

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

CASS GILBERT AND WILBUR WRIGHT

THE INFANCY of a mode of transportation that is playing a major role in the present world conflict is vividly recalled in a document recently discovered in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. It is a record of an interview between Cass Gilbert, the distinguished architect who began his professional career in St. Paul and who designed the Minnesota Capitol, and Wilbur Wright, one of the two brothers who invented the airplane. The date of the interview, October 5, 1909, is significant, for on the previous day Wright had made a momentous flight. The occasion was the Hudson-Fulton celebration in New York, which Wright marked by tracing "in the air part of the voyage made . . . by Henry Hudson in his ship the *Half Moon* three centuries before." From Governors Island the pioneer aviator flew upstream to Grant's Tomb and back. Below, in New York Harbor, was anchored an international fleet, including American, British, French, German, Italian, and Dutch warships, peacefully assembled to participate in an American celebration.¹

The importance of this flight in the history of aviation may be judged from the fact that one of its results was the organization of the American Wright Company, with a factory at Dayton, Ohio, for the manufacture of airplanes.² Evidence that Gilbert sensed the significance of Wright's accomplishments is to be found not only in the following document, but in a letter that accompanied it. It is addressed to Dr. Warren Upham, then secretary of the historical so-

¹ John R. McMahon, *The Wright Brothers: Fathers of Flight*, 237 (Boston, 1930); *New York Tribune*, September 28, 1909.

² Alexander Klemin, "Wilbur Wright," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 20: 570; McMahon, *The Wright Brothers*, 242, 243.

ciety. "I have set down my impressions for record as I occasionally do in matters of this kind," writes Gilbert in referring to his talk with Wright. "It occurs to me to send you a copy," he continues, "for at some time in the future, perhaps a generation or two hence, it may be interesting to find in the files of the Minnesota Historical Society such a record precisely as we would now be interested in reading of Robert Fulton, the inventor of the steamboat."

Certainly the future day toward which Gilbert looked thirty-two years ago has now arrived. With the permission of Mrs. Gilbert, her husband's record of an interview with Wilbur Wright is herewith published for the first time.

MEMORANDUM

Dict'd by MR. CASS GILBERT

October 5, 1909

I called on Mr. Wilbur Wright at the Park Hotel, Park Avenue and 33rd Street, New York, this morning and invited him to be present at the banquet of the American Institute of Architects in Washington in December. Mr. Wright stated that he expected to be in the South at that time and would probably not be able to attend. He says that he is going to Washington today and will remain there several weeks. I told him that I would ask Mr. Glenn Brown to send him a formal invitation and that I hoped he would be able to attend. I explained that at the Institute's Convention this year we were discussing the subject of transportation in relation to civic development and that it had several times been suggested that his invention of the aeroplane would eventuate in the modification of the designs of buildings and that he might talk on the transportation of the future. The suggestion was made in a humorous vein and he smiled as I said it. He answered "I do not believe that there will be any reason for changing buildings on this account for a long time to come. I like to avoid flying over cities and sky-scrapers." . . .

His personality interested me very much. He is a man a little below average height, very slender and wiry in build. He is smooth shaven and his face is wrinkled and without much color. His eyes are a greenish blue. He occasionally looked straight at me with a very frank, clear expression but more often looked slightly to the right and

downwards. He seemed to be quite unostentatious and without any pose of manner. Very simple and direct and of few words, modestly spoken. He smiled occasionally with a sort of half smile that did not give me the impression of much exuberance of spirit but rather of a provincial boy who had an underlying sense of humor and a perfect confidence in himself but with a slightly provincial cynicism as to how seriously the other man might regard him or his views. He was totally impassive and I should say unimpressionable so far as the surface went, but probably very keenly sensitive, and on the whole rather the type of high grade, intelligent and well read mechanic whom I occasionally meet in connection with building work. He looked like the student and the shop man rather than the man of affairs or the pushing administrator of a factory. He held a card in one hand which he constantly tapped or twirled against the other hand in a very nervous manner as though he were somewhat ill at ease though his entire self-possession and modest self-confidence belied the nervousness. It was as though some physical or mental strain through which he had passed had keyed him up to a point where his hand must be in motion, not at all as though he were impatient of his visitor or eager to leave him. I had noticed the same action while he was talking with a reporter just before I spoke to him. He was dressed in very plain dark business clothes of indefinite color, probably dark grey, and wore a derby hat throughout the conversation which only added to the general inconspicuous aspect of the man.

I remember distinctly that in answering my questions or replying he would look directly into my face and the sort of a wan, half cynical but kindly smile would flit across his countenance and disappear.

There is absolutely nothing romantic or distinguished in his dress, appearance or manner. He told me that he was born in Indiana and I laughingly said that I was born in Ohio and that when I was a boy we used to speak of the people of his state as "Hoosiers" whereat the wan smile again flitted across his countenance.

Just before leaving him I put my hand on his arm and looking him straight in the face said very seriously, "Mr. Wright I want to tell you that in common with all of your countrymen we are proud of you and of what you have accomplished and the way you have gone about it. The serious men of this country appreciate that you are working seriously to accomplish a scientific result and hope that you will keep

right on. The real men are glad that you don't make an acrobatic or circus performance out of the machine as some others seem inclined to do." He cut in and said "I never was much on circus performances anyway." I added, "We are proud of you and wish you every success and hope you will keep right along in the way you have been working." While I was saying this he shook hands with me warmly and looked me straight in the face evidently deeply appreciating the sincerity with which it was said, and I felt that he fully responded to it although he did not express it in words.

It was yesterday morning (October 4, 1909) that he "flew" from Governors Island up the Hudson River to Grant's Tomb, passing over the war ships anchored up near the Tomb and returned to Governors Island making the whole trip of 19 miles in about 30 minutes. Mr. Alexander Stewart with whom I dined last night at the banquet given to Admiral Seymour of the British Navy at the Waldorf-Astoria had told me that he had seen the flight from his office and that he thought Mr. Wright on his upward trip went about 35 miles an hour and on the return trip at about 60 miles an hour. Mr. Stewart spoke particularly of his flying part of the time very low, scarcely 15 or 20 feet above the water, and that as a ferry boat crossed his path he went directly toward it until he had almost reached it, then rising gracefully passed over it and came down to the lower level and returning to the Island hovering only a few feet above the water. The newspapers state this morning that part of the flight was at a considerable altitude, probably about 400 feet above the water. When Mr. Stewart and I were talking last night I made the remark that the war ships in the harbor probably represented the highest type of naval construction that the world had ever seen but that this little flying machine of Wright's was the beginning of an epoch that would make them all obsolete.

It is particularly interesting to meet Mr. Wright at this time when the City of New York is celebrating Hudson's discovery of the river and Robert Fulton's invention of the steamboat.

I have dictated this impression of Wilbur Wright within two hours after I met him for I wish to record while fresh in my mind the impressions that were made upon me at the time.

CASS GILBERT



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