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Ohio, North Carolina legislators join to defend Wright brothers' legacy

Release letter signed by 34 historians
disputing claims about Gustave Whitehead

Dayton, Ohio and Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina—State legislators from Ohio and North Carolina held a rare joint news conference on Thursday, Oct. 24, to defend the legacy of the Wright brothers against a claim by the state of Connecticut.

Ohio State Rep. Richard Perales and North Carolina State Sen. Bill Cook, linked by a Skype connection on the Internet, spoke from historically significant locations in their home states to rebuke a law Connecticut passed earlier this year that claimed one of its own residents, Gustave Whitehead, flew two years earlier than the Wright brothers.

They also released a statement signed by 34 historians, archivists, authors and others that said the available evidence “fails to support the claim that Gustave Whitehead made sustained, powered, controlled flights prior to the Wright brothers.”

Wilbur and Orville Wright lived in Dayton, where they developed the principles of controlled flight and built their first airplanes in their bicycle shop. They made their first flights at Kitty Hawk, N.C., at a location now within the town of Kill Devil Hills.

Historians regard their powered flights of Dec. 17, 1903 as the first successful manned flights of a controlled, powered, heavier-than-air machine.

“Ohio and North Carolina are known to have a longstanding rivalry over who gets to claim the Wright brothers, but the simple fact is we both do,” Perales said. “Heritage organizations in Ohio and North Carolina have worked together for years to preserve our common heritage. Today, Ohio and North Carolina stand side by side for the Wright brothers.”

“I’m honored to be the North Carolina state senator for the area where powered flight was first accomplished,” said Cook, who represents an area that includes Kill Devil Hills. “I’m also pleased to stand with Ohio State Representative Rick Perales on this issue.”

Perales, of Beavercreek, spoke from the hangar of Wright “B” Flyer Inc. at Dayton-Wright Brothers Airport south of Dayton. Wright “B” Flyer is a nonprofit group that flies a modern lookalike of a 1911 Wright airplane.

Cook spoke from the Kill Devil Hills town hall, next to the Wright Brothers National Memorial, where Wilbur and Orville made their flights.

Supporters of the Whitehead-flew-first claim point to a fanciful newspaper article published in Bridgeport, Conn., in 1901, and some statements gathered decades later. The claims have been studied and dismissed by historians, but they resurface from time to time and receive fleeting media attention.

What’s different this time is what Perales called Connecticut’s attempt to “rewrite history through legislation.” The legislature passed a bill declaring Whitehead was first to fly, and Connecticut Gov. Dannel Malloy signed it into law on June 26.

The statement the legislators released carried the names of some of America’s most noted aviation historians, including Wright brothers biographer Tom D. Crouch, former Air Force head historian Richard Hallion, aerospace historian James R. Hanson and others.

“Whitehead’s claims were rejected by local newspapers and by individuals in the best position to judge, including virtually all of those who funded his experiments,” the statement reads. “We strongly urge those who support the Whitehead claims to seriously reconsider the evidence in the case, and to rethink their position.”

Perales also announced he has introduced a resolution in the Ohio House of Representatives that would repudiate Connecticut’s claim and invite Connecticut citizens to visit the Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills and Ohio’s Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park and the National Aviation Heritage Area—all National Park Service sites dedicated to the legacy of the Wright brothers.

Cook noted his own state passed a resolution chiding Connecticut the last time the claim surfaced.

Cook said the only new evidence behind Connecticut's recent action was an "extremely blurry" image purported to be a photo of Whitehead in flight that is not accepted by scholars. "Leading aviation historians and scholars continue to endorse the Wright Brothers as the first to accomplish flight," Cook said.

Perales, whose district includes Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and the Huffman Prairie Flying Field where the Wright brothers continued their flying experiments after 1903, said the historical facts are important to Ohio.

"What the Wright brothers did more than a century ago led directly to Ohio's aerospace industry today—one of the largest sectors of our state's economy," he said. Wright-Patterson, NASA's Glenn Research Center in Cleveland and aerospace companies across the state employ more than 100,000 workers and support "tens of thousands of additional jobs," he said.

Facilitating the news conference were the National Aviation Heritage Alliance (NAHA) of Dayton and the First Flight Foundation of Kill Devil Hills. Both are not-for-profit organizations. NAHA is also the congressionally designated management entity for the National Aviation Heritage Area, an eight-county region of nationally important aviation heritage sites in southwestern Ohio.

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Editors: A PDF file is available that contains statements by Rep. Perales and Sen. Cook, brief biographies, a copy of Rep. Perales' resolution, a page showing side-by-side images of the Wright brothers first powered flight and the purported first flight of Gustave Whitehead, and the statement of the historians. Go to <http://aviationheritagearea.org/news-releases> to find the link.

Statement of Ohio State Sen. Richard Perales

Dayton, Ohio, Oct. 24, 2013

Ohio is proud to call itself the Birthplace of Aviation. The brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright lived in Dayton, and it was in Dayton that they developed the principles of controlled flight and built their first airplanes. They tested their invention at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, where they made their famous flights of 1903—the first controlled, powered flights in a heavier-than-air machine. Back in Ohio, they completed their experiments on Huffman Prairie in Greene County by demonstrating the world’s first practical airplane. And their company erected America’s first purpose-built aircraft factory in Dayton.

What the Wright brothers did more than a century ago led directly to Ohio’s aerospace industry today—one of the largest sectors of our state’s economy. Ohio’s aerospace industry directly employs more than 100,000 workers and supports tens of thousands of additional jobs among some 1,200 supplier companies serving multiple industries. Ohio continues to advance aerospace technology with breakthrough research in the Air Force Research Laboratory at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, the NASA Glenn Research Center, and in universities and aerospace companies across the state.

And Ohio’s aviation and aerospace heritage is an important part of the state’s tourism industry. The National Museum of the U.S. Air Force alone draws more than 1 million visitors each year. The Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park and the National Aviation Heritage Area are America’s formal stamps of approval on Ohio’s aviation heritage.

It’s a heritage Ohio shares with other states that also honor the Wright brothers. North Carolina is home to the Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kill Devil Hills, where Wilbur and Orville learned to fly with gliders and made their first powered flights on Dec. 17, 1903.

As a member of the Ohio House of Representatives and co-chair of the Ohio Aerospace Caucus, I’m immensely proud of our heritage. I’m especially proud that the story of the Wright brothers inspires school children around the world to reach for the sky.

Unfortunately, my counterparts in the state of Connecticut have tried to rewrite history through legislation by enacting a law proclaiming that one of their people, not the Wright brothers, flew first.

The new Connecticut law revives an old claim that a Connecticut man named Gustave Whitehead built a flying car and flew it repeatedly in 1900 and 1901. The claim rests on a few fanciful newspaper reports and a few witness statements gathered years after the fact. Nothing like the detailed photos and data the Wright brothers produced has ever emerged. The photograph of the Wright brothers’ first powered flight is one of the most famous pictures ever taken. The best Whitehead’s fans have come up with is a fuzzy photo of a photo that shows nothing but indistinct shapes. Respected scholars investigated and dismissed the Whitehead claim decades ago.

Once every so many years, the Whitehead claim resurfaces and then fades away again. That happened again early this year, but this time Connecticut legislators decided to seize on it to elevate a fellow Connecticut citizen—never mind the facts.

If it's wrong for one state to distort history, it's just as wrong for other states to accept it in silence. Wilbur and Orville were Ohioans, and Ohio needs to stand by them and speak up for them. This is why I'm announcing that I will sponsor a resolution in the Ohio House of Representatives affirming they were the first to fly as supported by all of the experts and the facts.

And I am pleased to announce that North Carolina is standing together with Ohio, as North Carolina Sen. Bill Cook will explain in a moment. Now, Ohio and North Carolina are known to have a longstanding rivalry over who gets to claim the Wright brothers, but the simple fact is we both do. Heritage organizations in Ohio and North Carolina have worked together for years to preserve our common heritage. So, today, Ohio and North Carolina stand side by side for the Wright brothers.

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Statement of North Carolina State Senator Bill Cook

October 24, 2013

The State of North Carolina takes great pride in the achievements of Wilbur and Orville Wright with accomplishing the world's first successful powered, sustained and controlled flight. The flight took place in the year of 1903 on the morning of December 17, in Kill Devil Hills near Kitty Hawk. The historic event of Orville Wright accomplishing flight was photographed by John T. Daniels with a clear and precise photo. There were five eyewitnesses of the first flight: John T. Daniels, W. S. Dough and A. D. Etheridge of the Kill Devil Hills Life Saving Station, W. C. Brinkley of Manteo and John Moore of Nags Head.

After their historic achievement, the Wright brothers continued with their powered flight experiments in the United States, England, France and Germany for all to see and witness. The Wright brothers' achievements have been affirmed by the President, Congress of the United States, federal courts, scholars and museums around the world.

The North Carolina General Assembly in the year of 1985 passed a resolution in favor of the Wright Brothers. "The North Carolina General Assembly repudiates the contention of a group of Connecticut residents and that state's legislature, that Gustave Whitehead, a resident of Bridgeport, Connecticut, was the first man to achieve sustained, controlled flight in a heavier than air machine on August 14, 1901."

Unfortunately, in June of this year the Connecticut General Assembly passed a bill denouncing the Wright Brothers and gave credit to Gustave Whitehead as the first individual to accomplish powered flight. The Governor of Connecticut signed it into law on June 26.

Leading aviation historians and scholars continue to endorse the Wright Brothers as the first to accomplish flight. Whitehead supporters have suggested that their evidence is strong enough to prove their case in a court of law. In fact, as aviation pioneer Grover Loening noted, the claim did have its day in court, and was soundly rejected.

The photo that has been found and released by the anonymous reporter of *Scientific American* that is supposed to be the evidence of the Whitehead claim is extremely blurry and has been enlarged where you truly cannot see what is in it.

I'm honored to be the North Carolina state senator for the area where powered flight was first accomplished. I'm also pleased to stand with Ohio State Representative Rick Perales on this issue. North Carolinians are proud of our heritage. "First in Flight" is on our state license plate. The National Wright Brothers Memorial is located here in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, where the first flight occurred. The North Carolina first flight is even commemorated on U.S. coins. The evidence is clear. There is no doubt about who performed the first powered flight.

130th General Assembly
Regular Session
2013-2014

H. C. R. No.

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

To repudiate the claim by the State of Connecticut 1
that Gustave Whitehead successfully flew a 2
powered, heavier than air machine of his own 3
design on August 14, 1901, or on any other date. 4

**BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE
OF OHIO (THE SENATE CONCURRING):**

WHEREAS, From time to time some individuals, publishers, and 5
lawmakers revive the claim that Gustave Whitehead (1874-1927), a 6
resident of Connecticut, made a sustained, powered flight in a 7
heavier than air machine at Bridgeport on August 14, 1901, two 8
years before the Wright brothers of Dayton, Ohio, flew on December 9
17, 1903, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; and 10

WHEREAS, The Governor of Connecticut signed into law on June 11
26, 2013, "an Act Concerning Government Administration"; and 12

WHEREAS, The law replaces the Wright brothers with Gustave 13
Whitehead as the person to be honored for the first powered flight 14
on Connecticut's Powered Flight Day each year; and 15

WHEREAS, The law provides no evidence that Gustave Whitehead 16
ever designed, built, and flew a successful powered flying 17
machine; and 18

WHEREAS, Scholarly research by respected and academically 19
credentialed historians over many decades have found no evidence 20
to substantiate the Whitehead claims; and 21

WHEREAS, A recently publicized digital image, purported to be 22
an enhanced copy of a photograph that shows Gustave Whitehead's 23
1901 machine in flight, reveals only indistinct shapes; and 24

WHEREAS, The North Carolina General Assembly previously 25
repudiated a similar claim in 1985; and 26

WHEREAS, The states of Ohio and North Carolina share and 27
cherish the legacy of the Wright brothers, who lived and built the 28
first powered airplane in Dayton, Ohio, and made their first 29
powered flight on December 17, 1903, in Kitty Hawk, North 30
Carolina; and 31

WHEREAS, The United States National Park Service preserves 32
the factual history of the invention of the airplane and the first 33
powered flights in the Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kill 34
Devil Hills, North Carolina, and the Dayton Aviation Heritage 35
National Historical Park and the National Aviation Heritage Area 36
in southwestern Ohio; now therefore be it 37

RESOLVED, That Gustave Whitehead did not fly a powered, 38
heavier than air machine of his own design on August 14, 1901, or 39
on any other date; and be it further 40

RESOLVED, That the citizens of North Carolina and Ohio invite 41
the citizens of Connecticut to learn the truth about the invention 42
of the airplane and the first powered flights by visiting the 43
Wright Brothers National Memorial in North Carolina and the Dayton 44
Aviation Heritage National Historical Park and the National 45
Aviation Heritage Area in Ohio. 46

Statement of historians regarding the Gustave Whitehead claim

We the undersigned are convinced that the evidence now available fails to support the claim that Gustave Whitehead made sustained, powered, controlled flights prior to the Wright brothers. The arguments in favor of such flights are based on a single flawed news article combined with questionable witness testimony gathered more than thirty years after the fact. Whitehead's claims were rejected by local newspapers and by individuals in the best position to judge, including virtually all of those who funded his experiments. Whitehead left no letters, diaries, notebooks, calculations, or drawings recording his experiments, his thoughts, or the details of his craft.

While there are a handful of photographs of Whitehead aircraft on the ground, the best efforts of his supporters over a period of seven decades have failed to produce a single image of a powered Whitehead machine in flight. The recent 'discovery' of an image supposedly showing Whitehead in flight has been totally discredited and the image has been proven to not be of Whitehead's machine.

All of this is in contrast to the meticulous and multi-layered records documenting the success of the Wright brothers and other bona fide pioneers of aviation. When it comes to the case of Gustave Whitehead, the decision must remain, not proven. We strongly urge those who support the Whitehead claims to seriously reconsider the evidence in the case, and to rethink their position.

Peter Amos, Aviation historian, author
Michel Bénichou, Aviation journalist, historian
David Browning, Aviation executive
Leonard C. Bruno, Aviation manuscript specialist
Louis Chmiel, Aviation historian, author
Tom D. Crouch, PhD, Aerospace historian, author
Nigel Dingley, Aviation historian, association chair
Barry Dowsett, Aviation historian, author
Paul Dunlop, Aviation historian, author
Nick Engler, Aviation historian, author
Jonathan Fallon, Aviation historian, editor
Carroll F. Gray, Aviation historian, author
Bill Grigg, Aviation editor
Dan Hagedorn, Aviation historian, curator
Richard Hallion, Aviation historian
James R. Hansen, Aerospace historian
Ken W. Hyde, Aviation historian, builder
Philip Jarrett, Aviation historian, author, editor
Bernd Lukasch, Aviation historian, author, museum director
Cam Martin, Chair AIAA History Technical Committee
Jay Miller, Aviation historian, journalist
Mick Oakey, Aviation historian, managing editor
Ian Oliver, Aviation historian
Frank Page, Aviation archivist

—more—

Erasmo Piñero, Jr., Aeronautical engineer
Simine Short, Aviation historian, author
Jonathan (Josh) Spoor, Aviation and aircraft historian
Josh Stoff, Aviation historian, author, museum director
Nick Stroud, Aviation editor
Julian Temple, Aviation museum administrator
Larry Tise, Distinguished Professor of History
Connie Tobias, Aviator, pilot, historic aircraft
William F. Trimble, Aviation historian, author, professor
Rick Young, Aviation author, editor

Biography of North Carolina State Senator Bill Cook

North Carolina State Senator Bill Cook represents Northeastern North Carolina and is a former member of the NC House of Representatives, Senator Cook is the Vice Chair of the Senate's Agriculture, Environment and Natural Resource Committee. He also serves as a member on the Appropriations on Natural and Economic Resources, Education/Higher Education, Finance, Judiciary II and Program Evaluation.



Cook graduated from the University of Maryland in 1970, earning a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration with a concentration in Economics. Upon graduation, he was offered an analyst position with Potomac Electric Power Company. After a few short years he was promoted to the first of several managerial positions. During his 34-year tenure he effectively managed revenue forecasts, cost of service studies, determining prices and budget preparation for multiple departments.

Cook has volunteered a good deal of his time back to the community. For several years, Cook has tutored adults in math and English as a Literacy Volunteer. He has volunteered his time performing home repair and remodeling work for disadvantaged families in surrounding communities. He was Treasurer of the Down East Republican Club and Finance Director of the Beaufort County Republican Party. He is a member of the Committee of 100, a group that promotes local economic expansion. In 2010, he was elected to the NC House of Representatives for District 6, Beaufort County and a portion of Pitt County. In 2012 he was elected to serve as District 1 NC State Senator, in the following counties: Beaufort, Hyde, Dare, Currituck, Camden, Gates, Pasquotank and Perquimans.

Cook has two grown children, Kerri and Billy and two beautiful granddaughters, Calli and Adelaide. Cook enjoys playing tennis, reading, target shooting, and taking long walks with his wife and Golden Retriever, Beau. He is a member of the First Baptist Church of Washington, NC. Cook and his wife of 20 years, Holly, live in Beaufort County.

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Biography of Ohio State Representative Rick Perales

State Representative Rick Perales is serving his first term in the Ohio House. He serves the 73rd House District, which includes the western portion of Greene County.

Prior to being elected to the House, Perales served for 15 years in the United States Air Force commanding the 788th CES Squadron at Wright Patterson Air Force Base. He later served on Beavercreek City Council, was Mayor of Beavercreek from 2002-2003, and then as Greene County commissioner. He has worked at the University of Dayton for 13 years, the past four as its Campus Planning and Real Estate Director.

Perales has been active in numerous community organizations, including the Red Cross, St. Joseph Children's Treatment Center, Greene County United Way, Dayton Public Schools Facility Steering Committee, and Big Brothers Big Sisters. He was named one of the Dayton region's Top 25 Most Influential People of the Decade in 2009 and was inducted into the Ohio Veteran Hall of Fame in 2010.

He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in building construction from Auburn University and his Master of Science degree in international relations from Tory State University.

Perales and his wife, Becka, live in Beavercreek. They have 4 children



Comparison of Wright brothers' first flight photo (top) with purported Whitehead flight photo.
(Image sources: First Flight, Library of Congress; Whitehead, National Air and Space Museum.)

