

22 South Williams Street The Wright Cycle Company building

National Park Service
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Dayton Aviation Heritage
National Historical Park



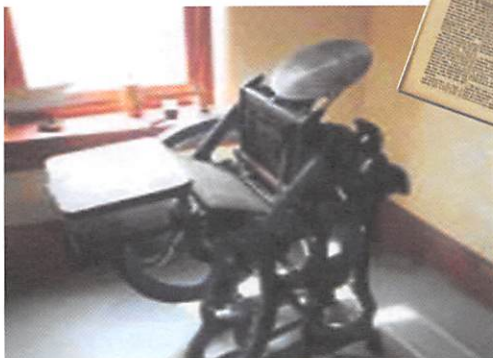
22 South Williams St.

The neighborhood on the west bank of the Miami River began a period of rapid growth with the construction of a streetcar line along Third Street in 1869. Home construction flourished and a commercial district started taking shape along Third Street. As part of that growth a two-story brick building was constructed by two brothers, Abraham and Joseph Nicholas, in 1886 at 22 South Williams Street. For varying lengths of time prior to 1895, the building served as a grocery store, a feed store, a saloon, and a boarding house.

With the growth of the Wright brothers' bicycle business came a need to expand their operations. They chose 22 South Williams for the space that it offered, and for its proximity to the family home at 7 Hawthorne Street, just a block away. Their businesses operated from this building between the spring of 1895 and the fall of 1897. The printing business had decreased in

importance and was placed on the second floor, while the bicycle operations took place on the first floor. This was the third of four west side locations chosen by the brothers for their bicycle business and the third of four rented locations for their printing business. This was the first time that both businesses were brought together under the same roof.

Businesses for the Brothers



Printing was the first joint venture undertaken by the Wright brothers. Started as a joint effort between Orville and his friend Ed Sines in 1889, the printing work expanded and became a cooperative effort between the two Wright brothers. As Wright & Wright, Job Printers grew, it moved through a series of business locations along West Third Street. Between 1890 and 1895, the business was located on the second floor of the Hoover Block on the corner of Third and Williams. While not fully successful at establishing a local newspaper, the printing business did provide a modest monthly income. Yet, printing would not long remain the main occupation for the brothers.

The Wright brothers became interested in bicycles in 1892 with the purchase of two machines. Personal transportation had been revolutionized in 1887 with the production of the "safety" bicycle, a machine featuring two wheels of equal size and a chain drive system from the pedals to the rear wheel. No longer was short distance travel confined to walking or to horseback. Suddenly, individuals could move from place to place with an ease that had never occurred before. By 1892 the demand for this new form of transportation erupted into a national craze. With this demand came a sharp increase in manufacturing, sales and repair facilities. 1894 saw over a dozen sales and manufacturing outlets scattered across Dayton. One of those facilities was owned and operated by Wilbur and Orville Wright.

The Wright Bicycles



"For a number of months, the Wright Cycle Co. has been making preparations to manufacturing bicycles. ...After more delay than we expected, we are at last ready to announce that we will have several samples out in a week or ten days... The Wright Special will contain nothing but high grade material throughout, although we shall put it on the market at the exceedingly low price of \$60. We are very certain that no wheel on the market will run easier or wear longer than this one,..."
Wright Brothers, "Snap-Shots," April 17, 1896.

Among the models produced by the brothers were the Van Cleve selling for \$60, and the St. Clair with a price tag of \$42.50. Average yearly wages for factory workers were running around \$440, so a bicycle of any type represented a significant investment. Despite the cost, both models met with success and modest popularity. To carry out their manufacturing goals, the brothers outfitted the shop at 22 S. Williams Street with tube cutting equipment, a drill press, turret lathe and other

tools that ran off an overhead line shaft. Power was provided by a one-cylinder engine that ran on natural gas designed and built by the two brothers. With this equipment in place, the business provided Wilbur and Orville with both a steady income and spare time, both essential ingredients necessary for later activities.



An Idea is Born



"My own active interest in aeronautical problems dates back to the death of [Otto] Lilienthal; in 1896. The brief notice of his death which appeared in the telegraphic news at that time aroused a passive interest which had existed from my childhood, and led me to take down from the shelves of our home library a book on Animal Mechanism... From this I was led to read more modern works, and as my brother soon became equally interested with myself, we soon passed from the reading to the thinking, and finally to the working stage." Wilbur Wright, "Some Aeronautical Experiments," September 18, 1901

That passive interest in the challenge of flight took root in Wilbur's mind during 1896 and 1897. It led to experimentation and testing that culminated in the development of powered, heavier-than-air, human controlled flight.

While the physical construction work occurred after the Wright brothers had moved from 22 South Williams Street, the mental processes leading up to that effort originated at that location.

After the Brothers Move

With continued success in the bicycle business, the brothers were again faced with the need for increased work space. During the fall of 1897 they moved their operations to 1127 West Third Street. That building was moved to Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan in 1936, and has been duplicated in Dayton at Carillon Historical Park.

Uncovering information on the building led to preservation efforts by the community. During May 1982, Aviation Trail, Inc. acquired the building and the process of restoring the structure began.

The building opened to the public on June 28, 1988 as a museum to the Wright brothers and their efforts in the quest of flight. The Wright Cycle Company building was designated a National Historic Landmark on June 20, 1990. On October 16, 1992, the building became part of Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, and today is administered by the National Park Service.



Between 1897 and 1911 the Williams Street building underwent major changes. By 1913, the commercial structure was remodeled into a two-family residence. Change in West Dayton during the 1960s brought a period of decline and neglect. Yet, the history of the building was not lost on everyone.

Research into Dayton's aviation heritage between 1980 and 1981 led to the discovery of 22 S. Williams Street and its significance to the Wright brothers.

