

## The Wright Brothers

Wilbur and Orville Wright were both born in Indiana, Wilbur near Millville, and Orville at the family home in Dayton four years later. As young boys, the brothers were close, sharing both toys and ideas. The sharing didn't stop at the end of their childhood. As they grew older they continued to share ideas, have discussions, and make many decisions together, even signing their checks "The Wright Brothers" with only their initials to distinguish who the signer actually was.

Their interest in flight developed over a period of twenty years, beginning with a rubber-band-powered toy helicopter their dad gave them when Wilbur was 11 and Orville was 7. This toy fascinated the boys, and they began building toy flying contraptions of their own. Orville even built kites and sold them to friends. As they grew older, their interest in flight grew stronger, and by the fall of 1900, the two brothers were on their way to Kitty Hawk, North Carolina to make their first attempts at flight.

While making camp on the beaches at Kitty Hawk, the brothers made close friends with locals who became apart of the Wrights' first "flight crew". The brothers even lived with a local family for several weeks until they could fully prepare their camp.

One of the people the Wrights became close with at Kitty Hawk was an inventor named Reginald Fessenden, who wasn't really a local at all. Mr. Fessenden came to Roanoke Island, North Carolina from Ontario, Canada in January of 1901, working to create the first wireless radio transmissions. Living such a short distance from Kitty Hawk, Fessenden became aware of the Wright Brothers experiments; and the Wrights became aware of Fessenden's. With three like-minded inventors in the same area, the Outer Banks became a hot-bed of experimentation in the early 1900s.

While Reginald Fessenden was only one of many people corresponding with the Wright's during these years, he continued to support their work years after 1902. Letters between him and the Wrights in 1911 tell us that he shared information with them about an engine he'd been working on that was light and powerful; just what the brothers needed to power their planes.

While Fessenden left the Outer Banks in 1902, the Wright Brothers continued to experiment at Kitty Hawk. On December 17, 1903, their efforts finally paid off. Their 675 pound, engine-powered plane was ready to fly, though not very far. The plane flew barely a quarter mile in all the brothers' attempts combined, but this was enough to put them in the record books. Their famous plane is now hanging in The National Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C.

The Wright Brothers continued experimenting together until Wilbur's death in 1912. Orville went on working for 36 years after Wilbur, until he passed away in 1948. Though the Wright Brothers were not North Carolina natives, their experiments done and friends made in the Outer Banks will remain an intriguing part of our state's history.

### MINI WEBQUEST

In this activity, you will get a look at how the Futch Family (and many other Civil War Families) may have felt and how they corresponded. By reading information from credible sources, including primary source documents, you will see how original ideas and images can inform our history.

Read the questions pertaining to the Futches and follow the links above them to find their answers. You should then record your answers on a sheet of paper, or the worksheet provided by your instructor. (The links will open in pop up windows.)

Read the Wright Brothers' short biography and study the photograph of the Wrights' first flight at Kitty Hawk.

What dangers did they face?

What things did they have to consider when they built the airplane?

Why was the terrain at Kitty Hawk good for their experiment?

If an experiment such as that depicted in the photograph were conducted today, how do you think the photograph might differ?

Read the original newspaper article about the first flight.

For an event that we think of as so important, the newspaper article is not a large one. Why do you think that is?

Why do you think the Wrights chose Kitty Hawk as a place to experiment with manned flight?

If such an experiment were to take place today, how do you think it might be treated differently in the newspaper?

Read the letter from Orville Wright to Reginald Fessenden, who was another important inventor of the period. It is obvious from the letter that both Fessenden and the Wrights were working on similar or complementary projects.

In the letter Wright expresses concern about the weight of the motor. Why would weight be an important issue to him?

Do you think inventors frequently write to each other? Why or why not?

Why is it important that such a letter be saved and preserved?