

A Trailblazer in Her Own Wright



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Wilbur and Orville Wright's successful flight at Kitty Hawk on December 17, 1903, was just one step in the journey to commercialize flying. To truly capitalize on such a novel feat required much more than mechanical expertise – known for their shyness, the brothers desperately needed a savvy leader to navigate the press, patent processes, and overseas networking. Plus, someone needed to hold down the bicycle shop and tend to family at home.

Luckily, their kid sister Katharine fulfilled each role with ease while searching for a life that was her own.



Katharine Wright successfully navigated a man's world to further the financial success and fame of her ingenious brothers. The three are shown standing together at the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909.

A Parenting Role in Childhood

Katharine Wright was born on her brother Orville's third birthday on August 19, 1874, perhaps foreshadowing their close bond. She was the youngest surviving and only female child to parents Milton Wright, a renowned bishop, and Susan Koerner Wright, a housewife and homemaker with a college education – a rarity in America at the time.

The three youngest children, Wilbur, Orville, and Katharine, were closest in age and made a pact to never marry, ensuring their loyalties remained with one another. They grew up in Dayton, Ohio, a thriving industrial city, which may have influenced the Wrights' path: for a number of years, the U.S. Patent Office granted city residents the most patents per capita of all American cities.

Katharine wrote lovingly of her mother in her journals as a child, lauding her encouragement of all her children's intellectual interests. When Susan died from tuberculosis in 1889 at 58 years old, 15-year-old Katharine was thrust into the role of surrogate spouse and mother for the entire family at the behest of her father. For the Wright family, this included a great deal of hosting and entertaining duties, as Milton had become the head of the Church of the United Brethren. In doing so, Katharine developed charisma and social expertise that would enable her to navigate the world skillfully in her adulthood.



Katharine Wright in 1879.

The exhausting roles of both mother and sister took its toll. Katharine took solace in the unfairness of the world through her religious beliefs, writing years later about “a need to believe that if things are not fair for those few years of life, they will be made so for eternity.”

College Years



Katharine Wright graduated from Oberlin College in 1898

Katharine was just coming of age in 1892 when Orville and Wilbur opened their bicycle repair shop. But, having written off the idea of marriage, Katharine needed a way to support herself. Teaching was one of the few professions open to American women during the early 20th century, and thus became Katharine's pathway for financial independence. She enrolled in Oberlin College, a progressive institution that was the first to officially admit Black students as well as issue bachelor's degrees to women.

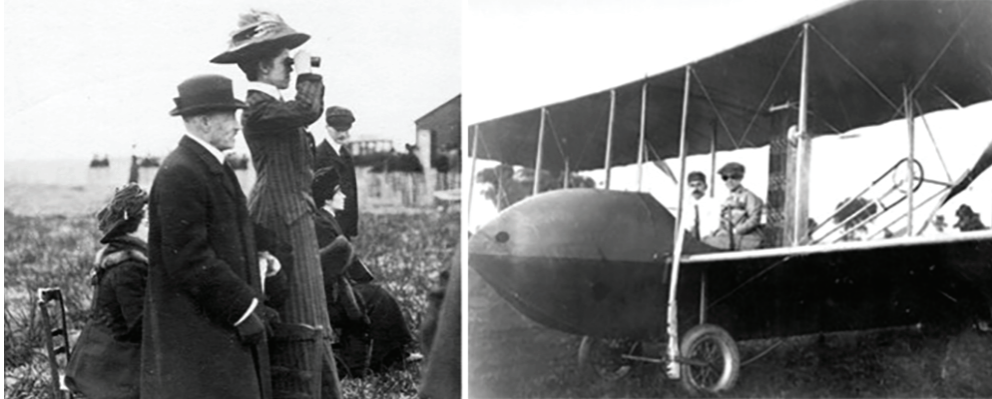
Outside of her prescribed domestic duties at home – and while staying in an all-women's dorm – she developed an understanding that her struggle for an identity beyond caretaking was widespread among women. This solidified her commitment to gaining financial independence and pursuing women's rights.

Still, attending to her family was at the forefront of her mind, and she took multiple breaks from her studies to care for Orville and her eldest brother's nephew when they developed typhoid. She also took a liking to some of her male peers, including Harry Haskell, a future newspaper editor. Haskell married one of Katharine's housemates, while another classmate, Arthur Cunningham, proposed to her. She

accepted, but years later ended the engagement and referred to it as her “narrow escape.”

Katharine graduated in 1898, the same year Wilbur and Orville began seriously studying the possibility of human flight.

Careers Take Off



Left photo: Katharine watching Wilbur in flight in 1909. Right photo: Katharine and Orville in the Model H in 1915.

The three siblings’ careers began taking off simultaneously. Katharine became a high school teacher for Latin and English in Dayton in 1899, while her brothers built and flew a biplane kite and began reaching out to local airspace-related authorities for permission to conduct flight tests.

If You Want to Go Far, Go Together

While Wilbur and Orville excelled in mechanics they lacked the social initiative to make the most of their work. In the years immediately preceding the brothers’ first successful flight, Katharine relentlessly pushed them to attend engineering conferences and talk shop with fellow innovators. She also sought translation help from fellow teachers for difficult German passages in aeronautical journals to support their research.



Known for their shyness, the brothers relied on their sister Katharine to navigate the press, patent processes, and overseas networking.

During testing phases, she recruited her friends and coworkers to help with flight tests when needed, as the aircraft and launching mechanism were each too large for the brothers to handle on their own. The brothers secured a patent in 1906 following the first successful flight at Kitty Hawk, but the siblings' work was far from over.

The Wright Brothers and Sister

In 1908, during a flying demonstration in a bid to sell the machine to the government, Orville crashed the plane, leaving him with a broken leg among other injuries. Katharine left her teaching job behind to care for Orville and never returned despite her competing loyalty to her independence. At the hospital, she was thrust into the familiar caregiver role she encountered after her mother died and during her nephews' illnesses. She wrote, "The doctors had dreaded my coming and were so relieved when I wasn't hysterical. They were sure glad to have me take charge at night."

Following the incident, Wilbur and Orville offered to match her current salary if she would accompany them to Europe and help connect them to business opportunities. As it turned out, the brothers were having a harder time selling the flying machine than they did inventing it.



Katharine Wright with Hart O'Berg and Lord Northcliffe in 1909.

To say Katharine made a splash in Europe would be an understatement. She committed herself to daily two-hour French lessons, the universal language in Europe at the time. Her proficiency in French and natural charm took the Wrights to higher ground. She was so involved that the "Wright Brothers", as they were known overseas, were now known as "the Wright Brothers and Sister".

The French government even awarded all three of them the Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur, the highest honor in France. While overseas, she also became the third woman to ever fly in an airplane.

Wilbur's Death and Company Sale

Katharine returned home to newfound fame, and shortly after, the trio sold the first aircraft to the U.S. Army. As the Wright company gained new investors, it turned its focus towards the manufacture and sale of aircraft while battling patent litigation.

Wilbur died at the height of the Wright family's fame in 1912 at age 45, further upending the family business. Katharine was reportedly integral in helping Orville sell the company amid his challenges of coping with the loss of their brother and helping secure his status as first in flight during a dispute. Amid it all, Katharine served as the director of the Young Women's League of Dayton and advocated for women's right to vote.

Liberation in Love and Women's Rights

Following Wilbur's death, Katharine, Orville, and their father Milton moved to a mansion on Hawthorn Hill in Dayton in 1915. After receiving the highest honor given by France and becoming one of the first women to fly, Katharine turned her attention to yet another feat: gaining her right to vote.

Though her father had restricted her to the sphere of domesticity in her youth, and Orville regularly teased her for her interest in women's rights, they each marched alongside her during a suffrage parade in 1914. In 1917, Milton passed away, leaving Orville and Katharine to live together at Hawthorn Hill.

Katharine began growing weary of serving as a surrogate mother and spouse yet again. As she did for her father in her youth, Katharine accompanied Orville to social gatherings and took care of his daily tasks such as correspondence. Perhaps she wondered whether the pact she, Orville, and Wilbur made all those years ago was really in her best interest.

In 1923, she was elected to Oberlin College's Board of Trustees, only the second woman to have ever served in that capacity. Having experienced less pay for more work throughout her career, one of her top priorities was ensuring equal pay for female faculty. Meanwhile, Harry Haskell, her college friend who had married her roommate, happened to show up at Oberlin in pursuit of an honorary degree. Haskell's wife had passed away the same year. The two immediately hit it off and began a long-distance romance through a series of letters over the next three years.



Katharine Wright at Hawthorne Hill in 1924.

Haskell proposed to a reluctant Katharine, who feared Orville's reaction. After nearly a year, she finally accepted the proposal and Haskell broke the news to her brother. As she expected, Orville saw her engagement as a personal betrayal to him and completely cut her off, citing the pact she had made to him as a child fifty-some years ago. He refused to attend her wedding and Katharine bid a bittersweet farewell to Hawthorn Hill, moving to Kansas City with her new husband in 1926. Of her old life, she brought only what she could fit in a suitcase.

The couple enjoyed a brief but loving time together. While planning a belated honeymoon about two years into their marriage, Katharine developed pneumonia. She passed away on March 3, 1929, at 54 years old without seeing Orville again, who indignantly held off on visiting her until it was too late. But her husband reciprocated the care she afforded others her whole life, placing flowers on her grave every year.

*Top photo: Katharine Wright (middle) and Orville (right) during a 1910 voyage across the Atlantic.
(Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all photos courtesy of wright-brothers.org.)*

— Colleen Kilday