

EARLY AIR FLIGHT

(The Air Mail and Transcontinental Flight)

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FIRST AIR MAIL

Lafayette, Indiana, in 1859, was a town of nearly ten thousand citizens who were proud of their town's position as head of navigation on the Wabash river. Lafayette would achieve another distinction: its Center Square would become the takeoff point for the nation's first airmail flight.

The pilot for this flight was John Wise, who was referred to as "the first American aeronaut of any consequence." During his long career, he developed improved methods of balloon construction, invented the ripcord for use in rapid descent, and did much meteorological research.

Charles Wetherill, wanted Wise to take measurements of ozone from a balloon that Wetherill would provide. Lafayette was due west of New York City, so that Wise would be able to take advantage of prevailing westerly winds. At 2:00 p.m. on August 17, 1859, the balloon rose carrying Wise, ozone-testing materials, a light lunch, some copies of the Lafayette Courier, 23 pamphlets, and 123 letters. Quickly Jupiter shot up to cloud level where it sat for about an hour waiting for the west-east winds.

Searching for Wind

In search of more favorable conditions, the aeronaut ascended to a point where the barometer read twenty-four inches, recording a slight detection of ozone as he grazed a cloud. He discharged more ballast and rose again until the reading was twenty-one, Jupiter remained motionless. Finally a breeze picked up and the balloon started to move, only to become motionless again at Grand Prairie, sixteen miles south of Lafayette. With scarcely a hundred pounds of ballast left, he tried again for the great west-east current above. He found it at a barometric reading of 17.6, at a height of nearly three miles.

The End of the First Flight

Near Crawfordsville, about thirty miles from Lafayette, Wise tied the airmail securely to a sheet with strings about five yards long fastened to the corners. Then he dropped it overboard and a slight breeze carried it just south of the village; the balloon and airmail, landed within fifty yards of each other. The airmail was sent to New York City by train.

Wise failed to impress the Post Office, which continued to rely on railroads for most of the next century. Experimental airmail service, using airplanes this time, was begun in 1918 as a wartime measure and quickly abandoned. Not until the 1930s would mail easily and routinely fly from place to place.

TRANSCONTINENTAL AIRLINE

In December 1848 President James Polk told America the reports of gold in California were true. Within days Eastern cities were rocking and humming with a feverish mania unequalled before or since. Companies of eager young men pooled their funds and bought sailing ships for the long voyage around Cape Horn to the golden shore; others consulted guidebooks to find the best overland route to the mines; ministers assailed the sinful greed afflicting their flocks, then quietly booked passage for California. The gold rush, and the gold-rush hustle, had started.

Ways to the Gold Fields

Overnight the prevailing atmosphere of Yankee skepticism was replaced by a gaping willingness to swallow any scheme, however preposterous, if it promised a quicker trip to the gold fields or a bigger haul for the would-be miner. It was the perfect for a genius or a hustler, and thus ideal for a fifty-six-year-old inventor-artist-journalist-promoter named Rufus Porter, who was both.

Porter's handbills appeared on New York City streets in March 1849. AIRLINE TO CALIFORNIA, "The Aerial Locomotive will leave the city positively on the 15th of April, on its first trip to the Gold Mines. Passage \$50; wines included, baggage extra." Porter claimed that his "Aerial Locomotive," a steam-powered, 800-foot-long craft, could transport up to a hundred passengers from New York to California in three days at sixty to one hundred miles per hour.

The only hitch was that it wasn't built yet. The promoter detailed the mechanics of his revolutionary invention in a sixteen page promotional pamphlet. The airship would have a frame of twenty-four curved spruce rods covered with rubber-coated cloth and filled with hydrogen gas. A 180 foot-long passenger compartment and engine room, containing two steam engines, would hang below the ship on wires. The engines would provide power to turn two propellers mounted atop the compartment, or saloon. An elevator built into the compartment floor would assist loading and unloading; the hydrogen would be confined in a system of separate airtight compartments, preventing an abrupt plunge should one of them spring a leak.

The projected ship was quite similar to the modern rigid airship, with its multiple gas compartments enclosed in a framework. It was sound in its basic principles, although Porter considerably exaggerated its speed and carrying capacity; it might even have flown.

The idea for an aerial locomotive had first occurred to Porter in 1820 and he built his first model in 1833 and published the airship's specifications the next year. He offered to split the patent claims with anyone who would back him, but there were no takers. In 1841 he tried again; this time he said he would settle for 10 percent if someone would come up with the money to build it. Again nothing happened. He built and exhibited two more models in 1847, to even further public apathy. Then came the gold rush.