



# Smithsonian

*National Air and Space Museum*

## Robert H. Botts Air-ship Collection

Patti Williams, 2001; revised by Melissa A. N. Keiser, 2022.

2022

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	National Air and Space Museum Archives
<b>Title:</b>	Robert H. Botts Air-ship Collection
<b>Date:</b>	1902-1904 (bulk 1980-1981)
<b>Identifier:</b>	NASM.XXXX.0621
<b>Extent:</b>	0.1 Cubic feet (2 folders)
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	This collection consists of six black and white photographs of Professor Robert H. Botts (initially known as Barnet Botts) and his air-ship [Botts (R. H.) 1904 Flying Machine] as well as copies of contemporary news accounts and biographical information compiled by donor Dr. William L. Thompson, M.D.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

William L. Thompson, MD, gift, 1981, NASM.XXXX.0621

### Processing Information

Arranged and described by Patti Williams, 2001; revised and encoded by Melissa A. N. Keiser, 2022.

### Preferred Citation

Robert H. Botts Air-ship Collection, Acc. NASM.XXXX.0621, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions

No restrictions on access

### Conditions Governing Use

Material is subject to Smithsonian Terms of Use. Should you wish to use NASM material in any medium, please submit an Application for Permission to Reproduce NASM Material, available at [Permissions Requests](#) .

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## Biographical / Historical

Barnet Botts (1857-1918) was born in Indiana on August 22, 1857, but after being orphaned at a young age he was sent to live with an uncle in Paso Robles, California. In 1894, Botts wrote a paper entitled "Botts' Air-ship, the Problem of Aerial Navigation," in which he explained the workings of his proposed air-ship and sought to secure financial aid to build it. During the winter of 1900, Botts, who was now identifying himself as Professor Robert H. Botts, moved to Richmond, California. Following this move, he secured at least two patents relating to the steam engine he designed

to be used on his air-ship, and he built a model of his air-ship which was displayed in Richmond and San Francisco. In February 1902, he announced that he was going to build two air-ships by summer for a scientific expedition to the North Pole. Each air-ship was to carry four persons and their scientific equipment. In March of that year, Botts began selling shares in his *World's Aerial Navigation and Construction Company of Richmond*. Eventually enough money was raised to build a proper hangar/workshop and work began in earnest on the air-ship. In May, Botts gave a successful demonstration of the engine. However, on the day of the trial flight, which occurred sometime in 1902-1903, the flying machine was demolished when a gust of wind caught it and smashed in on the steep slopes below the launching hill. According to contemporary sources, Botts was devastated by the destruction and returned to Paso Robles, where he resided until his death.

Photographer William Lewis Thompson (1869-1929) was a mechanic and neighbor of Botts in Richmond, California, and father of the donor.

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## Scope and Contents

This collection consists of six black and white print photographs taken by William L. Thompson, Senior, of Botts and his air-ship [Botts (R. H.) 1904 Flying Machine] as well as copies of contemporary news accounts (1902-1904) and biographical information compiled in 1981 by donor Dr. William Lewis Thompson, Jr. (1909-1998), and a copy of Susan D. Cole's book *Richmond—Windows to the Past* (Wildcat Canyon Books, Richmond, California, 1980).

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## Arrangement

The collection is divided into two folders, Photographs and Documents; the contents of each are presented in original order.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Aeronautics
- Aeronautics -- 1903-1916
- Airplanes -- California

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## Container Listing

Photographs, 1902-1903

Notes: Scope and Contents notes for items in this folder reproduce donor William L. Thompson's original descriptions for each of the photographs of the Botts (R. H.) 1904 Flying Machine on the ground at the top of Nicholl Knob, Point Richmond, California, circa late 1902 to early 1903.

NASM-9A18830: [The Botts Airplane, Photograph No. 1](#)

Notes: The Botts plane on the summit of Nicholl Knob. View to the northwest. The frame buildings of early Point Richmond in the distance below and to the right. The north section of the Point Richmond hills are in the distance. The dark streak in the distance to the left of the front propellor is the end of the wharf of the Standard Oil Company.

NASM-9A18831: [The Botts Airplane, Photograph No. 2](#)

Notes: The Botts plane at the entrance to its hanger. View somewhat to the south and west on the summit of Nicholl Knob. The structure in the left foreground is probably a part of a hanger door.

NASM-9A18832: [The Botts Airplane, Photograph No. 3](#)

Notes: The Botts airplane in its hanger. Probably a rear entrance to the building since the doors seen in photo #2 are not in evidence here. The smudge at the top of the picture is probably part of a finger print of the man developing the negative.

NASM-9A18833: [The Botts Airplane, Photograph No. 4](#)

Notes: The Botts plane on the summit of Nicholl Knob looking northwest over early Point Richmond. Part of the salt marsh is seen on the right in the distance below the plane wing. The Standard Oil Refinery is in the process of construction in the distance behind the engine and further propellor. My father's original home is the 2 story structure on the far hillside one inch directly below the lowest point of the left or rear propellor. Its state of completeness suggests that the picture was taken in late 1902 or early 1903. The prominent roads in the picture are Terrace Avenue (above the house) and Scenic Ave. (below the house). The Santa Fe water reservoir on the top of the ridge below near the left side of the picture. The road this side of the reservoir was probably the access road to the top of the hill. It still exists. The small white object on the distant hill to the left of the plane is probably an early S.O. Co tank.

NASM-9A18834: [The Botts Airplane, Photograph No. 5](#)

Notes: The Botts plane on the summit of Nicholl Knob. The view seems to be nearly west. Helpers seem to be assisting in the movement of the plane. The streak in the distance to the right of the plane

is the Long Wharf of the Standard Oil Company. I think that the human figure just to the right of the engine may be Botts.

NASM-9A18835: [The Botts Airplane, Photograph No. 6](#)

Notes:

Botts in his plane on the summit of Nicholl Knob. View northwest. Mr. Botts sitting in the sling-like seat of the plane. The ridge of the Point Richmond Hills extend north with the houses of early Point Richmond. The shore of the San Francisco Bay is seen on the left in the distance with the prominent Washington Point projecting into the bay. The long line of the Standard Oil wharf is seen in the distance behind the plane with the buildings of the salt water station where the wharf joins the land just below the wing and back of and above Botts hat. The peculiar rudder-aileron is seen below and this side of the rear propeller. The plane ultimately was destroyed by being blown off the hill in a gale and went over just to the right side of the photograph.

#### Documents

[Monograph, Dr. William L. Thompson, M.D., "Professor Botts and His Airship", April 19, 1981](#)

[Photocopies, various contemporary accounts, 1902-1904](#)

[Book, Susan D. Cole, Richmond—Windows to the Past \(Wildcat Canyon Books, Richmond, California\), 1980](#)