

Marion historian takes aviation history online

Wendell's site showcases autographed airplane models



Historian David V. Wendell set up a small display of models of US military transport aircraft used as “Air Force One” and “Marine One” at his home in Marion on Monday, August 8, 2016. Wendell has an online museum displaying 365 model aircraft, all signed by pilots, astronauts or other people with a connection to the history of that type of aircraft along with other artifacts and memorabilia from the history of aviation. (Cliff Jette/The Gazette)

Aug 22, 2016 at 4:00 am | [Print View](#)

Makayla Tendall

More stories from Makayla

MARION — Seeing an airplane crash as a 3-year-old was the catalyst that set Marion’s David Wendell on a lifelong course of

documenting aviation and aerospace history. Now, Wendell shares his hobby with the world through an online aerospace and aviation museum.

Wendell, 48, has spent the last 25 years and thousands of dollars securing model airplanes and space shuttles, traveling across the country to get the models autographed by the pilots who flew them.

Wendell’s online museum, which went live in July, can be found at. It wendellairandspacemuseum.org features 365 autographed model airplanes

and space shuttles, signed aviation and aerospace posters, paintings and various aviation and aerospace facts.

As a child, Wendell said he would ask his parents to take him to The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids. And that airport is where Wendell said he saw the crash of one of the Blue Angel planes, part of the Navy's aerobatics demonstration team that travels around the U.S.

It remains one of his first memories.

"The No. 4 Blue Angel came in for a landing, never put down its landing gear and sent up a huge plume of fire behind him," Wendell said.

"Finally the pilot ejected and landed safely under his parachute. We always wondered what it was that caused that incident."

After the crash, Wendell became fascinated with aviation.

He and his father spent hours building model airplanes in their basement.

Wendell went on to become a historian. He opened a living history museum in Chicago, worked as a journalist and as a tour guide in Washington, D.C. Through his work, he'd often show his models to school children.

"As I would present lectures to school children, the airplane models really drew their attention the most," Wendell said. "I wanted something extra to personalize, to show (kids) these people are real. I thought, 'Why not get them (pilots) to sign it?' Every time I would bring a model after that or kids would come to the museum and see these models, they would say, 'Wow, somebody really flew that?'"

Wendell said the signatures personalized the aircraft, giving the history a human touch.

"The kids especially could relate to it," he said.

In 2011, Wendell returned to Marion where his father was battling cancer.

"I wanted to give him a final gift, and that gift was a model of the very plane we saw together when I was a child," he said of the Blue Angel airplane that crashed. "I wanted it also to be signed, specifically by the aviator that was flying that plane."

Wendell tracked down Capt. Ernie Christensen, who lived only 40 miles from Wendell's apartment in Washington, D.C. Christensen signed the model, but it arrived back a week after Wendell's father died.

Today, Wendell continues to document aviation and aerospace history with an emphasis on military aviation history. He still speaks with school children and also takes his models and knowledge to area nursing homes.

Now, his website make his collection available to all and he hopes his passion sparks a fascination with aviation and aerospace history in others.

"If we don't learn our lessons of the bad parts of history, we're more likely to repeat it," Wendell said. But if we study what happened in the past, we can know what not to do and have a better future."