur and Orville. We should always be open to new evidence that may lead us to rethink events of the past. After seven decades of trying, however, the supporters of Gustave Whitehead have failed to prove their case.

Whitehead supporters have dismissed Smithsonian critics like me as incapable of an unbiased opinion in this case as a result of a 1948 agreement with the heirs of Orville Wright's estate. The executors of the estate wanted to avoid a repetition of the Smithsonian's false and ill-advised claims that the failed 1903 Langley Aerodrome had been "capable" of flight before the Wrights, so in the agreement transferring the world's first airplane to the National Museum, they inserted a statement stipulating that if the Smithsonian ever recognized that a machine was "capable of carrying a man under its own power in controlled flight" before the Wrights, the heirs would have the right to request the return of the historic machine. I regard that clause as a healthy reminder of the bad old days when the Smithsonian misrepresented facts to protect the legacy of its third secretary, Samuel P. Langley. (If you would like to read the entire clause stipulating that the Smithsonian accord the Wright *Flyer* the claim of first, you can find it on the National Air and Space Museum's website, airandspace.si.edu.)

In the most recent controversy over Whitehead's claims, critics have charged that because of the risk of losing a national treasure, no Smithsonian staff member would entertain the possibility that someone flew before the Wrights. If I were ever convinced that the evidence supported a pre-Wright claimant, I would say so. I can assure you, however, that the evidence would have to be a whole lot more persuasive than anything offered so far by those who believe Gustave Whitehead was the first to fly.