

Blanche Stuart Scott: The First Female American Aviator

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With her iconic leather jacket, aviator goggles, and mysterious fate, Amelia Earhart is easily among the most recognizable women in aviation. As the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, she was an aviation trailblazer in countless ways. However, she was not actually America's first female aviator. That honor goes to Blanche "Betty" Stuart Scott, who became the first American woman to fly a plane in 1910, eighteen years before Earhart's flight across the Atlantic.



Blanche Scott was born on April 8, 1885, in Rochester, New York. As a child, she loved spending time outdoors, riding her bicycle and exploring. She attended the Misses School for Girls, Howard Seminary, and Fort Edward College. Her mother tried to transform her into a lady by sending her to finishing school, but that did not work as Scott was, as she described herself, "a screwball" and "a cocky kid of 18."

Before Scott took to the skies, her interests were fixed on another machine: the automobile. In the early 1900s, there were no licensing programs or age restrictions on drivers, so Scott began driving at age 13. The young driver "terrorize[d]" the streets of Rochester to the point where the city council attempted to ban her from driving. Fortunately, they were unsuccessful, and at age 25, Scott became the second woman to make a transcontinental road trip across America. Scott's 5,500 mile journey, sponsored by automobile company Willys-Overland, started in New York City on May 16, 1910, and ended sixty-eight days later in San Francisco on July 23. Scott drove "an Overland roadster, finished in white with nickel plated trimmings" named "Lady Overland." Scott made the trip "purely for pleasure and educational value," but she also wanted to highlight that "women who have cars are too dependent on men . . . or their chauffeurs." Critics believed that Scott would not finish the journey because they were "skeptical of a woman's ability to cope with anything mechanical," but she was "going to prove the contrary." On this road trip, Scott caught her first glimpses of an airplane, later recalling "I thought these people flying were idiots, not realizing I'd be doing the same thing three weeks later."

Scott's cross-country driving feat caught the attention of Jerome Fanciull, a member of the Glenn Curtiss exhibition team. Fanciull asked her if she would like to learn how to fly under the direction of Glenn Curtiss, a pioneering aviator and inventor. Scott was thrilled. "The idea of being a nobody and a nothing in New York's millions had irritated [her], and she was eager to get back in the spotlight after her drive." However, Glenn Curtiss did not share the same excitement with the proposal of teaching this new student, fearing the negative attention he

would garner. Despite his reservations, he agreed and Blanche Stuart Scott was the first and only woman he ever trained.

“Mr. Curtiss was [a] stubborn . . . reluctant instructor.” Luckily, Scott “was determinedly willful.” Curtiss taught her in a one seat plane called a Curtiss Pusher. He stood outside the aircraft while Scott, wearing bloomers filled with three petticoats, sat in “an undertaker’s chair”



in front of “a motor that sounded like a whirling bolt of a dishpan.” Scott recalled that “in those days they didn't take you up in the air to teach you. They gave you a bit of preliminary ground training. They told you this and that. You got in. They kissed you good-bye, and trusted to luck you'd get back.” Scott quickly learned to navigate the aircraft by taxiing up and down the field. Acting on his own anxieties, Curtiss placed a block of wood behind the plane’s throttle pedal to prevent her from gaining enough

speed and becoming airborne. But on September 6, 1910, Blanche Stuart Scott became the first American woman to fly after a gust of wind came behind her and lifted the aircraft to an altitude of forty feet. Scott recollected, “I got down all right. After that, I wasn't going to stay on the ground any more, and I never did.”

On October 23, 1910, Scott made her first public flight in Fort Wayne, Indiana. This showcase was the first professional appearance of a female aviator. In the spring of 1911, she moved to Mineola, New York, and joined Thomas Baldwin’s exhibition group. She started to fly in a new aircraft, a Baldwin Red Devil, which was more perilous to operate than a Curtiss Pusher. Sometime in 1911, Scott became the first woman to make a long distance flight after she took off from Mineola airport and flew 60 miles. En route, she “was missing for over an hour and had everyone scared to death.” After the successful voyage, she moved to Nassau, New York, where other fellow female aviators like Harriet Quimby were based. Though other female aviators were getting their pilot’s licenses from the Aero Club of New York around this time, Scott never got one (the U.S. did not issue federal pilot’s licenses until 1927). Ultimately, both her mentors were against it. Curtiss said the license was a waste of a paper and Baldwin later concluded that women should not be flying. Without a license, Scott was unable to participate in exhibition events sanctioned by the Aero Club of New York. Because of this, she left the East Coast and traveled to California. In 1912, she joined Glenn Martin, an aircraft designer, and became the first female test pilot in America. Scott also joined Martin’s flying circus and was only allowed to participate in events not sanctioned by the Aero Club of New York due to her lack of license. On July 2, 1912, Scott witnessed the fatal airplane crash that killed Quimby. However, even though the “accident was horrible,” and “for a time it unnerved [her] utterly, she did not “give up flying.” In 1913, Scott signed a contract with the Ward Aviation Company in Chicago to fly in exhibitions in the Midwest. But on Memorial Day of 1913, she crashed after

her Red Devil's throttle wire broke. She took a year off to recover, and continued flying afterwards. In 1916, Scott retired because of the lack of opportunities for female engineers and mechanics. Additionally, she was bothered by what she perceived as the public's disturbing interest in air crashes.

After her retirement from aviation, Scott entered the entertainment business, working as a screenwriter, radio personality, and radio station assistant manager. She spent nine years in California writing for RKO, Universal, Warner Brothers, and other studios. Furthermore, she wrote and produced her own radio shows, appearing under the alias "Roberta." In September of 1948, Scott became the first woman to ride in a jet as a passenger after Chuck Yeager, a United States Air Force Officer, invited her to ride in a TF-80C. In the 1950s, she became a special consultant for the Air Force Museum at the Wright-Patterson Base until 1956. During her time there, she collected \$1.25 million worth of aviation artifacts. She herself claimed "I'm one of the world's best chisellers."

Blanche Stuart Scott died on January 12, 1970, at Genesec Hospital in Rochester, New York. She was 84 years old. Throughout her lifetime she set records and won awards for her achievements, but she still continued to be recognized after her death. She was the second woman to drive a car cross country, the first woman to fly an airplane, the first female aviator to fly publicly in a professional appearance, and the first woman to ride in a jet. As a consultant to the United States Air Force Museum, she collected numerous precious and important artifacts. She was honored by the Aeronautics Association of the United States in 1953 and by the Antique Airplane Association in 1960. In 1980, ten years after her death and seventy years after her first flight, the US Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp to recognize her achievements in aviation. Finally, she became a National Women's Hall of Fame Inductee in 2005. So now, when asked "Who was the first American woman to fly an airplane?" always respond with Blanche Stuart Scott, not Amelia Earhart.



Photo Sources

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