

'Air ship' caused stir in 1897

By Ben Sheehan
Staff writer

Was it An Air Ship? was the lead headline on the front page of *The Wilmington Messenger* for April 6, 1897.

In fact, later generations would probably have called it a UFO.

"Hundreds of people were out on the streets and wharves last night," the unsigned report began, "looking at a brilliant floating mass in the heavens to the west of the city."

"It was moving very rapidly and many persons are not-worried about the aerial wonder," the report continued. "Some of our very best and most reliable citizens saw so much of the heavenly stranger that they had not the slightest doubt but that it was the air ship which has been reported from other cities."

Underneath the Wilmington reporter's story, the *Messenger's* editors ran similar wire-service stories of mysterious "air ship" sightings. One was from Omaha, Neb., dated March 31; another from Kansas City, Mo., dated April 4.

Both stories carried accounts of bright, glowing lights similar to the one that Wilmingtonians had seen. In both cases, viewers assumed they were seeing a flying machine.

All three sightings came more than six years before the Wright Brothers' flight at Kitty Hawk, at a time when most lighter-than-air vessels were still slow and cumbersome.

The ship moved to the west at a rapid rate," the *Messenger's* report of the Wilmington sighting concluded. "It seemed to have something like a searchlight, facing earth-wards, and (it) created a peculiar among all classes of people."



"The ship appeared to come from the ocean and passed opposite the Market Street dock going in the direction of the Neversun gasco works. Some gentlemen who saw the ship through field glasses inform us that they could see wires and ropes and rigging about it."

The unidentified flying object over Wilmington, like those seen at Omaha and Kansas City, was not an isolated occurrence. Dozens of such sightings were reported in newspapers across the United States during 1896 and 1897.

Those who believe that many UFOs are advanced craft controlled by intelligent beings frequently cite these reports, noting their consistency with the UFOs described since World War II. Bright, hovering lights, searchlights and so forth.

UFO skeptics, however, see the "air ship" of the 1890s as a classic case of mass suggestion.

Ordinary citizens would read accounts of "air ship" sightings in either papers, they argue. Or they could read some of the many speculative books of the period about flight, such as John Verne's *The Master of the World*.

Then, when something strange passed over their homes, they would convince themselves they were seeing what others saw.

Books dealing with the "air ship" were include *The Great Air Ship Mystery of the 1890s* by Daniel Cohen (Doubt, 1981) and *The UFO Conspiracy in America* by David Michael Jacobs (Indiana University Press, 1975).