Bishop Milton Wright: A Man of Conviction

by John H. Ness, Jr.

The world has known and acknowledged the contribution of Orville and Wilbur Wright to human progress and science, but little has it been aware of the family heritage that these inventor brothers had received. The two bicycle repairmen who dreamed that men could fly, and then proved it on the wind-swept dunes of North Carolina in 1903, called themselves conservatives. As Wilbur once wrote, “We are too conservative for successful businessmen.” And yet on December 17, 1903, an odd machine made out of spruce, cloth, wire, bicycle chains, and a crude twelve-horsepower engine wobbled above Kill Devil Hill at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, but the air age had dawned.

The Wright brothers were not the dashing, seat-of-the-pants dare-devil pilots who were to come during the early half of the 20th century. They were shy, self-effacing sons of a United Brethren in Christ bishop, reared to live simply, work hard, and respect the Sabbath. In 1903 when they made their historic flight, Wilbur was thirty-six years of age, Orville thirty-two. Both were slightly built, Wilbur the larger at five feet, six inches and weighing 160 pounds. Neither was married, nor did they drink, smoke, or make speeches. As Orville once said, “The only bird I know that speaks is the parrot, and he cannot fly.”

The ancestors of Bishop Milton Wright came to America from England in 1636 and were Puritans. The family remained in New England until 1814, when Dan, Sr. and Sally Freeman Wright, grandparents of Milton, moved from Orange County, Vermont to Montgomery County, Ohio. Here Dan Wright, Jr., Bishop Wright’s father, met and married Catherine Reeder, a member of one of the founding families of Dayton, Ohio. Three years after their marriage, in 1821, Dan and Catherine with two small children moved to an eighty-acre tract of government land in Rush County, Indiana. It was there that Milton Wright was born on November 17, 1828 and spent the first eleven years of his life.

Dan Wright, Jr. was a man of strong convictions. His opposition to slavery was so strong that he refused to join any church, although an earnest Christian, because at that time no denomination had taken a strong enough anti-slavery position to suit him. When it came to the issue of temperance, his views were just as intense. Not only did he refuse to allow alcoholic drink in his home, but he saw to it that no grain of his would be sold to the distilleries. His third great conviction was in opposition to secret societies. The influence of Dan Wright upon his son in these three great issues marked Milton for life and gave him an intensity in fighting for them.
Catherine Wright left deep religious impressions upon her family. She was greatly concerned about their spiritual development, always willing to talk to them about such and to pray with them. Her preferences lay with the Presbyterian faith, but since there was no church of that denomination in her home community, she joined a Methodist Episcopal congregation.

The oldest son in the family died in early manhood, before he could fulfill their mother's wish for a minister in the family. Another brother later did become a Baptist preacher, whereas Milton eventually became a United Brethren in Christ minister.

When Milton was eleven years old the family moved ten miles away to a farm in Fayette County, Indiana, where the school system was much more advanced. The children took advantage of the better educational system and progressed as rapidly as possible. Milton read widely and set himself to advanced courses of study far beyond that offered in the rural school.

In June 1843, at fourteen years of age, Milton was converted while alone in the field at work. Earlier as a child of eight his mother had discussed with him what it meant to be a Christian. He had never forgotten that conversation. A regular attendant at church services, he had learned to pray as a child. His conversion was not a sudden revolutionary experience. It meant simply that he now had a sense of belonging to God, in soul and body. He did not immediately join a church, for he could not make up his mind. Then four years later, at Andersonville, Indiana, while attending a weekend series of services known officially as a quarterly meeting, he decided to join the United Brethren Church. From early childhood Milton had been greatly impressed with the deep sincerity and earnestness of John Morgan, a United Brethren minister and member of the White River Conference. Thus in 1847, at the age of eighteen, he affiliated with the church of his hero.

Milton continued to study independently and became quite scholarly. Employed as a teacher in the public schools, he was both popular and successful. For a brief period of time he had the opportunity to attend Hartsville College, sponsored by the United Brethren at Hartsville, Indiana.

In 1850, while teaching seventy-five miles away from his home congregation, the quarterly conference issued him a permit to exhort. Six months later the same church group gave him a regular license to exhort. On his twenty-second birthday, November 17, 1850, he preached his first sermon and was granted a regular preacher's license in January 1852. The next step was to apply for an annual conference license, which he obtained from the White River Conference in August 1853. Two years later he was persuaded to give up teaching and accepted his first circuit, the In-
Indianapolis Mission, in August 1855. A year later he was ordained by Bishop David Edwards and elected secretary of his annual conference. He was then appointed pastor of the Andersonville Circuit, near his boyhood home.

During April 1857, he heard a number of sermons preached by T. J. Connor, a missionary from Oregon who had come east to attend the General Conference. Four years earlier Connor had organized a wagon train of United Brethren people, four of whom were preachers, and headed westward to establish a United Brethren colony in the Pacific Northwest. When they found it impossible to secure desirable unoccupied land in sufficient quantity for the group to remain together, they scattered throughout the Willamette and Umpqua Valleys. Each family soon became a nucleus for a United Brethren society, and the Oregon Annual Conference was established in 1855.

Milton Wright was impressed by the challenge that was issued for additional missionaries to the virgin northwest. Later he attended as a visitor the meeting of the denominational Home, Frontier, and Foreign Missionary Society, which convened May 7, 1857, at Hartsville College. Here he discussed with Connor the proposition of accompanying him to Oregon. The missionary board made the assignment to another person at that time, who later declined going to Oregon. Then on May 27, Wright wrote in his diary that he had received word that day from D. K. Flickinger, missionary secretary, of his appointment to Oregon. His mother was greatly upset by this decision, but Milton wrote, “She had prayed that her sons might become ministers and ought not complain.”

On Friday, June 19, 1857, this terse statement appeared in his journal: “... talked with Susan Koerner, our first private conversation, and asked her to go to Oregon with me.” We do not know her reason for declining his offer at this time, which undoubtedly consisted of matrimony. Later that year, while in Oregon, he noted in his journal for September 18 that a letter had come from Susan, “the girl I left behind.”

Before the end of June, Milton Wright had bade farewell to his family and journeyed to Dayton, Ohio, where the United Brethren in Christ had located its denominational headquarters in late 1853. Here he met a number of the church leaders and joined his traveling companions, T. J. Connor and the William H. Daughertys and their son. Two days before departing from Dayton, the group of missionaries was entertained at dinner by Bishop Lewis Davis. Of that visit Milton wrote in his journal how the Bishop had given directions to them as to how they ought to be boarded up in a strong box if they were buried at sea. It must have been a very comforting bit of advice.
Leaving Dayton on Wednesday, July 1, 1857, they traveled by rail and boat to New York City, arriving there late the next day. The fare charged was seventeen dollars. They obtained passage on the ship Illinois, which was to sail from New York on Monday, July 6. As missionaries they were entitled to a twenty-five percent reduction in their fare to San Francisco by way of Panama. The total cost amounted to $132 for each person.

The Fourth of July was celebrated while they were in New York City. Rioting broke out from a fight between two neighborhood gangs, the “Bowery Boys” and “the Dead Rabbits,” in which ten were killed and fifty injured. Fortunately the missionary party stayed indoors and was not involved in the fracas, although the Daugherty family did venture out the next day and was forced to seek shelter suddenly when some fighting was resumed.

Soon after departure from New York most of the passengers became quite seasick, including Mr. and Mrs. Daugherty. Milton Wright reported in his diary that these were wearisome days with nothing but sea around them. The vessel passed in sight of Cuba and then stopped at Jamaica, where approximately sixty Negro girls carried half-barrels of coal on board, singing as they worked. Landing at Panama on Wednesday, July 15, they took a train across the isthmus and sailed Friday, July 17, on the vessel Golden Age to San Francisco. Several days before arriving at San Francisco, Milton Wright became quite ill with “Panama Fever.” For three months afterward he suffered from periods of relapse which seriously affected his missionary responsibilities in Oregon. The party was in San Francisco only part of one day, Friday, July 31. They continued their sea travel on the ship Commodore, at a cost of $23.75 from San Francisco to Portland. They reached Portland on Wednesday, August 5, and transferred to a steamer and then to a skiff to reach Oregon City. From there a small boat, the Hoosier, took them to Butteville and finally a trip of five miles by carriage brought the party to the United Brethren community of French Prairie.

How thankful Milton Wright was to reach Mother Childers’ home and to spend the succeeding days recuperating from the effects of his illness. For a few days he would suffer alternating chills and high fever; then there would follow several days in which the fever disappeared and weakness alone remained. During such moments Wright attempted to meet his missionary responsibilities.

Thus on Saturday, August 29, he felt well enough to accompany the Childers family to a camp meeting at Yam Hill. In his journal Wright noted that one of the speakers was a Methodist Episcopal preacher: “Good ability but far from magnetic.” Fever soon returned and he was required to spend most of the time in his tent.
The next weekend, feeling better, he visited a camp meeting along the Willamette at Abraham Hurlburt's, about ten miles from Corvallis. During this period he developed erysipelas. His swollen face was painted with iodine, causing him to be quite an attraction. On Wednesday, September 9, he left for Sublimity, Oregon, where the annual conference was scheduled to meet. The chills and fever began once more, so that following the conference adjournment he remained for some weeks with Mr. and Mrs. Jesse Harritt until fully recovered. Miraculously he suffered no further effects of his illness.

The Oregon Annual Conference appointed him to the Lane County Mission, but upon the advice of T. J. Connor and Jeremiah Kenoyer, who also served as a physician, Wright immediately resigned the appointment.

In his journal from Monday, November 9, during his convalescent period with the Harritt family, Wright noted the arrival of election day. A state constitution was adopted. In the vote on the slavery question, the anti-slavery forces were victorious, which he greatly approved. He also listed expenses of $131.90 for the first four months in Oregon.

On Thursday, November 19, Milton Wright accepted appointment as teacher and principal of Sublimity College, a school that was being organized by the United Brethren. There were twenty-seven scholars enrolled for the opening of classes on Monday, November 23, although the first building had not been fully completed. Brother Wright lodged at the home of Gabriel Brown, kind old Arkansas people who lived about one mile southwest of Sublimity. For two years he served at this school and in addition preached throughout the week and on Sundays, providing services almost equal to a full-time itinerant.

At the annual conference sessions in 1858, an arrangement was worked out so that Milton Wright could continue teaching, remain as principal at Sublimity College, and serve additionally as pastor of the Marion Circuit with primary responsibility to the Sublimity congregation, which was the most important appointment. It was agreed that Jeremiah Kenoyer, an older pastor, was to be Wright's assistant and care for the responsibilities of the other churches on the circuit. When the school year ended in early 1859, Professor Wright refused reappointment. He took the pastorate of the Calipooia Mission for a few months with the understanding that he would return to Indiana at the earliest opportunity.

Milton Wright’s personal impressions of Oregon are recorded in his autobiographical material:
Its [Oregon's] early springs, its late falls, and its intervening periods were to me delightful. With proper clothing I could travel at almost any time of the year in safety. An oilcloth overcoat, an umbrella, and a good horse were necessary to meet appointments any time of the year. The French Prairie, the Howell Prairie, the Salem Prairie, and up the Umpqua Valley were to me delightful spots. The ground was rarely in winter frozen more than two inches deep, and mostly not at all. There was rain to be sure. We had abundance of rain in December, January, and March. Snow fell and melted as it fell, but upon the mountains nearby where my school was, it lay all the time and became very deep. February was considered an open month, but the two winters I spent in Oregon, it was also a rainy month. April was earlier and more constant than the eastern April. May was a delightful month, not so cold or so warm as I was accustomed to in Indiana. June we had some real warm weather, the warmest of the year. But the heat was far less than in Indiana, and July and August without rain and cool. We had a slight shower about the last day of August and no more until November as a rule, when there came the usual mixture of rain and fair weather. ... It was a healthful climate which I very much liked.

In October 1859, Milton Wright departed from Oregon over the long sea journey which he had taken two years earlier. Upon reaching the isthmus of Panama, he learned of John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia. On Thanksgiving Day, November 24, 1859, he was married to Susan Catherine Koerner, who was born in Hillsboro, Loudoun County, Virginia, April 30, 1831. Although he had intended to claim his bride and take her with him back to Oregon for continued missionary service, these plans never worked out. Her health was poor and this was probably a deciding factor.

Milton Wright taught school during the remainder of that winter at New Salem, Indiana, six miles southeast of his home at Rushville. The following August the White River Conference assigned him to the Marion Circuit. Following the usual practice, he bought a farm nearby, lived on it, and traveled over the circuit which consisted of seven regular appointments as well as occasional others. Reuchlin, their first child, was born March 17, 1861. In August 1861, Wright was elected presiding elder and assigned to supervise the Marion District. The next year, reelected, he was placed on the Dublin District. After a third election as presiding elder in 1863, he took charge of the Indianapolis District. The following year Wright chose not to take work, but after three months had passed, he was persuaded to accept appointment to the vacant Dublin Circuit. He finished that year and then was appointed to the Williamsport Circuit from August 1865 to August 1866. A series of very successful revivals were held in which more than two hundred persons joined the churches of the circuit. Then the White River Conference
elected him to the office of presiding elder for two more years.

In 1868, Hartsville College, influenced by the agitation of the 1860's for theological education, established a department of theology and appointed Milton Wright to take charge of it. He thus became the first official theological professor in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. In addition he served as the pastor of the college church. This year proved to be a fruitful one both as professor and pastor, but it was terminated early when the General Conference, meeting in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, in May 1869, elected Professor Wright as editor of the *Religious Telescope*, the church's official newspaper.

This was his third General Conference, having attended in 1861 and 1865. He was appointed to the Committees on Education and the Revision of the Discipline. Concerning his election as editor, Wright wrote in his diary: "I twice defeated myself by voting for another. During the vote J. W. Hott sat by me, saw my tickets, and testified afterward that I did not vote for myself at any time." He was finally elected by a vote of 49 to 46. Without consulting him on the choice of an associate editor, the publishing board selected his predecessor, Daniel Berger, for that position. Wright noted in his journal that he did not object to this appointment.

When they moved to the corner of Third and Sprague Streets, Dayton, Ohio, in 1869, the family had increased to three living children, Reuchlin, Lorin, and Wilbur, twins having died in infancy. Wilbur, the third son, had been born on April 16, 1867, in Henry County, Indiana, eight miles east of Newcastle. Two children were born during this period of residency in Dayton—Orville on August 19, 1871 and Katherine, the only girl, in 1874. The closeness of their filial relationship and the support each gave the others in time of need characterized this family.

As an editor Milton Wright felt it was "the duty of an editor to uphold the right, oppose the wrong, inform his readers of necessary facts and questions of the day, to seek the largest help from able writers of the church, allowing them their own style and language, and to do his best to give respectability to the productions of illiterate writers. He must put some unity and conservatism into the paper as a whole."

He worked to make his paper a means for promoting piety, efficiency and intelligence in church work. It was not his aim to stimulate good fellowship with all things so that popularity might be gained. As he said, "Jesus did not thus pander; the Bible does not; but the unscrupulous politician or editor does." With his re-election by the General Conference of 1873, Professor W. O. Tobey became his assistant. This man was an expert in the use of words,
but he was ill adapted to the stormy seas of controversy toward which the Religious Telescope was moving.

Twice during these eight years as editor, Milton Wright spoke before the National Anti-Secrecy Association—in 1872 at Cincinnati and in 1875 at Pittsburgh. His involvement in the growing struggle within his church at this point made him one of the key figures in opposition to secret societies. He avoided discussion in the columns of the paper with leading opponents whenever possible. However, when it was forced upon him, he sought to limit and reduce the discussions and tensions.

The General Conference in May 1877, met in Westfield, Illinois. Although a liberal tide had become noticeable within the church, to the surprise of many Milton Wright was elected to the episcopacy and given supervision of the conferences between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, plus Wisconsin and northern Illinois. Soon after his election the family moved to Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Episcopal responsibilities required Bishop Wright to be away from home for weeks at a time. This thrust the burden of home supervision upon his wife Susan. She was a highly talented person, and she too had studied at Hartsville College. With an ingenuity somewhat foreign to women, she often contrived new and useful household appliances. Her own father had been convinced that girls as well as boys ought to know how to use tools, so he often had employed her to help him in his wagon and carriage shop. In this way she came to nurture an instinct for workmanship in her boys.

On a snowy day in Cedar Rapids, as the neighbor children were out coasting, Wilbur, aged eleven, and Orville, seven, watched through the window. Wilbur sadly commented, “If only we had a sled.” Since Susan knew that there was not enough money to indulge in this luxury at that time, she asked Wilbur to bring paper and pencil so that she might make him a sled. She drew it carefully to specifications that she desired and indicated that this sled needed to be lower than those of the other children. Wilbur wanted to know why this should be and his mother replied, “to lessen the wind resistance.” A new concept was born in the child’s mind. Then the boys and their mother went to the barn and with tools fashioned a sled according to her specific calculations. She explained, “If you get it right on paper, it’ll be right when you build it.” Wilbur always remembered this advice as he became a much more deliberate person in the years ahead, preventing costly and dangerous errors in plane fabrication.

Frequently Bishop Wright would return from one of his trips bringing token gifts to his children. Usually it was a mechanical
toy that he gave Orville. On one occasion he came back to Cedar Rapids bringing Orville a toy helicopter, powered with rubber bands. It was the product of a Frenchman named Alphonse Penaud, who had invented a number of similar flying toys before his death. The mother was fearful that the small tin propeller might strike someone in the eye and prohibited use of the toy. Orville proceeded to make the toy safer and better by putting a wooden propeller on it.

The four years in Cedar Rapids were difficult ones for Bishop Wright. He was required to travel a great deal, for the territory under his assignment was vast. The church was moving toward an ultimate showdown on the secrecy question. The liberal forces were increasing in strength. Bishop Wright, a strong supporter for the constitution of 1841 and anti-secrecy measures, served as the spokesman for the conservatives.

Defending unpopular causes does not make friends for one until the cause becomes popular. Anti-secrecy had been so popular in the church during the mid-nineteenth century; however, with the growth of secret societies during the later part of the century in America, anti-secrecy was becoming a less popular cause in the United Brethren Church. Milton Wright defended the truth as he understood it, even though he stood with a minority. When the General Conference of 1881 met in Lisbon, Iowa, in May, Bishop Wright was one of the casualties. His defeat was neither a reflection upon ability nor acceptability as a church leader. It cannot be understood apart from the controversial period through which the church was passing. The surprising thing was that he received fifty-eight votes out of one hundred twenty-six cast. Three futile efforts were made in the General Conference by conservatives to increase the rigidity of the church laws on secret societies. In each instance the liberals offered amendments and the resolutions were tabled for the duration of the sessions.

Bishop Wright did not allow himself to be crushed by this defeat. He gathered his family and moved to Richmond, Indiana, where he reentered the active service of his annual conference and was elected four successive times as a presiding elder. Then on February 24, 1882, Milton Wright placed in the mail the first issues of a monthly magazine, the Richmond Star, which he initiated. It was not meant to compete with the Religious Telescope, but to give information and argument against the dangers of secretism, which the official organ of the church could not properly do. The liberal forces were issuing The Monthly Itinerant from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Milton Wright decided to inaugurate a periodical which would be "a reform monthly . . . to present . . . the best thoughts of some of the ablest writers of the church on secrecy. . . .
It will seek to promote purity, unity, law, and harmony with constituted authority.” In taste and appearance it was considered a fine paper. It was self-supporting during the three years it appeared. In 1885, following his reelection to the episcopacy, Wright allowed it to merge with the United Brethren in Christ, another conservative independent paper, to become The Christian Conservator. A note in his journal for Thursday, June 29, 1882, stated that 2,000 copies of the Richmond Star had been printed for the July number.

In Wright’s diary of 1882 several scientific items appear that give some indication of an interest in astronomy which had never before been noted by the church historians. Monday, October 16, 1882: “I got up at 4:00 A.M. to see comet (seen for two weeks)—good sized nucleus—train dense brilliant and broad, about 35° in length.” Wednesday, December 6, 1882: “Saw Venus in her transit, a sight not to be repeated till the year A.D. 2004. The planet looked like a small black round spot.” Perhaps the father’s own interests at this point were not too far removed from the direction in which his sons were eventually to move.

Soon after his reelection as presiding elder in the summer of 1884, Wright moved his family back to Dayton. He continued to serve his district from this location, at times in the face of disapproval from one or more circuits of the district. His wife’s health had grown progressively worse and she was suffering more frequent lung hemorraghes. By this time she was approaching an invalid condition. Perhaps Milton Wright was considering the possibility of locating for a period of time. It thus came as a great surprise to him when the General Conference in May 1885, at Fostoria, Ohio, elected him as the fifth bishop. This meant that his assignment was to the Pacific Coast. He could not see how it was possible for him to accept with his wife’s physical condition. However, if this was the call of the church, he was not one to shirk his duty. He finally decided to continue the family residence in Dayton, Ohio, while he would spend six months of each year on the coast. The remainder of the time he would keep in touch with his area through correspondence from Dayton. He did a very constructive job in a difficult portion of the church during these four years.

During this quadrennium Wilbur, following a long illness, decided that he did not wish to finish high school. His parents talked it over with him and concluded that he needed to make up his own mind. Mrs. Wright expressed the opinion that a diploma was optional, and that educational achievement was the important thing. The parents never insisted upon formal education for the children, but they encouraged it. They were firm, however, that in their experiments the boys must finance these out of their own earnings.

Wilbur and Orville first became newspaper publishers. They
issued a four-page paper called the *West Side News*, which sold for eighty cents a year and ran editorials crusading against the lack of shoe and clothing stores on the west side of Dayton. From this venture they opened a bicycle repair shop. Using ideas learned from one source or another, they began to apply these in the bicycle shop. Before long they made for themselves an improved bicycle known as the Van Cleve, which had lower handle bars that caused the rider to bend down and offer less wind resistance. Orville rode this improved machine in a race and won. When the orders came in for this model, they began to produce new bicycles as well as repair old ones. But their desire to tinker with aeronautics caused them to read everything they could get their hands on in this field of research. Starting with the work of Otto Lilienthal, the father of gliding, they discovered that his tables of air pressures on curved surfaces were inaccurate. Not only did they work out new and accurate tables, but in the process developed the first wind tunnel to help examine their theories. They then proceeded to work out the first control system, the basic principles of which are still useful in modern aeronautics.

The children all pitched in during this period of family stress to help one another. Katherine lightened the load of the mother whose health continued to grow worse. The boys supported their father by building a printing press and issuing pamphlets in the church dispute.

The General Conference that met in York, Pennsylvania, in May 1889, brought the United Brethren in Christ to the moment of decision. The liberal preponderance during the quadrennium had worked through a Church Commission, established by the 1885 General Conference, to prepare revisions of the Constitution. This Commission tried to stay within a careful interpretation of the *Discipline*, which unfortunately was quite vague on how to proceed with revisions. The voting that took place across the church prior to the 1889 General Conference indicated a wide acceptance of the revisions. It resulted as follows: For the amended Confession of Faith 51,070, against 3,310; for the amended Constitution 50,685, against 3,659; for the section on secret societies 46,994, against 7,289. The opponents felt, however, that the entire procedure had been illegal, and they were ready to fight the decisions on the floor of the General Conference.

Soon after arriving at the seat of the Conference, Bishop Wright and other conservatives gathered on several occasions as a Council of Conservative Delegates at 33 South Newberry Street. They laid their plans, which included walking out of the General Conference if this became necessary.

The chairman of the Board of Bishops read the report of the
Church Commission to the General Conference. He then moved that it be approved, and the revisions became the law of the church. After a long discussion involving several days, the General Conference approved the report by a vote of 110 to 20. The proclamation of the bishops was made on Monday, May 13, 1889, placing the church under the revised Constitution and revised Confession of Faith. The minority stood by their agreement and walked out. They had previously reserved the Park Opera House in York, and they moved there on Monday to hold what they considered the continuation of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

In the years that followed, court cases were held in many states, some of which went to State Supreme Courts. In every instance, with the exception of the state of Michigan, which granted more autonomy to congregations at that time, the liberals were declared the true church. The Radicals, as they became known, adopted the name “Church of the United Brethren in Christ (Old Constitution),” and have continued in church life to this day.

Milton Wright was unanimously elected bishop by the dissident group, along with several other persons. He was also chosen to be the publishing agent for the Radicals. Shortly thereafter, upon his return to Dayton, he took charge of publishing *The Christian Conservator*, which was accepted by that church as its official paper.

The boys helped their father issue the paper, for as bishop and spokesman of the Radicals, he was limited in the amount of time spent at home. The sons soon discovered how much time was required of them, especially in folding newspapers for mailing. Putting their heads together, within three weeks they had invented a folding machine which did the same work in two hours that Wilbur had taken two days to perform.

Less than two months after the close of the 1889 General Conference, Milton Wright wrote the following lines in his journal: “Thursday, July 4, 1889—about 4 a.m. I found Susan sinking, and about five awakened the family. She revived about 7:00 somewhat, but afterward continued to sink till 12:20 afternoon when she expired, and thus went out the light of my home.” Burial was in Woodland Cemetery, Dayton, on Saturday, July 6.

After the court cases had been decided and the Radicals saw that they could not expect favorable legal considerations, the Old Constitution Church began to quiet down. It proceeded to replace some of the leaders who had brought it into form and nurtured it through the difficulties that followed. Milton Wright was one who faced serious opposition to his leadership. In 1902 several leaders of the White River Conference (Old Constitution) tried to promote a movement which would invalidate his episcopal leadership. For a time the young church was faced with a serious rift, as conferences
lined up for or against the rebellious group. Many unkind remarks were expressed on both sides before the insurrection was overthrown. In the 1905 General Conference of the Old Constitution Church, Wright voluntarily withdrew his name from further consideration. At the age of seventy-seven he had had enough.

His sons, Orville and Wilbur, had become internationally famous by that time, and the world eventually beat a path to their doorstep. They never married. Wilbur died on May 30, 1912, at the age of forty-five, while Orville continued to make a home for his father until Milton Wright died April 3, 1917, at eighty-eight years of age and was buried beside his wife. Orville’s death occurred January 30, 1948, in his seventy-seventh year.

There is a tradition that many years before the sons had mastered the art of flying, the father was said to have commented: “If God had wanted man to fly, he would have given him wings.” Nowhere in his journals have I ever found any hint that Milton Wright felt his sons were fighting against the laws of God or being foolish in their endeavors. The encouragement given the sons by the father in their various experiments belies this idea. Turn with me to the father’s diary for 1903 and catch the thrilling account as recorded during those days leading up to December 17, 1903. Can you not sense a father’s pride?

Wednesday, December 9: Orville started at nine o’clock with his new propeller shaft for Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. This new propeller or shaft was made of spring steel and was some longer than the former ones. [The original propeller taken to Kitty Hawk by the boys had broken. A second one mailed to them from Dayton had also broken. Then Orville returned to Dayton and fabricated a larger and more acceptable one. It was this third one to which the father referred.]

Monday, December 14: I spent the day largely in getting typewriter copies of the description of the Wright flyer and copies of a sketch of the inventors.

Tuesday, December 15: About 4:00 came the telegram—“Misjudgement at start reduced flight to one hundred and twelve [feet]—power and control ample—rudder only injured—success assured—keep quiet. Wilbur Wright.”

Thursday, December 17: In the afternoon about 5:30 we received the following telegram from Orville, dated Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, December 17. “Bishop M. Wright. Success four flights Thursday morning all against twenty-one mile wind started from level with engine power alone—average speed through the air thirty-one miles—longest 57 seconds. Home Christmas. Orville Wright.”
The years of retirement were lived in the glow of his sons’ adulation. The father kept a faithful account of the visitors who came to the home, many from abroad. Correspondence between father and sons has been preserved in the Library of Congress and indicate the ties that bound them together in great love and affection.

Typical of the advice that Milton gave his children is a quotation from a letter that he wrote his daughter Kate from St. Paul, Minnesota, May 30, 1888: “. . . I am especially anxious that you cultivate modest and feminine manners and control your temper; for temper is a hard master.” No one could ever claim that Bishop Wright lost his temper, even in thick of debate and accusations. He was known as a strong and trusted leader. All who knew him recognized a man of deep convictions who had little sympathy for those whom he regarded as willing to sacrifice principles for expediency.