

# History Without Evidence is Myth: J.G. Household and Claims of Flight in 1870's Africa.

By James W. Swinnich

It's all William Gallagher's fault! The *NSM Journal* editor mentioned in passing, two years ago, a John Goodman Household. This apparition of an aviator supposedly had a controlled flight(s) in a hang glider in Africa during the 1870's, fifteen to twenty-five years prior to Lilienthal, Chanute and the Wright Brothers. William had taken one of the hundreds of e-mail, letter and telephone requests regularly received by the NSM over the course of a year; the answer to the inquiry was Household's name itself. It should be noted that even the spelling of Household's name is up for debate: Household or Houshold? William, however, likes to put thorns in the paws of the curious, especially regarding aviation history.

After dropping Household's name and pulling the pitifully thin NSM "Household" educational folder, Gallagher twisted the thorn; there was no primary source evidence that the flight, or flights, were ever made. To our knowledge only stories from later generations existed, and even these sources had not been documented (cited) or validated by any cross referencing of historical sources.



Fig.1 John Household

History and myth will always be entwined, with apocryphal sources and stories aplenty. Encompassed in the NSM mission, as an institution of higher learning, is a vain attempt to separate out fact from fiction. Gallagher is constantly immersed in the *NSM Journal*, responding to inquiries, performing outreach programs at schools and for local organizations, and aiding in preparing exhibit text and object searches for the new exhibitions in the expanded physical plant. In placing the thorn, Gallagher knew I, as unsuspecting dupe, was the only one at NSM with enough time to track the Household history or legend.

We are no closer to the truth about Household and his flight(s) than when this research effort started. Continued probing meant increasingly conflicting information, often with sources directly juxtaposed

against one another, not agreeing upon the most basic information, and providing descriptions of the flight(s), which are illogical, and without factual base. It is a repetitive demonstration of the cliched axiom "you can't always believe what you read."

I have not been able to identify one object(s), document(s), photograph(s), or oral narrative(s) from an eyewitness (that has been written or recorded and cited) providing even the most basic platform on which to build the case for arguing Household designed, built or flew a glider. At this point, there just is no valid historical evidence.



Fig.2 Map of Kwa Zulu-Natal

All of these accounts in monographs, newspaper articles, magazines, lectures, even a plaque, and there is no primary source evidence for these claims. Although it is apparent from duplicate words and phrases that authors lifted information from the earlier writings of others, the later authors do not even acknowledge or reference from where they received their material. Where references do exist, they direct the researcher only to secondary sources. As U.W. Nanni stated in 1980 at an event held by the

PMB Hang Gliding Club in Natal, “the authors embellished each others’ versions or uncritically paraphrased earlier accounts.” (1)

Nanni is one of the few individuals having written or spoke on the Household subject that admits there are more questions than answers. Another such personage who argues this point of view is L.J. Clarke. In an unpublished undated manuscript held at the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAS) Archives in London, England, Clarke writes on the lack of evidence regarding the Household story. After performing extensive research, Clarke laments not being able to identify credible historical resources to support writings about Household’s adventures. I wrote Clarke through the dutiful and expeditious efforts of Brian Riddle, librarian at the R.A.S. Mr. Clarke responded with a letter confirming the results of his original research.

Clarke’s work, from the 1960’s, resulted in similar frustration. “Specific claims were found to be either contradictory or when finally tracked down, false. Documents and plans which people said they owned were never forthcoming. And again and again claims were found to be based on hearsay – often of long-dead illiterate African farm laborers... “The further the investigation progressed the more dead-ends, the greater the silence from those who had claimed to possess what I was looking for: contemporary writings or other legitimate evidence plus specific information on design and construction from reliable sources.” Clarke concludes that Household’s aviation works were a “far cry from Man’s first true flight, but perhaps a starting point for a local legend which has now swollen into emphatic nation-wide assertions.” (2)



Fig.3 Bishop Colenso

Continuing to write on the subject, in 1987, Clarke states, “clearly, there is nothing here to legitimately substantiate either a glider as such, or actual flights by it. Instead, the

“evidence” with its wild exaggerations, inaccuracies, contradictions and sheer impossibilities, carries all the hallmarks of legend and even patriotic myth.” (3)

Admittedly, there are numerous stones left unturned in this research. Clarke touches upon further investigation regarding Archer Household’s 1923 or 1926 claims to a Salisbury, Rhodesia newspaper, a 1928 Natal motoring magazine article, and the research performed by the South African National Historical Monuments Commission in their 1964-1966 work.

I would argue that the elemental source rests with the works of Bishop Colenso. Documentation from this primary source would be irrefutable. If one believes some of the stories, Household had communications with Colenso, and even showed him drawings, sketches and calculations in preparation for flight. Some say these papers were burnt. The challenge is that Colenso was a brilliant man and author of pamphlets, textbooks, periodicals, volumes of letters, diaries, and personal papers. Vast collections of Colenso’s works exist; the most promising at the Killie Campbell Africana Library at the University of Natal in Durban and the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository. One would have to scour the entirety of these collections to learn if any of the Household related materials are extant.

In addition, one should query, how about the archives of the *Natal Witness* and *Natal Mercury* newspapers from the 1870’s through the 1910’s? Do such archives exist and are they accessible? After reading the fictional accounts from the 1960’s newspapers it is difficult to believe anything found written in such sources. However, first hand accounts, as quoted in the papers from the time period would certainly prove invaluable.



Fig.4 Zulu King Cetshwayo

If Household designed, built and experienced controlled flight in the 1870’s, his accomplishments must still be kept in historical perspective. Compared to even contemporaneous events in Natal and South Africa, the

Household flight(s) must be viewed as bordering on inconsequential.

Conflict between the imperialist British and indigenous Zulu, especially in Natal, boiled for decades in the 1800's. The Zulus were fighting for their land, independence, home, and families. The festering boil exploded in 1879 with the Anglo-Zulu War. This horrific episode included the battle of Isandlwana (17 January 1879), in which 20,000-25,000 Zulu led by King Cetshwayo attacked and annihilated 1,400-1,500 British troops under Lord Chelmsford. As with all other engagements, the Zulu had shields and assegai (a slender hardwood spear or light javelin usually tipped with iron, made from assegai tree) while the British had muskets, revolvers, machine guns, and artillery. The worst fighting in war took place in the Natal region where Household supposedly flew only a couple years earlier in the decade.

This warring did not resolve disputes between the two peoples. In 1906 Natal, the conflict again erupted as the Zulu people revolted and were squelched by the British. One of the Zulu leaders, Chief Bambatha, was beheaded after the six-week uprising.

The Anglo-Boer wars of 1880-1881 and 1899-1902 also devastated Natal and South Africa, with scorched earth policies being implemented. Concentration camps held 115,000 captives, with between 20,000 and 25,000 people dying (about 80% of them women and children) within these confines (4).” Indigenous peoples were either forced to fight (15,000 for the British) or rounded up for fear they had strong allegiances to either the British or the Dutch and Huguenots. In a bizarre twist of racism, they were placed in their own concentration camps. (5)

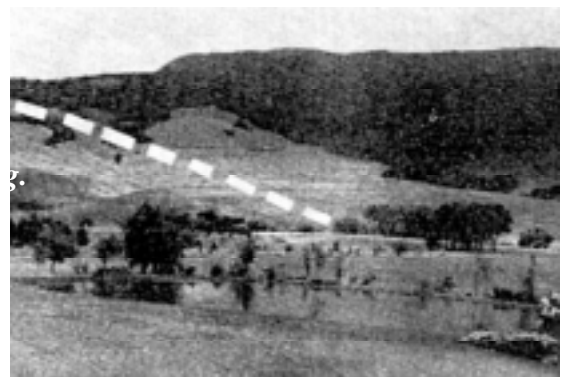
If one moves forward in time, South Africans (indigenous and otherwise) fare no better. Similar to the treatment of indigenous people and minorities in this country, apartheid, its overthrow, outcomes and backlash, translates solely into increased hatred, violence and a struggle for power. Tying these tragic events to Natal, one can point to the arrest of Nelson Mandela, just outside Howick, by South African police on 5 August 1962 on the Dargle Road. Howick is the closest city to the Household farm where his attempt(s) were made. (6)

Certainly the Household question is a valid historical

subject from an aviation and scientific standpoint. The question also could be interpreted as another example of the history of Africa only being written from the perspective of the white man's presence there. One of the unfortunate aspects of the research executed for this article is the obvious lack of African history prior to the arrival of whites, the nearly non-existent history of Africa's original inhabitants through the 1960's, and the lack of African history written from the black perspective. These histories are probably available in languages other than English, but it is unfortunate there is not a developed core of such materials regarding African history, let alone that of South Africa.

In performing such research, one is struck by the absolutely horrendous hell-on-earth brought to the nation and region by humans and the indescribable magnificence of natural beauty in South Africa, and in particular in Kwa Zulu-Natal.

In the Sterling Library, as part of the Yale University Manuscript and Archives Collection, is a black and white image of Howick Falls, taken at about the same time Household allegedly made his flights. The photograph captures the wild beauty of the region. From the glossy prints of the same Howick Falls and Karkloof Falls taken in the 1990's, the plush highlands remain what must be some of the most beautiful landscapes on earth. Game reserves, national parks and refuges abound, justifiably covering thousands of squares acres. It was indeed over the Karkloof River Valley, KwaZulu-Natal, Midlands Region, in South Africa, that Household allegedly flew.



**Fig.5 One of a myriad of imagined flight paths**

Household's surroundings at the time also included one Bishop John William Colenso. Colenso, serving the Anglican Church, arrived in 1855 (he had previously visited for ten weeks) and departed only in death in 1883.

Among his accomplishments was that of academic, mathematician, theologian, philosopher, missionary, linguist, biblical scholar, and humanitarian. He translated entire the New Testament and part of the Old into Zulu, he wrote the first Zulu-English dictionary; he championed the indigenous Zulus, and was nicknamed Sobantu - father of the people. (7)

Barring any other primary source material being located, it is within Colenso's papers that the last gasp of life is held in which to find valid primary source material on Household and his work. A couple of secondary works on the Household subject detail how he had both correspondence and contact with Bishop Colenso, given Colenso's noteworthy accomplishments in the field of mathematics. Household, so the myth/legend/history goes, discussed design and calculations with Colenso to gain his considerable opinion. This contact included, supposedly, drawings, sketches, calculations and the like. The same stories have the papers being destroyed (usually burned) at Household's request, or doing, as part of his following through on his promise to his mother never to discuss or attempt flying again.

It is amongst Colenso's vast papers, held primarily at the Killie Campbell Africana Library at the University of Natal in Durban and the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository, in Pietermaritzburg, that one would spend weeks examining thousands of documents in search for what could be one, if such a researcher was indeed so lucky, piece or shred of evidence that Colenso knew of, or participated in, Household's endeavor. That piece of evidence would provide the world with valid historical documentation that Household was indeed decades ahead of his aeronautical compatriots.



Fig.6 Household as Miner

Questions abound. Why wasn't there any discussion about Household's efforts upon learning of the accomplishments by the generation of aviators to follow - Lilienthal, Chanute, and the Wrights. Household lived until 1906.

Photographs of Lilienthal in flight received worldwide distribution and newspapers covered him heavily as he established his "hill of flight" close to a railroad station outside Berlin to guarantee such exposure. Chanute was well known for striking up long term communications with aeronauts from around the world.

The region of Natal was, and still is, isolated, even for South Africa. However, both the *Natal Witness* (Pietermaritzberg in 1846) and the *Natal Mercury* (Durban in 1852) went to press for the first time long before Household took flight. Both are still in operation. Are there answers in their archives? Do they have such archives? Surely, given the importance and novelty of work in aviation in the late 1800's and early 1900's, and given Household's work and continued residence in Natal, wouldn't an editor or writer be inclined to pursue such a story? Of course we must realize that there were other far more significant events taking place in Natal at the time.

Although Household supposedly promised his mother never to take to the friendly skies again, or even to discuss flight, what happened after his mother passed (when did this occur)? Not to argue that a promise made should ever be a promise not kept, but Household even kept mum with all the developments in aeronautics taking place prior to his death. Once one has flown, especially in such an adventurous and sensory overload experience, a human being does not simply lose the spirit for flight which first inspired. If not Household himself, what about his brother Archer, other relatives or area residents? Nobody said or wrote a word until after Household's death?

So what do we know for sure? There is general agreement on dates of Household's birth, death and voyage to Africa, but we know more about Octave Chanute's dogs, *Rags and Tatters*, than we do about John Goodman Household. We know how to spell their names, have references to the canines in writings by those conducting the aeronautic experiments and photographic evidence they were at Chanute's Lake Michigan camp.

Did Household fly some craft sometime? There are too many stories with too much widespread conjecture to not be based upon some type of event. Of course, this cannot pass for knowledge, this is guesswork. With this stance, we once again reach the definition of mythology. This is the highest bar over which we can claim to have vaulted

regarding known truth on the subject. According to *The Random House College Dictionary* (unabridged and revised edition, with Jess Stein as editor, New York, Random House International, 1982). A *myth* is “a story or belief that attempts to express or explain a basic truth” or “a belief or a subject of belief whose truth or reality is accepted uncritically.” Currently, the Household stories must be classified as mythology.

When were the flight(s) attempted? Sources vary both on the number of flight(s) and when they were taken. The number runs from one, two and three up to “several.” The time frame stretches from 1871 to 1878, with 1871 and 1875 being the most common guesses. (8)

Where did the flight(s) take place? There is consensus that Household attempted flight from a cliff (krantz) near his Der Magtenberg Farm (from “behind” the house to “1.75 miles” away). Most authors identify this escarpment as overlooking the Karkloof Valley, near the 325-foot drop Karkloof Falls, over which the Karkloof River flows.



**Fig.7 Karkloof Falls**

Glider design and materials are intriguing, regardless of the version contemplated. If there are two craft constructed in the story, the first is usually described as a single wing hang glider with a shifting (or swinging) seat, built from bamboo, river reed, oiled paper and rope. Wood and calico fabric are also sometimes included in the list of materials. It should be noted that a couple writers state that this first hang glider was built, but never flown. The second craft, if one is believed by the writer to have been built and flown, is usually similar in design, but varies from the first with the substitution of steel rods (for bamboo) and silk (for oiled paper).

What were the dimensions of the flight(s)? The distance covered by Household is either noted as about 3,900 feet or about 1,200 feet. A couple authors do not venture a guess at a distance. How high did he fly? Close enough to the sun so as to melt the wax, which bound together his feathered wings? Heights attained include 8, 20, 200, 300, and 1000 feet. One thousand feet would mean Household probably would have had to actually climb significantly during the flight. The Karkloof precipice, over which the falls flows, measures only about 325 feet, if this is indeed the location from which Household ventured from the earth. The claim that his flight reached eight feet is more believable, if the same article had not stated the flight covered 1,200 feet. It is difficult to imagine covering that much ground without ever flying higher than the height of a living room ceiling.

Nearly all versions have the glider surviving the crash, being stored in a barn on the Household farm (why bother if he was never to fly again?), and then being burnt or otherwise destroyed soon after the homestead was sold (latest 1890's or earliest 1900's). Another common thread relates that any existing paperwork relating to flight was discarded or set afire by Household soon after his last flight, and following the promise to his mother of no more aeronautical thoughts or pursuits.

Are you more confused about Household and his flight(s) than when you began reading this article? If so, then this article has accomplished at least a measure of its assigned task. Everyone with an interest in the history of aviation should be aware that we know far less about John Goodman Household and his flight(s) than what has been written. No one should be writing about the subject at hand until primary source documentation is located and identified; otherwise, we are merely perpetuating a myth.

This is a call to action for aviation historians in the United States and South Africa. Primary sources must be found to break the cycle of misinformation, half-truths, falsehoods and fabrications about Household. It is hoped that this article is a small first step taken, thorn in paw, toward that ambition.

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