Samuel Pierpont Langley Encyclopedia Article

Samuel Pierpont Langley

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Samuel Pierpont Langley

1834-1906

American aviation pioneer who first worked as an astrophysicist before becoming secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in 1887. While there, he studied solar radiation and popularized scientific knowledge through magazine articles. Beginning in 1890, he used his knowledge of aerodynamics to design and construct powered aircraft models and test them from a houseboat on the Potomac River. A full-scale piloted machine failed to fly in 1903, but the hired pilot survived. Langley claimed later that his machine could have beaten the Wright brothers' aircraft; the design, however, was structurally too weak to withstand aerodynamic forces.