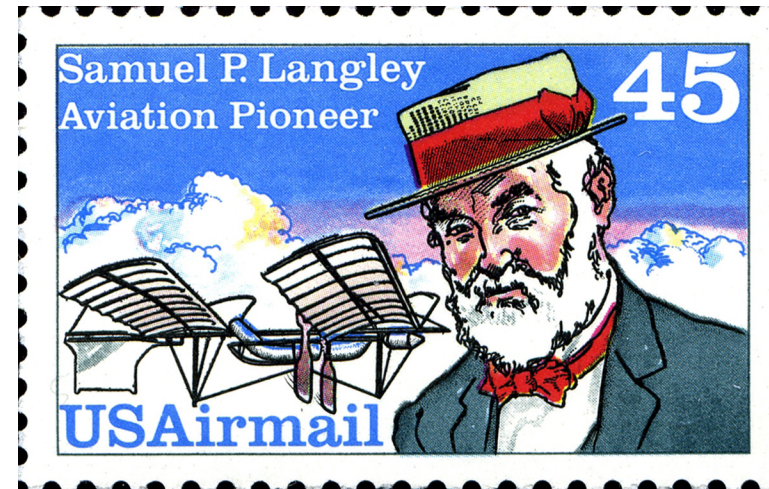


Samuel P. Langley

Aviation pioneer (1834 – 1906)



Langley, born in Massachusetts, was an assistant at the Harvard College Observatory before becoming chair of mathematics at the Naval Academy. In 1867, he became the director of the Allegheny Observatory and a professor of astronomy at the Western University of Pennsylvania (University of Pittsburgh), a post he kept until 1891. Langley was the founder of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory.

His first success with a flying machine came on May 6, 1896 when an unpowered model flew nearly a mile after a catapult launch from a boat on the Potomac River. The distance was ten times longer than any previous experiment with a heavier-than-air flying machine. Later that year his Number 6 model flew more than 5,000 feet.

In 1898, Langley received a War Department grant of \$50,000 and \$20,000 from the Smithsonian to develop a piloted airplane he called the Aerodrome. In contrast to the Wright brothers' design of an airplane that could fly against a strong wind and land on solid ground, Langley sought safety by practicing in calm air over the Potomac River. His craft had no landing gear, the plan being to descend into the water after demonstrating flight. He gave up the project after two crashes in 1903.

A heavily modified Aerodrome was flown a few hundred feet by Glenn Curtiss in 1914, as part of his vain attempt to fight the Wright brothers' patent. However, the Curtiss flights emboldened the Smithsonian to display the Aerodrome as "the first man-carrying aeroplane in the history of the world capable of sustained free flight." Fred Howard wrote: "It was a lie pure and simple, but it bore the imprimatur of the venerable Smithsonian and over the years would find its way into magazines, history books, and encyclopedias, much to the annoyance of those familiar with the facts." The Smithsonian's action triggered a decades-long feud with the surviving Wright brother, Orville.