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# Biography of Dr. PAUL GARBER

## Modeler, Museum Model Maker, Curator at Smithsonian Institution, Collector of Famous aircraft

Modeler for: 83 years    Age: 93 (1899 – 1992)

Written & Submitted by GS (6/99)

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Edited by SS (2002)

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### Career:

- Worked for the Smithsonian for 49 years, before retiring
- In 1920 he started as an exhibit preparer
- Solicited the Spirit of St Louis from Charles Lindbergh

### Honors:

- 1963 – AMA Fellows
  - Named Historian Emeritus of the Smithsonian Museum
  - The Silver Hill restoration center was named the Paul Garber Restoration Center in his honor
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*In 1999 the Smithsonian Institution created a traveling exhibit on model aviation, called "On Miniature Wings." It traveled the entire country, giving the average citizen the history of model aviation and its importance in the development of many skills and concepts derived thereof. It chronicles the biography of a number of famous modelers that made all of this possible. This is a sample of the text that was used by the Smithsonian in that exhibit. This was sent to me by Gail Spilsbury, editor in charge of putting this exhibit together.*

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## Career Connections

How did expert modelers start out? How did their passion for aircraft and model airplanes lead to successful careers in related branches of science? "Career Connections" introduces you to five master modelers and the careers they chose.

### Paul Garber

*"Although as a youngster I enjoyed making and flying kites, it was my first visit to Ft. Myer, Virginia in 1909, when I saw Orville Wright flying, that greatly stimulated my interest in flight and in the making of kites and model airplanes. That morning I had planned to be a doctor, but that afternoon I planned to be a pilot." – Paul Garber*

In an illustrious career spanning more than 70 years, Paul Garber acquired historic aircraft and model airplanes for the Smithsonian Institution. His long life not only paralleled aviation development in the United States, but also interfaced with it.

Four years after Garber's birth on August 31, 1899, Orville and Wilbur Wright made their first successful flight near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Forty-five years later, Garber would be responsible for bringing the 1903 Flyer to a permanent home at the Smithsonian.

Garber loved planes and model making as a boy growing up first in Philadelphia and then in Washington, D.C. When he was 16, he built and piloted a hang glider he had admired at a

Smithsonian exhibition. This achievement gained him membership in the exclusive Early Birds of Aviation pilots club.

During World War I, Garber, age 17, pursued pilot training in the army, but the armistice was signed before the course finished. For the next two years he worked for the newly established Postal Air Mail Service.

At age 21, Garber took a job with the Smithsonian as an exhibit preparator, repairing and refurbishing exhibits, but his passion remained firmly fixed in all matters related to aviation. The 1920s witnessed rapid advances in aviation development, including Charles Lindbergh's 1927 transatlantic flight. Garber's foresight about the future of aviation and the importance of its historical record spurred his leadership role at the Smithsonian. Due to his efforts, a Smithsonian cablegram awaited Lindbergh when the Spirit of St. Louis touched down in Paris. The cable congratulated Lindbergh on his historic flight and asked him to donate his plane to the Smithsonian. In 1928, following a tour to many U.S. cities, Lindbergh flew the plane to Washington, D.C., where Garber awaited him.

Though it would take another half century for the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) to be built and open its doors to the public, collecting historic aircraft was well underway, as was 29-year-old Garber's career as collector, model builder, curator and historian. Prior to acquiring the Spirit of St. Louis for the Smithsonian, Garber had already procured the Fokker T-2, the Douglas World Cruiser Chicago and the 1924 Berliner Helicopter.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Smithsonian's model aircraft collection expanded under Garber's direction. He was so intent on forming a collection that would record the history of flight that he personally built historic models when no originals were available, including Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine, John Stringfellow's Triplane, the Henson Steam Carriage and several of Sir George Cayley's designs. The introduction of balsa wood in the late 1920s contributed to a golden age of model airplanes that matched the period's Golden Age of Aviation.

By the outbreak of World War II, Garber, then assistant curator for aeronautics, had amassed hundreds of model aircraft for the Smithsonian. He enlisted in the Navy and worked on several instrumental recognition-model programs. Garber's naval involvement paved the way for the Smithsonian's large acquisition of representative warplanes.

Returning to the Smithsonian in 1946, Garber devoted himself to the Smithsonian's efforts to create the National Air and Space Museum, of which he became curator. He was also instrumental to setting up a storage facility in Silver Hill, Maryland that is now named for him. In spite of the immense labor involved in creating the new museum and storage facility, Garber continued collecting models for the Smithsonian. The post-World War II period proved to be the age of exhibit model making. Suddenly accurate plans and references were abundantly available to modelers. Also, the advent of plastics aided their work.

In November 1972, ground was broken for the new National Air and Space Museum on the Washington Mall, and it opened in a Bicentennial celebration on July 1, 1976. Due to the enormous popularity of the museum's airplanes, the Silver Hill storage facility opened for guided tours in January 1977. These last, culminating events in Garber's active career happened after he reached the mandatory retirement age of 70 in 1969; however, he was named NASM's Historian Emeritus and, when the new museum opened, he moved into an office near the library.

Paul Garber spent nearly his entire lifetime building the Smithsonian's aircraft and model collection, and was able to witness the fruition of his efforts when NASM was completed. Its massive pink marble structure covering two blocks of the Mall became home to more than 360 aircraft and hundreds of models built by the best modelers in the country, including Garber himself Paul Garber died in 1992 at the age of 93.

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