Q&A

Wright Brothers and Gustave Whitehead

The following questions and answers are based on *The Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead* and other materials written by Tom Crouch, senior curator of aeronautics at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum.

What are the Whitehead claims?
Among other things, Gustave Whitehead claimed to have flown powered aircraft on two occasions: Aug. 14, 1901, and Jan. 17, 1902, as much as two years before the first four flights of the Wright brothers near Kitty Hawk, N.C., Dec. 17, 1903.

Did newspapers report the flights?
Whitehead’s first flight claim—half a mile through the air at a maximum altitude of 50 feet in an aircraft known as No. 21—was reported in the Bridgeport, Conn., *Sunday Herald* four days afterward in the paper’s feature section under the headline “Flying,” illustrated with witches on brooms. The second claim was reported by Whitehead himself in the April 1, 1902, issue of *American Inventor*. On this occasion he said that he made two flights in an aircraft called the No. 22 on Jan. 17, 1902, the longest of which was seven miles over Long Island Sound.

Other newspapers repeated the news based on the Bridgeport *Sunday Herald* feature but no other journalists reported witnessing any of the 1901 or 1902 flights. A number of articles between 1901 and 1902 reported on Whitehead’s business activities and plans for building aircraft. Some articles dismissed the Whitehead claims. For example, on April 2, 1902, the *Bridgeport Evening Farmer* published *Unrealized Dreams, the Last Flop of the Whitehead Flying Machine*, which reported that both the 1901 and 1902 Whitehead machines were failures.

Is there photographic evidence of flight?
Despite recent claims, no photograph of a powered Whitehead aircraft in flight has ever been found. The image cited recently as proof is a blurry picture within a picture: an image of a photo, along with other photos, on display at the 1906 Aero Club in New York.

The picture within a picture has been studied at length by Smithsonian curators and other students of early flight who do not believe that it shows a powered Whitehead aircraft in flight. Whitehead himself commented on his difficulties with photography.
I attempted this [photography] before, but in the first trial the weather was bad, some little rain and very cloudy sky, and the snapshots that were taken did not come out right. I cannot take any time exposures of the machine when in flight on account of its high speed.

The photograph of the 1906 Aero Club exhibition and related photos are available from the museum’s Archives Department through its website here.

Were there witnesses?
In a Bridgeport Sunday Herald article of Aug. 18, 1901, Richard Howell reported that, in addition to himself, Whitehead had two assistants present: James Dickie and Andrew Cellie. In 1936, Dickie was interviewed and signed a statement saying:

I worked with the late Gustave Whitehead when he was experimenting with the construction of airplanes almost from the time he came to Bridgeport...I believe the entire story in the Herald was imaginary, and grew out of the comments of Whitehead discussing what he hoped to get from his plane. I was not present and did not witness any airplane flight on August 14, 1901.

Dickie also said he did not know Cellie, nor does Cellie’s name appear in any local directories of the period.

Between 1934 and 1974, researchers supporting Whitehead’s claim interviewed a number of other people who said that they had seen him fly at one time or another during the period 1901–1902. These witnesses were being interviewed about an event that had occurred more than three decades before by interviewers anxious to prove that Whitehead had flown. The testimony was contradictory. Most were not even certain of the year in which they had seen a flight. It is quite possible they could have been remembering a later, post-1903 glider flight. At least one of the witnesses had a financial interest in a book being written about Whitehead and stood to gain financially from a claim that the inventor had flown.

Were family members involved?
John B. Crane, a Harvard professor who interviewed the family in the article, “Did Whitehead Ever Fly?” for the National Aeronautic Association Magazine, December 1936, wrote:

Since Gustave Whitehead has been dead for several years direct questioning is of course precluded. But personal interviews with his widow and children, who still live in a suburb of Bridgeport, revealed that none of them had ever actually seen Whitehead make any flights, although they reported that he had frequently told them he had made flights and had flown before the Wright brothers. They did not recall, however, his ever mentioning the two long flights of 1901 and 1902. It seems strange that Mrs. Whitehead, who had helped him for several years in the covering of the wings of his flying machines, should never have witnessed any of his numerous short hops along the streets of the neighborhood.
What did contemporaries say?
In 1907, Stanley Yale Beach, the grandson of the editor of *Scientific American*, said in a seven-page statement to that publication:

> Again I say that I do not believe any of his machines ever left the ground...I think I was in a better position, during the 9 years I was giving Whitehead money...to know what his machines could do.

Samuel Cabot, who employed Whitehead in 1897, regarded him as a “pure romancer and a supreme master of the gentle art of lying.”

Did Whitehead fly an airplane at a later date?
There is no evidence to suggest that any of the powered machines that he built after 1902 ever left the ground. Nor did any of those machines resemble the aircraft that he claimed to have flown in 1901–1902. Why did he not follow up his early success? Why did he depart from a basic design that he claimed had been successful?

Is there any other evidence that Whitehead flew?
Whitehead 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 reputed to have flown seven miles in 1902. Generations of Whitehead supporters have failed to produce a creditable photo of a powered Whitehead aircraft in flight.

Does the Smithsonian have a contractual obligation to support the claim that Orville and Wilbur Wright were the first to achieve powered flight?
No. To say that would be a misinterpretation of the 1948 agreement between the Wright family and the Institution. The agreement simply states that should the Smithsonian endorse an individual as having been capable of flight prior to the Wright brothers, the Wright heirs would be allowed to request the Flyer be returned to the family.

Background
Whitehead supporters dismiss Smithsonian staff as incapable of rendering an unbiased opinion in this case as a result of a 1948 agreement with the heirs of Orville Wright’s estate. In order 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, the executors of the estate inserted a clause in the agreement transferring the world’s first airplane to the National Museum 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, then the heirs would have the right to request the return of the historic machine.
The Smithsonian is under no obligation to support one historical figure over another and would never compromise its reputation for exceptional scholarship and integrity by altering or concealing historical facts.

A copy of the contract is available from the museum’s department of communications at 202-633-2370.

Materials written by Crouch and other Smithsonian staff members may be viewed in the museum’s newsdesk or blog. Crouch, who has studied first flight claims for 30 years, is working on a detailed study of the Whitehead case.

# # #