



THE
Wright
Company
from invention to industry

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INTRODUCTION

In west Dayton, Ohio, an empty factory complex quietly stands. Wedged between U.S. Route 35 and West Third Street, two of Dayton's major roads, the site is similar to many other former industrial sites throughout the Rust Belt, awaiting redevelopment and new investment. The site, though, contains two buildings built when Dayton was an industrial powerhouse, a city famous for its factories. These buildings, the former factory of the Wright Company, were the first buildings in the United States built specifically to house an incorporated airplane builder. Vacated by the Wright Company in 1916 and used as part of an automobile parts plant into the 2000s, the buildings today are monuments to Wilbur and Orville Wright's attempt to turn their invention into a profitable commodity, an attempt they found difficult to realize.

Aviation as a business in the United States changed greatly in the years between Wilbur Wright's demonstration flights at Le Mans, France, in 1908, and the start of the First World War, in 1914. In 1908 it barely qualified as an industry. The men—and initially they were all men—who pursued flight in the United States and Canada generally did so with aircraft they personally built and modified. Wilbur and Orville Wright and Glenn Curtiss experimented on single machines built in small, informal settings either with personal funds or through the assistance of a wealthy benefactor (as with Alexander Graham Bell's role with Curtiss and the Aerial Experiment Association), not with capital raised through a sale of company stock. By 1908 the Wrights and Curtiss, now satisfied that their airplanes were practical vehicles, looked to profit financially from marketing their wares. To begin to bring airplanes before the public as the period's automobile makers were commercializing their products, Wilbur and Orville Wright and Glenn Curtiss all required outside investment since on their own they did not have sufficient capital for commercial-scale airplane production. In 1909, after gaining capital from outside investors, both parties opened small airplane factories in their hometowns and started selling their models to governments and private buyers. Airplane manufacturing was a small, skilled craft in its first years. Its status as a small industry changed with the coming of the First World War, both in North America and Europe. By 1914 thousands of workers at companies in

Great Britain, Germany, and France—joined over the next four years by hundreds of people working in North America—built standard-model airplanes on variants of the assembly line for the air forces of the Allies and the Central Powers. European airplane production greatly outpaced that of the United States before the coming of the war. The U.S. industry, ensconced in a country distant from the arms races in Europe and greatly affected by patent infringement lawsuits, developed fitfully in the years before the war.

The Wrights' efforts at capitalizing on their invention were at the center of this fitful development. Vigorously defending their primacy and intellectual property was the Wright Company, formed by the brothers and a group of investors in 1909 to market their invention to North Americans and to prosecute infringements of the Wrights' 1906 patent (which the brothers assigned to the company upon its formation). Incorporating the brothers' fame in its name, the Wright Company produced thirteen different models of airplanes and served as an introduction to industrial aviation for individuals who later became prominent in aviation manufacturing such as Frank H. Russell (1878–1947) and Grover C. Loening (1888–1976). But the Wrights were engineers and inventors, men who previously owned and operated a small printing shop and a bicycle sales and repair business. Neither brother had any experience in running a company co-owned with a group of stockholders who wanted the firm in which they invested to grow to be the dominant airplane maker in the United States. Yet they resisted implementing suggestions for corporate growth from executives and managers with actual experience in running larger businesses. Moreover, the primacy the Wright Company gave to patent litigation over business development and technological innovation and Orville Wright's lack of interest in corporate management after the 1912 death of his brother, confidant, and business partner, with whom his work was closely intertwined, caused it to remain a small (if well-known) operation, even after Orville Wright sold it to a group of New York-based industrialists in the autumn of 1915.

As a specialized batch producer, the Wright Company is representative of the starting point of the transition of the aviation industry from craft production to assembly lines turning out thousands of airplanes each year. Its story shows that a famous name is insufficient to ensure a company's success and that a company marketing a new product—especially in times of recession—needs to combine innovative products with competent front-office management. Still, the prominence of its two presidents as the inventors of the airplane and the attempts it made at controlling the industry through patent infringement

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litigation gave the Wright Company a place in early aviation greater than the small number of airplanes—approximately 120 between 1910 and 1915—that its workers built in Dayton would otherwise indicate. When Orville sold the Wright Company, in 1915, he had realized his and his brother's dream of turning aviation from an oddity into a practical enterprise.

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