

# Flight

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County in 2001 that it was narrowing its focus to Dec. 13-17, 2003.

Even the plans for December 2003 include few specifics so far. In July, the commission agreed to pay two consultants up to \$800,000 to flesh out the schedule.

All hope seems to ride on a re-enactment of the historic flight at 10:35 a.m. on Dec. 17, 2003, precisely 100 years later. It will be staged by the Experimental Aircraft Association, a national hobbyists' group based in Oshkosh, Wis.

The association has contracted with The Wright Experience, an aircraft-production team in Warrenton, Va., to build a replica of the Wrights' 1903 Flyer. The reconstruction is so meticulous that the "Pride of the West" muslin fabric the Wrights stretched over their craft's parallel wings — popular at the time for women's undergarments but no longer manufactured — is being made from scratch.

"This is as close to the original as possible," said park superintendent Lawrence Belli. "That's what the attraction was for the National Park Service."

In this case, however, authenticity is a two-edged sword. The 1903 Flyer was a rudimentary, notoriously unstable aircraft that was greatly improved by subsequent refinements. The

Wright's flew it only four times; the fourth and longest flight covered 852 feet and lasted 59 seconds. After that flight, it was caught by a gust of wind, rolled over and damaged beyond repair.

The plan to focus the entire centennial celebration on a re-enactment with a replica strikes some observers as risky — even foolhardy.

"I just think that's a terrible, terrible idea," said Wise. "Dec. 17, 1903, was a unique historical moment — everything came together for four flights. And it's not possible to replicate that. The more you build your story around the great Waldo Pepper flying his barnstorming machine, the more likely that when it fails, you will ruin your ceremony."

Ken Hyde, a retired pilot and mechanic who is supervising construction of the replica for The Wright Experience, is confident that it will be flyable. "The only thing I know that's iffy is the weather, and I can't predict that," Hyde said.

At the Outer Banks, where hopes for a successful centennial are riding on the efforts of Hyde and his team, park superintendent Belli said he's not worried.

"Ken Hyde has done a lot of archival research to try and become as accurate as possible," Belli said. "I think he's got the best chance."

And what happens if the 2003 Flyer doesn't fly? Belli's reply was matter-of-fact.

"People are going to see what happens here on Dec. 17, 2003, at 10:35 in the morning