

IDEAS & VOICES >>

UNDERSTANDING OUR HERITAGE EARLY AVIATION

Wright Co. factory site may have high-flying future

If you've been along U.S. 35 west of downtown Dayton lately, you may have seen the demolition of a large complex of blighted old factories and the emergence of some unusual-looking historic structures that were long hidden from view – the original airplane factory buildings of Orville and Wilbur Wright. The National Aviation Heritage Alliance in Dayton has big plans to turn them into a future tourist attraction, with a few twists. Today we share a conversation with Tony Sculimbrene, executive director of NAHA, and Tim Gaffney, its communications director, about their ideas. To learn more, visit wrightfactory.org. – Ron Rollins



A worker applies fabric to an airplane wing in the original Wright Factory in west Dayton.

THE WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Q: For readers who aren't familiar with your organization, describe NAHA and what it does.

Sculimbrene: NAHA is the management entity for the Aviation Heritage Area, a congressionally designated heritage area revolving around aviation history in eight counties in southwest Ohio.

Q: With that many counties you're talking about more history than just the Wright brothers, yes?

Sculimbrene: The Wright brothers, of course, and those who succeeded them, with many parts to the story. We have the long legacy of research and development that was acted out at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base as part of the story. We have the historic WACO Field in Miami County, where airplanes were made in the 1920s – the single largest number in the world at that time, right in Troy, Ohio. We also have places like Grimes Field up in Champaign County, where Warren Grimes developed the first aircraft lighting system – which continues today as Honeywell Aerospace Systems, making lights for all kinds of airplanes. There's also the Neil Armstrong museum site in Wapakoneta, which is where he was born and raised. And of course there's the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force here in the Dayton area – as well as the Dayton Aviation Heritage National Historical Park, which is mostly dedicated to the Wright brothers and to Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Q: Talk about the Dayton site – it's unusual compared to other national parks, isn't it, since it isn't all connected together?

Sculimbrene: It's unique in two ways. One, it's a partnership park consisting of several sites that are owned by entities other than the National Park Service. And it's also a multi-site park scattered throughout the region, not in a single location. Five of the six sites are open to the public in different parts of the Dayton region. There are the three principal interpretive centers – the Wright-Dunbar Interpretive Center in west Dayton, where Orville and Wilbur lived; there's the Huffman Prairie site and memorial at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, where they flew after coming back from Kitty Hawk in 1904 and perfected their skills; and the third is owned by Dayton History at Carillon Historical Park – the Wright Flyer 3 and the Berry Aviation Center that houses it. That location is also how you get to the Wright family home, Hawthorn Hill, where you buy

a ticket and take the shuttle to the mansion in Oakwood. It's where Orville lived from 1914 till 1948, when he died.

Q: Where does Dunbar's home fit in?

Sculimbrene: The fifth site open to the public is the home of the poet and writer Paul Laurence Dunbar, who was a business associate and friend of the Wright brothers – and while it's not directly related to aviation, the Wrights printed his newspaper for a time. Dunbar's house is also one of the most unique parts of the park here, in that it was the nation's first public memorial to an African-American when the state of Ohio opened it as a historic site in the 1930s. In terms of artifacts, the house is pretty much how it was when he lived and died there – you can see his study, his books, his toothbrush, his typewriter.

Q: You mentioned the sixth site in the park isn't open to the public. Where is it?

Sculimbrene: It's the Wright Co. factory site at the former Home Avenue Delphi site on Dayton's west side. For many years it was covered up and surrounded by the more modern Delco and then Delphi factory buildings, which have of course since closed and are now being demolished – so that now the Wright factory is visible. We're working on redeveloping and restoring it so that it will be open someday. We're working actively with a group called Home Avenue Redevelopment LLC and the city of Dayton to see the non-historic buildings are removed. By the end of October, the environmental remediation will be finished – the asbestos removal is already done.

Q: In terms of the history, what's there?

Sculimbrene: The original two buildings constructed by the Wright brothers in 1910 and 1911 that became the nation's first dedicated aircraft-building facility – the first place in the United States that airplanes were built for commercial use. We think that's tremendously important, given the Dayton community's continuing interest in not just the R&D part of aerospace and aviation activities, but also the city's desire to get back into the 21st-century manufacturing business. We think the factory site is a great place to celebrate the birth of the aviation industry, and also celebrate its return to Dayton in the new century.

Q: What's your thinking for the site?



These employees in the Wright Factory building, circa 1910-12, were among the first commercial-aviation workers in the world. THE WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

Sculimbrene: The site is about 54 acres. There are the two historic buildings, where we think the Wrights built about 120 airplanes, and then three others of similar design that were built in support of the manufacturing that took place at the site after the Wright Co. was sold by Orville in 1915. Those will all remain intact and our hope is that the five will become part of a center that will give people a chance to experience an interpretive center, educational activities for kids, some additional aircraft exhibits.

Q: What would the factory site have been like back in the day?

Sculimbrene: Several things were notable about it. For one thing, this was the site that allowed Orville and Wilbur to attract capital for their business from New York, with individuals like J.P. Morgan and others, after they witnessed Wilbur's flight around the Statue of Liberty in 1909; investors saw this as an industry worthy of their investment. Also, we have a lot of historic photographs from the factories when they were in use – one shows a horse and buggy at the site, which means that America's first aviation workers may have gotten to work by horse and buggy, which is really fascinating to think about.

Q: What's the plan for the site?

Sculimbrene: Well, NAHA is looking to acquire the site from Home Avenue Redevelopment LLC, the current owner. That should take place in 2015, and buildings one and two will be set aside for the National Park Service. Buildings three, four and five would be developed by partners we hope to work with. We also hope to have some actual manufacturing work take place there – we're in discussion with individuals who may use the site for business related to aerospace and aviation development. Nothing is firm, but those conversations are happening.

Gaffney: There are a couple of things happen-



Tim Gaffney (left) and Tony Sculimbrene of the National Aviation Heritage Alliance, in front of the National Park Service interpretive center in Dayton. CONTRIBUTED

ing right now. NAHA started gears turning to raise money to acquire and redevelop the site either for historical purposes or commercial use. We've hired fundraising counsel. Right now, there's very little prospect that somebody will step in with a whole bunch of money for this, so we're doing it in partnership with a number of parties.

Gaffney: What we're also doing now, a really intriguing part of the project since we have all these photographs of the people working at the original factory, is to find out: What is their story? What do we know of them? How much of that history can we still capture? The Wright Co. didn't leave rosters or good employee records – we have names of about 20 people who worked there, and oral histories of about four of them. But for the most part, we don't know that much about these folks and their families. We hope we can somehow get in touch with the descendants of these workers, and see if there are families out there with boxes of documents, plans or letters they'd share.

Q: So, this would be a combination of historical park and business/industrial park? That seems like an unusual combination.

Sculimbrene: There's none like it we know of in the national heritage area community of 49 areas around the country. In addition to our history and our unique address, we have factors that will help make this an aerospace manufacturing center in the 21st century, we believe – rail access, highway access to U.S. 35 and interstates 75 and 70. If you combine all those assets, that could make this a place that could potentially transform west Dayton. We think it's one of the best ways to use the region's history – not just to celebrate something in the community's past, but to also make the most of it for the future.

Q: What's the price tag?

Sculimbrene: To develop buildings one and two into what we'd like, we'd expect \$13 million to \$15 million, and about three-quarters of a million dollars a year to operate it. To redevelop buildings three, four and five, depending on what degree goes in there, might run \$15 million to \$18 million.

Gaffney: The initial funding to acquire the property is \$4 million.

Sculimbrene: The goal is to have some part of the site open to the public by 2016, to celebrate the centennial of the national park system. It won't be complete, but like the Wright-Dunbar interpretive site, it was done in stages. We're working hard to make this happen. If we're successful with our \$4 million cam-

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Q: Any events planned for the new book?

Gaffney: Yes, an official launch this Wednesday, July 2, at Books & Co. at the Greene, at 7 p.m. We're trying to use it to put out the word to anybody who knows if one of their relatives worked at the Wright factory, and hope they'll come and make themselves known, and share their stories.

Q: It's surprising the Wright Factory is still

intact, isn't it?

Sculimbrene: GM knew what they had, and preserved the Wright buildings. Inland/GM/Delco/Delphi – they were always very respectful of the historic structures and took care of them. Even when they were in bankruptcy and were transitioning out of the area, they were good corporate citizens and kept them intact. The "Wright Hangar" was the name of the employee break room, and in Building One they had a big photo of Wilbur flying around the Statue of Liberty in 1909.

Q: So, what are the challenges you're facing with the project?

Sculimbrene: Well, even a lot of people who know the Wrights' story don't equate them with the manufacturing business, so we have to reinvigorate and refresh that idea so that we can do it again.

Gaffney: Their story has always focused on invention, not commercialization. Wilbur died in 1912, Orville sold the business in 1915 and exited the scene really early in the history of commercial aviation. But it still starts with them, and that's the incredible thing that's been forgotten. It started here. No place else in the world has the first airplane factory. We have it.

Sculimbrene: NAHA has been here since 2004, and the factory restoration has long been one of our top goals. And the opportunity to do it has finally presented itself, and it's our 600-pound gorilla now. And we've made outstanding progress in a fairly short time.

Gaffney: The site was an eyesore. Now it's a 34-acre, asbestos-free site, on the other 20 acres you'll see graded ground all around these historic buildings that have emerged from obscurity in the last few months – you couldn't see them before, and now you see this row of little white buildings with these gracefully curved roof lines, and when you look at them, you know they're something different. They're not ornate, but they make a statement.

Sculimbrene: That's huge progress. This is going to be a success story.

Gaffney: And it's a national project, not just a local one. Of course community support will be critical, but we know this will draw national and international attention. It already is. This isn't an impossible dream – it's a very, very possible dream.