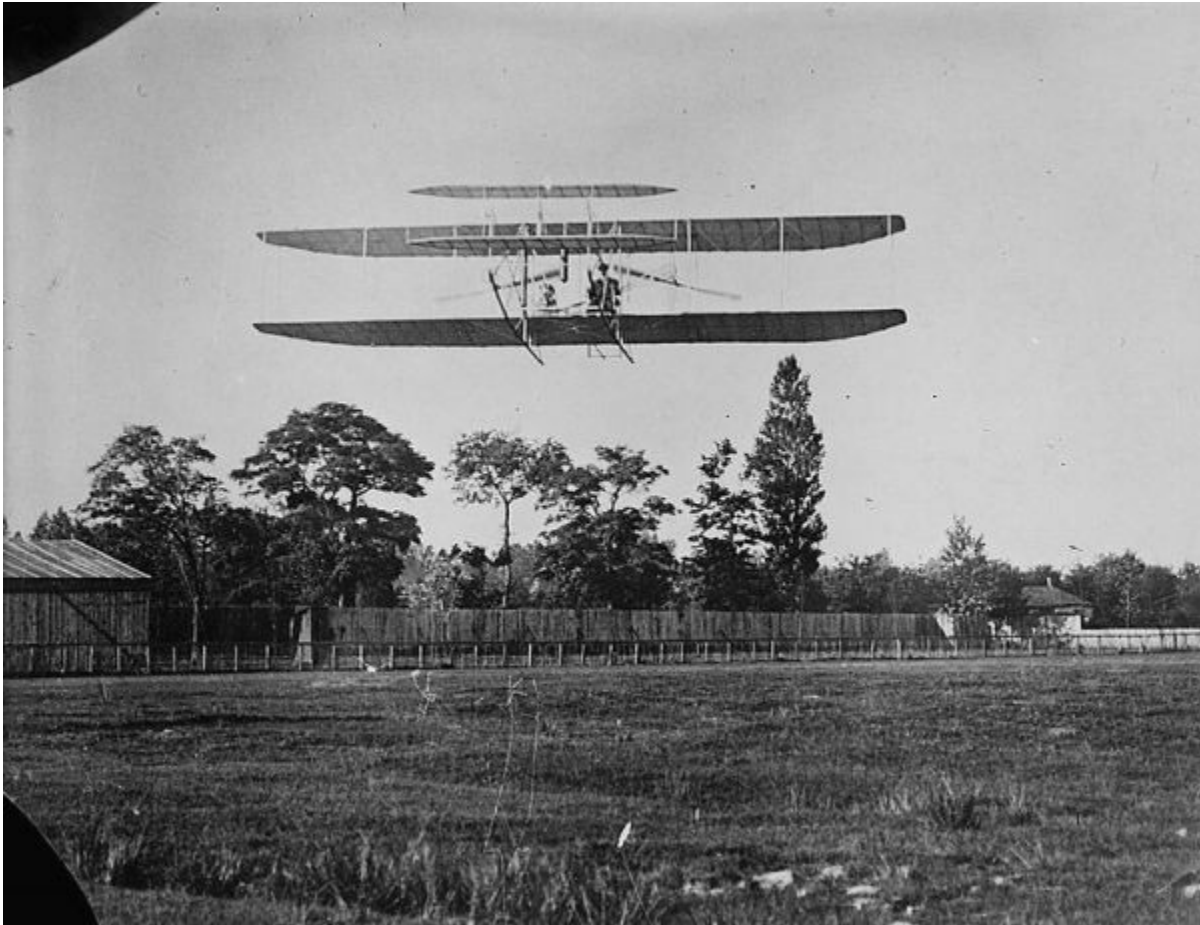


Wrong About Wright



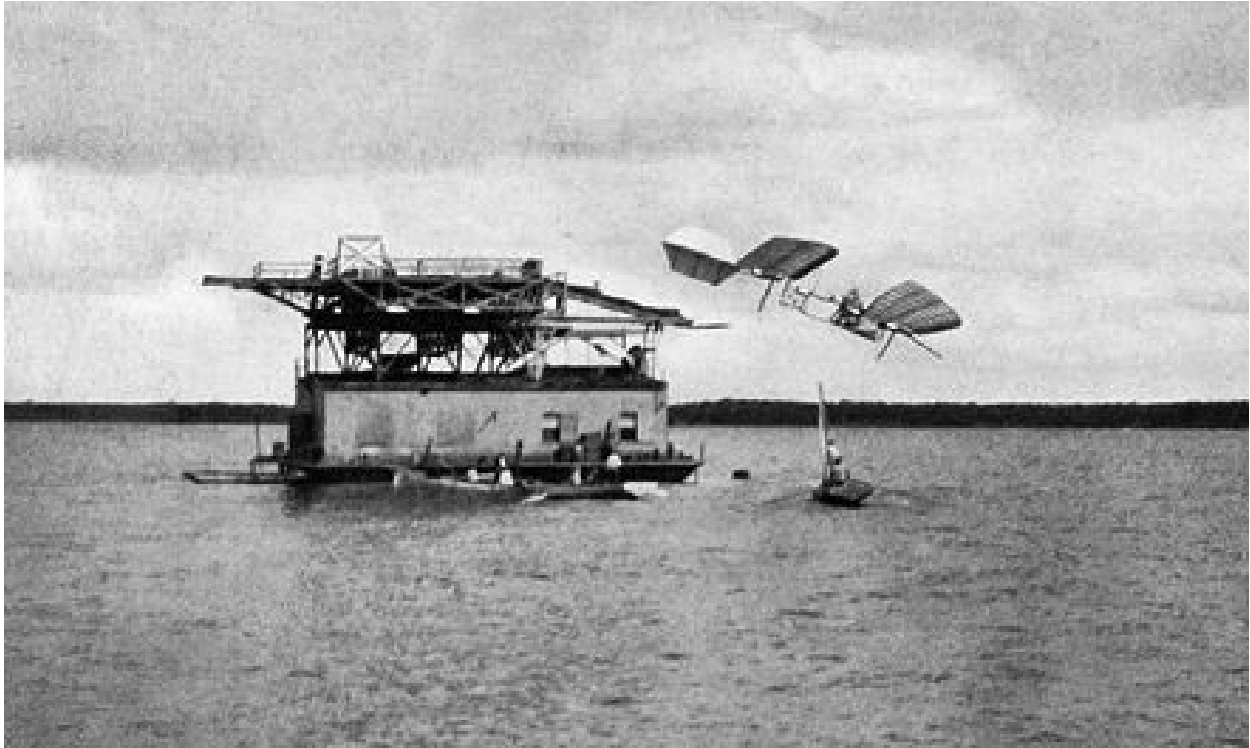
Judging from what we've been told in history books, when the Wright Brothers invented powered flight, they were rewarded with parades, medals, and headlines. But that's a lie. The truth is, the U.S. government insisted that one of the greatest technological achievements of all time simply hadn't happened. Here's the true story.

CHANCE- THE UNINVITED GUEST

On December 8, 1903, Samuel Langley, head of the Smithsonian Institution and America's foremost expert on flight, was ready to make his most important attempt at manned flight. Since 1891 he'd been flying unmanned models powered by internal combustion engines; the U.S. government considered his experiments so promising that they've given him \$50,000 to continue. Now he planned to fly his gasoline-powered, manned flight off of a houseboat in the Potomac River. The press was on hand, waiting expectantly.

But it didn't happen. Unfortunately, the launching device, which was supposed to hurl the plane into

the air, snagged the plane at the last second instead... and it went into the water “like a handful of mortar.”



The *New York Times*, scornful of attempts at powered flight anyway, heaped abuse on Langley. They editorialized: “The ridiculous fiasco... was not unexpected. The flying machine might be evolved by the combined and continuous efforts of mathematicians and mechanics in from one to ten million years.”

THE REAL THING

It didn't take that long. Only nine days later, on December 17, two bicycle makers from Dayton, Ohio -Wilbur and Orville Wright- achieved the goal of all the world's would-be aviators: powered flight. It was a revolutionary development in the history of humankind ...but few people even noticed. Only a few papers carried the Associated Press story of the flight. Most editors considered the whole thing a scam. When the Wrights set up the world's first airstrip outside Dayton in 1904 and flew daily all summer, only a few reporters came to see.

In fact, the first published eyewitness account of flight appears, amazingly enough, in a beekeeping journal called *Gleanings in Bee Culture*. And this almost a year after they started flying. The editor, A.I. Root, saw the Wrights make aviation's first turn on September 20, 1904 and wrote:

I have a wonderful story to tell you, a story that in some respects outrivals the Arabian Nights fables... It was my privilege, on the 20th day of September, 1904 to see the first successful trip of an airship, without a balloon to sustain it, that the world has ever made...

These two brothers have probably not even a faint glimpse of what their discovery is going to bring to the children of men.



The scientific press was also slow to acknowledge the Wrights' accomplishment. As Sherwood Hayes writes in *The First To Fly*:

Scientific American had been skeptical of reports about the Wright Brothers long flights, its editorial board feeling that if the reports were true, then certainly the enterprising American press would have given them great attention. When the reports persisted, the magazine finally obtained confirmation by letter from many reputable people who had witnessed the actual flights. In its December 15 [1906] issue, the magazine stated its complete acceptance of the Wrights.

MILITARY INTELLIGENCE

You'd think the U.S. government would leap to purchase one of the most revolutionary weapons ever. Not so. In 1904 after making flights of five minutes, the Wrights wrote their Congressman, Robert Nevin, offering to license their device to the government for military purposes. Their letter said they'd made 105 flights up to 3 miles long at 35 mph. The flying machine, they said, "lands without being wrecked" and "can be are of great practical use in scouting and carrying messages in time of war." Interestingly enough, for many years the *only* use the Wrights could imagine for their creation was war.)

The War Department, under future president William Howard Taft, responded that they weren't interested. They'd gotten many requests for "financial assistance in the development of designs for flying machines" and would only consider a device that had been "brought to the stage of practical operation without expense to the U.S. government." But, they added, do get in touch "as soon as it shall have been perfected."



In October 1905, the Wrights wrote that they'd built a better plane and made flights up to 39 minutes and over 20 miles. The War Department again declined in a letter with almost the same wording -a form letter! Obviously, either no one was reading their letters, or no one understood what they were saying.

Showing incredible patience, the frustrated Wrights politely wrote back again. This time they said they'd build a flying machine to *any* specifications the government would name. The War Department, still clinging to the obvious impossibility of powered flight, wrote back saying it "does not care to

formulate any requirements for the performance of a flying machine ...until a machine is produced with by actual operation is shown to be able to produce horizontal flight and to carry an operator” -even though they had already produced it. They were so dejected that they didn’t fly again for two and half years.

ACCEPTED AT LAST

In 1907 a young balloon racer named Frank Lahm got a job with the Army Signal Corps office in Washington, DC. He knew all the early flight pioneers and had heard from them about the miracle achieved by the Wrights. That, finally, was the Wrights’ big break. Fred Howard writes in *Wilbur and Orville*:

Lahm wrote a letter to the Board of Ordnance and Fortification (of the Army Signal Corps), urging that the brothers’ latest proposal for the sale of a Flyer receive favorable action. It would be unfortunate, he said, if the U.S. should not be the first to take advantage of [the] unquestioned military value of the Wright Flyer. Lahm’s letter had the desired effect...

Wilbur decided a fair price for the Flyer would be \$25,000. The Board only had \$10,000... When Wilbur went to Washington to attend a formal meeting of the Board, his frankness of manner and self-confidence worked their usual magic and the Board assured him the entire \$25,000 would be forthcoming by drawing on an emergency fund left over from the Spanish-American War.



MORE BUREAUCRATIC INSANITY

Apparently nothing much has changed: Even though the Wrights were the only ones in the world making practical airplanes, the U.S. government still had to put a letter out for bids. So on December 23, 1907, it issued an “Advertisement and specifications for a Heavier-Than-Air Flying Machine,” capable of carrying two men at 40 mph and staying up for at least an hour, then landing without serious

damage. Critics howled. The *American Magazine of Aquatics* wrote, “There is not a known flying machine in the world which could fulfill those specifications.” Amazingly, the Signal Corps got 41 bids, with price tags ranging from \$850 to \$1 million. One was from a federal prisoner who would build a plane for his freedom. Another had plans written on wrapping paper and a third bidder offered to build planes by the pound.

The Wrights, of course, got the contract.

I SEE LONDON, I SEE FRANCE

Still, it was the French and British who first acknowledged the Wright Brothers’ feats publicly. Shortly after winning the government contract (but before they’d proved themselves by building the U.S. a plane), Wilbur went to France to demonstrate their machine. The French were avid aviators, and welcomed him enthusiastically... at first. Then, as he rebuilt his plane (it had been damaged in shipping), working long hours and living simply in a nearby room, they became suspicious. Why wasn’t he more flamboyant? Why didn’t he attend the rounds of parties, like other celebrated French air pioneers?



Eventually, the French and British press decided he was a charlatan. But on August 8, 1907, they changed their minds. “To make a long story short,” recalled an American named Ross Browne, who was there to see Wilbur’s first European flight, “he got into the machine that afternoon, got into the air

and made a beautiful circular flight. You should have seen the crowd there. They threw hats and everything.”

STILL DUMB

Finally, four years after the first flight, the Wright Brothers were heroes. But there was one final insult: The Smithsonian Institution insisted that the first manned flight had been Langley’s slam dunk into the Potomac. They didn’t want the Wright Flyer, so it sat in a shed in Dayton until 1928... when Orville finally gave it to the London Museum of Science. Only in 1942 did the Smithsonian bow to common knowledge, reverse its position, and humbly asked for the plane. The Smithsonian restored it and dedicated it in 1948, on the 45th anniversary of flight.

The article above is from [*Uncle John's All-Purpose Extra Strength Bathroom Reader*](#).