The Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead

Tom D. Crouch, senior curator of aeronautics at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, has written this detailed response to claims that Gustave Whitehead, and not Orville and Wilbur Wright, flew the first powered airplane:

The possibility that someone may have flown a powered airplane before the Wright brothers is back in the news. In March 2013, John Brown, an Australian researcher living in Germany, unveiled a website claiming that Whitehead (Gustav Weiskopf), a native of Leutershausen, Bavaria, Germany, who immigrated to the United States, probably in 1894, made a sustained powered flight in a heavier-than-air machine as early as Aug. 14, 1901, two years before the Wright brothers. The claim is not new. Arguments in favor of Whitehead’s flight claims were first put forward in a book published in 1937 and have been restated many times over the years. The evidence in the case has been considered and the claims refuted by leading aeronautical figures from pioneers like Orville Wright and Grover Loening to C.H. Gibbs-Smith, who remains, 30 years after his death, the most distinguished historian of flight.

The enthusiasm for Whitehead took a more serious turn, however, 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. The announcement sparked a number of news stories and led some popular aviation magazines to express interest in the revisionist claim. The Connecticut legislature passed a resolution, creating a state “Powered Flight Day” honoring Whitehead, onto an omnibus bill that established the ballroom polka as the official state dance. With a new wave of interest in the Whitehead claims, the time has come for a fresh look at this old story.
What Are the Claims?

On Aug. 18, 1901, Richard Howell, a reporter for the Bridgeport, Conn., Sunday Herald, published an account of an early-morning flight Aug. 14, in which he claimed that Whitehead travelled half a mile through the air at a maximum altitude of 50 feet. Due to the rise of newswire services, the story was picked up by a large number of American newspapers and a handful of overseas publications. In two letters published in the April 1, 1902, issue of American Inventor, Whitehead himself claimed to have made two more flights Jan. 17, 1902, on the best of which he said that he flew seven miles over Long Island Sound. During the months that followed, additional widely circulated stories reported that Whitehead was organizing a company to build airplanes and that he intended to enter one of his machines in the aeronautical competition planned for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition to be held in St. Louis in 1904. Although his company failed and he did not fly at the St. Louis Fair, Whitehead did build a number of powered flying machines for other enthusiasts during the period 1906–1909, none of which ever left the ground.

What Is the Evidence?

Although the original Bridgeport Sunday Herald story, supposedly an eyewitness account, sounds impressive, it is important to note that the editor did not rush into print with the news. The article appeared on page 5, four days after the event, in a feature story headlined with an illustration of four witches steering their brooms through the word “Flying.” The newspaper commonly used page 5 for sensational stories with a humorous twist. In the Whitehead story, the reporter notes two witnesses other than himself, James Dickie and Andrew Cellie. When an interviewer returned to Bridgeport to research the claims in 1936, he could not find anyone who remembered Cellie. He did find Dickie, however. “I believe the entire story of the Herald was imaginary and grew out of the comments Whitehead discussing what he hoped to get from his plane,” the supposed witness commented.

“I was not present and did not witness any airplane flight on August 14, 1901, I do not remember or recall ever hearing of a flight with this particular plane or any other that Whitehead ever built.”

On April 5, 1902, the Bridgeport Evening Farmer published an article titled, “ Unrealized Dreams, Last Flop of the Whitehead Flying Machine.” The article told the story of Herman
Linde, Whitehead’s financial backer, who had been disappointed by the failure of two Whitehead machines to fly. “Mr. Lind had faith in Mr. Whitehead to the extent of $6,000,” the article noted.

“That amount of money went away in experimenting and there is yet no airplane. This will be a blow to some of the New York daily papers who have been printing long accounts of the airship and which were amply illustrated. It appears that Mr. Whitehead made a failure of some kind…After the failure he constructed another…which Mr. Lind thought was in all respects similar to that of the failure. This made him angry, hence, the unrealized dreams of an airship.”²

The same day, another local paper, the Bridgeport Post, offered a similar opinion in a headline of its own: “Whitehead Flew High…Financially, but Not Actually—That is to say, He Has Not [Flown].”³ These stories were published in local newspapers two days after the appearance of Whitehead’s article in the American Inventor, and only four months after his claim to have flown seven miles over Long Island Sound.

Between 1934 and 1974, pro-Whitehead researchers gathered contradictory witness testimony regarding the old claims. At least one of those witnesses was paid to remember a flight. Others offered memories that were demonstrably false. Many of those being interviewed 30 years after the fact were not even certain of the year in which they remembered a flight, suggesting that they could have been remembering post-1903 glider experiments that Whitehead conducted. Whitehead supporters swear by those accounts, the skeptics dismiss them.

The members of Whitehead’s own family reported that they had never seen him fly. Many of the individuals who were most closely associated with Whitehead, or who, like Herman Linde, were funding his efforts, doubted that he had flown. John J. Dvorak, who had been on the teaching staff of Washington University in St. Louis when he visited Whitehead in 1904 to purchase an engine, became convinced that Whitehead was incapable of completing the project, and left in disgust. “During my stay in Bridgeport,” he remarked, “I did not meet a single individual who had ever seen Whitehead make a flight . . . I personally do not believe that Whitehead ever succeeded in making any airplane flights.”⁴

Stanley Yale Beach, the grandson of the editor of Scientific American, and one of Whitehead’s primary backers, was unequivocal on this issue.

“I do not believe that any of his machines ever left the ground…in spite of the assertions of many people who think they saw them fly. I think I was in a better position during the nine years that I was giving Whitehead money to develop his ideas, to know what his machines could
do than persons who were employed by him for a short period of time or those who remained silent for thirty-five years about what would have been an historic achievement in aviation.”

Aeronautical authorities certainly doubted the tale. Samuel Cabot, who had employed Whitehead in 1897, regarded him as “…a pure romancer and a supreme master of the gentle art of lying.” Cabot told Octave Chanute, a Chicago engineer then widely regarded as the world’s authority on flying-machine studies, that Whitehead was “completely unreliable.” Hermann Moedebeck, a German military officer and aviation authority, wrote to Chanute in September 1901 remarking that he believed Whitehead’s “experiences are Humbug.” Charles Manly, Samuel Langley’s chief engineer, had sent knowledgeable observers to study the Whitehead machine when it was on view at Atlantic City. He believed that “…the man is a fraud insofar as he claims to have flown in the machine, since I understand that the whole construction is so flimsy that I doubt whether the framework would hold together.”

Whitehead supporters have suggested that their evidence is strong enough to prove their case in a court of law. In fact, as aviation pioneer Grover Loening noted, the claim did have its day in court, and was soundly rejected. “The Whitehead projects were carefully examined by the Courts in connection with the Wright patent suits,” he recalled. “These examinations show that Whitehead was completely ignorant….” Loening, who earned the first degree in aeronautical engineering offered by an American university, concluded that Whitehead failed to understand either the need for lateral control or the movement of the center of pressure on a wing in flight.

Finally, there is the fact that not one of the powered machines that he built after 1902 ever left the ground in sustained, controlled flight. 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? Are we to assume that he forgot the secret of flight?

Where is the evidence one would expect to find if the claims were valid? There are no original documents supporting the Whitehead story. 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 photo of the aircraft reputed to have flown seven miles in 1902. This is compared to the meticulous and multilayered record documenting the success of the Wright brothers and virtually every other pioneer of early aviation.
There is also the question of missing photo: In an article describing an indoor New York aeronautical show in 1906, the *Scientific American* noted that, “A single blurred photograph of a large bird-like machine propelled by compressed air, and which was constructed by Whitehead in 1901, was the only other photograph beside Langley’s machines of a motor-driven aeroplane in successful flight.” No such photograph has ever been located, in spite of the best efforts of Whitehead supporters, including John Brown, to turn one up over the years. It is important to note that the Langley machine in question was a quarter-scale powered model, not a full-scale machine capable of carrying a pilot. Was that the case with the Whitehead photo, or did the reporter mistake a photo of an unpowered Whitehead gliders in the air for a powered aircraft?

**Conclusion**

Whatever the anonymous *Scientific American* reporter who penned the paragraph on the Whitehead photo at the 1906 exhibit thought, there can be no doubt as to whom the editors of that journal credited with having made the first flight. In an editorial in the issue of Dec. 15, 1906, at a time when the Wright brothers had yet to fly in public, and when their claims to have developed a practical powered airplane between 1903 and 1905 were widely doubted, the *Scientific American* offered one of the first definitive statements recognizing the magnitude of their achievement:

> In all the history of invention there is probably no parallel to the unostentatious manner in which the Wright brothers of Dayton, Ohio, ushered into the world their epoch-making invention of the first successful aeroplane flying machine….Their success marked such an enormous stride forward in the art, was so completely unheralded, and was so brilliant that doubt as to the truth of the story was freely entertained….10

Following a thorough study of the Wright claims, the editors of the *Scientific American* “…completely set to rest all doubts as to what had been accomplished.” Unlike the case of Gustave Whitehead, a careful investigation proved that Wilbur and Orville Wright had accomplished all that they claimed, and more. When it comes to the Whitehead claims, the decision must remain, at best, not proven.

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3 “Whitehead Flew High … Financially, but Not Actually—That is to say, He Has Not [Flown].” *Bridgeport Post*, April 5, 1902.

4 Crane, “Did Whitehead Ever Fly?”

5 The entire Beach statement is included in C.H. Gibbs-Smith, “The Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead,” an unpublished manuscript in the author’s collection, p. 66. A copy is available to the public in the National Air and Space Museum Archive.


7 Moedebeck to O. Chanute, Sept. 5, 1901, Chanute Papers.


9 Grover Loening to E.E. Husting, June 29, 1968, author’s collection.