

Mary Doll and Jill Hanson

# Preserving the History of the First Flight

## Wright Brothers National Memorial

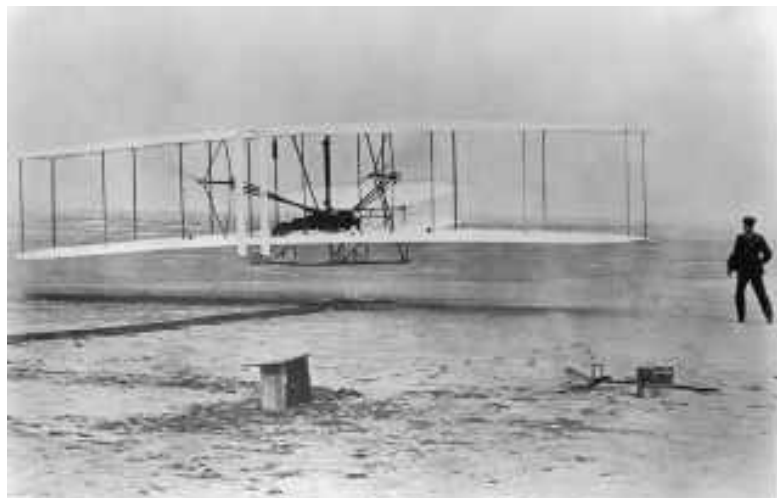
*The Wright Brothers National Memorial commemorates the first flight at Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina. Photo courtesy NPS.*

The next several years will be busy at Wright Brothers National Memorial, as park staff and partnership groups plan the 100th anniversary celebration of the first flight made by Orville Wright on December 17, 1903. While conducting initial flight experiments at their home in Dayton, Ohio, the Wright brothers sought a testing ground with wide-open spaces and steady winds. In the fall of 1900, the Wrights began their first round of experiments at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, but soon settled on a site at nearby Kill Devil Hills. They returned in the fall of each year until they made their first flight in 1903.

Commemoration and preservation efforts at Kill Devil Hills began in 1926 with a congressional bill establishing the site as a national memorial. President Calvin Coolidge signed the legislation on March 2, 1927, and a small granite marker was placed at the site on December 17, 1928.

A commemorative plan developed for the memorial drastically altered the landscape at Kill Devil Hills. To preserve the hill used in the Wright's experiments and to prepare a foundation for a large monument, the War Department stabilized sand dunes with grass and other vegetation. A juried design competition for the monument

*Orville and Wilbur Wright conducted the first flight on December 17, 1903. Photo courtesy NPS.*



attracted 36 entries. The winning design, submitted by the New York architectural firm of Rodgers and Poor, called for an Art Deco-inspired masonry shaft with relief carvings symbolizing wings on the sides. Measuring 61' high, the triangular-plan shaft rests on a star-shaped terrace. A light beacon at the top of the tower served as a navigational aid for planes in the area. The monument, dedicated in 1932, and the memorial site became a unit of the National Park Service in August 1933. The NPS completed the park's commemorative design by adding formal trails, roads, and plantings that defined the commemorative core of the park between the Rodgers and Poor Monument and the original granite marker.

The NPS recently completed a General Management Plan for improvement of the memorial in anticipation of the centennial. The plan calls for steps to ensure resource protection and visitor enjoyment of centennial events. The memorial was also the subject of a recent publication of the NPS Southwest Support Office in Atlanta. Written by William Chapman and Jill Hanson, *The Wright Brothers National Memorial Historic Resource Study* traces the history of the Wright brothers' experiments. The study also established the significance of the site and identified contributing elements of the original commemorative design in the National Register of Historic Places.

The First Flight Centennial Foundation, a primary fundraising organization for the 2003 celebration, is working with the NPS to improve visitor facilities at the memorial and to plan a series of celebratory events. Two major foundation projects include the rehabilitation of the Wright Monument in 1997 and the construction of a new visitor center by 2001. The foundation will replace the current 7,500 square foot visitor center with a spacious 17,000 square foot design. The new center will feature an interactive exhibit of the first flight. For information about the foundation, please write: The First Flight Centennial

Foundation, P.O. Box 80337, RDU Airport, North Carolina 27623, or call 919-840-2003.

Aviation and aerospace industries, along with professional organizations, have expressed strong interest in the celebration and, as 2003 draws near, more groups and organizations will join the commemoration. Congress is considering legislation for the establishment of a national commission. North Carolina has established the First Flight Centennial Commission to develop events honoring the first flight. The Commission has already begun a major education effort within the North Carolina school system. The 2003 Committee, established in the Wright brothers' hometown of Dayton, Ohio, leads the observation in Ohio. NPS staff at the Wright Memorial are working with the staff at Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, which was established October 16,

1992, to commemorate the contribution of the Wrights and the early development of aviation in the Dayton, Ohio, area.

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## NPS Sites Related to Aviation History

**Crissy Field at Presidio of San Francisco, Golden Gate National Recreation Area**

**Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, Dayton, Ohio**

**Floyd Bennett Field, Gateway National Recreation Area, Brooklyn, New York**

**Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, Porter, Indiana**

**Wright Brothers National Memorial, Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina**

*—Compiled by Ann Deines, historian  
Dayton Aviation Heritage  
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Liam Strain

## Floyd Bennett Field Gateway of Flight

**F**loyd Bennett Field, now part of the Breezy Point/Jamaica Bay Unit of Gateway National Recreation Area, played an important role in New York City's aviation history. The field was New York's municipal airport from 1930 to 1941 and the site of many record-breaking flights and technological advances during the Golden Age of Aviation.

Floyd Bennett's superior facilities, including steel-reinforced concrete runways, 10 million candlepower lights for night operations, and one of the first directional radio beacons, made it an ideal location for record-breaking transcontinental and transatlantic flights. The airfield was also used for the Bendix Cup airplane races. One of the more colorful pilots who broke records at Floyd Bennett was Roscoe Turner, who flew with a live lion cub. The media attention generated by these

flights helped change public perceptions of aviation, which was still a novel means of travel.

Floyd Bennett Field was also the site of several technical innovations. Among the breakthroughs associated with the field are the Sperry autopilot used by Wiley Post in his 1933 around-the-world flight; Howard Hughes' global communications network created for his 1938 around-the-world flight; and a helicopter wench developed by Igor Sigorsky. Floyd Bennett also saw the first rotor-wing aircraft used for police work.

Today, the NPS interprets the contributions of Floyd Bennett Field to aviation history. Gateway NRA has developed the Historic Aircraft Restoration Project (H.A.R.P.), a Volunteers-In-Parks program dedicated to restoring vintage aircraft acquired by the park. The park also preserves eight original hangars, the original Administration Building (including the control tower), other related buildings, and the original runways and taxiway in its Historic District. Much more will be done to preserve and interpret Floyd Bennett Fields historic structures to help the public understand its aviation heritage.

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