

KOEHLER KORNER for OCTOBER 2026

I had the opportunity in September to visit the Glenn H. Curtiss museum in Hammondsport NY. It is at the southern tip of the western finger lake in the New York wine country, so there is plenty to do, besides the museum, which is spectacular. It is easy to find, with a huge C-46 Curtiss Commando parked in front.

Glen Curtiss was a contemporary of the Wright brothers, and they actually asked him to build the engine for the Wright Flyer! He turned them down. Curtiss and the Wrights were later embroiled for years in a lawsuit over lateral control systems for aircraft. While the Wrights were the first to demonstrate controlled heavier-than-air flight, Curtiss was the one that commercialized early aircraft production.

After dropping out of school after the 8th grade Curtiss got into the bicycle manufacturing business. A stated fact at the museum is that the development of urban trams and bicycles caused the horse population to drop by 50% in the US! In the 1890s the bicycle business was the primo business, analogues to the Tech business to us today! At one point Curtiss had over 500 people working for him producing bicycles. There are stories of selling a thousand a day!

Curtiss became fascinated with bicycle racing and then started designing engines for “motorizing” the bikes and racing them. If we step back and think a bit, it is fairly obvious that the design requirements for a motorcycle engine are very similar to that for an airplane (light weight for power output, reliable, compact, etc.). It wasn’t long before Curtiss was winning all the bike races. Perhaps his ultimate “bike” had a V-8 engine on it. The bike was so big and powerful that racing officials would not let him race it with others on the track, but they agreed to time him on the measured mile. Right here on Daytona Beach he took two miles to get up to speed, ran the mile, and took two miles to stop it. The result was a world speed record of 132 miles per hour! Curtiss was the fastest man alive on earth!



Because of his engine expertise he was invited to join a group sponsored by Alexander Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone). The group was to build a plane a year building expertise until

they had a successful flying aircraft. The first failed, but the second, designed by Curtiss worked. He later raced an improved version in Europe and won the 1909 Gordon Bennett Trophy, becoming the fastest man on the ground and in the air at the same time! Remember that in this time frame the Wrights were mostly not flying, awaiting someone with investment money.

Curtiss went on developing and building planes, dodging the lawsuit from the Wrights. WWI started and he designed the JN-4 for training. It was the only real aircraft in production in the US at the war's start, and many were made. We all know the story of the "Jenny", and its post-war spawning of the Barnstormers.

It was in this time, prior to WWI, that Curtiss designed the "America" for a wealthy industrialist to fly the Atlantic! This full scale replica is in the Museum.



In 1910 Curtiss started a flying school at North Island (San Diego) CA, where he taught the first military pilots how to fly. That area is now Naval Air Station North Island. Along the way, also prior to WWI Curtiss invented retractable landing gear and the amphibian aircraft. His plane and pilot also did the first takeoff and landing from a Navy ship, ultimately leading to the Aircraft Carrier. Between the North Island development and demonstrations of operating from a ship, he is often referred to as "The Father of Naval Aviation". He built most of the seaplanes for WWI for the US, Brits, French and Italian navies. At the end of WWI Curtiss was the largest producer of aircraft in the US. His company went on to produce the P-36 and later P-40 monoplane metal fighters and even though the P-40 was not a first line fighter, it was available and in production at the start of WWII. The tail of the 10,000th P-40 is on display in the museum.



The museum has a very good movie that covers his early life and goes into a lot of detail about his issues with the Wrights. It is very well done, in my opinion.

The museum includes many vintage planes, motorcycles and even cars. Allocate several hours to see it all. There is even a restoration center where they are reassembling a crashed P-40.

Hope you get to see this museum to one of the great pioneers of early aviation.

Keep building, maintaining and flying,

Dick
9/2026