



Fairfield Museum and History Center Library
370 Beach Road
Fairfield, CT 06824

Manuscript Finding Aid

Title: O'Dwyer, William J. Gustave Whitehead Research Collection

Collection #: Ms B107

Dates: 1869-1987

Size of collection: 18 linear ft

Accession number: L1999.31, L1999.35

Donor: William J. O'Dwyer. Also includes photocopies of materials donated by the Connecticut State Library, from the William A. O'Neill Collection, Series I, S-561, folder 7. These materials are housed in Series E - Governmental Recognition, 1964-1986 of this collection.

Restrictions: The donor requires that an author receiving profits made from a publication using these materials pay a royalty of 60% to William J. O'Dwyer, with 50% of that sum going to the Fairfield Historical Society for maintenance of this collection.

Processed by: Barbara E. Austen

Related Collections: Stella Randolph Collection - History of Aviation, Special Collections, Eugene Mc Dermott Library at the University of Texas at Dallas. P.O. Box 830643, Richardson, TX 75083, (972) 883-2950

Date: January 2000

Biographical/historical note:

Retired Air Force Major William J. O'Dwyer, a Fairfield, Conn., resident, began his research on the life and work of Gustave Whitehead in 1963 when he found some photograph albums with pictures of Whitehead's aircraft taken by A. L. Watson. In more than thirty year of research O'Dwyer published numerous articles and co-authored a book about Whitehead. In 1986 he and other aviation professionals constructed and flew a replica of Whitehead's plane

model 21. Despite his efforts, O'Dwyer was never able to obtain the Smithsonian Institution's recognition of Whitehead's accomplishments.

Gustave Whitehead (1874-1927) was born in Leutershausen, Germany. He emigrated to America in the 1890s, settling in Bridgeport in 1900 and later in Fairfield, Connecticut. He is recorded in city directories as a mechanic. His tinkering led to the development of a powered aircraft that flew in Fairfield on August 14, 1901, two years before the Wright brothers made their now historic flight.

Scope and content note:

The collection was transferred to the Historical Society from two file cabinets at the donor's house. With few exceptions, the original order did not contribute to any understanding of the collection. However, where feasible, original organization was maintained (such as the Stella Randolph correspondence, and the Scientific American articles) and any information on the original folders were transferred to new acid-free folders in which the documents are stored. Newspaper articles were copied onto acid-free paper and the originals disposed. The collection was divided by type of document and then arranged either chronologically or alphabetically as required.

O'Dwyer's interest in Gustave Whitehead was sparked by the discovery of photographs of one of Whitehead's planes. These photographs, taken by A. K. L. Watson of Bridgeport and Fairfield, and stored in a series of photograph albums, form the start of the collection. Series A contains three photograph albums, dating from 1898-1915, that include images of balloons and kites in flight, Southport and Bridgeport landscapes, airplanes, and motor cars. These albums are supplemented by individual photographs, some of which are copies of those in the albums. Other images include a photograph Whitehead sent to St. Louis illustrating his airplane design; the Wright brothers' airplane; information on Helmuth Bottcher, a German biographer of Whitehead; photographs of Leutershausen, Whitehead's birthplace; and images of replicas of Whitehead's plane built in the United States and Germany.

Series B, Research Files, comprises the bulk of the collection. O'Dwyer collected newspaper and magazine articles about early airplane flight, dating from 1869. Some he found on his own, while others were sent to him by his numerous correspondents. The articles are arranged chronologically in Sub-series I. Eyewitness accounts, 1897, 1931-1987, of friends and neighbors of Gustave Whitehead are arranged alphabetically by interviewee in Sub-series II. Assorted research notes and correspondence are organized in Sub-series III and include maps of Black Rock, Fairfield and Bridgeport; a chronology of Whitehead's accomplishments; information on Horsman's kites and the Ezekiel Airship; and data concerning other "Fathers of Aviation" including Lyman Gilmore and Santos-Dumont.

Sub-series IV in this series concerns the construction and flight of a replica of Whitehead's plane, model 21. The project was entitled Hangar 21. Included in this portion of the collection are plans and specifications, 1966-1987, drawn by such engineers and aviation enthusiasts as Mike Catalbiano, Herb Kelly, Anton Pruckner and Alling Schmidt; research and project schedules outlining and assigning tasks and the dates they were to be accomplished; a report log, 1986; mock-ups of the propeller in wood; photographs and articles about the project, 1986-1988; and samples of silk used to cover the airplane.

Series C contains correspondence between O'Dwyer and various aviation researchers throughout the world. Sub-series I consists of correspondence, 1934-1983, between O'Dwyer and Stella Randolph, the author of several books on Whitehead. The earliest letters in this group include correspondence between Randolph and Junius Harworth in preparation for her first book in 1937. Annotated copies of O'Dwyer's and Randolph's 1966 book *History by Contract* and publishers proofs are also included.

Jesse Davidson, an aviation enthusiast, corresponded with O'Dwyer from 1973-1989. Their letters are arranged chronologically in Sub-series II. Correspondence among members of the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association (CAHA), 1963-1986, are organized chronologically in Sub-series III. Records include minutes of the Grave Committee that lobbied for the placement of a gravestone for Whitehead in Bridgeport in 1964 (and includes the bunting from the grandstand) and reports on Operation "Find It," a project that endeavored to enlist school children and adults in collecting and preserving aeronautical history. Additional correspondence about the CAHA can be found among the letters to and from Herb Kelly and Bob Stepanek in General Correspondence.

General correspondence, 1964-1999, is arranged alphabetically by correspondent in Sub-series IV. Many of the letters include research notes and information and an occasional piece of publicity about Whitehead. Notable among these letters are those with Mike Catalbiano that include research and information on Hangar 21, 1986; Fritz Jacobsen, 1968-1978, about Whitehead in Germany; Herb Kelley, 1969-1990, containing calculations and technical data about Whitehead's planes; Walter Prufert, 1979-1986, an aviation researcher and engineer who contributed to the construction of the Whitehead replica built by O'Dwyer; Bob Stepanek, 1972-1993, concerning activities of the CAHA; George Weissenborn of St. Michael's College in Toronto, Canada about his research on early aviation; and Bill Winter, editor of a magazine on aircraft modeling.

Sub-series V consists of letters to and from German institutions and individuals, 1965-1984, accompanied by photographs of Leutershausen and a recording of sounds of Leutershausen. The bulk of the letters concern the development and opening of a Gustave Whitehead museum in Leutershausen and the continuing research on and recognition of Whitehead's accomplishment.

O'Dwyer's efforts at publicizing Whitehead and the Hangar 21 project are organized chronologically in Series D. He contacted a wide range of media, including newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television, and he documented every reference to Whitehead he could find. Included among these publicity items are brochures from the Whitehead Museum, commemorative plates, German and Japanese magazines, video tapes of the flight of the No. 21 replica, a German film entitled "Der belichelte Pionier" and a continuous loop Japanese film of Hangar 21 by KANEBO/ASME showing the powered flight of the 1901 replica.

Series E documents government recognition of Whitehead, 1964-1986, including proclamations by Governor John Dempsey, 1964 and 1968; correspondence with the State Department, 1966; and Senate Bill 401, 1985-1986.

O'Dwyer's interests went beyond Whitehead and included flying ace Eddie Richthofen. Series F contains his research notes, correspondence, drawings, and articles about Richthofen, 1968-1969.

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Series A. Photographs, 1898-1997

Box 1

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Series E. Government Recognition of Whitehead, 1964-1986

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- 1964, 1968
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- Folder5.² Correspondence concerning the public hearing requested in SA 86-11, January-June, 1987. In addition, eight letters to and from State Senator George Gunther, Gov. W. O'Neill, and the Smithsonian Institute during 1987 concerning the proposed hearing and the first flight claim for Gustav Whitehead.

Box 21

Series F. Other Research Projects, 1968-1969

Folder 1-3 Eddie Richthofen research, 1968-1969

Subject headings:

Aeronautical museums--Germany--Leutershausen
Aeronautics--history
Airplanes, wooden--Connecticut
Whitehead, Gustave, 1874-1927

¹ Photocopies of materials donated by the Connecticut State Library, from the William A. O'Neill Collection, Series I, S-561, folder 7.

² See note 1 above.