



SINCE

1841

WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



Above: Photo by William Lutzenberger, 1909. Courtesy [Wright State University](#) Special Collections & Archives.

Flying High with the Wright Family

August 25, 2024

Last week, we learned a little bit about Orville and Katharine Wright; a pair of siblings who put Dayton on the map through their invaluable contributions to the development of aviation. When we left the Wrights, things were looking promising—Katharine, now an Oberlin graduate,

had found work as a high school teacher in Dayton. Orville and Wilbur had created a successful flying machine and obtained a patent for it, though they were not well known outside of Ohio. Their next goal was finding a buyer for their invention.

In 1908, the Wrights were offered two promising contracts; one with the United States Army, the other with European investors—provided their invention met certain requirements. To demonstrate the Wright Flyer on both sides of the Atlantic, Orville went to Fort Myer (in Virginia, near Washington, D.C.) and Wilbur sailed to France.



"Flyers, or Liars?"

The Wrights had their doubters at home and abroad. European newspapers—particularly French newspapers, weren't sure what to make of this pair of brothers from Dayton.

The Wrights were called bluffeurs ('bluffers' in English) by the press, implying that Orville and Wilbur had embellished or even outright lied about their accomplishments.

Pressure was surely mounting for the Wrights—public demonstrations might be their best bet to prove nay-sayers wrong.

Left: Humorous postcard published 1908 by J. Bouveret of Le Mans, depicting Wilbur flying the 1907 Flyer as a kite. Courtesy [Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).

That August, Wilbur began his demonstrations at a horse racing track near Le Mans, France. His effortless banking turns thrilled the formerly skeptical French, prompting Ernest Archdeacon, a leading French aviation promoter, to write;

"For a long time, the Wright brothers have been accused in Europe of bluff ... They are today hallowed in France, and I feel an intense pleasure ... to make amends."

As the Wrights' fame grew, thousands of spectators began to flock to the horse racing track to see the Wright Flyer in action. Wilbur did not disappoint them—he put the Flyer through its paces, demonstrating to onlookers exactly what the Wrights' machine could do while proving his own skill as a pilot.



Above: Wilbur Wright, ca 1910, standing among a crowd of admirers.
 Courtesy [Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).

Orville began demonstrations for the United States Army at Fort Myer using a nearly identical Flyer. Everything went according to plan until September 17th, 1908, when Orville and Army lieutenant Thomas Selfridge took off to perform another demonstration. Only minutes into the flight, disaster struck, causing Orville to lose control of the Flyer. A witness, Superintendent Magoon of Arlington National Cemetery, described the accident;

"I heard the crash with which the propeller blade was wrenched away," he told a New York Times reporter, "[...] It came down like a bird shot dead in full flight describing almost a complete somersault and throwing up a dense cloud of dust."



Both men were extracted from the wreckage of the Flyer and rushed to a nearby Army hospital. Lt. Selfridge's skull was fractured; he died later the same evening. Orville suffered a broken leg and several fractured ribs.

Above: Spectators at the scene of the Fort Myer crash, 1908. The crumpled wing of the Flyer can be seen in the center. Photo attributed to C.H. Claudy, of Washington D.C. Courtesy [Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).

Within hours of hearing the news, Katharine boarded a train bound for Washington D.C., leaving her classes in the care of a substitute teacher. For the next seven weeks, she rarely left her brother's bedside. Contemporaries recalled Katharine talking to Orville's doctors, answering his mail, and perhaps most critically, negotiating a one year extension of the Army contract. Katharine and Orville returned home to Dayton that October.



Wilbur, an ocean away and deeply concerned about his younger siblings, invited them both to join him in France. That December, he wrote Katharine with an offer she couldn't refuse:

"We will be needing a social manager and can pay enough salary to make the proposition attractive, so do not worry about the six per day the school board gives you for peripateting about Old Steele's classic halls."

Thus convinced, in January of 1909 the youngest two Wright siblings boarded a ship to France. They were greeted with great enthusiasm. For the first time, the Wrights were celebrities; sought after by aristocrats, the press, and the public. The kings of Great Britain, Spain, and Italy each came out to see Wilbur fly. Upon their departure from France, Orville,

Wilbur, and Katharine were awarded the French Legion of Honor. Katharine remains one of the very few American women who have received this award.

Left: Katharine Wright looking over the railing of an ocean liner, ca 1909. Orville stands behind her, facing the camera. [Courtesy Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).

Upon their return to America in May 1909, the Wrights were met with the same celebrity that had followed them across Europe. Never the most attention-seeking of families, the Wrights considered the awards and celebrations a distraction, making it known that they would prefer to quietly get back to their work. It didn't dampen anyone's enthusiasm; America would not be denied honoring their new heroes, and the Wrights had to come home eventually.

President Taft invited all three Wright siblings to a reception in the East Room of the White House, where they were presented with medals. The grandest celebration of all was the Wright Brothers' Home Days Celebration in Dayton, held over June 17th & 18th, 1909. Stands capable of seating many thousands had been erected to either side of Main street, and every inch of the

city that could be decorated was festooned with colorful banners. Wilbur and Orville accepted medals from Congress, the state of Ohio, and Dayton herself. Scores of elementary school children clad in red, white, and blue made up a “living flag” to close the ceremony with a song.

Above Left: Photograph of a cartoon inscribed and sent to Katharine Wright ca 1909 showing the Wright Brothers walking with Uncle Sam followed by American birds. Image is attributed to nHomer Davenport, of New York. Courtesy [Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).



According to Howard Burba, who reported on the celebration as it happened:

“[the Wrights] showed in a real and sincere manner that each and every little tinge of color, each effort in their honor, was actually appreciated.”

“From a seat of honor on the reviewing stand in front of the courthouse two silent, unspoken men sat and watched. On their breasts were the newly-pinned medals of honor of a city, a state and a nation. In their hearts there was the feeling of triumph that comes to those who have accomplished that which they sought.

From their lips came no word of acclaim. Wilbur and Orville Wright were being welcomed home —their hearts were filled to the point where words were impossible. There are times in some men’s lives when joy reveals itself in tear-bathed eyes. There were tears of joy in the eyes of the Wright boys that day.”

Above: A view of the crowd & decorations on Hawthorn Street, 1909. Courtesy [Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).

Below: Brig. General James Allen presenting Congressional Medals to Orville and Wilbur Wright, 1909. The 'living flag' of children can be seen in the background. Courtesy [Wright State University Special Collections & Archives](#).



Upcoming Events!



Lantern Tours at Woodland Cemetery:

Are you ready to tour the cemetery in the near dark?
Lantern tours are offered throughout the month of October!
For more information & to reserve tickets, please see our [website](#).



Sports Legends Tour:

Everyone loves a good sports story and we have plenty!

Learn about legendary local athletes including:

Sprint Car racer--Johnny Shackelford;
Inventor of the metal baseball bat--William Shroyer;

Race Car driver--Earl Kiser;
UD Basketball Coach--Tom Blackburn;
Harlem Globetrotter--Albert Tucker;
Rodeo Champion--Marguerite Doane
Plus many more!

Upcoming Tours:

8/27 @ 6pm

Click [here](#) to register!



Luminaries of Dayton:

Explore Woodland's section 101 and learn about influential Daytonians including the Wright Brothers and family, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Medal of Honor recipient Charles Goodwin Bickham, lawyers Grafton Kennedy & Sylvester Carr, the Mead family, brewery owners George Schantz & Frederick Olt, Electra C. Doren, Katharine Kennedy Brown, John Alexander Collins, reverends Edward A. Puff & William J. Shuey plus many more!

Upcoming Tours:

8/28 @ 6pm

Click [here](#) to register!

Support Woodland:

Woodland is proud to remain an active part of the Dayton community as a popular place to walk, relax and enjoy.

We invite you to contribute to the Woodland Arboretum Foundation to ensure that what's meaningful to you today, continues tomorrow! Your gift makes an immediate impact on the horticulture, arboriculture, and restoration efforts needed to maintain one of Dayton's most historic and beautiful outdoor museums.

Thank you for your generous support of Woodland Cemetery and Arboretum.

DONATE ONLINE!

Come Visit Us!



Office Hours:

Monday-Friday
8am-5pm

If you need help finding where someone is buried, need directions to a particular area, or have questions about pre-planning or funeral services, Woodland's Staff is here to assist you!

Volunteer opportunities

Woodland is seeking volunteers to give presentations to community groups on subjects such as local history, notable biographies, and trees.

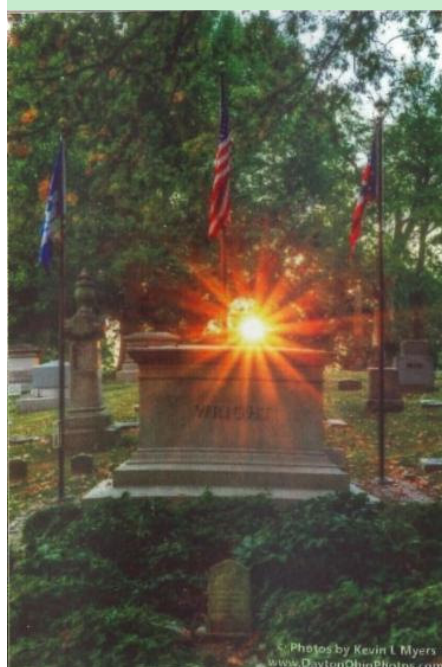
Not into public speaking? Consider getting involved with our horticulture team, or assisting with special events & research projects.

*If there is something you'd like to see here at Woodland please reach out to us & suggest it!

Tours & More:

We welcome walkers, runners, and wanderers -- leashed dogs & school groups.

Register for a guided tour: visit the Woodland Cemetery website! Learn about fascinating Daytonians resting peacefully in one of America's oldest rural garden cemeteries! Or check out our [virtual tours](#)! (if you really don't want to go outside)



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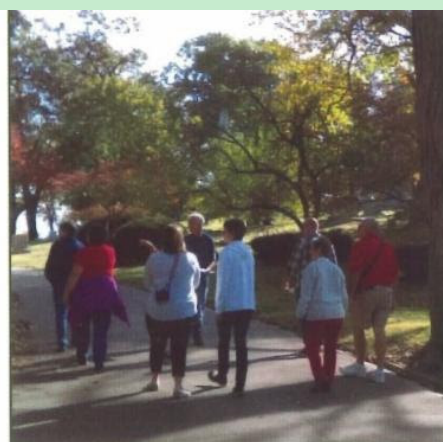
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