

Inventors and Scientists: The Wright Brothers

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Orville Wright (1871-1948) and his brother Wilbur (1867-1912) Apic/Getty Images

Synopsis: Brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright were the inventors of the world's first functioning airplane. The brothers conducted the first successful controlled flight of a power-driven airplane on December 17, 1903. They subsequently became wealthy businessmen, filling contracts for airplanes in both Europe and the United States. Today, the Wright brothers are considered the "fathers of modern aviation." Wilbur died in 1912, while Orville lived until 1948.

Early Life

Wilbur Wright was born on April 16, 1867, near Millville, Indiana, the middle child in a family of five children. His father, Milton Wright, was a bishop in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. His mother was Susan Catherine Koerner Wright. As a child, Wilbur's playmate was his younger brother, Orville, who was born on August 19, 1871, in Dayton, Ohio.

Milton Wright's preaching took him on the road frequently, and he often brought back small toys for his children. In 1878, he brought back a small model helicopter for his boys. It was made of cork, bamboo and paper, and was powered by a rubber band which twirled its blades. The toy plane was based on a design by the French aeronautical pioneer Alphonse Pénau. Wilbur and Orville were fascinated by the toy and its mechanics. They studied it carefully and soon developed a lifelong love of flying and airplane design.

Inventing The Airplane

Neither brother finished high school, so to support themselves the two opened a bicycle shop in 1892. They both sold and fixed bikes, and began manufacturing their own design in 1896. Orville invented a self-oiling wheel hub for their popular bikes.

Always curious about aeronautics — the science of flight — Orville and Wilbur followed the latest flying news. When famous German aviator Otto Lillenthal died in a glider crash, the Wright brothers concluded that inadequate design was to blame. They felt sure that better designs would make human flight possible. Determined to develop their own successful design, the brothers moved to Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The area's heavy winds were conducive to flying.

Wilbur and Orville set to work trying to figure out how to design wings for flight. They observed that birds angled their wings for balance and control, and tried to imitate this. Soon, they developed something they called "wing warping." The Wright brothers found the magic formula when they added a moveable rudder.

On December 17, 1903, the brothers achieved the first successful power-driven airplane flight in history. Wilbur flew the plane for 59 seconds over a distance of 852 feet. Of four flights they made that day, the longest was 59 seconds, over a distance of 852 feet.

News of the Wrights' feat was at first met with doubts. After funding a number of failed flying experiments, the U.S. government was not eager to back their work. As a result, Wilbur set out for Europe, in 1908. He hoped he would have more success there in convincing the public and selling airplanes.

Later Fame

When Wilbur set sail for Europe, Orville headed to Washington, D.C. There he began demonstrating their flying machine in hopes of winning government and army contracts. In July 1909, Orville completed the demonstration flights for the U.S. Army, which had demanded that a passenger seat be built in the plane.

Meanwhile, in France, Wilbur found a receptive audience. He made many public flights and gave rides to journalists and officials. In 1909, Orville joined his brother in Europe. The Wrights soon became hugely famous there, and began selling their airplanes throughout the continent. After this success, they returned to the United States.

The brothers went on to become wealthy businessmen. Their company built numerous airplanes for customers in both Europe and the United States.

Death And Legacy

Wilbur Wright fell ill on a trip to Boston, in April 1912. After being diagnosed with typhoid fever, he died on May 30, 1912. He passed away at his family home in Dayton, Ohio.

Following his brother's death, Orville sold their company in 1915. He spent the rest of his life serving on boards and committees related to aeronautics. One group he worked with was the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, which later became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

On January 30, 1948, Orville died after suffering a heart attack. He is buried at the Wright family plot in Dayton, Ohio.

Today, the Wright brothers are known as the "fathers of modern aviation."

Quiz

- 1 Which detail BEST supports the article's central idea?
- (A) Milton Wright's preaching took him on the road frequently, and he often brought back small toys for his children. In 1878, he brought back a small model helicopter for his boys.
 - (B) On December 17, 1903, the brothers achieved the first successful power-driven airplane flight in history. Wilbur flew the plane for 59 seconds over a distance of 852 feet.
 - (C) In July 1909, Orville completed the demonstration flights for the U.S. Army, which had demanded that a passenger seat be built in the plane.
 - (D) One group he worked with was the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, which later became the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).
- 2 Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) The Wright brothers were very successful in selling airplanes in Europe, but struggled to win over skeptical officials in the U.S.
 - (B) The Wright brothers' father, who was a preacher, often had to travel for work and left the boys alone at home with their mother.
 - (C) The Wright brothers moved to Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, to continue to develop their early airplane designs.
 - (D) Wilbur Wright became very ill with typhoid fever on a trip to Boston and died many years before Orville.
- 3 What is the MOST likely reason the author included the information about Orville's work with the group that would later become NASA?
- (A) to show that Orville was always more interested in flying than Wilbur
 - (B) to show that the Wright brothers' work had a lasting impact on air and space technology
 - (C) to explain why the Wright brothers became very rich and famous later in their lives
 - (D) to explain why Orville gave up selling airplanes after Wilbur passed away

- 4 In the section "Early Life," the Wright brothers are introduced in which of the following ways?
- (A) through a discussion of their relationship with their parents
 - (B) through a description of how they were affected by their father's job
 - (C) through a story of how a toy sparked their interest in flying
 - (D) through a description of other aviators who had attempted to fly