

The Rest of the Story...

The Wright Brothers Struggle for Acceptance by Gary Palamara

In 1904 the Wright Brothers decided to devote as much time as was necessary, to the perfection of the flying machine and converted much of their Bicycle business into aircraft design. For real progress to be made, the Wrights knew a location closer to their shop was needed for testing. Less concerned now with the idea of crash landing on hard ground, the brothers searched the Ohio countryside for a place to do their experiments. They came to settle on a remote field eight miles north and east of Dayton, owned by a local banker, Torrence Huffman. Simms Station or Huffman Prairie as it was later known, was bordered on two sides by heavily traveled roadways and on another by the electrified, Dayton to Springfield trolley. As in North Carolina the year before, a small field camp was setup at the site. Huffman Prairie would serve as the Wrights' airfield through 1904 & '05 and would much later become part of the new Army Air Corps' Wright Field.



The brothers knew many improvements would be needed to make their flying machine practical. After 1903 airplane operators would be seated upright and no longer control the craft from a prone position, lying next to the engine. They also added a more powerful motor, which allowed the Wrights to fly with a passenger. A two-person flying machine would help the brothers market their invention and later facilitate pilot training. Along with improvements to the flyer itself, an improved take off mechanism was needed.

At take off, an airplane needs to head into the prevailing winds in order to achieve maximum lift. Until 1904, the brothers' method of launching their aircraft was to lay down a wooden track that pointed the flyer towards the source of the wind. Without paved runways, the track system reduced the amount of friction or drag, during takeoff. For a larger, heavier flying machine, capable of taking aloft more than one person, the Wrights estimated a track of several hundred feet would be needed for a successful takeoff. Back at Kitty Hawk, the winds were relatively steady, coming from off shore, but that was not the case at Huffman Prairie, Ohio. When testing finally started in the spring of 1904, the brothers found themselves laying down track in one direction, only for the wind to shift to a new position or completely die away. So, to solve the problem



of laying down large sections of track in every direction, the brothers came up with another uniquely Wright idea.

The Wrights built a tower approximately 20 feet tall, and suspended a heavy weight from the center. Through a series of ropes and pulleys that ultimately attached to the bottom of the nine hundred pound, 1904 flying machine, they magnified the downward force of the falling weight. When the weight was released, they succeeded in catapulting their airplane into the

air with less than twenty five percent of the “runway” otherwise needed for takeoff. The “launching derrick” as it was known, was so successful, even windless takeoffs were made possible.

During the two years that followed Kitty Hawk, the Wright brothers improved their machine and refined the art of flying. By the end of the 1905 season, flights of more than 20 miles were becoming routine. Although local newspaper accounts of their activities were still rare, the location of the Huffman Prairie site did attract a small number of regular on-lookers. But the brothers continued to find themselves in an awkward position with regard to publicity.

When the Wright Brothers first began seriously thinking about the challenge of manned flight, their only goal was the notoriety that would come from being the first ones to solve the problem. Soon, they came to realize that flying held a commercial promise as well. In March of 1903, prior to adding propulsion to their machine, the brothers applied for a United States patent to cover the 1902 glider design. That patent, would not be granted until 1906. Not wanting to publicly demonstrate their flying machine, for fear of being copied by others, the brothers knew that without practical demonstrations and widespread publicity, any thought of commercial sales would be impossible. Many potential buyers, upon hearing stories about a manned flying machine, simply did not believe the claims as real.



So, with the U.S. patent not yet granted, the brothers made the decision by the end of December 1905, to stop flying and concentrate on trying to market their invention to potential buyers. Though the Huffman Prairie site was along heavily traveled thoroughfares, only a handful of local residents had witnessed the brothers’ success. Nonetheless, some of those witnesses were among the most prominent members of Dayton society. The Wright brothers’ plan was to enlist their support to provide affidavits as to what they had seen.

At the time, neither Wright brother envisioned that the flying machine would in later

years, become a practical mode of public transportation. Rather, they put all their efforts into military sales, theorizing that only governments had the resources to build planes and train pilots in large numbers. They also believed that with the government production of the airplane, any future wars would become unnecessary. Flying over an enemy territory they reasoned, would remove the element of surprise needed by warring armies. But repeated attempts to secure U.S. government contracts fell on deaf ears. Comical letters of reply from War Department officials, chided the Wrights for wasting the government's time with fanciful dreams of manned flight. So in desperation, the brothers began to look to foreign governments, for any possible sales.

Manned flight seemed more believable to the overseas press than it did in America. While the Wright's received little attention from the U.S. press, foreign magazines and newspapers did report their exploits. But the European reports remained skeptical and gave the impression that if manned flight were possible surely no American could have done it. This chauvinistic attitude was especially rooted in stories written by the French press. A century before the Wright brothers, the French had invented the hot air balloon, so it would seem natural for them to assume that the skies were their domain. But in spite of a slightly more favorable climate over seas, the Wright Brothers would find themselves on even less secure ground when they traveled throughout Europe in the years following 1905.

With foreign patents for their flying machine not yet applied for, the Wright brothers began negotiations with governments across the Atlantic. In France, Italy, Germany, Russia and Great Britain, each offer was essentially the same as the proposals first made to the U.S. War Department. The Wrights' contract would include: one working flyer, a full demonstration of the machine, and the training of several pilots. In addition the brothers' contract would give each government, an exclusive right to build more flyers within that country. The brothers would also receive a royalty for each machine that was built. Still hoping that someday, American officials would come around to their way of thinking the Wright brothers exempted the United States government from any other countries' exclusivity clause. So sure were the Wright brothers of the performance of their machine, they refused to exhibit or demonstrate their flyer without a signed contract for sale. With many trips between Europe and the new world behind them, finally in late 1907 their fortunes began to change on both sides of the Atlantic.

With news of the Wright brother's negotiations in Europe, in December of 1907 the United States War Department finally seemed to be interested in the idea of procuring a flying machine... if one existed. Rather than handing an exclusive contract to the Wright brothers to build a machine, 1907 government red tape, required War Department engineers to draw up specifications for a flying machine and advertise for bids. Upon acceptance, the winner of the bid would be awarded a contract to produce a flying machine, plus a bonus for any increased performance beyond the bid's specifications.

Although several proposals were received by the War Department, the Wrights placed the only credible bid and on February 8, 1908 a contract was signed between the Wright brothers of Dayton, Ohio and the government of the United States to build and demonstrate a flying machine. The total price to produce a working airplane and train several pilots was \$25,000 dollars. Testing would take place the following summer. Back in Europe, the on and off negotiations with the French government, once again bogged down. Then, with a patriotic fervor, a consortium of wealthy French businessmen was formed. They negotiated an agreement with the brothers and donated the money to demonstrate the Wright flyer in Europe. If the Wright brothers' claims were true, the group planned to give the contract to their country, thereby insuring that France would be the first to fly in Europe.

With promises of sales on two continents at nearly the same time, the brothers would be forced to split apart to cover the workload. Wilbur would eventually travel to Europe, to handle the trials in France, while Orville would do the same at the government's chosen test site, Fort Myer, near Washington, D.C. It had been over two years since either brother had piloted an aero-plane. Before splitting up for the demonstrations, the brothers decided to return to Kitty Hawk, in April of 1908, to safely practice their skills with the improved flyers. The new machine the Wrights would demonstrate on both sides of the Atlantic had a more powerful engine and was now capable of carrying two men in a seated upright position.

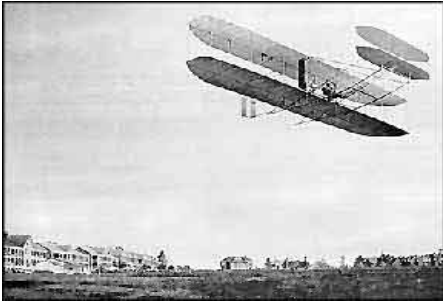
After practicing at Kitty Hawk, Wilbur traveled to New York, and there sailed for Europe on May 21st. Arriving in France, his first task was to find a suitable location for the demonstrations. After considerable searching he finally chose an area used for racing, near the small French town of La Mans, 200 kilometers west of Paris. Once in La Mans, assembly of the flyer went slowly.

The Wright flyer shipped from America was damaged in transit and needed considerable rebuilding. At first, Wilbur wrote a scathing, brotherly letter to Orville, complaining about the poor manner in which the machine had been packed. But it was later determined that the shipping crates had been opened and then resealed, by clumsy custom officials. Finding English speaking mechanics to assist in construction of the machine, proved difficult. After only partially completing the flyer, a rubber coolant hose for the planes' engine gave way during testing, badly scalding Wilbur's arm. It would be weeks before he would fully recuperate from the injury.

With all the delays and setbacks, the first powered flight from Le Mans, France would not be made until August 8, 1908. But after the initial flight, progress came quickly. By the end of the first full week of flying, Wilbur was making "figure eights" in the skies above the La Mans racetrack, to the excitement of the ever growing crowd. Back in

America, Orville was almost ready to demonstrate his flying machine for official Washington.

After leaving North Carolina in mid-August, Orville Wright decided to stop by Fort Myer before returning home to Dayton. He wanted to survey the site of the upcoming government trials. What he found at Fort Myer displeased him. The parade grounds where the tests were to be performed were smaller than had been described and ringed by a row of trees and one end of the field had deep ravines running through it. Although confident of his own abilities, upon seeing the field, Orville, knew that he would have to start work immediately.



With the help of their mechanic, Charles E. Taylor, assembly of the flyer went smoothly, and by early September, the machine was ready to launch. There were only a handful of witnesses present at Fort Myer, for the first brief flight made on September 3, 1908. As in Europe, once flying began, progress was made rapidly. With nearly every flight Orville increased his time aloft. An ocean away, Wilbur was now extending his flight time to more than an hour. On both continents, the brothers competed with each other from afar, keeping track of their progress via telegram and newspaper reports.

Within the first week after flying began at Fort Myer, Army Lt. Frank S. Lahm became the first person in America to fly as a passenger, when Orville Wright took him on several circuits around the field. Lahm, whose father was a friend of the Wrights, would later go on to greatness as an accomplished Army pilot & instructor.

Another young Army officer, Lieutenant Thomas Selfridge, had hoped to be the first passenger to fly with Orville, but Orville didn't trust the 26 year-old West Point graduate. Prior to their meeting, Thomas Selfridge had been involved with a group of men that would later be sued by the Wright brothers for patent infringements. Nevertheless, Orville would be forced to take Selfridge skyward, after Selfridge got himself re-assigned as an official Army observer for the government trials.

In spite of his personal feelings towards Selfridge, Orville wanted everything to go well for the scheduled test of September 17th. With Thomas Selfridge seated to his right, Orville took the craft aloft. All was well, as the craft made several circles above the Fort Myer parade grounds, cruising at an altitude of approximately 125 feet. Then suddenly, Orville heard a loud bang from the rear of the plane. He turned and immediately began to assess the situation. Wright decided to cut power and attempt to glide the plane back to earth. Just then, with the ship more than 50 feet in the air it began to nosedive towards the ground. Struggling, at approximately ten feet off the ground, Orville regained control of the craft, but it was too late. The Wright flyer crash-landed into a

ravine at the far end of the field, out of view. Army officials raced to the site of the crash.

At first it was feared that both men lay mortally wounded. Orville was found amidst the wreckage, with a broken leg and four cracked ribs. Lieutenant Thomas Selfridge upon hitting the ground struck his head on one of the machine's upright supports and died a short time later.

The death of an Officer during the Fort Myer tests became big news across the country and the world. The Wrights, who had largely been ignored by the American press, now, found their names splashed across banner headlines. When news of the accident reached him in La Mans, Wilbur was devastated. He felt helpless, and partially responsible for leaving his younger brother alone, to face the burdens of the Washington trials. Several days after the accident pieces of the aircraft were brought to Orville's bedside for inspection. The first powered aircraft accident in world history was blamed on a cracked propeller blade. The blade severed cables that attached to the planes control mechanism.

After Orville's long period of recuperation through the winter of 1908-09 the Washington tests would be completed the following year with both brother's present for the flights. War Department acceptance of the Wright flyer took place on August 2, 1909. With added bonus' paid for increased performance, thirty thousand dollars was the total cost of the contract. Over the next few years the Wright Brothers would take turns handling business affairs on either side of the Atlantic and instructing eager young men in the art of flying.

Tragedy once again struck the Wright family in May of 1912. Wilbur at home in Dayton, first thought that he had only a minor ailment. The trouble, turned out to be typhoid fever. Weary from the demands of their success and despite the best medical care available, Wilbur's condition worsened. Within the month he would be gone. On Thursday, May 30, 1912, Wilbur Wright died, he was forty-five years old. Now, forced to carry on alone without his life long partner, Orville Wright succeeded his older brother and became president of the Wright Company.



After 1903, details about the manor in which the Wright brothers conquered the heavens, began to leak out to those interested in manned flight. The public domain patent application, covering the original Wright glider, spelled out in great detail the exact methods by which the brothers' achieved their success. The temptation of flight proved too much for many to ignore.

In 1907, an organization was formed known as The Aerial Experiment Association, the purpose of which was ostensibly, “research” into manned flight. The officials of this association were some of the most well known people of the day, including Alexander Graham Bell and others. The secretary of the Aerial Experimentation Association was Lt. Thomas Selfridge, and the “Director of Experiments,” was a Long Island, New York, small engine manufacturer, Glenn Curtiss.

Selfridge, on behalf of the organization had written to the Wrights in 1907, seeking a scientific exchange of ideas. Though they initially decided to cooperate with the group, the brothers soon became suspicious of the organizations motives. By July 4, 1908, Glenn Curtiss, working with information supplied by the Wright brothers, had produced a powered flyer he called the “June Bug.” Within a short time, Curtiss was charging for exhibitions of the machine, and offering to produce copies of “his” flyer.

The Wright brothers eventually decided to file lawsuits against all they believed to have stolen their design for a flying machine. Most patent violators ceased operations or produced their machines under a franchise agreement, once an injunction was filed. With each case that went forward, the Wrights’ claim to air supremacy was upheld at every level of court. Collecting damages from these awards however, proved more difficult. As late as the 1920s Orville Wright still found himself involved with patent infringement lawsuits.

By far, the most notable and repeated patent violator was Glenn Curtiss and later The Herring-Curtiss Company. With every award granted to the Wright brothers, Curtiss managed to produce another design still worthy of adjudication. Then in 1914, Glenn Curtiss put himself at the center of another controversy that lasted for nearly thirty years.

In 1897, the Wright brothers had written to the Smithsonian Institute seeking information about the previous attempts at manned flight. The Wrights were encouraged to find out that the then head of the Smithsonian, Dr. Samuel Pierpont Langley had also been conducting flying experiments. In October of 1903, several months prior to the Wright brothers’ successful flights, at Kitty Hawk, one of Langley’s last experiments was an ill fated attempt to cross the Potomac river. Using a steam powered, manned “flyer” of Langley’s own design, the attempt ended with the machine crashing into the water, nearly drowning the operator. In the early months of 1906, Dr. Langley died, never having seen any of his creations take flight.

To honor the memory of their late Director, officials of the Smithsonian decided to erect a memorial within the institute. The memorial, which included the display of the ill fated Langley “flyer” of October 1903, gave the impression that Langley, not the Wrights, was the first to fly. The inaccuracy persisted for several years and by 1910, it seemed that

the entire world except for the Smithsonian Institute, had recognized the Wright brothers' achievement. In April, the Smithsonian then made a halfhearted attempt to correct the record. They offered to display in their "hall of flight" the Wright brothers' 1908 flyer that had been used during the U.S. Government trials at Fort Meyer. To this offer, the Wrights refused. The Wrights knew that having their 1908 machine hanging next to the Langley "flyer" of 1903 would continue to foster the false impression that Langley was the first to fly. Although they believed his work did not significantly advance the art of flying, the Wright brothers received great encouragement from the fact that so great a man as Dr. Langley thought manned flight, possible. The brothers also believed that had Langley lived, he would have recognized their achievements, and given them their place of honor.

By 1914, with Wilbur gone, Orville Wright had come to a stalemate with the Smithsonian over the display of the 1903 flying machine. At that same time, Glenn Curtiss, was about to appeal another lost patent infringement suit with the Wright Company. It was then, that Curtiss had an idea that in his mind would clear up the entire controversy surrounding the Langley flyer and possibly help his appeal. Curtiss petitioned the officials of the Smithsonian, to let him take the 1903 Langley machine and test whether or not it could fly. He reasoned that, if the 1903 Langley machine was capable of flight, he might then be able to challenge the Wright brothers' patent in court, and at the same time, preserve the reputation of the Smithsonian and their leader. The Smithsonian agreed, and the Langley flyer was shipped to New York for testing by Glenn Curtiss.

Although the Smithsonian seemed to be gambling with their reputation, the deck was stacked against the Wrights when the Smithsonian Institute appointed Dr. A. F. Zahm, as an "impartial" Smithsonian observer for the testing. Zahm, had several times before, been paid by Glenn Curtiss to appear as an expert witness, in suits brought against him by the Wright brothers.

Once in New York, the Langley flyer was completely reconstructed, and modified as per much of the known art of 1914 flying. The wing surfaces were lacquered to make them more aerodynamic and the motor was changed to a larger size than the one used on the original Langley machine. No justification was ever made for the changes, but with all of the modifications, Curtiss succeeded in getting the Langley flyer into the air on three occasions, with each "flight" lasting only five seconds. Once testing was complete, the Langley machine was returned to its' original condition and shipped back to the Smithsonian. Once back in Washington, the Langley 1903 machine was again displayed as the first manned flyer. Several Smithsonian press releases spoke to the New York test flights as proof of the craft's air worthy-ness, but no mention was ever made of the changes that had been done to the Langley machine by Curtiss.

With the prestige of the Smithsonian Institute, the false impression continued that Langley preceded the Wright brothers as the first to fly. This falsehood, found its' way

into much of the reference material of the time, and clouded the Wright brothers true accomplishments. Until the mid nineteen twenties, Orville Wright was convinced that the heads of The Smithsonian Institute had been deceived by Curtiss and had taken no part in the deception surrounding the Langley flying experiments of 1914. Later, Orville learned that Curtiss' actions were fully known by Langley's successor at the Smithsonian Institute, Dr. Charles D. Walcott.

Although Orville Wright had many offers within America, to display the original Wright brothers' 1903 flying machine, no other museum carried the scientific predominance of the National Museum in Washington. Orville knew that the Wright brothers' accomplishments would still be questioned, if the 1903 machine were displayed anywhere in America, while the Langley machine was being displayed at the National museum in Washington. It was for that reason that Orville Wright chose to accept an offer in 1926 from the Science Museum at South Kensington, in London, England. The museum offered to display the Wright brothers' 1903 flying machine, as the First to Fly anywhere in the world. Orville's agreement with the premiere British science museum, would allow the 1903 flyer to be on display for a minimum of five years, and give the museum permanent possession of the flyer, upon his death.

The controversy with the Smithsonian went on through several changes of museum administration and each time negotiations reached the same conclusion. In October 1942, after lengthy discussions, the Smithsonian finally came to an agreement with Orville Wright over the display of the 1903 flyer. Dr. Charles G. Abbott, then Director of the Smithsonian Institute, issued a multi page statement, outlining the past transgressions of the Smithsonian and its directors. In part Dr. Abbott wrote:

"It is everywhere acknowledged that the Wright brothers were the first to make sustained flights in a heavier-than-air machine at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903. Mainly because of the acts and statements of former officers of the Smithsonian Institution, arising from tests made with the reconditioned Langley plane of 1903... Dr. Orville Wright...sent the original Wright Kitty Hawk plane to England in 1928". "Should he decide to deposit the plane in the United States National Museum, it would be given the highest place of honor, which is its due." 1

At a White House dinner on December 17, 1943, celebrating the fortieth anniversary of manned flight, President Franklin D. Roosevelt made the announcement that after more than twenty years abroad, the Wright brothers' 1903 flying machine, would be coming home to America. But with World War II raging throughout Europe, it was decided to delay the return until after the war.

Orville Wrights' last flight in a Wright brothers' aero-plane was in 1917. In his later years Orville would become, as official Wright biographer Fred C. Kelly called him, ...

“the elder statesman of aviation.” 2. Preferring to spend his time writing and experimenting, rather than getting involved with the day-to-day needs of a business, The Wright Company was eventually sold to a syndicate of investors that continued to defend the brother’s patents in court. With every case, the Wright brother’s claim to the invention of the Aero-plane was upheld. But without his brother Wilbur by his side, Orville found it a hollow victory.



At 10:30 pm on Friday January 30, 1948, Orville Wright died of a massive heart attack, at his home in Dayton, Ohio. He was seventy years old. Several months after his death, delayed by World War II, the Wright Brothers’ 1903 flying machine was once again on American soil. On December 17, 1948, forty-five years after it first flew, the Kitty Hawk flyer took its rightful place of honor at The Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C., where it remains today.

Epilogue

When reading about the early attempts at flying, several inconsistencies seem to appear. Stories about pre-Wright “Aviators” crash landing their “flying” machines, have a tendency to give a false impression. In order to “crash” an airplane, it would be logical to assume that the craft had once flown. But in the traditional sense, this was not the case. Before the Wright brothers, attempts at flight, consisted largely of releasing a “flying machine” or glider from a high place, to see if it could sustain flight. Some attempts were even made by releasing the craft from the bottom of a hot air balloon. Once in the air, if the craft didn’t go straight into the ground, but glided for a short distance, the attempt would get reported as a successful “flight”. Inaccurate reporting along with the Wright brothers’ secretive nature, clouded the brothers’ early claim to air supremacy. As was proven in the many court cases throughout the early years of aviation, prior to the Wright brothers, no one had ever, taken a vehicle from a standing start into the skies, controlled the craft in the air, and then returned safely back to the earth. The Wright brothers were indeed, the first to fly!

Two-bicycle mechanics solving the problems of manned flight in their spare time was perhaps as difficult to believe in 1903, as part time biochemists discovering a cure for cancer might be today. Throughout the last century, many have wondered how the Wright brothers could do what so many others found impossible. Only days before his death in May of 1912, Wilbur Wright wrote a letter to the Aero Club of America that spoke to some of the challenges the brothers had faced along the way.

“...Those who aspired to solve the problem were constantly pursued by expense, danger, and time. In order to succeed it was not only necessary to make progress, but it was necessary to make progress at a sufficient rate to reach the goal before money

gave out, or before accident intervened, or before the portion of life allowable for such work past.” “Those who failed for lack of time had already used more time than was necessary; those who failed for lack of money had already spent more money than was necessary; and those who were cut off by accident had previously enjoyed as many lucky escapes as reasonably could be expected.”³

So the question remains, how did the Wright brothers succeed where others failed? Perhaps the largest advantage given to the Wrights was the fact that they were brothers. They respected and trusted each other in a way that no co-workers could. Each brother possessed abilities of their own and independent thoughts, yet as brothers they were of one mind, one purpose. Their thoughts and actions complemented each other perfectly. In his book “Miracle at Kitty Hawk” originally published in 1953, Fred C. Kelly who knew Orville Wright for the last thirty years of his life gives some further insight.

“Neither one could or would have solved the problem alone. Each enjoyed the tremendous advantage of having someone to combat his theories and detect flaws or snags, which accounts for the astonishing fact that they were able to fly a power machine within a little more than three years from the time they started their gliding experiments.” “... No matter what either one did, the other seemed sure to take the next needed step.”⁴

Throughout the century that followed the Wright brothers’ first flight, men and women of vision and determination have taken those “next steps”. Man has conquered the heavens, with each generation standing firmly on the shoulders of those who have come before. A straight line can be drawn from the gliding experiments of the early part of the last century, to a Space Shuttle gliding in for a landing at Cape Canaveral. From Wilbur and Orville Wright, to Charles Lindbergh, Amelia Earhart, Chuck Yeager, Jackie Cochran, Neil Armstrong, Sally Ride, ...the list of names and the list of accomplishments are endless. Along the way, there have been great successes, and horrific failures. While we now glory in the past, what the future will bring is anyone’s guess. Perhaps the Wright brothers’ greatest legacy to mankind was to show the world, that the sky has no limit.

1 The Wright Brothers: A Biography By Fred C. Kelly Dover Publications, Inc. – New York

2,3,4 Miracle at Kitty Hawk the letters of Wilbur and Orville Wright

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Photo Captions:

Photo One: The restored Wright Brother's Bicycle Shop Dayton, Ohio

Photo Two: Launching Derrick at Hoffman Prairie USAFM

Photo Three: The restored Wright brother's hanger overlooks the Huffman Prairie flying field

Photo Four: Orville Wright's first flight at Ft. Meyer Sept. 3, 1908 Copyright USAFM

Photo Five: Wilbur Wright's Grave at Woodlawn Cemetery, Dayton, Ohio

Photo Six: Orville Wright's Grave at Woodlawn Cemetery, Dayton, Ohio

About the Author

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