



# Foundation Document Overview

## Wright Brothers National Memorial

North Carolina



### Contact Information

For more information about the *Wright Brothers National Memorial Foundation Document*, contact: [caha\\_superintendent@nps.gov](mailto:caha_superintendent@nps.gov) or (252) 473-2111 or write to: Superintendent, Wright Brothers National Memorial, 1401 National Park Drive, Manteo, NC 27954

## Purpose



*WRIGHT BROTHERS NATIONAL MEMORIAL commemorates the first successful power-driven airplane flight, which was made by Wilbur and Orville Wright at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Wright Brothers National Memorial resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- Wright Brothers National Memorial is the site of the first-ever powered, controlled, heavier-than-air flights, made on December 17, 1903, by Wilbur and Orville Wright.
- The presence of steady wind, massive dunes, unobstructed open space, isolation, and soft sand were instrumental in the selection of the site where the Wright brothers tested, perfected, and implemented the basic principles of flight, launching an era of aeronautical development that revolutionized human transportation.
- The Wright Brothers Monument and associated commemorative landscape, including the take-off point and path of the four powered flights of December 17, 1903, perpetuate the memorialization of Orville and Wilbur Wright for their conquest of the air and the significance of their dream, vision, and achievement.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Wright Brothers Monument**
- **Wright Brothers National Memorial Landscape**
- **First Flight Marker**
- **Museum Collections**



Wright Brothers National Memorial contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **First Flight Airstrip**
- **First Flight Sculpture**
- **Wright Brothers National Memorial Visitor Center**

## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- **The Wright Brothers of Dayton.** The Wright brothers' extraordinary accomplishments were made possible by a unique combination of factors, including problem-solving, ingenuity, intellectual tenacity, discipline, conviction, and perseverance that continues to offer perspective and inspiration today, and to invite reflection on the characteristics that lead to the achievement of success.
- **Why Kitty Hawk?** The human and geographic advantages of Kitty Hawk combined to make this the ideal site for the Wright brothers' experiments, reminding us of the ways that physical and cultural geography shapes human events.
- **Achieving Flight.** By methodical research, a deliberate engineering approach, and years of experimentation, the Wright brothers discovered the fundamental principles of powered flight, ushering in an era of technological development that broke mankind's bonds to earth.
- **Commemorating the Wrights.** Wright Brothers National Memorial commemorates the inaugural flights made by Wilbur and Orville Wright on December 17, 1903, after years of hard work and scientific research—a tenacious process of invention that inspires continuing global achievement in flight technology and celebration of the power of human achievement.
- **The Global Impact.** The Wright brothers' invention of powered flight fundamentally affected the evolution of world civilization.
- **Changing the Outer Banks.** The local grassroots effort to honor the Wright brothers' achievements at Kitty Hawk demonstrates the strength and impact of citizens working together to achieve dreams. The effort fundamentally changed the community in ways that continue to have an impact today.
- **Preservation and Stewardship.** Preservation and stewardship of Wright Brothers National Memorial's natural and cultural resources is critical so that future generations can access, enjoy, value, and learn from these valued resources.



# Description

Wright Brothers National Memorial is in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina, in the region of barrier islands known today as the Outer Banks. Wilbur and Orville Wright selected this site for their experiments because it provided vast expanses of soft sand for landings, as well as steady winds. Also, the isolated location allowed the Wrights to conduct their flight experiments under secrecy. In 1900, they camped near the settlement of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and used these dunes to make numerous glider test-flights. After analyzing their data and conducting additional experiments in Dayton, Ohio, the brothers returned to the Kill Devil Hills in the fall of 1902 and launched nearly 1,000 glider flights from the dunes. During this period of experimentation they tested their new control system and wing shape. They set world records for flight distance, time, angle of descent, and for a flight in high wind conditions. They then designed the world's first successful flying machine incorporating a specialized gasoline engine and unique propellers, and on December 17, 1903, near the base of the Big Kill Devil Hill, the Wright brothers made the first ever successful, powered, heavier-than-air, controlled flight.

The park was established on March 2, 1927, as Kill Devil Hill Monument, and an executive order on March 3, 1933, transferred administrative responsibility of the park to the National Park Service. The secretarial order of December 1, 1953, redesignated the area and monument as Wright Brothers National Memorial. When Wilbur and Orville Wright visited

the area from 1900 to 1911, they saw sparsely vegetated sand flats and various-sized, naturally formed sand dunes. Since then, the sand and dunes have been stabilized with grass, shrubs, and trees.

The 428-acre memorial, listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1972, protects historic resources including the site where the Wright brothers conducted their experiments, the Wright Brothers Monument, and several commemorative markers. The takeoff point of the four powered flights made by the Wrights on December 17, 1903, is marked by a boulder (First Flight Marker) of North Carolina granite that was dedicated in 1928. Four smaller granite markers were installed in November 1992 to identify each of the landing sites. The Wright Brothers Monument, erected in 1932 on Kill Devil Hill, is a 60-foot, triangular-shaped structure constructed of concrete and Mount Airy, North Carolina, granite. Bronze busts of Wilbur and Orville Wright were placed on each side of the steps leading up to the base of the monument.

The Wright Brothers National Memorial Visitor Center was built in 1960 and serves as the center of visitor and administrative activities. In 2001, the Secretary of the Interior designated the Wright Brothers National Memorial Visitor Center as a national historic landmark for its architectural significance, as an excellent example of the Park Service Modern and Philadelphia School architectural styles, and

because it was a precedent-setting example of a visitor center, a new building type developed during the Mission 66 period.

Approximately 470,000 visitors come to Wright Brothers National Memorial each year. Visitors can engage with the park's history and resources through interpretive programs and talks, visit the areas of the First Flight Boulder and Flight-Line, the Wright Monument, and First Flight Statue, and visit the visitor center's museum exhibits, museum store, and First Flight room, which houses a reproduction of the Wright Flyer.

