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Ms B107

Title: O'Dwyer, William J. Gustave Whitehead Research Collection

Dates: 1869-1987

Size of collection: 18 linear feet

Accession number: L1999.31, L1999.35

Donor: William J. O'Dwyer. Also includes photocopies of materials donated by the Connecticut State Library, from the William A. O'Neill Collection, Series I, S-561, folder 7. These materials are housed in Series E - Governmental Recognition, 1964-1986 of this collection.

Restrictions: The donor requires that an author receiving profits made from a publication using these materials pay a royalty of 60% to William J. O'Dwyer, with 50% of that sum going to the Fairfield Historical Society for maintenance of this collection.

Processed by: Barbara E. Austen

Related

Collections: Stella Randolph Collection - History of Aviation, Special Collections, Eugene Mc Dermott Library at the University of Texas at Dallas. P.O. Box 830643, Richardson, TX 75083, (972) 883-2950

Date: January 2000

Biographical/historical note:

Retired Air Force Major William J. O'Dwyer, a Fairfield, Conn., resident, began his research on the life and work of Gustave Whitehead in 1963 when he found some photograph albums with pictures of Whitehead's aircraft taken by A. L. Watson. In more than thirty year of research O'Dwyer published numerous articles and co-authored a book about Whitehead. In 1986 he and other aviation professionals constructed and flew a replica of Whitehead's plane

model 21. Despite his efforts, O'Dwyer was never able to obtain the Smithsonian Institution's recognition of Whitehead's accomplishments.

Gustave Whitehead (1874-1927) was born in Leutershausen, Germany. He emigrated to America in the 1890s, settling in Bridgeport in 1900 and later in Fairfield, Connecticut. He is recorded in city directories as a mechanic. His tinkering led to the development of a powered aircraft that flew in Fairfield on August 14, 1901, two years before the Wright brothers made their now historic flight.

Scope and content note:

The collection was transferred to the Historical Society from two file cabinets at the donor's house. With few exceptions, the original order did not contribute to any understanding of the collection. However, where feasible, original organization was maintained (such as the Stella Randolph correspondence, and the Scientific American articles) and any information on the original folders were transferred to new acid-free folders in which the documents are stored. Newspaper articles were copied onto acid-free paper and the originals disposed. The collection was divided by type of document and then arranged either chronologically or alphabetically as required.

O'Dwyer's interest in Gustave Whitehead was sparked by the discovery of photographs of one of Whitehead's planes. These photographs, taken by A. K. L. Watson of Bridgeport and Fairfield, and stored in a series of photograph albums, form the start of the collection. Series A contains three photograph albums, dating from 1898-1915, that include images of balloons and kites in flight, Southport and Bridgeport landscapes, airplanes, and motor cars. These albums are supplemented by individual photographs, some of which are copies of those in the albums. Other images include a photograph Whitehead sent to St. Louis illustrating his airplane design; the Wright brothers' airplane; information on Helmuth Bottcher, a German biographer of Whitehead; photographs of Leutershausen, Whitehead's birthplace; and images of replicas of Whitehead's plane built in the United States and Germany.

Series B, Research Files, comprises the bulk of the collection. O'Dwyer collected newspaper and magazine articles about early airplane flight, dating from 1869. Some he found on his own, while others were sent to him by his numerous correspondents. The articles are arranged chronologically in Sub-series I. Eyewitness accounts, 1897, 1931-1987, of friends and neighbors of Gustave Whitehead are arranged alphabetically by interviewee in Sub-series II. Assorted research notes and correspondence are organized in Sub-series III and include maps of Black Rock, Fairfield and Bridgeport; a chronology of Whitehead's accomplishments; information on Horsman's kites and the Ezekiel Airship; and data concerning other "Fathers of Aviation" including Lyman Gilmore and Santos-Dumont.

Sub-series IV in this series concerns the construction and flight of a replica of Whitehead's plane, model 21. The project was entitled Hangar 21. Included in this portion of the collection are plans and specifications, 1966-1987, drawn by such engineers and aviation

enthusiasts as Mike Catalbiano, Herb Kelly, Anton Pruckner and Alling Schmidt; research and project schedules outlining and assigning tasks and the dates they were to be accomplished; a report log, 1986; mock-ups of the propeller in wood; photographs and articles about the project, 1986-1988; and samples of silk used to cover the airplane.

Series C contains correspondence between O'Dwyer and various aviation researchers throughout the world. Sub-series I consists of correspondence, 1934-1983, between O'Dwyer and Stella Randolph, the author of several books on Whitehead. The earliest letters in this group include correspondence between Randolph and Junius Harworth in preparation for her first book in 1937. Annotated copies of O'Dwyer's and Randolph's 1966 book *History by Contract* and publishers proofs are also included.

Jesse Davidson, an aviation enthusiast, corresponded with O'Dwyer from 1973-1989. Their letters are arranged chronologically in Sub-series II. Correspondence among members of the Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association (CAHA), 1963-1986, are organized chronologically in Sub-series III. Records include minutes of the Grave Committee that lobbied for the placement of a gravestone for Whitehead in Bridgeport in 1964 (and includes the bunting from the grandstand) and reports on Operation "Find It," a project that endeavored to enlist school children and adults in collecting and preserving aeronautical history. Additional correspondence about the CAHA can be found among the letters to and from Herb Kelly and Bob Stepanek in General Correspondence.

General correspondence, 1964-1999, is arranged alphabetically by correspondent in Sub-series IV. Many of the letters include research notes and information and an occasional piece of publicity about Whitehead. Notable among these letters are those with Mike Catalbiano that include research and information on Hangar 21, 1986; Fritz Jacobsen, 1968-1978, about Whitehead in Germany; Herb Kelley, 1969-1990, containing calculations and technical data about Whitehead's planes; Walter Prufert, 1979-1986, an aviation researcher and engineer who contributed to the construction of the Whitehead replica built by O'Dwyer; Bob Stepanek, 1972-1993, concerning activities of the CAHA; George Weissenborn of St. Michael's College in Toronto, Canada about his research on early aviation; and Bill Winter, editor of a magazine on aircraft modeling.

Sub-series V consists of letters to and from German institutions and individuals, 1965-1984, accompanied by photographs of Leutershausen and a recording of sounds of Leutershausen. The bulk of the letters concern the development and opening of a Gustave Whitehead museum in Leutershausen and the continuing research on and recognition of Whitehead's accomplishment.

O'Dwyer's efforts at publicizing Whitehead and the Hangar 21 project are organized chronologically in Series D. He contacted a wide range of media, including newspapers, magazines, radio stations and television, and he documented every reference to Whitehead he could find. Included among these publicity items are brochures from the Whitehead Museum, commemorative plates, German and Japanese magazines, video tapes of the flight of the No. 21

replica, a German film entitled "Der belichelte Pionier" and a continuous loop Japanese film of Hangar 21 by KANEBO/ASME showing the powered flight of the 1901 replica.

Series E documents government recognition of Whitehead, 1964-1986, including proclamations by Governor John Dempsey, 1964 and 1968; correspondence with the State Department, 1966; and Senate Bill 401, 1985-1986.

O'Dwyer's interests went beyond Whitehead and included flying ace Eddie Richthofen. Series F contains his research notes, correspondence, drawings, and articles about Richthofen, 1968-1969.

Contents Note

Series A.	Photographs, 1898-1953	Box 1-3, 22
Series B.	Research files, 1869-1989	Box 4-6, 22, 23
Series C.	Correspondence, 1934-1999	Box 7-19
Series D.	Publicity articles, books and films, 1937-1999	Box 20, 23
Series E.	Government recognition, 1964-1986	Box 20
Series F.	Other research projects, 1968-1969	Box 21

Series A. Photographs, 1898-1997

Box 1

Volume 1. 1898-1904 (balloons, kites, landscapes) and glass plate negative

Box 2

Volume 2. 1905-1908 (Elwood Hand house, Southport, cars, landscapes)

Volume 3. 1907-1915 (airplanes (including Whitehead), cars, landscapes)

Box 3

Folder 1. A.K.L. Watson's "Serpent of Eden" file

Folder 2-3. A.K.L. Watson photographs

Folder 4. Photocopies and article about Watson photographs, 1967, 1996

Folder 5. Correspondence of William O'Dwyer about preservation of glass

Folder 6-9. Negatives and copy prints of Whitehead's plan

Folder 10. Whitehead's photograph of his plane, sent to St. Louis, 1904

Folder 11. Wright Brothers, photocopies of photographs and articles, 1962, 1970

Folder 12. Research notes about and slides of Helmuth Bottcher, 1979

Folder 13. Photographs of Leutershausen, Germany, ca. 1935, 1987

Folder 14. Color photographs of Hangar 21, 1986; music box, n.d.

Folder 15. Photographs of Hangar 21, German replica, and Whitehead

Folder 16. *L.A. Times* photographs

Folder 17. Photographs of German test flight of Whitehead replica, 1997

Folder 18. Photographs of German models of Whitehead plane, n.d.

Folder 19. Photocopies and scans of photographs

Box 4

Series B. Research files, 1869-1999

Sub-series A. Early magazine and newspaper articles, 1869-1953

Folder 1. Scientific American references

Folder 2. *Popular Science Review*, 1869

Folder 3. *Engineering*, 1885, 1890

Folder 4. French journals, 1891

Folder 5. 1893

Folder 6. Photographs, Clemente Ader 1897 flight

Folder 7. *New York Press*, October 6, 1897

Sub-series I. Early magazine and newspaper articles, 1869-1953

Folder 8. *New York World*, March 1898

Folder 9. *Scientific American*, 1899

Folder 10. *Liquid Air*, March 1900

Folder 11. *Revue Universelle*, June 8, 1901

- Folder 12. *Scientific American*, June 8, 1901
- Folder 13. *New York Sunday Herald*, June 16, 1901
- Folder 14. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, August 14, 1901
- Folder 15. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, August 18, 1901
- Folder 16. *Danbury News-Times*, August 28, 1901
- Folder 17. Letter from Charles Manly to Hodge, September 1901
- Folder 18. *Daily Union*, Atlantic City, September 3, 1901
- Folder 19. *Collier's*, September 21, 1901
- Folder 20. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, November 17, 1901
- Folder 21. *New York Tribune*, November 18, 1901
- Folder 22. *New York Herald*, November 19, 1901
- Folder 23. *The Billboard*, December 7, 1901
- Folder 24. *Illustrierte Aeronautische Mitteilungen*, 1901
- Folder 25. *Scientific American*, January 4, 1902
- Folder 26. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, January 26, 1902
- Folder 27. World's Fair Bulletin, February 1902
- Folder 28. *American Inventor*, April 1, 1902
- Folder 29. Bridgeport newspapers, April 5, 1902
- Folder 30. *Bridgeport Daily Standard*, August 2, 1902
- Folder 31. French journals, 1902
- Folder 32. *Vienna Airship Journal*, 1902-1904
- Folder 33. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, March 1903
- Folder 34. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, May 31, 1903
- Folder 35. *Scientific American*, August 29, 1903
- Folder 36. *Scientific American*, September 19, 1903
- Folder 37. *American Monthly Review*, September 1903
- Folder 38. *Evansville Journal News*, October 1, 1903
- Folder 39. *Scientific American*, October 31, 1903
- Folder 40. *Broadway* magazine, November 1903
- Folder 41. *Dayton Evening Herald*, December 18, 1903
- Folder 42. *Scientific American*, December 1903
- Folder 43. *Die Luftschiffahrt der Gegenwart*, 1903
- Folder 44. *Aeronautical World*, 1903
- Folder 45. *Scientific American*, January 2, 1904
- Folder 46. Arthur Boltzmann's dispatch, September 25, 1904
- Folder 47. *Bridgeport Daily Standard*, October 1, 1904
- Folder 48. St. Louis Library, letters to and articles found, 1904
- Folder 49. St. Louis World's Fair, 1904
- Folder 50. *Scientific American*, January 28, 1905
- Folder 51-52. *Scientific American*, January 27, 1906
- Folder 53. *Scientific American*, April-November, 1906
- Folder 54. *Scientific American*, December 15, 1906
- Folder 54a. *Illustrierte Aeronautische Mitteilungen*, 1907
- Folder 55. *Scientific American*, January 1908

- Folder 56. *Scientific American*, February 1908
- Folder 57. *Scientific American*, March 1908
- Folder 58. *Scientific American*, April 1908
- Folder 59. *Scientific American*, May-June 1908
- Folder 60. *Scientific American*, November 14, 1908
- Folder 61. *Bridgeport Herald*, November 22, 1908
- Folder 62. *Automotor Journal*, November 1908
- Folder 63. *Bridgeport City Directory*, 1909
- Folder 64. Morris Park booklet, 1909
- Folder 65. *Scientific American*, March 5, 1910
- Folder 66. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, May 15, 1910
- Folder 67. *Aeronautics*, June 1910
- Folder 68. *Scientific American*, July 16, 1910
- Folder 69. *Aircraft*, July 1910
- Folder 70. Aeroplane exhibition, San Francisco, 1910
- Folder 71. German patent for Whitehead plane, 1910
- Folder 72. *Bridgeport Herald*, July 23, 1911
- Folder 73. *Aero*, August 19, 1911
- Folder 74. Air meet at Lake Aerodrome, Stratford, Conn.,
September 28, 1911
- Folder 75. *Bridgeport Herald*, November 1911
- Folder 76. Advertisement of Whitehead motor, 1912
- Folder 77. *Scientific American*, September 18, 1915
- Folder 78. *New York Times*, July 14, 1918
- Folder 79. 76-mile cannon, 1918
- Folder 80. *Der Flug*, 1920
- Folder 81. Whitehead obituary, 1927
- Folder 82. *The World*, April 7, 1929
- Folder 83. *Bridgeport Telegram*, January 17, 1935
- Folder 84. *Bridgeport Sunday Post*, March 14, 1937
- Folder 85. *Popular Aviation*, 1937
- Folder 86. *Air Trails*, 1938
- Folder 87. *Men with Wings* [film], 1938
- Folder 88. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, February 17, 1939
- Folder 89. *Der Flieger*, 1939
- Folder 90. *Rundschau Deutscher Tenchik*, 1942
- Folder 91. *Early Powerplane Fathers* [book], 1944
- Folder 92. *Readers' Digest*, July 1945
- Folder 93. *Bridgeport Post*, August 13, 1953
- Folder 94. articles with no date
- Folder 95. References
- Folder 96. Whitehead reference listings
- Folder 97. Leads

Sub-series II. Eyewitness accounts, 1897, 1931-1988

- Folder 1. Neighbors of Whitehead
- Folder 2-3. Whitehead family, 1934-1983
- Folder 4. Interview transcripts, 1963-1970

Box 5

- Folder 5. Stanley Beach, 1939-1986
- Folder 6. Sam Cabot, 1969
- Folder 7. Cabot to Chanute, and replies, 1897
- Folder 8. Clifford Connor, 1987
- Folder 9-10. Louis Davarich, 1937-1983
- Folder 11. Michael d'Andrea, 1986
- Folder 12. Elizabeth Koteles, 1974, 1980
- Folder 13. Frank Lanye, 1963-1974
- Folder 14. Steven Lengen, 1974-1977
- Folder 15. Gustave Peschel, 1987
- Folder 16. Louis Pirazolli, 1964
- Folder 17. Carl Roberts, 1988
- Folder 18. Cecil Steeves, 1964-1968
- Folder 19. Zulle/Zulli/Sully, 1931-1943

Sub-series III. Research notes and correspondence, 1961-1999

- Folder 1. Early Black Rock map (1867) and history
- Folder 2. Maps of Fairfield and Bridgeport, 1910, 1935
- Folder 3. Chronology
- Folder 4. Evangelista photo request, 1978-1979
- Folder 5. Search for William Hammer photographs, 1984-1992
- Folder 6. Research letters, 1976-1985
- Folder 7. Dorman photograph of Whitehead biplane, n.d., and

Box 6

- Folder 8. G. Whitehead photos, index reference log
- Folder 9. O'Dwyer reasonings, 1961-1966
- Folder 10. Horsman's kites, 1976-1984
- Folder 11. Ezekiel Airship, 1988
- Folder 12. Ferdinand D'Esterno (1805-1883), 1969
- Folder 13. Lyman Gilmore (1874-1951), 1981-1982
- Folder 14. Santos-Dumont (1873-1930), 1953, 1979

Sub-series IV. Hangar 21 project, 1943, 1970-1988

- Folder 1. Curtiss engine catalog, 1943
- Folder 2-4. Plans and specifications, 1966-1987
- Folder 5. Research and project schedules, ca, 1986
- Folder 6. Report log, 1986
- Folder 7. Photographs and articles, 1986
- Folder 8. Photographs of replica, 1986

- Folder 9. Silk for airplane replica, 1987-1988
- Folder 10. Article by William O'Dwyer, 1988

Box 7

Series C. Correspondence, 1934-1999

Sub-series I. Stella Randolph Correspondence and Book Publication, 1934-83

- Folder 1-2. Correspondence with Junius Harworth, 1934
- Folder 3. 1935
- Folder 4. Correspondence with A. Horn, 1936
- Folder 5. Correspondence concerning 1937 and 1966 books
- Folder 6. Correspondence with O'Dwyer about Harworth, 1961-1982
- Folder 7. 1963
- Folder 8. 1963-1980
- Folder 9. 1964
- Folder 10. Anton Pruckner, 1964
- Folder 11. 1965
- Folder 12. 1966
- Folder 13. 1967
- Folder 14-18. 1968
- Folder 19-20. Correspondence with publishers, 1968, 1969
- Folder 21-25. 1969
- Folder 26. 1970
- Folder 27. 1971

Box 8

- Folder 28. 1972
- Folder 29. 1973
- Folder 30-31. 1974
- Folder 32. 1974-1979
- Folder 33-34. 1975
- Folder 35. 1975 and article by O'Dwyer on powered vs. controlled

Box 9

- Folder 36-43. 1976
- Folder 44. "Epilogue"
- Folder 45. Documents for use in book *History by Contract*
- Folder 46-47. 1976 correspondence with publisher
- Folder 48. Senator Lowell Weicker, Jr., 1976
- Folder 49. 1977
- Folder 50. 1978
- Folder 51. Publishers contracts, 1978-1993
- Folder 52. 1979
- Folder 53. Books sold, 1982
- Folder 54. 1982, 1986, correspondence with publisher

- Folder 55. 1982-1983
- Folder 56. book manuscript and corrections
- Folder 57. Documentation
- Folder 58. Proof of book
- Folder 59. Randolph's chronology of Whitehead

Box 10

- Volume 1-3. Copies of *History by Contract*, annotated by O'Dwyer

Box 11

Sub-series II. Jesse Davidson Correspondence, 1973-1989

- Folder 1. 1973
- Folder 2. 1974
- Folder 3. 1975
- Folder 4. 1976
- Folder 5. 1977
- Folder 6. 1978-1979
- Folder 7. 1979
- Folder 8. 1980

Box 12

- Folder 9. 1981
- Folder 10. 1981-1982
- Folder 11. 1982
- Folder 12. 1982-1983
- Folder 13-14. 1983
- Folder 15. Obituaries of Stella Randolph and Jesse Davidson, 1983, 1989

Box 13

Sub-series III. Connecticut Aeronautical Historical Association, 1963-1986

- Folder 1. 1963
- Folder 2. Grave Committee, 1963-1964
- Folder 3. 1963-1972
- Folder 4. Operation "Find It," 1964
- Folder 5-6. Whitehead grave, 1964
- Folder 7. Whitehead Committee, 1964-1970
- Folder 8. 1967-1968
- Folder 9. 1969-1970
- Folder 10. Bradley Air Museum, 1986

Box 14

Sub-series IV. General Correspondence, 1964-1999

- Folder 1. Air Force Historical Foundation, 1964-1969
- Folder 2. Ted Bache, 1986-1987
- Folder 3. Don Berliner, 1974, 1982-1983
- Folder 4. Stewart Best and Carlson, 1974
- Folder 5. C. B. Boyer, 1983

- Folder 6. Bridgeport Bicentennial Committee, 1975
- Folder 7. Bridgeport Library Mural, 1983
- Folder 8. Susan Brinchman, 1981-1983
- Folder 9. Buffalo Public Library, 1969
- Folder 10-11. A. J. "Mike" Catabiano, 1986 (Hangar 21 Project)
- Folder 12. John B. Crane, 1935-1937
- Folder 13. Don Dahm, 1985-1987
- Folder 14. Nick D'Alto, 1990-1992
- Folder 15. Fairfield Historical Society, 1982-1983
- Folder 16. Robert Fort, 1986
- Folder 17. G. R. M. Garratt, 1981-1993
- Folder 18. Ed Gardyan, 1970
- Folder 19-21. Gibbs-Smith, 1968-1969
- Folder 22. Werner Groth, 1987
- Folder 23. James Greenwood, 1996-1997
- Folder 24. Gilbert Guinn, 1984-1986
- Folder 25. Allan Halladay, 1984, 1996
- Folder 26. Gerald Homkey, 1979
- Folder 27. Gene Husting, 1967-1969
- Folder 28. International Aero-Space Hall of Fame, 1983
- Folder 29-31. Fritz Jacobsen 1968-1970
- Folder 32. Ken Johnson, 1982-1986
- Folder 33. Herb Kelly, 1969

Box 15

- Folder 34. Herb Kelley study, 1969-1975 Ms B107
- Folder 35-36. Herb Kelley, 1969-1990
- Folder 37. Herb Kelley, 1987
- Folder 38. Miscellaneous correspondents, 1964-1989
- Folder 39. MGM, Andrew L. Stone, 1975-1976
- Folder 40. National Air & Space Museum, Nov. 2, 1968
- Folder 41. National Geographic, 1986
- Folder 42. New York Historical Society, 1992
- Folder 43. Leo Opdycke & Phil Jarrett, 1980-1999
- Folder 44. Leo Opdycke, 1982
- Folder 45. Pittsburgh Intermediate School, 1986

Box 16

- Folder 46. Walter Prufert, 1979
- Folder 47. Walter Prufert, LAAM & SAMP, 1979-1980
- Folder 48. Walter Prufert, 1980
- Folder 49. Walter Prufert, photos by and for, 1980
- Folder 50. Walter Prufert, 1981
- Folder 51. Walter Prufert, 1982
- Folder 52. Walter Prufert, 1983
- Folder 53. Walter Prufert, 1984

- Folder 54. Walter Prufert, Preserved Moose, SAMP, 1984
- Folder 55-56. Walter Prufert, 1985-1986 (Hangar 21)
- Folder 57. Tom Saine, 1998-1999
- Folder 58. Arling Schmidt, 1976-1996
- Folder 59. Smithsonian "cover up," 1964-1966, 1986
- Folder 60. State of Connecticut, 1982
- Folder 61. Bob Stepanek, 1972-1993 (CAHA)
- Folder 62. Bob Stepanek, letter of support, 1979, 1984
- Folder 63-65. Scott Sutton, 1982-1987
- Folder 66. Bill Teg, 1996
- Folder 67. Willi Urban, 1971-1991
- Folder 68. Werner Von Braun, 1964, 1968
- Folder 69. Bill Warner, 1982-1987
- Folder 70. George Weissenborn, 1987-1988
- Folder 71. George Weissenborn, 1988-1994
- Folder 72. George Weissenborn, 1992
- Folder 73. Claire Whitehead, 1984-1987
- Folder 74. Charles Willard & Hud Weeks, 1969
- Folder 75. Bill Winter, 1968-1969
- Folder 76. Bill Winter, 1968-1982
- Folder 77. Bill Winter, 1983-1984
- Folder 78. John Worth, 1977-1987
- Folder 79. Tom Young, 1986

Box 17

Sub-series V. Correspondence with German institutions and individuals,

196

- Folder 1. 1965
- Folder 2. Deutsches Museum, 1965
- Folder 3. Leutershausen, 1966
- Folder 4. Photographs of Leutershausen, 1966
- Folder 5. Sounds of Leutershausen [record], 1966

Box 18

- Folder 6-9. 1966
- Folder 10. 1967
- Folder 11. 1968

Box 19

- Folder 12. 1969
- Folder 13. Henry Kissinger, 1969-1974
- Folder 14. 1972
- Folder 15. 1973
- Folder 16. H. Betscher, 1973-1977
- Folder 17. Leutershausen, 1974
- Folder 18-19. 1974
- Folder 20. German newspaper coverage, 1974-1979

- Folder 21. Leutershausen newspapers, 1974-1981
- Folder 22. Leutershausen Heimatbuch, 1975-1978
- Folder 23. Leutershausen, 1978
- Folder 24. 1978-1979
- Folder 25. Leutershausen newsletters, 1979-1981
- Folder 26. Leutershausen, 1980
- Folder 27. Leutershausen, 1981
- Folder 28-29. Gustave Whitehead Museum, H. Betscher, 1981-1988
- Folder 30-31. Leutershausen, 1982
- Folder 32-33. Leutershausen, 1983
- Folder 34. Gustave Whitehead Aerodrome, 1983
- Folder 35. Leutershausen, 1984
- Folder 36. Die Brucke, 1984
- Folder 37. NASA Lunar Rock Exhibit, Sept.-Nov. 1984

Box 20

Series D. Publicity articles, books and films, 1937-1999

- Folder 1. 1937, 1953
- Folder 2. New England Aero Conference, 1963-1968
- Folder 3. *Famous First Facts*, 1964
- Folder 4. *Bridgeport Post*, August 9, 1964
- Folder 5. *Town Crier*, August 9, 1964
- Folder 6. *Sunday Republican*, September 13, 1964
- Folder 7. 1964
- Folder 8. WICC radio interview, ca. 1964
- Folder 9. German documentary, 1966
- Folder 10. 1966
- Folder 11. *History of German Flying*, 1967
- Folder 12. 1967, 1978, n.d.
- Folder 13. 1968
- Folder 14-15. *American Aircraft Modeler*, 1968-1969, 1983, 1985
- Folder 16. *Flying Models*, June 1970
- Folder 17. Invitations to speak, 1970-1986
- Folder 18. 1973-1980
- Folder 19. *Connecticut Sunday Herald*, 1974
- Folder 20. Press releases, 1978
- Folder 21. Whitehead film, 1980
- Folder 22. Whitehead 80th Anniversary, Wadertag Dish & Legend, 1981
- Folder 23. Whitehead 80th Anniversary postage stamp, 1981
- Folder 24. 1981
- Folder 25. Whitehead logo, 1981
- Folder 26. Newspaper articles, 1981-July 1982

- Folder 27. Newspaper articles, August 1982
- Folder 28. Newspaper articles, September 1982-1983
- Folder 29. *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, September 1982
- Folder 30. *Die Haus Frau* [magazine], October/November 1982
- Folder 31. German Readers' Digest book, 1982
- Folder 32. *Believe It or Not*, ABC-TV, 1982
- Folder 33. Newspaper articles, 1982
- Folder 34. Newspaper articles, Fall 1983
- Folder 35. US Embassy in Bonn, 1983
- Folder 36. Press releases, etc., 1983-1984
- Folder 37. Articles, 1984-1985
- Folder 38. *New York Times*, September 15, 1985
- Folder 39. Articles, January-May 1986
- Folder 40. Articles, June 1986
- Folder 41. Articles, July 1986
- Folder 42. Articles, August-Dec. 1986
- Folder 43. *Washington Post*, 1986
- Folder 44. *Wall Street Journal*, 1986
- Folder 45. *Los Angeles Times*, 1986
- Folder 46. *Christian Science Monitor*, December 1986
- Folder 47. *Focus* [magazine], 1986
- Folder 48. Fuji-TV, 1986
- Folder 49. 1987
- Folder 50. First Flight Society, June 8, 1987
- Folder 51. *Nuernberg Sentinel*, August 10, 1987
- Folder 52. 1988-1999
- Folder 53. 90th Anniversary, 1991
- Folder 54. *Connecticut Sunday Post*, January 24, 1999
- Folder 55. Undated articles
- Folder 56. Gustav Weisskopf Museum brochures, etc.
- Folder 57. "Humorous results" [cartoons, etc.]
- Folder 58. Video tapes of flight of No. 21 replica, German film, Japanese

Series E. Government Recognition of Whitehead, 1964-1986

- Folder 1. Correspondence and proclamations by Gov. John Dempsey, 1964, 1968
- Folder 2. State Department, Cultural Affairs, 1966
- Folder 3. Signed Senate Bill 401, 1985-1986
- Folder 4.¹ Letter from Carl Fonden to Gov. W. O'Neill, July 1986. O'Neill's reply, enclosing copy of Special Act no. 86-11 requesting Smithsonian to conduct a public hearing concerning Whitehead flight, August 28, 1986.

¹ Photocopies of materials donated by the Connecticut State Library, from the William A. O'Neill Collection, Series I, S-561, folder 7.

Folder5.² Correspondence concerning the public hearing requested in SA 86-11, January-June, 1987. In addition, eight letters to and from State Senator George Gunther, Gov. W. O'Neill, and the Smithsonian Institute during 1987 concerning the proposed hearing and the first flight claim for Gustav Whitehead.

Box 21

Series F. Other Research Projects, 1968-1969

Folder 1-3 Eddie Richthofen research, 1968-1969

Subject headings:

Aeronautical museums--Germany--Leutershausen

Aeronautics--history

Airplanes, wooden--Connecticut

Whitehead, Gustave, 1874-1927

² See note 1 above.