
Early Black Flyers of Western Pennsylvania, 1906-1945

by George Edward Barbour

THE year — 1906; the date — Tuesday, July 3, and throughout the Pittsburgh area, residents and officials prepared for what was to be the most grand, glorious, and exciting Fourth of July in the city's history. Earlier, Mayor George W. Guthrie had been pessimistic, but now he officially touted the festivities, urging not only city residents but those of outlying areas to attend. The coordinator of the event, J. W. Clark, Director of Public Works, never doubted. He knew the program would be great; his goal was to make it the greatest. All the traditional features were in place. What he needed was the new, the nontraditional, and what could better point to America's great future than a flying machine piloted by a daring young man?¹

One aeronautical hero, Lincoln Beachey, already was in Pittsburgh. He was at nearby Luna Park after seven successful airship flights at Ingersoll's Scranton Luna Park. Beachey, however, was without an airship; he planned to build one at the park for a series of flights later that summer. Clark did want an airship, but on the eve of the Fourth, he announced two balloon ascensions. Both aeronauts would be women who would rise several hundred feet and then parachute to earth. All that was needed was favorable weather, since forecasts predicted the contrary.²

Despite brief morning showers, thousands were on hand for the official opening — "America" played by the Pittsburgh Holcomb's Band. After a prayer and speeches, the skies started to clear, but a hitch developed in another key area of the day's program. The giant balloon was at Schenley Oval, but there was no balloonist. The two

This article is respectfully dedicated to the memory of the Challenger crew, including Dr. Ronald E. McNair, the second black astronaut in space.

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¹ Pittsburgh Press, July 1, 1906; Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times, July 3, 1906.

² Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times, Pittsburgh Press, July 3, 1906.

women aeronauts were absent, as was their substitute, a man later identified as a well-known actor who apparently lost his nerve after volunteering to ride the balloon for travel fare to New York City.³

Nevertheless, as stirring notes from the band ended the opening program, the sky was blue, and the promoter had a daredevil — a black aeronaut. The balloonist was announced as Ajax Montmorency, but only an hour earlier he had been a laborer named Jackson.⁴ It is unknown why he volunteered, but soon he was in the air with thousands of eyes focused on him as he dangled from the giant hot-air balloon.

The first flight was to five hundred feet from which Montmorency “gracefully dropped to earth with the parachute.” Originally, only two ascensions were scheduled, but more were made. Montmorency’s second flight was at one o’clock, and descent was made from two hundred feet. A three o’clock flight was cancelled when the balloon malfunctioned, but “at about 4 o’clock the dramatic climax was reached,” reported the *Pittsburgh Post*.

This time the balloon slowly ascended with its black passenger clinging to a horizontal bar. . . . Thousands of upturned faces followed the course of the balloon and watched expectantly for the parachute to drop. But the balloon only soared higher. Interest turned to surprise and then surprise turned to fright as the whole top heavy outfit soared and soared and soared. . . . The last many watching eyes saw was something that looked about the size of an apple with a tiny object dangling from it. Many believed the balloonist’s trip would end fatally, and all manner of calculations were made on the probable result. . . .

Some hours later, outfit and aeronaut landed safely at Nine Mile Run.⁵

The estimated seventy thousand people at the celebration apparently had never witnessed such excitement. The *Pittsburgh Press* and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times* described the flight as “sensational.” The *Gazette-Times* headlined, “Amateur Aeronaut Is Lost In Clouds . . . Unable to Release Parachute, He Sails from Schenley Park and Lands in Creek.” The report read, “Sensational aerial navigation by an amateur negro aeronaut was an exciting event in Schenley Park yesterday afternoon with spectators horror-stricken as they saw the speck representing the balloon drift slowly towards Homestead.”⁶

Montmorency/Jackson’s exciting balloon ride placed a black aeronaut in the limelight for the first time. Although it was pure showman-

³ *Pittsburgh Press*, July 5, 1906.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Pittsburgh Post*, July 5, 1906.

⁶ *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette-Times*, July 5, 1906.

ship rather than commitment to flight, his performance anticipated later aerial achievements by blacks.

From Montmorency’s flight in 1906 until World War II, no other Western Pennsylvania black who took to the air received comparable coverage and headlines in daily newspapers. Generally, blacks were headlined only when they committed major crimes against whites; their other activities were not cited in the Afro-American notes which the dailies carried twice weekly or in black periodicals. However, black men *were* in the air, and the novelty of poor black men in a field dominated by comparatively well-to-do whites was enough to provide occasional features.

One of these featured black flyers was Charles Wesley Peters of Pittsburgh’s Hill District, who in 1911 was identified as “the only colored aviator in the world.” A story in the September 26, 1911, *Pittsburgh Dispatch* was headed: “Negro Aviator To Fly . . . Pittsburgher will Entertain Colored Fair in Georgia.”

One of the features of the Colored Fair, which will be held in November, will be the presence of the only colored aviator in the world. President R. R. Wright of the Fair Association announced tonight that a contract had been signed with Wesley Peters of Pittsburgh, Pa., a negro, to give exhibitions in an aeroplane each day while the fair is in progress.

Negroes all over the State are interested in the announcement. Peters will be as much a hero among the negroes during fair week as Johnson was after his fight with Jeffries. This is the first time the negroes of Georgia have ever attempted a fair of Statewide significance.⁷

Charles Wesley Peters was the first black to pilot a heavier-than-air craft and the first black designer and builder of an airplane. He was born in Virginia in 1889, the second son of John and Jemima Peters who migrated to North Carolina and then to Pittsburgh when Charles was about four years old.⁸

At the turn of the century, young Peters, like Wilbur and Orville Wright, was fascinated by newspaper and magazine stories of early aeronauts and their aeronautical achievements. He admired the successes of pioneers like Samuel Pierpont Langley of Pittsburgh’s Allegheny Observatory, the Frenchman Louis Blériot, the first to pilot an airplane across the English channel, and Otto Lilienthal, a German engineer whose glider flights inspired other experimenters. By the time of the Wright brothers’ famous flight in 1903, Peters, an apparent fourteen-year-old genius, had conducted many experiments with box

⁷ *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, Sept. 26, 1911.

⁸ Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, ed. 312: 135.

kites, gliders, and other winged devices which he built in his spare time.⁹

A French flight enthusiast, Louis Pierre Mouillard, once wrote, "If there be a domineering tyrant thought, it is the conception that the problem of flight may be solved by man. When once this idea has invaded the brain, it possesses it exclusively."¹⁰ This observation characterized Peters, who, after working fourteen hours at an auto body repair shop, would go to his workplace and cut and stretch canvas for many more hours. He persisted despite humiliations. Many in his neighborhood viewed him as insane. He continued until 1906, when he thought he had what he had dreamed and worked for — a man-carrying glider. With continued help from his wife and two friends, he transported the contraption to the Herron Hill reservoir for a launching. All went well as Peters glided the airship one hundred yards down the steep hillside for a safe landing.

The new and exciting world of flight was now open to Peters. In between subsequent flights, he even allowed those who had ridiculed him earlier to share in his triumph, charging admission so that curiosity seekers could see his flying machine resting in its glory in a vacant lot. He began work toward a real airplane — a craft with a motor that would be capable of sustained flight. His blueprint called for an air-cooled automobile engine which he stripped and reconditioned. The plane had a 40-foot wing span. He made ten twelve-minute flights and, as with his earlier glider, displayed it for a fee. Peters' first plane was destroyed by fire.¹¹ However, he built another which he used for the Georgia exhibition. It is unclear whether it actually flew. According to the December 16, 1911, *Savannah Tribune*, the "Fifth Annual Georgia State Negro Fair was a big success in Macon . . ." and "C. Wesley Peters, the negro aviator, held out for a cash advance about \$3000 more than originally contracted. . . ." It added that the colored balloonist F. H. Bradford "failed to show."¹²

As novelties, airplanes and aeronauts caught the imagination of thousands. In the Western Pennsylvania area, record numbers attended airshows where the nation's most daring pilots excited them with their exploits. Magazines and newspapers reported on intrepid young flyers like Western Pennsylvanian Calbraith P. Rodgers who on No-

vember 6, 1911, completed the first transcontinental flight of a heavier-than-air craft. Rodgers' success was an exciting story of many narrow escapes. The route began at Middletown, N.Y., included numerous stops such as one in Meadville, and ended in Los Angeles after Rodgers flew through a mountain pass with cliffs on both sides. About two months after this flight, Rodgers was killed when his plane crashed in the Pacific. His heroics were not forgotten, and Pittsburgh's first airport near Aspinwall was named in his honor.¹³

Like other fads, airshow excitement began to wane just before World War I as reports from Europe demonstrated the belligerent nations' war aviation preparations. When war erupted, the air experiments continued on the battlefield. The fatality rate among flyers was very high, but despite the low survival rate, recruits came in huge numbers.¹⁴

There were no Western Pennsylvania blacks among them because the fledgling air corps barred black flyers. In fact, the only known black flyer during World War I was Eugene Bullard. Bullard, originally of Georgia, hating discrimination and segregation, left the United States and went to France before the war started. He joined the French Foreign Legion and, when the call went out, volunteered and was sworn into France's flying corps, the Lafayette Escadrille. He was known as the "Black Swallow of Death," who flew with a monkey as a companion. After the war, Bullard stayed in France until returning to the United States in the 1950s.¹⁵

As white World War I air veterans returned to Western Pennsylvania, a number were able to buy planes similar to those they flew in the service. Curtiss JN-1 Jennies and other aircraft were soon zooming over local cow pastures, racetracks, and fairgrounds with passengers who, for a dollar or two, could experience a once-in-a-lifetime thrill.¹⁶ Men, women, and children of various races prayed for some way to get into the skies. Among the blacks who were able to turn their dreams to fly into realities were James Lincoln Holt ("Jimmie") Peck of Stoops Ferry, near Sewickley, and Charles Vincent ("Chubby") Proctor of Hollidaysburg, near Altoona.

⁹ Pittsburgh Courier, Feb. 21, 1941.

¹⁰ Valerie Moolman, et al., *The Epic of Flight: The Road to Kitty Hawk* (Alexandria, Va., 1980), 111.

¹¹ Pittsburgh Courier, Feb. 21, 1941.

¹² Savannah [Ga.] Tribune, Dec. 16, 1911.

¹³ William F. Trimble, *High Frontier: A History of Aeronautics in Pennsylvania* (Pittsburgh, 1982), 67; Suri Fleisher and Arlen Keylin, *Flight as Reported by the New York Times* (New York, 1947), 8, 9.

¹⁴ James J. Hudson, *Hostile Skies: A Combat History of the American Air Service in World War I* (Syracuse, N.Y., 1968), 3-10, 26, 35, 96, 97, 113-15, 299.

¹⁵ P. J. Carisella and James W. Ryan, *The Black Swallow of Death* (Boston, 1972).

¹⁶ Trimble, *High Frontier*, 116, 118-20.

A member of a socially prominent Western Pennsylvania family, Peck had been mesmerized by the World War I Jennies taking off and landing on a little grass strip near the railroad tracks and the Ohio River at Leetsdale. Although he practically lived at the field, Peck did not make his first flight there. That came on a similar field in Fremont, Ohio, while he was visiting a cousin; it forever convinced him that he was going to be an aviator. Peck's visits to the Leetsdale airfield ended when his family moved to Pittsburgh but his dream of flying did not. It persisted during his attendance at Westinghouse and Peabody high schools, where he was a better-than-average student and trap drummer; it was with him when his parents insisted in 1930 that he enter the University of Pittsburgh. The dream finally overwhelmed him, and at the end of his sophomore year, he enrolled in the Curtiss-Wright Flying School operated by H. R. ("Hal") Bazley at Bettis Field in West Mifflin.

Peck's instructors soon recognized him as one of the school's outstanding students. One day, Bazley called him into his office. He complimented Peck on his superb airmanship and told him that he was ready to pass the flying test and get his license. However, the federal flight examiner at Bettis would not pass him because he thought blacks should not be allowed to fly. He would flunk Peck regardless of his skills. As a friend, Bazley suggested Peck transfer to a school in Cleveland, the Cleveland Institute of Aeronautics, where he was sure Peck would be judged solely on his flying ability. Peck agreed, and Bazley arranged the transfer. Within a short time, Peck was flying out of Cleveland with a pilot's certificate. Ambitious for a future in flying, Peck decided to join the U.S. Army Air Corps, only to be turned down because of race. He attempted to enlist in the U.S. Naval Air Service and was refused again.

These denials and a portion of Peck's subsequent life have resulted in a historical controversy. Unable to fly for the military, Peck took a job as a drummer with Alphonso Trent's Victor Recording Orchestra and toured the country from 1931 to 1935. During that time, he flew occasionally and continued to study. In 1936, he returned to aviation, doing substantial research. He began to write and had his first article published in *Aero Digest* early in 1937. In August of that year, he reportedly sailed for Spain with thirty other Americans who had enlisted to fight for the Spanish government during that country's civil war. Peck said that as a lieutenant pursuit pilot, he flew and fought for four months and, in the process, shot down five enemy planes and was given half credit for another, thus becoming an ace. After the war, the

American Aces Society recognized Peck and hung his picture in its hall of honor in San Diego.

Allen Herr, in an article in the fall 1978 issue of the *American Aviation Historical Society Journal*, quoted Spanish Civil War flyer "Chang" Selles that "James Peck's service as a fighter pilot in Spain was utterly impossible." In an earlier article, Herr had said that stories written by and about Peck are fraught with errors and cannot be corroborated by any known Spanish or American source on aviation in the Spanish Civil War.¹⁷ Peck has calmly reasserted his claim.

There can be no corroborative evidence of Peck's flying service in Spain: his side lost the war and its records. However, there is ample documentation of his later life and accomplishments. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, he established himself as an authority in the field of aviation journalism, writing numerous articles for technical and popular magazines. His first full-length book, *Armies With Wings*, published in 1940, was heralded throughout the flying community. The *Boston Transcript* said Peck had written "one of the better books on wartime flying," and added, "If you want to know what an air force is and how it fights, here is a book to tell you." Peck's second book, *So You're Going to Fly*, was published in 1941. Among his many magazine articles were those in *Harper's*, *Look*, and *Popular Science Monthly*. After World War II, Peck was hired by TRW's space engineering team for whom he worked until his retirement in Los Angeles.¹⁸

Like Peck, Charles Vincent ("Chubby") Proctor was hooked on flying by the post-World War I flying craze. His early hero was a war veteran named Wilbur Stultz who later piloted Amelia Earhart. Proctor was born September 6, 1906, in Hollidaysburg, and at the age of fourteen was so obsessed with flying that he sent to New York for an instruction book on building a glider. At that time, auto racing rivaled Proctor's dream of flying. He stood stricken in a nearby garage watching Stultz, his brother-in-law, and a neighbor build and test race cars. The men respected Proctor's desire to learn, and one day Stultz allowed the boy to follow him to a pasture on the edge of town where he saw one of those airplanes he had long dreamed of — a World War

¹⁷ *Current Biography* 3 (Aug. 2, 1942): 40-42; telephone interview of James Lincoln Holt Peck by George Barbour, Jan. 13, 1984; Allen Herr, "American Pilots in the Spanish Civil War—Addendum," *American Aviation Historical Society Journal* 23 (Fall 1978): 235; Allen Herr, "American Pilots in the Spanish Civil War," *American Aviation Historical Society Journal* 22 (Fall 1977).

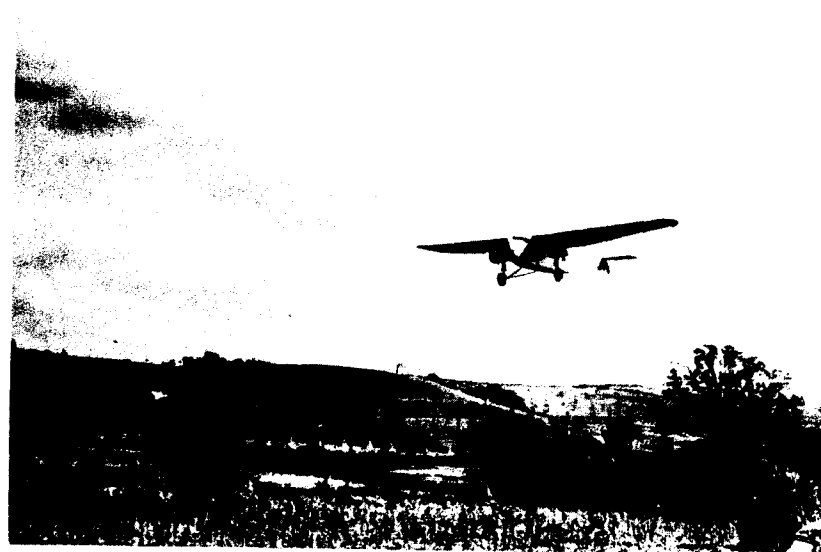
¹⁸ *Current Biography* 3; Peck interview, Jan. 13, 1984.

I Jenny. An Altoona businessman had bought the plane to “hop” passengers — take them on sightseeing trips for a fee. Needing an experienced pilot, he had hired Stultz.

Business was usually good, but one slow day, Stultz turned to young Proctor and asked if he wanted to fly. Proctor was stunned by the prospect of flying at last, but soon was in the front seat of the biplane rumbling down the field and into the air. Not only did Stultz give the teenager a ride but also his first flying lesson. Proctor knew that with the help of his idol, some day he would be able to solo himself. Stultz, however, was lured to Long Island. An American firm had begun to import German Fokker trimotored transports and needed a test pilot. One of their customers was Amelia Earhart, who hired Stultz as her pilot. Stultz flew her plane across the Atlantic in 1928. He was later killed in a crash on Long Island and his body was returned to his hometown. Proctor recalled that Earhart flew to the local airstrip, attended the funeral, and then later flew a salute to her former teacher, friend, and pilot.¹⁹

Although serious about flying, Proctor was unable to pursue it actively until 1935 when, as a barber in Canonsburg, he was able to scrape up enough money and time to take lessons at Butler-Graham Airport under Carl Litzenberger and Ken Beech. He followed with more lessons at New Alexandria from black flying instructor George Allen, and at Mayer Field in Bridgeville, where he soloed under Robert Foley.

Proctor wanted more time in the air but faced the major obstacle for black flyers — money. There were other roadblocks for blacks at that time, especially racial discrimination, but this was apparently minimal at flying fields in Western Pennsylvania. The only requirements seemed to be the desire to fly, normal coordination, and the means to pay for flying lessons. Because of the cost, Proctor and other black pilots hoped to turn to military flying. Like Peck, he was shocked to learn that the United States government had no provisions for training black aviators. Many federal officials believed that blacks could not fly and should not have the opportunity to try. When World War II broke out, Proctor found himself too old to join the Tuskegee Experiment, the country’s program for an all-black fighter squadron, and of the wrong race to become an army artillery spotter pilot. He did serve in the war, but not as a pilot. After the war, he and Raymond Jackson of Sharon (who owned his own airplane) flew a number of



Ford Tri-Motor preparing to land at Meadowlands Field near Washington, Pennsylvania, 1938 (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



“Chubby” Proctor and Ford Tri-Motor, Meadowlands Field (Courtesy Charles Proctor)

¹⁹ Interview of Charles Vincent Proctor by George Barbour, Cleveland, Ohio, Apr. 28, 1984.



Charles Vincent ("Chubby") Proctor and his Kinner-Bird biplane, New Alexandria Airport, 1930s (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



Raymond Jackson and "Chubby" Proctor with Jackson's Piper Super Cub (Courtesy Charles Proctor)



George Allen with a training plane, Tuskegee Army Air Base (Courtesy George Allen)



Staff of the Civilian Pilot Training Program, Tuskegee, Alabama. Two bi-winged Stearmans and six Piper J-3s are in the background. George Allen is fourth from the left, front row. (Courtesy George Allen)



Lawrence ("Larry") Anderson, Latrobe Airport, 1939 — one of the few teenaged licensed pilots in the area (Courtesy Lawrence Anderson)