



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of Dr. PAUL GARBER

**Modeler, Museum Model Maker,
Collector of Famous Aircraft**
1899 – 1992 Started modeling in 1910



Written & Submitted by GS (06/1999), BW (01/1981); Transcribed by NR (09/1999); Edited by SS (2002), Reformatted by JS (08/2009)

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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“Just for the Fun of It” by Bill Winter*

Paul Garber – Larger than Life

To tell the story of this remarkable man within this space is an Icarus fantasy – the writer’s wings melt like wax as he flies too close to the sun. Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum (NASM) has a spirit in residence, Paul Garber, who is a walking repository for the entire history of aviation.

Garber, who built his first model in 1910, joined the Smithsonian in June 1920 as a preparator. In 1932, he was named assistant curator, and several years later, he became associate curator. After more than 60 years of service, he retired in 1969 as Head Curator and Senior Historian. Currently occupied with on-going Air and Space Museum programs, he is Historian Emeritus and Ramsey Associate of the Smithsonian Institution – a man much honored in his own time. Garber was responsible for acquiring a large portion of the Smithsonian’s aeronautical collection – including a magnificent array of scale models costing many thousands of dollars apiece.

On June 1, 1980, the famed Silver Hill Museum, which houses the NASM’s reserve collection of air and space craft, was



Even in a publicity thumbnail, Paul Garber projects a message. With three pencils, he symbolically depicts the three axes which govern flight of heavier-than-air machines.

renamed the Paul E. Garber Preservation, Restoration and Storage Facility. At the Garber Facility, over 90 historically-significant aircraft – a *Spad XIII*, a *Jenny*, a *Sabre*, to name a few – are displayed, as well as numerous spacecraft, engines, propellers, landing gear, and other flight-related objects.

Air-wise tourists who visit this no-frills museum are treated to a behind-the-scenes look at the restoration workshop where craftsmen preserve aircraft and other objects. Work is in progress on the *Double Eagle II* transatlantic balloon, a *Corsair* familiar to millions because of the TV program *Baa, Baa Blacksheep*, and a WWII Japanese *Irving*.

As a 14-year-old boy, we read Garber's *Building and Flying Model Aircraft* (Ronald Press, 1928). More recently, we chatted with him in the "tower" of the original Smithsonian "castle." He is fond of the story of how one night, after the visitors had gone, he provided a ladder for Charles Lindbergh to climb aboard his suspended *Spirit of St. Louis*. Lindbergh wished to check the marks he had made on the "instrument panel" that recorded gas consumption during the flight. The curator had forgotten his long-silent visitor when a voice shocked him. Lindbergh himself, in the *Spirit of St. Louis*. The editor of *The Smithsonian* magazine commented in one word, "Eerie."

During the Smithsonian Lunch Box Forum speech, five years after his so-called retirement, and on the precise anniversary of the memorable Paris flight, Garber was carried back to a long-ago day at Fort Myer, Virginia when, as a boy, he saw the Wrights fly. "I heard the staccato noise of the engine. The airplane was flying towards me. I was astounded. I had often seen my homemade kites in the air, but here was an enormous two-winged aircraft with two men seated in it, its engine roaring, its propellers whirling, and the whole marvelous machine soared right over my head.. later, at home, I tried making a flying model of the *Flyer*. I can't say that my model actually flew, but it lost altitude slowly... In 1913, among my schoolmates in Washington, I founded the Capitol Model Aeroplane Club, and organized competitions for the making and flying of models and kites."

Born in 1899 in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Paul was receiving aviation instruction at the time of the 1918 Armistice. As a Navy commander in WWII, he was assigned to the Special Services Division of the Bureau of Aeronautics and saw sea duty on a carrier, a destroyer, a transport, a heavy cruiser, and a battleship. He invented the U.S. Navy Target Kit for ship-to-air gunnery practice.

Paul wrote *Kites*, Boy Scouts of America, 1931; *Safety in Flight* (and pamphlets) for the Columbia Broadcasting Company, 1930-1940; the *National Aeronautics Collections*, Smithsonian, 10 editions, 1927-1967; *Annual Reports of the National Air Museum*, 1952-1957; *The Navy Target Kite*, U.S. Navy, 1943; *Masters of the Air*, Smithsonian, 1969; and numerous magazine and encyclopedia articles.

A spellbinding lecturer, he talks about: This History of Flight, the Wright Brothers, Glen Curtiss and the Early History of Naval Aviation, Alberto Santos-Dumont, the Robert J. Collier Trophy;

the Air Mail, Early History of the U.S. Air Forces; Kites; Women With Wings; The 13 Most Famous Aircraft; and many other things. He is guest lecturer, U.S Air Force Academy.

His professional experience is simple: U.S. Post Office Department, Aerial Mail Service, 1918-1920; and the Smithsonian, his home since 1920. He holds memberships in many prestige groups – past president of Early Birds of America, vice president of Air Mail Pioneers; the OX-5 Club; and so on, including an AMA Fellowship (with life member privileges.) His list of awards is even more impressive – impossible as that seems.

Paul now works to maintain representation of naval aerospace in the museum. He is working on a series of films on the history of flight. He is in charge of the Smithsonian's Kite Festival that takes place each year on the Washington Monument grounds – earning a yearly splash in the local newspapers. In fact, at the Garber Facility, you'll find Chinese kites that formed the nucleus of the Smithsonian's aeronautical collection in 1876 – and such contrasts as the Minute Man II ICBM Guidance and Control System and the *Jupiter* vehicle that carried two monkeys into space in May of 1959.

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. Gail Spilsbury, editor in charge of putting this exhibit together, sent this to Norm Rosenstock.

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 daVinci'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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