



- Emory C. Malick, raised in Sunbury and shown in a 1912 student photo, may have been the first African-American to earn a pilot's license. Photo provided



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[Was first African-American pilot born here?](#)

By Jane Kessler [For The Daily Item](#)

— Carter G. Woodson, who acquired a doctorate degree in history from Harvard University in 1912, is known as the father of Black History Month. Woodson would have been thrilled to know that in that same year, while he was accomplishing his own dreams of becoming a scholar, there was another young African-American man from Pennsylvania, Emory C. Malick, who was attempting a feat of his own: becoming a licensed pilot.

Today, one of his descendants is trying to prove he was, in fact, the first African-American to hold a pilot's license.

Malick, born in 1881 and raised in Sunbury, acquired an early interest in aviation. The events of his flights were in newspapers of that time, but the background for his interests was shown in his hand-written letters that were in his estate and presented to the Snyder County Historical Society by his nephew, Warren F. Groce, of Selinsgrove.

Malick acquired a pilot's license at Curtiss Aviation School in San Diego on March 20, 1912. After earning his license, Malick obtained, assembled and improved upon a Curtiss "pusher" bi-plane, which in August 1914 he flew over Selinsgrove to "the wonderment of all," the Selinsgrove Times reported.

By Aug. 30, William M. Schnure's "Chronology of Selinsgrove" mentions that Malick made several flights over Penns Creek above town and that a new era was reached in local history. Malick became the first pilot to soar through the skies of Snyder and Northumberland counties. Factories shut down to witness the novelty.

Malick in later years made Philadelphia his home and applied his skills to transporting passengers for the Flying Dutchman Air Service and took aerial photographs for Dallin Aerial Surveys.

On a brisk March day in 1928, at a Camden, N.J., air show, Malick took two passengers for a quick hop in his Waco three-seater. They were barely aloft when the engine died. Malick banked to the left to avoid spectators; unfortunately, the wind caught the aircraft, and the Waco crashed.

“The entire plane seemed to crumple as if it had been smitten by the fist of a giant,” reported a Sunbury newspaper. The two passengers were injured. Later that year, Malick crashed again — the cause isn’t known — this time injuring himself and killing his passenger. He never flew again.

He remained interested in aviation; at a flying club banquet, Malick displayed the 60-horsepower engine that powered his 1914 flight over Selinsgrove. But the aviator refused all opportunities to go flying. Documents at the Snyder County Historical Society say that, in the 1930s, when local pilots offered to take Malick flying, he would reply, “I had my fun, and now I’m done.”

Emory C. Malick died in late 1958 in Philadelphia after being found unconscious on a city sidewalk, possibly the victim of a crime, a fall or a heart attack. His body lay in the morgue for a month because of a lack of identification. Fortunately, a Christmas card received from his sister, Annie M. Groce, led the FBI to contact her to identify the body. Emory was laid to rest with his mother and grandmother in Wolf’s Crossroads Cemetery near Sunbury.

On Feb. 5, the Smithsonian Air Space Magazine published an article about Malick called “In the Museum: “The Unrecognized First.” Since 2004, Mary Groce, great-niece of Malick, has struggled with hours and hours of conscientious research to prove that her ancestor is unequivocally the first African-American licensed pilot in the United States, some 14 years before aviator James Herman Banning, who was long thought to be the first.

Malick’s historical significance might have been lost if it weren’t for the tireless efforts of his great-niece, who is writing a book about him, hopefully to be published next year.

— *“Once Upon A Time In ...” is a Monday feature provided by the historical societies in Montour, Northumberland, Snyder and Union counties. The columns focus on people, places and objects of historical significance in those counties. Jane Kessler is a lifetime member of the Snyder County Historical Society, 30 E. Market St., Middleburg. The library is available for research from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays. It is closed holidays and during inclement weather. For information, call 837-6191 or visit www.snydercounty.org/schs.*