

Amelia Earhart: What happened to Amelia Earhart and Her Impact on U.S. History

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HY 103: US History from 1865

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August 18, 2018

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“Someday, I’ll get bumped off. There’s so much to do, so much fun here, I don’t want to go, but...” (Rich, 1989, p.86). She was determined, intelligent and unique! Although Amelia Earhart lived in a time when women were constrained in what they could, she left a significant mark in the fight for women's equality. She proved to be a skilled aviator and accomplished female. She wrote bestselling novels about her flying experiences. She shaped an image that women are strong and could endure hardship, and her legacy is still cherished by many.

Amelia Mary Earhart was born in Atchison, Kansas, on July 24, 1897, the daughter of Edwin and Amy Otis Earhart. She had one sibling, Muriel, her sister who was two years younger. Amelia and her sister lived with their grandparents, Alfred and Amelia Harres Otis until she was twelve years old. Amelia had the privilege of growing up of a wealthy lifestyle as her grandfather was a “U.S. District Court Judge, president of the Atchison Savings Bank, and chief warden of Trinity Episcopal Church” (Rich, 1989, p.161). They resided in Atchison, Kansas, where Amelia attended the College Preparatory School, the same school her mother attended. Her schools’ years were spent with her grandparents, and summers with her parents.

Amelia led a highly active childhood. Her and her sister spent much time playing outside, jumping over fencing that surrounded the house, climbing trees, playing with bugs, and belly sliding down the hill in her grandparents’ yard (Rich, 1989, p.161). Her grandmother believed in the societal norm that ladies should be prim and proper, and she often scolded Amelia for her tomboy-like behavior. Bloomers were of an uprising fashion when shown in a much unreserved manner. Amelia and her sister would flaunt around playing in their bloomers on Saturdays feeling “free and athletic,” according to the book, *Amelia Earhart: A Biography*. The late 1980’s

was a revolutionary time for women. During this revolutionary time, Amelia found the conservative rules of how females should conduct themselves bewildering even from a young age.

Amelia was often impatient and tenacious. She was seldom intentionally disobedient as a child, but her eagerness caused her to often clash with authority. She was extraordinarily strong willed, a remarkable speaker (Rich, 1989, p.178). Amelia attended a private college preparatory school, where, although she loved to read, she sometimes got into trouble because of her independent nature. Her mother and sister Muriel, frequently came to Atchison to visit, but Amelia rarely ever saw her father Edwin during these years. In 1908, Amelia's family moved to Des Moines, Iowa, because the railroad had transferred her father's location for employment (PBS, *Amelia Earhart*, n.d).

When Amelia was ten years of age, she and her family went to the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines. This is where she saw her first aircraft, which she did not find intriguing at all. Her father encouraged Amelia (evidence that her father played some impact in her interest in becoming a pilot) and her sister to go for a flight, but they instead chose the merry go round. "A thing of rusty wire and wood and not at all interesting" (Glines, 1997), were her own words taken out of one of the many pieces of writing she composed during her lifetime. Aside from keeping her own personal thoughts on paper, "she kept a scrapbook of newspaper clippings that highlighted women entering jobs in motion-picture directing, law, advertising, management and automobile mechanics" (Glines, 1997).

The years of Amelia life from 1910 to 1915 are described as turbulent according to the article published by PBS.org, "*Amelia Earhart*." Her grandmother that raised her from an infant passed in 1911. Her father loses his job, becomes an alcoholic, struggling to support his family.

He left for a month, checking himself into a sanatorium with the intent of rehabilitation from alcohol abuse. Amelia's father's battled alcoholism, causing Amelia to feel humiliated and embarrassed. "Watching her mother struggle financially caused a lifelong dislike for alcohol and need for financial security" (Laubar, 1988). Amelia also watched her mother struggle because of this financially. Her parents separated in 1914 after her father moved them back to Kansas, and Amy took Amelia and Muriel to live with a friend in Chicago (Szalay, 2017).

In the June of 1916, Amelia graduated from Hyde Park Highschool in Chicago. Her decision to enroll at Hyde Park Highschool was based on its science program being the best in the area in comparison to other educational institutions. She excelled in the program but did not do as well with making friends. "She was described as the girl in brown who walked along" (PBS, *Amelia Earhart*, n.d). During the fall of the same year, Amelia enrolled at Ogontz School, an elite finishing girls school located outside of Philadelphia. She was an extraordinary student who did exceptional in her studies and was Vice President of her class. Instead of graduating, she made the decision to volunteer at Toronto's Spadina Military Hospital. Inspired by the experience of seeing an amputee returning wounded from World War I, a volunteer nurse in a hospital for veterans, where she worked until after the armistice (truce) of 1918.

During her time in Toronto, she and a friend went to a flying expedition where a stunt pilot dove down at them to make them "scamper," according to information pulled out of her own recordings. Amelia wrote, "I did not understand it at the time, but I believe that little red airplane said something to me as it swished by" (Szalay, 2017). Amelia found the airplanes to ride gallantly and was amazed by what the pilots could do.

In December of 1920, Amelia and her father went to California. She became aware of air meets distinctly for wartime exhibitions. She went to everyone single one until she finally had a

chance to ride. The pilot that took her for her on the flight was Frank Hawes. According to an article in Aviation History Magazine and taken from Amelia Earhart's own recordings, "As soon as we left the ground," she later said, "I knew I myself had to fly" (Glines, 1997). On January 3, 1921, one of the first women to graduate from Glenn Curtiss school gave Amelia her first flying lesson. The Curtiss Flying School was started by Glenn Curtiss to compete against the Wright Flying School of the Wright brothers. Amelia took her lessons at the location in San Diego, California. The flight lessons cost Amelia \$1 per minute. She used her World War I liberty bonds to cover the cost. Two and a half hours later, she knew she wanted to buy her own plane (Earhart, 1988, p.147).

According to the literature, "*The Last Flight*," by Amelia Earhart, her mother helped her purchase her first airplane (Earhart, 1988, p.147). With the loan from her mother and a job sorting mail, Amelia was able to buy one a small yellow secondhand airplane for \$2,000.00. After a year of owning the aircraft, she was recorded her farthest flight of 40 miles from Long Beach to Pasadena. In 1922, she set a women's altitude record in October 1922 by flying the Airster to 14,000 feet (Rich, 1989 p.728). On May 16, 1923, Amelia was issued an international pilot's license by the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI). This made her the 16th female every to accomplish this.

In 1925, Amelia was hired as a social worker in Boston at the Denison House. She still did what flying she could afford on the side. One day at work, she received a phone call from George Palmer Putnam, a publisher and publicist in New York City. He invited her to be a passenger on a plane across the Atlantic Ocean. There was controversy over the decision if Amelia should be the passenger (because of her gender) of the pilot, Fredrick Guest. Amelia would be the first female to experience this flight across the Atlantic. A few days later the verdict

was reached, the committee of gentlemen decided she would go. The first attempt at the flight was unsuccessful due to fog. The second attempt took twenty hours and forty minutes, and Amelia and Gorge landed Wales (Earhart, 1988, p.185). Earhart earned international attention as the first woman to fly across the Atlantic. Back home in America, she was immediately deemed a spokesperson for women aviators. Putman became her manager and she traveled all the country conducting lectures and publishing a column on aviation. She had her own line of traveling clothing and luggage. Her role as a strong independent female became cherished by many.

From 1928 to 1931, Amelia was persistent with accomplishment. During the summer of 1928, Amelia published her book the “*Friendship Flight, 20 Hrs. 40 Min.*” Her publicist and manager George Putman helped her put together the literature that quickly received. She became an endorser for Lucky Strike cigarettes and an Aviation Editor for *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In 1929, she buys another airplane and competes in the Women’s Air Derby race from Santa Monica to Cleveland, placing third. In November of 1929, she “helped found The Ninety-Nines, Inc., which was first organization for women aviators. She was president of the organization for two years and used her celebrity status to promote the growth of American Commercial airlines” (PBS, *Amelia Earhart*, n.d). On June of 1930, she set the women’s world speed record for 100 kilometers without any additional weight or load added to the aircraft, and again set another record of a women’s world speed 181.18 mph over a 3-kilometer course (Glines, 1997).

On February 1931, Amelia Earhart and George Putnam married in Noank, Groton, CT. They married secretly with just three others attending as witness, Putnam’s mother and two others (not identified in the text). Amelia kept her last name and wrote a prenup for Putman. She also told him that she would not every give up her passion for flying, and that she was not bound to him, as was he told her (Earhart, 1988 p. 342).

On May 20, 1932 Amelia attempted to fly to Paris from Harbor Grace, Newfoundland. The weather conditions became poor and thick clouds invaded the flight along with ice on the wings of the plane. She made a quick decision to land the plane in a farmer's back yard in Londonderry when she knew she would not make the flight to Paris. In her biography, *Amelia Earhart*, by Doris Rich, the author includes Amelia's own recorded thoughts, "after scaring the cows in the neighborhood, I pulled up in a farmer's back yard (Rich, 1989 p.308). Even though she did not land in her anticipated location, many quickly gathered to praise her in her accomplishment for crossing the Atlantic Ocean.

Amelia wanted to be the first female pilot to fly around the world. Near her 40th birthday, on June 1, 1937, Amelia Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, took off from Miami, Florida (Ware, 1993). The trip they were attempting was 29,000 miles long. Their plan was to go to Brazil, then continue across the Atlantic Ocean to Africa, across the Red Sea, Arabia, Pakistan, India, and Burma. Twenty-nine days later they landed in Lea, New Guinea. There was seven thousand miles left to complete the journey. Amelia had planned to land on an island that measured two miles long called Howland Island, located in the Pacific Ocean. Amelia and Fred never made it to the island. "Supporting evidence in a biography about Amelia Earhart states that when the Japanese learned of her mission, they shot down the plane, and took her captive" (Ware, 1993). Another theory is that "they ran out of gas, unable to find the island in time" (Ware,1993).

Amelia Earhart left a great legacy as a feminist who symbolized the elation of aviation and new roles for women to Depression-era Americans. Her many incredible accomplishments caught the hearts of many Americans, not just women. Yes, what happened to her during her last flight remains an unsolved mystery the twentieth century's. It does not define her as

unaccomplished or repel attention from her significance as a record-breaking aviator and a powerful symbol of women's emancipation.

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