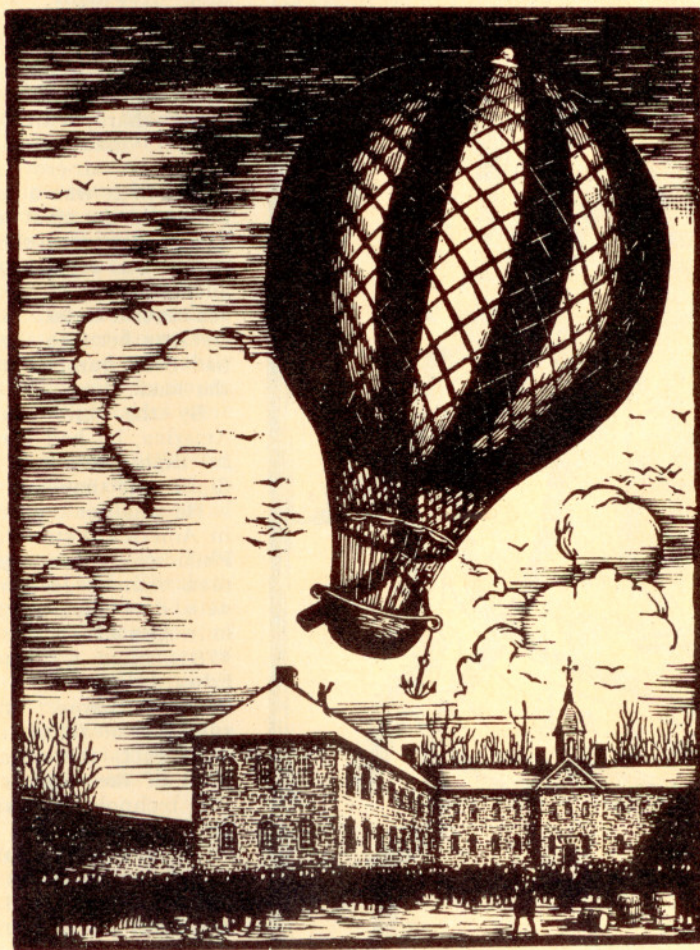


The first flight in America was achieved by a Frenchman, who did it for 'prestige . . . money . . . and fun,' but mostly to be first

BLANCHARD - 'The Celebrated Aeronaut'

by LEW HODGES / AOPA 424601

*The departure of Jean Pierre Blanchard
from Philadelphia's Old Walnut Street
Prison on Jan. 9, 1793.*



*The First Air Voyage in America
—woodcut by Charles R. Gardner, 1931. ©*

■ ■ Although there may be controversy about who was the first to fly an airplane, the record is clear as to who made the first flight in the United States. But in spite of his remarkable achievement, few of America's aeronauts are aware of the importance of the flight—or the man, Jean Pierre Blanchard.

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At 6 o'clock on the morning of Jan. 9, 1793, Jean Pierre Blanchard walked to the Old Walnut Street Prison in Philadelphia and observed the weather. In his journal, he described it as "a calm night, a serene sky, spangled with ten thousand glittering stars." Temperature on the Fahrenheit scale was 30 degrees, and winds were light from the south-southwest. A large crowd was already beginning to gather.

Blanchard carefully examined the great pile of yellow, highly varnished silk, the tethering lines, and the "blue and spangled boat" attached. Then he began preparations to fill his balloon with hydrogen gas created by pouring vitriolic acid on a heap of magnesium, zinc, and iron.

Blanchard looked every bit the part of the brave adventurer. He was dressed in bright blue breeches and matching waistcoat, and wore a cocked hat with a flamboyant white feather. He lived with a confident *elan*; during his year of residence in Philadelphia, he had his name listed in the city directory as "Blanchard, the celebrated aeronaut, 9 N. 8th Street."

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Illustrations used are through the courtesy of The Penn Mutual Insurance Company, from whose Philadelphia location the first balloon ascension was made in 1793.

Blanchard doffed his hat, bowed deeply, and exchanged pleasantries. Someone dumped a small black dog in his arms, and not quite sure what to do with it, Blanchard dropped it into the basket. Then he climbed aboard.

Washington shook his hand, wished him good fortune, and handed him a "passport" recommending him "to all citizens of the United States, and others, that in his passage, descent, return or journeying elsewhere, they oppose no hindrance or molestation to the said Mr. Blanchard; and that, on the contrary, they receive and aid him with that humanity and good will, which may render honor to their country, and justice to an individual so distinguished by his efforts to establish and advance an art, in order to make it useful to mankind in general."

It was the first airmail letter. Within a few years it would become very valuable, but Blanchard appears to have lost it, and it has never turned up.

According to the report on January 10 in *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser*: "As soon as he was in the boat, he threw out some ballast, and the balloon began to ascend slowly and perpendicularly, whilst M. Blanchard waved the colours of the United States and those of the French Republic, and flourished his hat to the thousands of citizens from every part of the country who stood gratified and astonished at his intrepidity."

The first man ever to fly from American soil was airborne.

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Once airborne, Blanchard was both the busy scientist and the fascinated philosopher.

His journal carefully described the temperature every few minutes (47.8° at takeoff) and the corrected barometric pressure (29.7 inches, rising).

Although the barometer had not yet become an altimeter, Blanchard was certain it *would* be. He said, "It not only serves to measure the heights of mountains, and the depth of subterranean caves, and to ascertain, by accurate observations, made at very different degrees of elevation, the density of the air; but it also indicates the variations and the absolute weight of the atmosphere."

The barometer he used on this trip was borrowed from Mr. Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin. It was broken in landing, but served as an accurate measure of altitude in flight.

And the philosopher. He said, "My ascent was perpendicular, and so easy that I had time to enjoy the different impressions which agitated so many sensible and interesting persons who surrounded the scene of my departure." He wrote of the comparison between the United States and his native France, now in the first weeks of its revolution, and just 12 days away from the day Louis XVI would lose his head.

Prior to the revolution, he had once found himself a political prisoner for a short time, but his fame as an aeronaut earned for him his freedom and the right to be a pensioner of France. In America, he prudently avoided politics.

At 1,200 feet, Blanchard ran into a somewhat stronger breeze and a flock of wild pigeons; they seemed "to be much frightened." He wrote that it was never his intention to disturb the feathered inhabitants in their own world.

He carried with him 108 pounds of ballast, a basket of food and wine, a few scientific experiments recommended to him by another scientist, Dr. Wistar, and the small black dog. The dog seemed to feel sick, and tried several times to get out of the car before finally resigning himself to the floor of the basket. He whined the rest of the trip.

Dr. Benjamin Rush had asked Blanchard to take his pulse at the highest point of the trip, and he did, noting that it was 10 beats faster per minute than on the ground. He also experimented with a lodestone to determine if magnetism was different in the air. His conclusion was that there *were* differences. On the ground it would lift 5½ ounces; in the air, it would barely lift 4 ounces.

At 10:38 a.m.—33 minutes into the flight—Blanchard recorded his greatest altitude. Measuring the mercury in his barometer, he determined his height at 5,812 feet above the Delaware River. Although he still had all his ballast, it was the highest point of the flight. From that altitude, the 9,600 houses of Philadelphia "appeared to me as a most minute and microscopic object."

The wind was rising, and Blanchard began to be concerned that landing might be difficult, so—after enjoying lunch and a glass of wine—he began packing things away for his descent.

From his flight journal:

"I opened the valve of the balloon, and the aerostatic equilibrium was soon broken, but in a manner as exactly graduated, and as uniform as that which regulated my ascent. I could soon distinguish with the naked eye those large masses, which are raised above the surface of the earth. I observed a large forest; I tried to approach it—I judged it to be about 1,000 or 1,200 feet distant; but through my spyglass, it appeared impenetrable to me, and I gave up the idea of landing there.

"I now threw out a quantity of ballast sufficient to give the balloon a superior equilibrium; it rose again and I followed my course, looking for a more convenient landing-place. Thinking I had found one, I again opened the valve; the ascending force diminished; I descended obliquely in a new direction: but in this second attempt I was not more fortunate than in the first. I perceived a field covered with stumps of trees, whose stems were yet too strong not to embarrass and injure my apparel.

"I kept clear of it, and raising myself by throwing out more ballast, my direction was such that I could discover a clear spot in the midst of a thick wood,

that is to say, an opening large and free enough to permit me to descend without any kind of danger: I attempted it for the third time.

"I then took the string of the valve in my hand, and letting out the inflammable air in such proportion that my course, pressed by a proportionable quantity of the yet remaining ballast, terminated in a direction of a curve of 45 degrees. I soon found myself at the height of about 80 feet above the surface of the ground; I reached it like a bird in full flight: the flexible limbs of the trees around me gave way to the strong pressure of my apparel; I landed at last and set my foot on the ground at 10^h 56^m a.m."

The dog immediately debarked and headed for the nearest tree.

Blanchard had landed in a plowed field near Woodbury, N.J., 15 miles and 46 minutes after his departure from Philadelphia.

He let the air out of his balloon and began wondering how he was to get back to Philadelphia. He took out his compass, took a sighting toward the northwest, and gazed directly into the open mouth of a farmer who was obviously amazed and frightened by the strange man who had dropped from the heavens into his field.

The aeronaut called to the farmer—in French, because he knew no English—and the farmer stepped back a few paces. Then, with French ingenuity, Blanchard held out his bottle of wine and motioned for the man to come forward for a drink. In the American tradition, the farmer accepted, but drank only after Blanchard had the first glass.

After a few more drinks, Blanchard had an enthusiastic helper, thanks to "the exhilarating juice of the grape." The farmer couldn't read, but he recognized the name "Washington." A second farmer, equally astonished and frightened, came on the scene and shared in the bottle. He could read, and Blanchard's troubles were over.

With the help of the townspeople, Blanchard's equipment was folded, placed in his basket, and taken to the river for his return to Philadelphia. By 7:00 that evening, he called on President Washington and presented the flags to him. The first flight had officially ended.

Blanchard had suffered such great financial losses on the trip that he was never again able to fly from American soil. After a few attempts to raise money, he returned to France.

Over the next few years, he completed 14 more successful flights in Europe. On his 60th, he suffered a heart attack over The Hague and never recovered.

Blanchard died in 1809. His wife, Marie, also a flying enthusiast, made several ascents and was finally killed in a fall from her burning balloon in 1819.

Blanchard loved flying. He did it for prestige, and glory, and money, and fun. But his biggest thrill was to be first.

And in almost everything he did, he was first. □