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Pioneers of Flight

Discover ingenuity and innovation along the Dayton Aviation Trail. BY SUSAN B. BARNES

Flying Fortress:

The *Memphis Belle* B-17F aircraft on display at the National Museum of the United States Air Force

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Though they followed their dreams and took flight for the first time in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright began their journey into the history books in their hometown of Dayton, Ohio. In Dayton they owned a printing business and a series of bicycle shops, including Wright Cycle Co., where they built their own bikes and gained the mechanical experience and financial resources needed to fuel their experiments leading to human flight. Those experiments — and their successes — forever changed the way we travel.

“I’m not sure they would have been able to invent the airplane if they had not grown up in Dayton, Ohio,” said Amanda Wright Lane,

a great-grandniece of the Wright brothers. “I think the town they grew up in was important because they were able to find resources to pursue their idea, a town full of engineers and what they would have considered advanced materials at the turn of the century.” She said the library was unbelievably large for the size of the city, so they did much of their homework in Dayton.

“The family they grew up in was just ... the bishop, their father, [who] never questioned what they were doing, but he always told them to read up on everything they can possibly get their hands on if they were going to pursue this. They really heeded his words around their dining room table,” Wright Lane added. “The family accepted that this was what they were trying to do and build.”

The famous brothers put Dayton on the map, and the city’s aviation heritage continues today. “The birthplace of aviation” is also home to the National Museum of the United States Air Force, the world’s largest military aviation museum. It encompasses 19 acres of indoor exhibit space filled with more than 360 artifacts along with the National Aviation Hall of Fame, which added five inductees each year since 1962.

Wright Cycle Co., National Museum of the United States Air Force

and National Aviation Hall of Fame are three of the 17 sites that comprise Dayton Aviation Trail, established in 1981 in partnership with the National Park Service. Additional stops on the Aviation Trail include, among others, Wright-Dunbar Interpretive Center and Aviation Trail Parachute Museum housed inside; the Wright Brothers Memorial overlooking Huffman Prairie Flying Field, where the brothers continued developing their flying invention and later operated their flying school; Carillon Historical Park, housing the 1905 *Wright Flyer III*, the world's first practical airplane; and Sinclair National UAS Training and Certification Center and Aviation Technology facilities, which lead the nation in Unmanned Aerial Systems and traditional aviation training and education.

“I think the thing that is most amazing about Dayton is that you can see that 1905 *Wright Flyer III* on the Aviation Trail in Carillon Historical Park,” said Wright Lane, adding Wilbur flew the *Flyer* for nearly 40 minutes and traveled about 20 miles before landing because he was running out of fuel in a tank about the size of a large Thermos or Yeti bottle.

“When you look at the fragility of it, you can't imagine it carrying a man, let alone, three years later in 1908, carrying two people because they modified it while doing demonstrations around the world,” she added.

The aviation scene in Dayton has no intentions of slowing down. In fact, the aviation and defense industry accounts for more than 37,000 jobs at five major employers; the entire population of Montgomery County, in which Dayton sits, is just over 531,000.

The Wright brothers' legacy continues to inspire this and future generations of aeronautics and aerospace innovators, not only in Dayton but in outer space, too: In 2021 NASA's *Ingenuity* Mars Helicopter landed on Mars in an “airfield” named Wright Brothers Field — so named, according to a NASA press release, “... in recognition of the ingenuity and innovation that continue to propel exploration.”



Aviation History:
The Wright- Dunbar Interpretive Center and Plaza (above), *Wright Flyer* sculpture at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (left), and Armstrong Air & Space Museum (below)

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SCENIC DRIVES

Travel about an hour north of Dayton to Wapakoneta, hometown of Neil Armstrong. There, in tribute to the first person to walk on the moon, you will find Armstrong Air & Space Museum, another stop on the Dayton Aviation Trail. After visiting the museum, take some time to enjoy the charming historic downtown area boasting 65 properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Browse the windows of downtown Wapakoneta's shops, stop for a bite to eat, or sit and take it all in at the riverside park before traveling back to Dayton.