

Pass It On®...

Milton Wright, Father of Famous Fliers.

The stern man who believed humans were never meant to fly was overcome with emotion when Wilbur took him on his first flight.

The Wright family history is the story of American history. The family tree's roots reach back through abolitionists, clergymen and ancestors who landed at Plymouth only two decades after the Puritans. They served in the Revolutionary War, carved farms out of the wilderness and pursued the treasures of knowledge.

The Wright brothers' mother, Susan Koerner Wright, was a studious woman who attended Hartsville College, a rarity in those times. She had grown up on a farm and was very handy with tools. It is said that she could fix practically anything, and she was the one to solve the boys' early engineering problems. Their father, Milton Wright, worked long hours on the farm, studied incessantly and was a minister in the United Brethren Church. The family's strong moral values included eschewing alcohol and being vocal opponents of slavery.

The Wright children were expected to work hard and be upstanding in their morals. When they were young boys, their father Milton brought home a flying toy: a propeller made of bamboo and powered by a rubber band. Fascinated with it, the boys began tinkering immediately. Their insatiable curiosity was inhibited only by their lack of mechanical know-how.

As the boys grew, all things mechanical fascinated them. They tinkered with bicycles and printing presses. Through all this, Milton was a bit nervous. He was weighed down with financial obligations, church politics and the sorrow of Susan's death in 1889, when Wilbur was 22 and Orville just 17.

When the family struggled financially, the brothers dropped out of school and put their hands and minds to work. They published a weekly newspaper and opened the Wright Cycle Company, selling and repairing bicycles.

The business was successful enough to fund their flying experiments. It's easy to imagine the brothers working long hours on bicycles during the day and

assembling propellers, gears and motors in the back workshop in their off time. They spent hours on the beach watching birds glide. They made sketches and obsessed over the details of materials, dimensions, rotor spin and weight. Their work continued for more than a decade until they finally developed their dream: an airplane.

When it came time to test their first full-scale model in 1903, they were meticulous about the right environment and time of day. And, when that day finally came, they flipped a coin to see who would be pilot.

Milton, meanwhile, was anchored to the earth with practicalities and doubts. He couldn't bear the thought of losing his sons, so he made them promise never to fly together — that is, if their experiment ever got off the ground.

The boys did get off the ground. They became a national sensation. And, at age 82, Milton finally agreed to fly with his son Orville. The craft slowly gained altitude, wobbling side to side and gliding like the birds they had so often watched on the beach. An excited Milton cried out to his son: "Higher, Orville, higher!"

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