

Katharine Wright Haskell, The Third Wright “brother”

“If ever the world thinks of us in connection with aviation, it must remember our sister.” – Wilbur Wright

Katharine Wright Haskell was born in Dayton Ohio, and is sister to the famous Wright Brothers, who famously originated heavier-than-air, manned, powered flight. When Katharine’s mother died, management of the Wright household was left to her because she was female, despite being the youngest sibling of five, and despite her father still being alive. Katharine balanced managing the household finances while attending school and ended up graduating from Oberlin College with a degree in Classics in 1898, and becoming a high school Latin teacher. While teaching, she managed the family business, which was a bicycle shop in Dayton. As the only member of the family making any sort of money, she became the support (both financial and moral) for Orville and Wilbur while they were away at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, making their first controlled powered airplane flights. Although she flourished in her role running the bicycle business in Dayton, after a crash during a flying exhibition at Ft. Meyer severely injured her brother, Orville, she left her career to see to him through his 6-week hospitalization. Then, her more direct contributions towards the Wright Brothers’ began.

Katharine’s contributions to aviation were not in the form of equations or theories, but she helped with social connections and funding for the Wright Brothers. The brothers were apparently very shy. They were “not the kind of guys you would want to invite to dinner,” as Katharine Wright’s biographer, Richard Maurer, wrote. They even refused to learn French as they were travelling Europe, and did not impress the public with their personalities as much as they would with their flying exhibitions. Katharine, on the other hand, was an outspoken suffragette, who used her expertise in negotiation and language to functioned as their “social secretary,” doing things like helping the Wright Brothers to win a year-long extension of their Army contract, contacting Kings and Ambassadors,

Princes, and bankers on their behalf, and helping them navigate the new world of the famous and elite. She was well-loved in the highest circles of European Aristocracy.

Aside from helping the Wright Brothers with their societal and financial connections, she fought their battles on paper as their advocate. She would battle the Smithsonian institute over their credit to Samuel Langley for inventing the first working aeroplane, despite the fact that it did not operate successfully in his lifetime: "Before I ever quit on this business, the Smithsonian Institution must be shown up for joining in such a fraud." In light of the patent battle between Glenn Curtiss, who repaired and successfully flew the Langley aeroplane, and the Wright Brothers, she had this to say: "I am determined that the country shall know that Wilbur was killed by the fights he had to make to keep from having every thing stolen... that the government which pretended to give him a patent has made the patent worthless by disregarding it...that, in short, a patent is a swindle, pure and simple, and that patent procedure in the Courts is a disgrace."

When in my classes, the names that are remembered and revered are those that have famous equations and ideas attached. All are male names and figures: Newton, Euler, Kepler, Hemholtz. Every time I search the internet for female contributions to the sciences, it is the same story: many women whose names we can actually remember today were all either denied entry to schools, clubs, or scientific journals, or forced to publish under the names of the men around them (brothers, mentors, fathers). Some women working in the sciences gained notoriety through brokering relationships between men in their field, such that the men they propped up became internationally renowned or won more rewards. In spite of that, women are sprinkled everywhere in the sciences, either making whatever mark they can despite the notoriety, or in the business of being the support of others. Katharine Wright forged the trail for her brothers, leaving a successful career behind in order to make someone else's dreams happen. Katharine's name should be remembered alongside her brothers' names for her mark on aviation history.

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