

DE ACOSTA, AIDA (1884–1962)

Before Wilbur and Orville Wright's epic flight in December 1903, Aida de Acosta, a New York Cuban woman from a well-to-do family, became, possibly, the first woman to pilot a motorized airship. Her father fought for independence in the Spanish-Cuban–American War (1898) but de Acosta's daring deed in 1903 was never mentioned because women of that time were expected to maintain private, lady-like reputations. The story of de Acosta's flight surfaced some thirty years later at a dinner party in New York City when a young U.S. Navy officer explained to his hostess why he wanted to fly dirigibles, to which she replied with her own story. During World War I de Acosta sold \$2 million worth of liberty bonds. Later, she worked for the American Committee for Devastated France. Known for her philanthropy and social action, in 1935 New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia named her chair of a newly formed art committee to "stimulate the artistic life and expression of the city." Afflicted with glaucoma, de Acosta led a multimillion-dollar campaign to help establish the Wilmer Ophthalmological Institute at Johns Hopkins University. In her sixties she served as the first director of the Eye Bank for Sight Restoration, a position she held from 1945 until she retired in 1955.