

# Helping the Wright Brothers— Friends on the Outer Banks

Series: Aviation



Wright brothers monument in Tate yard, Kitty Hawk. *Courtesy Outer Banks History Center, Manteo.*

Have you ever wondered why the Wright brothers chose North Carolina as the site of their first flight? Wilbur and Orville Wright had not traveled outside the Midwest. Yet in 1900 they packed their gear and headed 750 miles to Kitty Hawk to begin their glider experiments. The reason why is simple: they were invited.

When the Wright brothers needed a place to test their glider, they wrote to the U.S. Weather Bureau requesting wind charts for all weather stations. Several stations reported strong, steady winds, so Wilbur wrote to them. J. J. Doshier of the Kitty Hawk

weather station relayed Wilbur's inquiry to postmaster Bill Tate. Tate responded by inviting the brothers to the Outer Banks. He informed them that the area had not only the winds they required but also wide sandy dunes with no trees to interfere with flying. "If you should decide to try your machine here & come I will take pleasure in doing all I can for your convenience . . . and assure you you will find a hospitable people when you come among us," he wrote. Tate was true to his word. When Wilbur arrived on his doorstep in September 1900, Tate provided lodging. Tate's wife, Addie, loaned Wilbur her sewing machine to stitch the wings of the glider. His brother Dan worked as the Wrights' handyman and assistant. Other Kitty Hawk residents supported the brothers in various ways while they camped at nearby Kill Devil Hills.

One group of Outer Bankers put their muscle into helping the Wrights. The crewmen of the Kill Devil Hills Life-Saving Station helped launch the 1903 flyer. Just as important, they helped haul it back to the starting point at the end of every attempted flight. The Wrights could not have maneuvered the 675-pound flyer without the lifesavers.

Some historians speculate that without this assistance it would have taken the brothers several more years to fly. Had their experiments been delayed, they might not have been the first to fly. Lifesavers Adam Etheridge, William Dough, and John T. Daniels witnessed the first flight on December 17, 1903. Daniels took the famous photograph of Orville piloting the flyer.

Bill Tate supported the Wright brothers enthusiastically after the first flight. His business cards proclaimed, "Original Host to Wilbur and Orville Wright" and "Original N.C. Aviation Booster." He helped produce the first monument in America to honor the

Wright brothers—a marble obelisk erected in the front yard of his former home. Tate also helped plan the national monument at Kill Devil Hills and lobbied for installation of the flyer in the Smithsonian Institution. Wilbur died in 1912, but Orville remained friends with Tate, Daniels, Etheridge, and many other Outer Bankers throughout his life.

Would the Wrights have unlocked the secrets of flight if they had not accepted Bill Tate's invitation back in 1900? We'll never know. But we do know that the pioneering brothers achieved success with a little help from their friends on the Outer Banks.