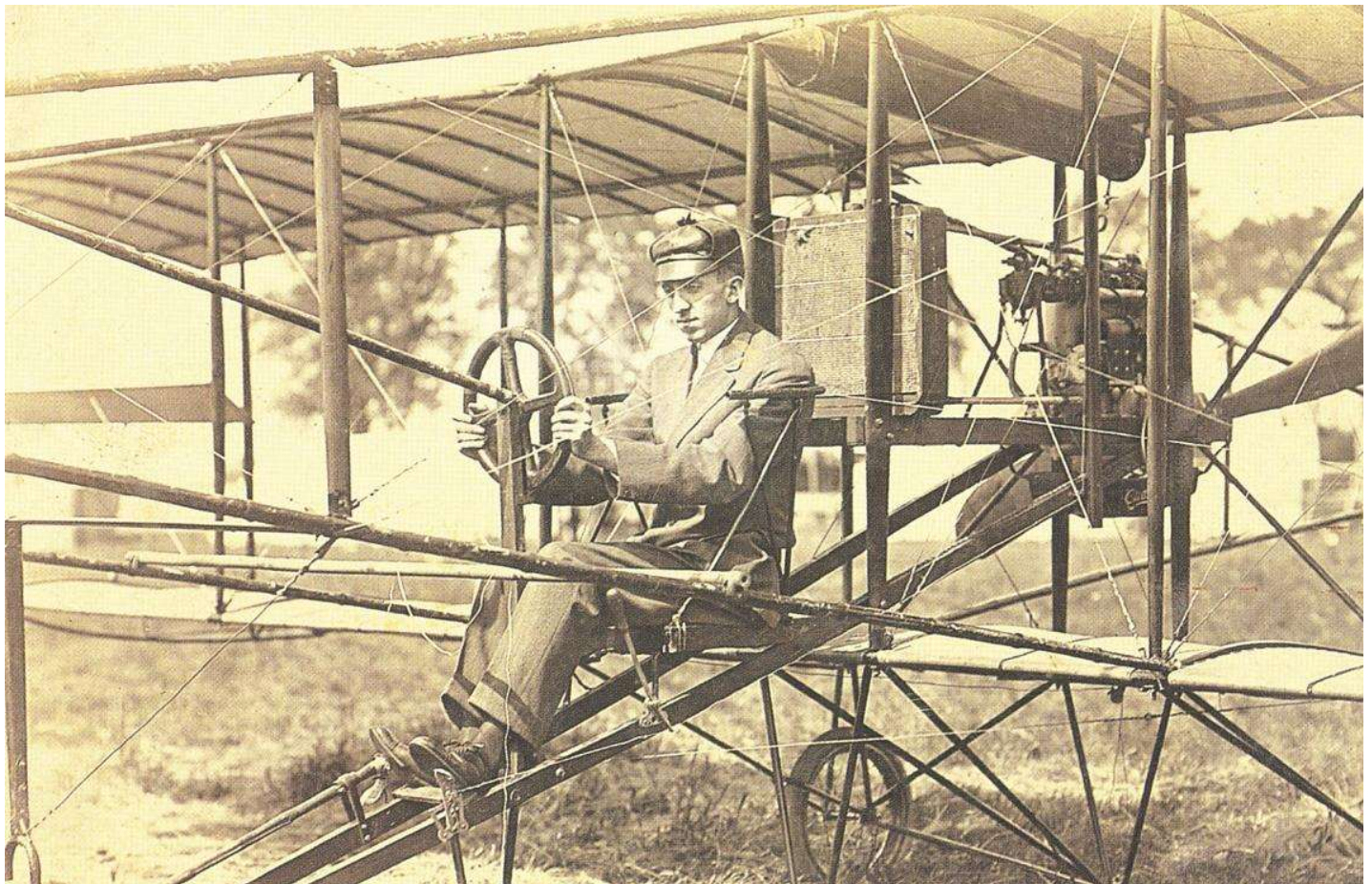


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## Iowa's Aviation History

Little-known Iowans helped get flying industry off the ground

By Jeff Morgan Iowa Culture Wire - special to the Herald-Leader  
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Eugene Ely's Curtiss Pusher takes off from the USS Birmingham in 1910. (State Historical Society of Iowa)

If Ohio claims to be the "Birthplace of Aviation," Iowa was at least its childhood home. Ohio natives Wilbur and Orville Wright spent a few boyhood years in Cedar Rapids, and a young Amelia Earhart first saw a plane at the Iowa State Fair.

In fact, several little-known Iowans helped get the flying industry off the ground.

Iowa's earliest aviators "were very much pioneers at the cutting edge of technology," said Greg VanWyngharden, an author and aviation enthusiast from St. Charles, Iowa. "They were definitely popular heroes and as famous in some ways as today's astronauts."

Here are a few early birds from history's wild blue yonder.

### Neta Snook of Ames

When it came to chasing dreams, Mary Anita "Neta" Snook (1896-1991) was unstoppable.

She was fascinated with the new-fangled flying machines as a teenager and enrolled in the Davenport Aviation School in 1917. She was probably the first Iowa woman to attend an Iowa flight school, according to Leo Landis, state curator of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

"When World War I broke out, she wanted to fly for the United States military and enrolled at the Curtiss Flying School in Newport News, Virginia, for additional training," Landis said.

After graduating, Snook tried to join the Army Air Corps but was turned away. She eventually became a British Air Ministry plane inspector at a factory in Elmira, New York, and worked there until the war ended in November 1918.

Later, she traveled west and organized hunting excursions by plane. She also gave Earhart her first flying lessons, in a plane that had been wrecked in Columbus Junction, Iowa, and repaired at her parents' home in Ames.

Snook was the first woman to set an altitude record over the Pacific Ocean, soaring to a height of 15,000 feet.

### Oscar and Mary Solbrig of Davenport

Oscar Solbrig (1870-1941) and his wife, Mary (1869-1954), jumped into stunt flying when they built their own Benoist biplane in 1917. Mary took booked gigs for exhibitions, maintained the plane's engine, and surveyed the fields where pilot Oscar took off and landed.

"I do not know of any work that has more ups and downs than building aeroplanes and learning to navigate them," Oscar said in 1914. "There is always danger attached to air flying. This danger is to some extent being overcome, and I believe aeroplanes will within a few years be generally used as a means of transportation."

## Eugene Ely of Williamsburg

During World War I, the military made use of information daredevil pilots gathered about aerodynamics.

One of the earliest military aviators was Eugene Ely (1886-1911), who was born on a farm near Williamsburg, Iowa, and made history with the first ship-to-shore and shore-to-ship flights.

In October 1910, he flew off the deck of the USS Birmingham in a Curtiss Pusher, bounced off the water and landed safely on shore. Three months later, he became the first pilot to land a plane on a ship when he touched down on the armored cruiser USS Pennsylvania.

"The military had first offered the opportunity to the Wright brothers but they turned it down. That's when Ely decided to do it," said Kris Schildberg of the Iowa Aviation Museum in Greenfield. "He also designed the tail-hook system that is used today to stop the planes when they land on aircraft carriers.

"The funny thing is," he added, "Ely did all this and he didn't know how to swim. He was terrified of the water."

Ely died just two days shy of his 25th birthday, when he couldn't pull out of a dive during an exhibition in Macon, Georgia. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and is buried in East York Cemetery near his hometown.

Learn more

Join Greg VanWyngarden on Sept. 20 at the State Historical Museum of Iowa, where he'll discuss the record-setting Bleriot XI airplane and its impact on aviation history.

Designed by Frenchman Louis Bleriot more than 100 years ago, this type of aircraft achieved many landmark flights, including reconnaissance missions during World War I. Around the same time, Bleriot planes circled the skies above Atlantic, Sioux City, Des Moines, Ottumwa and Davenport during air shows that included barrel rolls, figure eights, and 5,000-foot "dips of death." A Des Moines newspaper published one account under the headline "Daring Bird Men Flirt With Death."

A historic Bleriot XI airplane is on display at the State Historical Museum of Iowa in Des Moines, along with Oscar and Mary Solbrigs' Benoist biplane and a Curtiss Pusher similar one Eugene Ely flew for the military. All three planes will be de-installed this fall and moved to temporary storage to make way for museum renovations. Visitors are invited to watch the process from a special viewing zone Sept. 23-Oct. 10.

Bleriot Aeroplanes:

Innovation and Adventure

When: Noon-1 p.m. Sept. 20

Where: State Historical Museum of Iowa, 600 E. Locust St., Des Moines Admission: Free. Pre-ordered boxed lunches are available for \$10.

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