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GUSTAVE WHITEHEAD

An RAeS statement regarding claims that Gustave Whitehead successfully flew an aeroplane before the Wright brothers



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Amended and approved by the Chairman and the members of the RAeS Historical Group Committee.

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Front cover: A front view of Whitehead's bat-winged No 21 monoplane of 1901, in which it is claimed that he flew on 14 August 1901.
Library of Congress.

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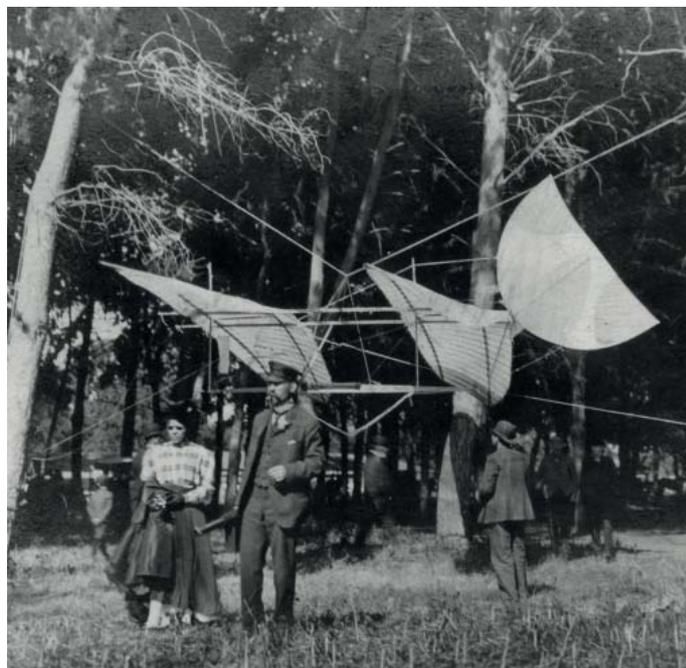
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Gustav Weisskopf

A portrait of German-born, USA-based experimenter Gustave Whitehead, known as Gustave Weisskopf before his arrival in America. Philip Jarrett Collection.



The photograph of John J Montgomery's glider The California taken at San Jose Agricultural Park, California, on 21 May 1905.

STATEMENT

All available evidence fails to support the claim that Gustave Whitehead made sustained, powered, controlled flights pre-dating those of the Wright brothers. The arguments in favour of such flights are based on a single flawed news article combined with questionable witness testimony gathered more than 30 years after the fact. Whitehead's claims were rejected by contemporary 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 the aircraft in which others have claimed he made flights.

While there are a handful of photographs of Whitehead aircraft on the ground, the best efforts of his supporters over seven decades have failed to produce a single image of a powered Whitehead machine in flight. The 'discovery' in 2013 of an image supposedly showing Whitehead in flight has been discredited and the image has been proven not to 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

A detail of the photograph on which John Brown's claims that Whitehead flew before the Wrights are focused. The original photograph was taken at an Aero Club of America exhibition in New York in early 1906. The image that Brown's theories are based on is in the top row, third from left. National Air and Space Museum, NASM 2009-4596, Smithsonian Institution.



other *bona fide* pioneers of aviation. When it comes to the case of Gustave Whitehead, the decision must remain: not proven.

BACKGROUND

This statement has been prompted by the persistent and well-publicised claims in 2013 by Germany-based researcher John Brown. The evidence with which he backed up his claims did not bring anything new to the debate — it was all previously known within the worldwide aviation-history community — but his highly detailed 'analysis' of one specific but indistinct photograph unfortunately led to the claims being endorsed by *Jane's All The World's Aircraft*¹. This erroneous endorsement led to the story being picked up by the world's media when it would otherwise have passed unnoticed — and even led the State of Connecticut (Whitehead was based in Bridgeport, Conn) to pass a bill honouring Whitehead on the State's 'Powered Flight Day', specifically replacing the Ohio- and North Carolina-based Wright brothers².

Brown's 'analysis', which appears on his website³, revolves around an indistinct and much-enlarged detail of a photograph of an exhibition held by the Aero Club of America in early 1906. The detail is of a photographic print, hung as part of the exhibition. Brown claimed that it showed Whitehead's aircraft 'No 21' in powered flight.

Brown bolstered his claims by citing a contemporary newspaper report in the *Bridgeport Herald* of 18 August 1901.

Brown's case was given a sceptical examination in an article in *The Aviation Historian* in July 2013⁴ which, in particular, pointed out the context of the newspaper report — it was published at a time when 'spoon' stories were common.

A few months after Brown's claims appeared, members of the aviation-history community identified that the detail actually depicted John J Montgomery's glider *The California*, photographed in 1905⁵ — nothing to do with Whitehead or

his aircraft. From the aviation history point of view, Brown's claims were by this point thoroughly discredited.

Claims by earlier advocates of Whitehead, such as Stella Randolph in 1937, are summarised in a 2003 article by RAeS Historical Group Committee member Philip Jarrett in *Aeroplane*⁶. In addition, from the 1960s onwards, Charles Gibbs-Smith — another highly-respected historian and member of the RAeS HG Committee — wrote several articles analysing and rejecting the claims, including one for the The American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics⁷.

NOTES

1. Paul Jackson: Foreword to *Jane's All The World's Aircraft, Development & Production*, 8 March 2013.

2. United Press International report, 27 June 2013: http://www.upi.com/Odd_News/2013/06/27/Conn-decrees-

[Wright-Brothers-were-not-first-with-powered-aircraft/UPI-50341372389001/](http://www.upi.com/Odd_News/2013/06/27/Conn-decrees-Wright-Brothers-were-not-first-with-powered-aircraft/UPI-50341372389001/)

3. <http://www.gustave-whitehead.com/history/detailed-photo-analysis>

4. Michael Oakey: History or Hogwash? — published in *The Aviation Historian*, Issue No 4, July 2013, pp 82-89. Downloadable PDF available at http://www.wright-brothers.org/History_Wing/History_of_the_Airplane/Who_Was_First/Gustav_Whitehead/History-or-Hogwash-TAH.pdf

5. *The Aviation Historian*, Issue No 5, October 2013, p 6.

6. Philip Jarrett: Claims to Fame: Gustave Whitehead — published in *Aeroplane*, September 2003, pp 83-86.

7. Gibbs-Smith, C H The Sorry Affair of Gustave Whitehead and His Alleged Powered Flight Claim — published in *Astronautics and Aeronautics*, February 1970, pp 66-68.