

## “The Wright Stuff”

By John D. Wilson, Rush County Historian

The recent success of the Perseverance Rover on Mars, and the fantastic pictures sent back to us would have made Wilbur and Orville Wright very proud.

Many may not realize that Rush County has played a significant role in the history of aviation. The family tree of Wilbur and Orville Wright can be traced to the early settlement of Rush County.

The first member of the Wright family to migrate to America was Samuel Wright. He and his wife came from Essex County, England, to Massachusetts about the year 1637. Some of their descendants fought in the American Revolution.

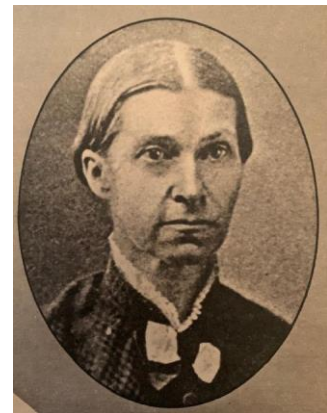
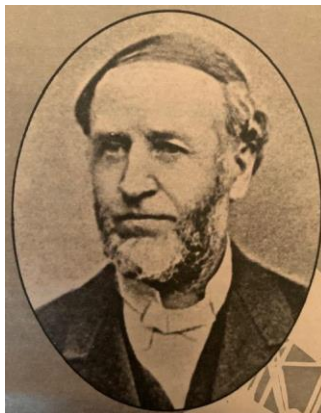
The Wright Brothers’ grandfather, Daniel Wright, Jr., was born in 1790 in New England. He married Catherine Reeder in 1818, and they migrated west and settled near Centerville, Ohio. Three years later in 1821 they moved to Rush County, Indiana. Here they built a one-room log cabin in the southeast corner of the county three miles north of Clarksburg and south of New Salem. The cabin had hewn walls on the inside. In 1823 the Wrights moved 1 ½ miles southwest of the original cabin and eventually owned 160 acres.

According to recorded testimony, Dan Wright had been educated in Vermont. He was a studious man and had strong opinions. He was an abolitionist, he did not believe in secret organizations, and he was against the use of whiskey. Dan did not allow alcohol in his home, and he would not sell his corn crop to local whiskey distillers.

Dan and Catherine had seven children: Samuel, Harvey, George, Sarah, Milton, William and Kate. Kate died at birth. All of the boys became ministers. Harvey was well known not only in Rush County but in eleven states where he traveled as an evangelist Baptist minister. At one time he served as pastor for a church two miles south of Center known as “Old Hickory”.

Wilbur and Orville Wrights’ father, Milton, was born in Rush County November 17, 1828. In 1840 when Milton was 12 years old his family moved to Orange Township in Fayette County. The location was about seven miles from their Rush County location. Dan and Catherine are buried in Fayette County.

Milton joined the United Brethren Church when he was 18. In 1854-55 he taught school in Rush County at Neff’s Corner two miles north of where he grew up (where 700E and SR 244 come together). By 1856 Milton had become an ordained minister in the United Brethren



Bishop Milton Wright and Susan Wright  
(Photo’s Indianapolis Star – Sept. 23, 1979)

Church. He directed a mission in Indianapolis for one year and also served a church in Andersonville, Indiana.

Milton then decided to serve as a missionary in the Oregon Territory. He went to Panama by ship, crossed the isthmus by land, and then sailed up the Pacific Coast. He contracted yellow fever and decided not to become a frontier missionary. He instead taught at Sublimity College in the Willamette Valley for a short period.

By 1859 he had returned to Indiana and married a girl from Union County named Susan Catherine Koerner. Susan's family was from Virginia. She was born in 1831 before her father moved the family to Union County. Her family was known for their mechanical aptitude and ingenuity.

Right after they married, Susan and Milton settled near New Salem in Rush County. They were only back in Rush County a short time. Being a minister, I guess you always need to have your bags packed. So the Wrights moved ten times in 25 years!

In 1861 just as the Civil War was starting Milton was named a presiding elder of the Marion District. That same year their first son Reuchlin was born. When the second son Lorin was born in 1862 the family lived in Dublin, Indiana. Then Wilbur, the oldest of the airplane inventors, was born near Millville in Henry County in 1867. Orville was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1871, and the youngest Katharine was born in Dayton in 1874. Two other children died in infancy. Three of Milton and Susan's sons were named after religious figures. Reuchlin was named after a German theologian, Wilbur for Wilbur Fiske a Methodist churchman, and Orville for Orville Dewey a Unitarian minister.

The United Brethren Church elected Milton Wright as a Bishop in 1877 and sent him to Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Four years later they moved to Richmond, Indiana. There Milton supplemented their income by editing the Richmond Star newspaper. He had edited a church weekly called the Religious Telescope when they were in Dayton, Ohio.

They stayed in Richmond for four years. While there Lorin invented a hay baler, and Wilbur invented an improved paper folder. The Wright boys made kites and sold them in Richmond. They also developed an unwillingness to borrow money. Making something from scrap parts and available raw material was a family trait. One winter the boys had wanted a new sled, so Susan made one for them out of old tools and kitchen utensils.

The Richmond years ended with Milton's transfer back to Dayton, Ohio. Unfortunately for Wilbur the move came only a few weeks before his high school graduation, and it robbed him of a diploma.

In Dayton the aviation ideas became serious. Wilbur and Orville established a bicycle shop to support themselves. Many of the concepts involved in the designs of their first flying machines developed from experimentation at the bicycle shop. Sadly their mother Susan died in Dayton of tuberculosis in 1889.

The Wright brothers were in a race against time to get their flying machine patented. Other inventors like Dr. Samuel P. Langley, Glenn Curtiss and others were trying to perfect powered flight.

The brothers were interrupted in their venture by a church dispute. A church publication official was accused of embezzlement. Bishop Wright was determined to get to the bottom of the problem. Wilbur made numerous trips to Huntington, Indiana, to audit the books.

The accused United Brethren Church official sued the Wrights, and the Wrights sued the church. By 1905 after considerable litigation, the General Conference gave a victory to Bishop Wright and his followers. The accused church official was later convicted in another case in another state.

The lawsuits had created some negative press, so the Wright brothers decided to keep their inventive efforts secret. The brothers were finally able to test their newest flying machine on the beach at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 14, 1903. Wilbur crashed on the first attempt. Three days of repair were needed. On December 17<sup>th</sup>, Orville flew for 12 seconds. Three additional flights were made the same day. The last and longest was made by Wilbur. He flew for 59 seconds and covered 852 feet; just short of the length of three football fields. Soon after, a heavy gust of wind picked up the machine and tumbled it end over end. It was never flown again.

A few days earlier Langley, a Director of the Smithsonian Institution, lifted a plane into the air, but like a previous attempt it plunged into the Potomac River. Had it succeeded the Wrights would have been also-rans. The Wright brothers' flying machine was finally patented in 1906. The Smithsonian refused to recognize the Wrights as the airplane's inventor for many years. One of their planes was displayed in a British Museum until 1948!

But what about Rush County's own Milton Wright? Bishop Wright went aloft for the first time in 1910 when he was 81. With Wilbur at the controls, the elderly Bishop shouted, "Higher! Higher!" He also commented that "People look pretty small down there."

Bishop Milton Wright never stopped being an example of his convictions. In 1915 at age 86 and only two years from his passing, Milton Wright marched 1 ½ miles in a suffrage parade in Dayton, Ohio. Milton died on April 3, 1917, at the age of 88. He is buried at Dayton, Ohio, at the Woodland Cemetery. Women won the right to vote in 1920.

Orville Wright once recalled, "We were lucky enough to grow up in a home environment where there was always much encouragement to the children to pursue intellectual interests; to investigate whatever aroused curiosity. In a different environment, our curiosity might have been suppressed long before it could have borne fruit."

In tribute to the father of the fathers of aviation Wilbur wrote: "To my father, earnest thanks for his example of courageous, upright life and for his earnest sympathy for everything pertaining to my true welfare."

Sources for this writing include: The Family Tree That Led To Flight by Richard S. Simons, Rush County Retrospect, and Wilbur Wright birthplace Wright Brothers' Timeline Of Important Events. Special thanks to Carol Holzback, Charlie Fields, and Ken Wilson.