Division of Aviation

Our Part in Aviation's History

America's history with aviation has shaped our nation, with North Carolina paving the way for innovation. As we celebrate America's 250th birthday, we make room to commemorate achievements in aviation, which began in 1973 with a balloon flight by Jean Pierre Blanchard. Today, North Carolina aviation drives $88 billion in economic impact.

N.C. Pioneers in Aviation

The Wright Brothers

Orville and Wilbur Wright flew the first powered, controlled flight in Kitty Hawk, N.C., contributing to the understanding of flight mechanics and earning N.C. the title "First in Flight."





Georgia "Tiny" Broadwick

Known as the First Lady of Parachuting, Tiny was the first woman to parachute from a plane. Her first jump was from a hot air balloon at the N.C. State Fair. Tiny's jump demonstrations influenced pilot safety features.

Thomas Oxendine

From Robeson County, N.C., Oxendine was the first Native American Navy pilot. He was awarded The Flying Cross for rescuing downed airmen during Japanese fire in WWII.





Warren Wheeler

Wheeler was the first African American to own an airline -- Wheeler Flying Services in Durham, N.C. The airline traveled between N.C. cities and eventually to New York and Virginia. Wheeler was also the first Black pilot for Piedmont Airlines.

Henry Gatling

Gatling was the inventor of the first documented flying machine. Just outside of Murfreesboro, N.C., the hand-cranked machine flew about 100 feet from a raised platform.



Fall 1873

Gatling's hand-cranked flying machine makes its first and only trip.

Dec. 17, 1903

The Wright Brothers achieve the first powered airplane flight, which lasted 12 seconds and traveled 120 feet.

June 1913

Tiny is the first woman to parachute from an airplane. In 1914 she is invited to demonstrate parachute jumps for the U.S. Army.

October 1942

Laurinburg-Maxton Airport is used as the primary U.S. base for training glider pilots. N.C. as a whole is used as a major training hub for pilots throughout WWII.

February 1948

Piedmont Airlines makes its first flight, traveling from Wilmington to Cincinnati. Piedmont Airlines later grows to be a vital form of transportation for N.C. by connecting rural towns to major cities.

April 1974

Tracy Barnes, a founding father of modern hot air ballooning, creates the first FAA certified balloon in N.C.

March 2026

NCDOT is selected to participate in the FAA's eVTOL Integration Pilot Program (eIPP) to support the safe deployment of air taxis in the National Airspace System.

Future of Aviation in N.C.

Air Taxis

The Division of Aviation is working to demonstrate real-world applications of air taxis. North Carolina's eLIFT-NC initiative was one of eight projects selected as part of the FAA's eIPP. The initiative is working to create a statewide network of air taxis to transform rural healthcare access.

Drones

NCDOT is pushing the boundaries of unmanned aviation technologies to integrate beneficial drone use across North Carolina. During Hurricane Helene, NCDOT's drone teams and Photogrammetry Unit flew over 200 missions to capture images to inform the massive disaster response effort. NCDOT was able to assess road and rail routes, and bridge and road conditions without risking staff safety.