

# CT Lawmakers Join Fight Over Who Was 1st To Fly

Stephen Singer, Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. (AP) — Connecticut's leading role in aviation has never been disputed, but legislators have passed a bill insisting that a Connecticut aviator flew two years before the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, N.C.

The measure is the latest twist in an effort to credit the first successful airplane flight to German-born aviator and Bridgeport resident Gustave Whitehead.

The legislation is a flight of fancy, say Wright brothers partisans. Gov. Dannel P. Malloy has not committed to signing the legislation, but will review it when it reaches his desk, a spokesman said.

The bill honors what it calls the first powered flight by Whitehead in 1901, "rather than the Wright brothers." Whitehead is credited by some for the first flight in August 1901. The Wright brothers lifted off from North Carolina in December 1903.

"We want to correct something that should have been corrected long ago," said state Rep. Larry Miller, R-Stratford, who spearheaded the legislation. "All we're trying to do is correct history. There's nothing in it for us."

Tom Crouch, senior curator for aeronautics at the Smithsonian Institution, which displays Wilbur and Orville Wright's plane at the National Air and Space Museum, said Whitehead's backers are "absolutely wrong."

"Whitehead's legend has spawned much speculation and hearsay," he said. "People who have looked at this over the years ... almost unanimously reject the claim."

Connecticut has a long and storied history in aviation. Aircraft engines were made at Pratt and Whitney in East Hartford beginning in 1925, and a desk used by Charles Lindbergh is still on display at the jet engine manufacturer. And famed helicopter maker Igor Sikorsky set up shop in Stratford in 1929 to make seaplanes.

A recent burst of interest in Whitehead followed a documentary by an Australian historian, John Brown. In addition, Whitehead Research Committees in the United States and Germany have stoked interest. Jane's All the World's Aircraft, an influential industry publication, recently cited contemporary news accounts in concluding that Whitehead beat the brothers from Dayton, Ohio, into the air.

Janet Bednarek, a professor of aviation history at the University of Dayton, said many are seeking a share of the credit for flight development, but Whitehead's supporters "seemed to be particularly persistent."

The Wright brothers were the first to combine the lift, control and thrust systems, she said.

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"They put it all together for what was really the first modern airplane and demonstrated it," she said. "Every airplane that has flown can trace its lineage to that Wright brothers' plane in 1903," something Whitehead cannot claim.

Andrew Kosch, a high school science teacher in Milford, said he has been working 30 years to promote Whitehead's achievement. He lobbied the legislature and even persuaded Chip's Family Restaurant in Fairfield to name an omelet the No. 21, for the plane Whitehead flew.

He said the aviator is well-known in Connecticut for flying before the Wright brothers and the world needs to know it.

"How can you prove someone didn't fly? That's what the Smithsonian is trying to do," Kosch said.

He and Miller said the Smithsonian is forbidden by a contract with the executors of the Wright brothers' estate to admit that anyone else was the first to fly.

Crouch said the Smithsonian signed a contract with two heirs of the Wright brothers' estate in 1948, after the brothers' deaths. The heirs insisted on the provision, he said, because they fought a fraudulent claim of early flights for 20 years.

It doesn't change what he said is the fact that Wilbur and Orville Wright operated the first heavier-than-air machine.

"What they achieved changed the face of the world," he said. "They were the ones who took those final steps. They deserve the credit for it."

Kosch will not be persuaded to reject Whitehead.

"I do everything I can to keep the story alive," he said.

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