

The Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead

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Introduction

Over the years a number of claims have been reported on behalf of experimenters said to have made powered, sustained and controlled flights in a heavier-than-air machine before Wilbur and Orville Wright. The arguments in favour of Brazilian Alberto Santos-Dumont, New Zealander Richard Pearse and most other claimants have been shown to be unsubstantiated.¹ The most persistent claim, however, is that of Gustave Whitehead (born Gustav Weisskopf), a German immigrant to the U.S. who claimed to have made flights in 1898, 1899, 1901 and 1902. Whitehead (1874-1927) and his experiments had been largely forgotten until January 1935, when free-lance writer Stella Randolph rediscovered the story in a scrapbook in a Smithsonian collection and published an article, "Did Whitehead Proceed Wright in First Public Flight?" in the magazine *Popular Aviation*.² She continued to champion Whitehead's cause in two books published over the next thirty years.³ Occasional media interest in the story led Orville Wright to publish a detailed refutation in 1945.⁴

In 1963 William J. O'Dwyer, a retired Air Force pilot living in Fairfield, Ct., became interested in the case, and emerged as a determined champion of Whitehead. His book on the case, *History by Contract*, co-authored with Stella Randolph, which included an attack on the Smithsonian Institution for its links to the estate of Orville Wright, summarized all of the evidence gathered to date in support of the Whitehead claim.⁵ In a series of often heated exchanges, C.H. Gibbs-Smith, then the world's leading authority on the birth of aviation, vigorously countered O'Dwyer's claims.⁶

In March 2013, John Brown, an Australian researcher living in Germany, reopened the old debate, unveiling a website arguing the Whitehead case, and announcing the discovery of a large numbers of news articles on Whitehead, and a photograph which he claimed to show one of his powered machines in the air.⁷ In 2009 the editor of *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* announced his recognition of Whitehead's priority in the centennial edition of that reference work.⁸ His decision caught the attention of the media, sparking a flurry of news stories and leading some popular aviation magazines to express interest in the revisionist claim.⁹ The Connecticut legislature jumped on the band wagon, tacking a provision creating a state Powered Flight Day honouring Whitehead onto an omnibus bill whose major purpose was to establish 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?

Whitehead's earliest flight claims appeared in a series of confusing, contradictory and unsubstantiated new articles. In a March 4, 1898 article in the *New York World*, he claimed

to have made a four and one half mile flight in an ornithopter, but failed to mention the date or place where it occurred. In 1899 he claimed to have flown a steam-powered aircraft into a three story building in Pittsburgh.¹⁰ He reported an unmanned flight test of his No. 21 machine at Fairfield, CT, in a June 9, 1901 article in the New York Sun. Whitehead's supporters either ignore or spend little effort attempting to prove these early claims, preferring to begin their defence with the supposed flight of August 14, 1901.¹¹

On August 18, 1901, the Bridgeport [Connecticut] Sunday Herald published an account of an early morning flight of No. 21 four days earlier. The reporter, whom Whitehead supporters identify as Richard Howell, claimed to have watched as Whitehead took off and travelled half a mile through the air at a maximum altitude of fifty feet. Thanks to the rise of news wire services, the story was picked up by a large number of American newspapers and some overseas publications.¹²

In two letters published in the April 1, 1902, issue of American Inventor, Whitehead himself claimed to have made two more flights in his No. 22 machine on January 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 being planned for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition to be held in St. Louis in 1904. While 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?

The original Bridgeport Sunday Herald story, supposedly an eye-witness account, sounds impressive. It is important to note, however, that the editor did not rush into print with a front page story. The article appeared on page five in a feature story headlined with four witches steering their brooms through the word - Flying. The newspaper commonly used page five for sensational stories with a humorous twist. Just a month before, on July 14, page five carried an account of "The Dog Man of Wyndham," about a mysterious creature marauding the neighborhood. The week after the Whitehead revelation, page five offered an account of "The Woodbury Kleptomania," about a local woman caught stealing chickens and rare plants.

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, Howell was dead and James Dickey was the only one of the named witnesses a Harvard researcher could locate. "I believe the entire story in the Herald was imaginary and grew out of the comments Whitehead discussing what he hoped to get from his plane," Dickey stated. "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."¹³

Even Richard Howell, said to be the author of the original article, failed to support the Whitehead story. In his memoir of his years as a newsman, *Tales From Bohemia Land* (1928), he did not even mention Gustave Whitehead or his supposed flights. Strange behaviour for a respected editor/reporter who once claimed to have witnessed the world's first airplane flight!

Other local papers took a more jaundiced view of the story. 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."¹⁴

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]."¹⁵ These stories were published in respected local newspapers just 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. Clearly, some newspapers in Whitehead's neighbourhood did not believe that he had flown.

Between 1934 and 1974 pro-Whitehead researchers gathered contradictory witness testimony regarding the old claims. The earliest of those witnesses was not interviewed until thirty three years after the supposed flight.¹⁶ The ability of the mind to confuse, scramble, or even create "memories" after a long passage of time is well known. Moreover, at least one of those witnesses was paid for his testimony.¹⁷ Others offered memories that were demonstrably false. Some of those interviewed thirty 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 which Whitehead did conduct. Whitehead supporters swear by those accounts, the sceptics dismiss them.¹⁸

The members of Whitehead's own family reported that they had never seen him fly.¹⁹ 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."²⁰

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."²¹

Aeronautical authorities certainly doubted the tale. Samuel Cabot, who had employed Whitehead to build and test gliders 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."²² Hermann Moedebeck, a German military officer and aviation authority, wrote to Chanute in September 1901, remarking that he believed Whitehead's "experiences are Humbug."²³ Albert Horn, who worked with Whitehead on the Boston Aeronautical Society's gliders, agreed that the experiments were a disappointment.²⁴

Charles Manly, Smithsonian Secretary 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."²⁵ Grover 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 centre of pressure on a wing in flight.²⁶

Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, the most distinguished 20th century historian of flight, rejected the claims in no uncertain terms as "a myth an apocryphal story"²⁷ Sergei Sikorsky, son of aviation pioneer Igor Sikorsky, and himself an important figure in aeronautics, regards the Whitehead claims as "pure fiction, not fact."²⁸

Ultimately, even William J. O'Dwyer, the leading Whitehead spokesman in the 1960s and 1970s, doubted that his hero's aircraft had made the flights in question. "For my money," he admitted in a 1966 letter to aviation historian Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, "it [Whitehead aircraft No. 21] never made a ½ mile flight or a 7 mile flight." In the end, after years spent researching the claims, he could only suggest that "it made some short flights." At best, that would put Whitehead in a class with Clément Ader, Hiram Maxim, A.M. Herring and others who had left the ground under power before the Wright brothers, although their respective crafts were incapable of either sustained or controlled flight.²⁹

There is no record that Whitehead himself ever called the attention of newsmen to his achievement in the years after 1909, as the Wright brothers and other aviation pioneers were the subject of headlines around the globe. Over the next two decades, one aviation story after another dominated the front pages of the world's newspapers, culminating in Charles

Lindbergh's flight from New York to Paris in May 1927, six months before Whitehead's death. Yet there is no indication that Gustave Whitehead ever spoke up in defence of his own claim. While Whitehead's obituary in the Bridgeport Telegram identifies him as "a well-known resident" and a "member of the International Bible Students Association," it makes no mention of his flight claims.³⁰

Not one of the powered machines that Whitehead 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? 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? 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 on the ground, there is not a single photo of his No. 22 aircraft, reputed to have flown seven miles in 1902! Compare that to the meticulous and multi-layered record documenting the success of the Wright brothers and virtually every other pioneer of early aviation.

Then there is the 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."³¹ 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?

Since the resurgence of interest in the Whitehead claim in the spring of 2013, some of the world's leading historians of flight have expressed their doubts. A group of more than thirty international scholars, writers and museum curators signed a statement concluding that: "When it comes to the case of Gustave Whitehead, the decision must remain, not proven."³² The historians of the Royal Aeronautical Society noted that: "All available evidence fails to support the claim that Gustave Whitehead made sustained, powered, controlled flights pre-dating those of the Wright brothers."³³ The editors of the *Scientific American* agree: "In determining whether the Wright Brothers or Gustave Whitehead first successfully piloted an airplane, I have enough data - the original text within its original context - at hand, (and now, dear reader, so do you) to show that *Scientific American* quite clearly gives the priority to the Wright brothers. The data show that not only was Whitehead not first in flight, but that he may never have made a controlled, powered flight at any time."³⁴

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 December 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....”³⁵

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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References and notes

1. On Pearse, for example see his statement that he did not begin his work until 1904, in: “A New Zealand Flying Machine, Mr. Richard Pearse of Waitohi the Inventor,” The Timaru [New Zealand] Post, (November 17, 1909). On Santos-Dumont see, Paul Hoffman, *Wings of Madness* (NY: Hyperion, 2004).
2. Stella Randolph and Harvey Phillips, “Did Whitehead Proceed Wright in World’s First Powered Flight?” *Popular Aviation* (January 1935) Vol. 16, No. 1, pgs. 22-25, 55-57.
3. Stella Randolph, *The Lost Flights of Gustave Whitehead* (Washington, D.C.: Places, 1937); Stella Randolph, *Before the Wright Brothers: The Story of Gustave Whitehead*, (NY: Putnam, 1966).
4. Orville Wright, “The Mythical Whitehead Flight,” *US. Air Services*, Aug. 1945, vol. 30, p. 9.

5. William J. O'Dwyer and Stella Randolph, *History by Contract* (Leutershausen, West Germany: Fritz Majer, 1978). O'Dwyer's daughter, Susan Brinchman, is the latest Whitehead supporter to offer her findings in print: *First in Flight: Hidden History of Gustave Whitehead & the Wrights* (La Mesa, CA : Apex Educational Media, 2015).
6. C.H. Gibbs-Smith's writings in response to W. O'Dwyer's efforts to prove the flight claims of Gustave Whitehead include: "The Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead," unpublished manuscript; "Reflections on the Whitehead Claims to Powered Flight in 1901 and 1902"; "Gustave Whitehead: His Flight Claims and his Place in History"; "An open letter on the subject of the Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead to Major William J. O'Dwyer," all in the Gustave Whitehead Manuscript Collection (Gibbs-Smith, Collection XXXX-0603, National Air and Space Museum Archive. Charles Harvard Gibbs-Smith, "The Sorry Affair of Gustave Whitehead and His Alleged Powered Flights," *Astronautics & Aeronautics* (February 1970), 66-68.
7. John Brown's website can be accessed at : <http://www.gustave-whitehead.com/>
8. Paul Jackson, ed., "Justice Delayed is Justice Denied," *Jane's All the World's Aircraft* (London: HIS Global Inc., 2013). The article can be accessed at: <http://www.gustave-whitehead.com/history/jane-s-foreword-march-8-2013/>
9. See for example: Bus Davisson, "Who Was First? The Wrights or Whitehead," *Flight Journal* (March 25, 2013), the article can be accessed at: <http://www.flightjournal.com/blog/2013/03/25/who-was-first-the-wrights-or-whitehead/>
10. For a detailed analysis of the Pittsburgh flight claims see, "Carroll Gray, "1899-Gustave Whitehead: Airship, Pittsburgh and Steam," http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carroll-f-gray/1899---gustave-whitehead_b_8028572.html , accessed by the author, August 31, 2016. Mr. Gray has emerged as a leading analyst of the Whitehead claims in a superb series of web posts to be found at: <http://flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/index.html>. The author is in his debt.
11. *New York World*, March 4, 1898; "Improved Flying Machine," *New York Sun*, June 9, 1899.
12. For a list of newspaper articles based on the Bridgeport Sunday Herald story of August 18, 1901, see: <http://www.gustave-whitehead.com/history/news-reports-1901-2-flights/>
13. John Crane, "Did Whitehead Ever Fly," *National Aeronautic Association Magazine* (December 1936)
14. "Unrealized Dreams: The Last Flop of the Whitehead Flying Machine," *Bridgeport Evening Farmer* (April 5, 1902)
15. "Whitehead Flew High ... Financially, but Not Actually - That is to say, He Has Not [Flown],." *Bridgeport, Post*, (April 5, 1902).
16. The earliest witnesses were interviewed in July 1934, see Randolph, *Lost Flights*. See also, Carroll Gray, "84 Witnesses, Eye, Ear and Otherwise," <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/witnesses.html>

17. Junius Harworth/Julius Horvath, Stella Randolph's "prize witness" negotiated an agreement with Ms. Randolph to offer his testimony in exchange for 10% of the proceeds from her resulting book. S. Randolph to J. Horvath/Harworth, August 12, 1934. A copy of the letter was received from Carroll Grey on November 1, 2016. See also: <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/JWHtruth.html>,
18. See for example the testimony of William Chatlos, <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/chatlos.html> ; Elizabeth Koteles, <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/koteles.html> ; and John Havery, <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/havery.html>. All of the testimony can be accessed at: <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/witnesses.html>.
19. Whitehead's brother John, for example, testified that he had never seen his brother fly: <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/whiteheadj.html>
20. Crane, "Did Whitehead Ever Fly?"
21. 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 NASM Archive.
22. S. Cabot to O. Chanute, May 7, 1897, The Papers of Octave Chanute Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; .S. Cabot to O. Chanute, September 1, 1897.
23. Moedebeck to O.Chanute, September 5, 1901, Chanute Papers; also, Correspondence, Vol. 9, p. 81.
24. For Horn's testimony see; <http://www.flyingmachines.org/gwinfo/horn.html>
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26. Grover Loening to E.E. Husting, June 29, 1968, author's collection.
27. C.H. Gibbs-Smith, "The Flight Claims of Gustave Whitehead."
28. Sergei Sikorsky to Tom Crouch, June 21, 2013.
29. W. J. O 'Dwyer to C.H. Gibbs-Smith, June 7, 1966, author's collection, obtained from Carroll Gray.
30. "Gustave Whitehead," Bridgeport Telegram, October 13, 1927.
31. "The Aero Club of America's Exhibit of Aeronautical Apparatus," Scientific American, Volume XCIV, No. 4, January 27, 1906, pp. 93-94
32. Copy of Statement in the author's collection.
33. GUSTAVE WHITEHEAD An RAeS statement regarding claims that Gustave Whitehead successfully flew an aeroplane before the Wright brothers <http://aerosociety.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/SpecialistPapers/GustaveWhiteheadStatement.pdf>
34. Scientific American, July 2, 2014.

35. "Genesis of the First Successful Aeroplane," *Scientific American*, December 15, 1906, p. 1.

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Dr. Crouch has won a number of major writing awards, including the history book prizes offered by both the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics and the Aviation/Space Writers Association. He received a 1989 Christopher Award, a literary prize recognizing "significant artistic achievement in support of the highest values of the human spirit," for *The Bishop's Boys: A Life of Wilbur and Orville Wright*. His book, *Wings: A History of Aviation From Kites to the Space Age*, won the AIAA Gardner-Lasser Literature Prize for 2005, an award presented to the best book selected in that year from all books in the field of aerospace history published in the last five years.

Throughout his career, Dr. Crouch has played a major role in planning museum exhibitions. In the fall of 2000, President Clinton appointed Dr. Crouch to the Chairmanship of the First Flight Centennial Federal Advisory Board, an organization created to advise the Centennial of Flight Commission on activities planned to commemorate the 100th anniversary of powered flight.