

*presents*

# Bessie Coleman: Queen of the Skies

*featuring*

**Charlotte Blake Alston,  
Storyteller**

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# Introduction

# Introduction

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Dear Teachers,

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman was a native Texan who was determined to fulfill her dream of learning how to fly. Making that dream a reality was exceedingly difficult in America in the 1920’s, as women and people of color faced many prejudices and roadblocks.

Even though people tried, she let no one stop her from achieving her dream of being an aviator. People were fascinated by her fearless public flight performances, and she became famous in both the United States and in Europe. In fact, Dr. Mae Jemison, the first Black woman astronaut, carried a picture of Bessie Coleman in her flight suit when she went into space in 1992.

This study guides provides a support to the fabulous storytelling of *Bessie Coleman: Queen of the Sky*, narrated by Charlotte Blake Alston. We hope you and your students enjoy learning how Bessie found a way to achieve her dream, despite the obstacles she faced, to become the “Queen of the Skies.”

Children’s Education Program  
Performing Arts Fort Worth





# Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills

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There are many TEKS that correspond with *Bessie Coleman: Queen of the Sky*. Below are just a few that we felt best correlated with the production.

## Social Studies:

The student understands important issues, events, and individuals in the United States during the 20th and 21st centuries.

- 5.5(A) explain the significance of issues and events of the 20th century such as industrialization urbanization, the Great Depression, the world wars, the civil rights movement, and military actions
- 5.5(C) identify the accomplishments and contributions of individuals and groups as well as in the areas of civil rights, women's rights, military actions, and politics
- 5.18(B) identify leadership qualities of national leaders, past and present
- 5.17(A) explain why individuals have a duty to participate in civic affairs at the local, state, and national levels
- 5.19(A) describe the fundamental rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights, including freedom of religion speech, and press; the right to assemble and petition the government; the right to keep and bear arms; the right to trial by jury; and the right to an attorney
- 5.21(B) summarize the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to our national identity
- 5.22(A) identify the accomplishments of notable individuals in the fields of science and technology such as Benjamin Franklin, Eli Whitney, John Deere, Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, George Washington Carver, the Wright Brothers, and Neil Armstrong
- 5.22(B) identify how scientific discoveries, technological innovations, and the rapid growth of technology industries have advanced the economic development of the United States, including the transcontinental railroad and the space program
- 5.22(C) explain how scientific discoveries and technological innovations in the fields of medicine, communication, and transportation have benefited individuals and society in the United States

## Theater:

The student relates theatre to history, society, and culture. The student responds to and evaluates theatre and theatrical performances.

- 5.4(A) explain theatre as a reflection of life in particular times, places, cultures, and oral traditions specific to American history.
- 5.5(B) compare visual, aural, oral, and kinetic aspects of informal and formal theatre with the elements of art, dance, or music.



**Charlotte Blake Alston**

# Charlotte Blake Alston

Charlotte Blake Alston grew up in Philadelphia. As a child, her father read to her and encouraged her to learn and recite poems written by African American poets. Alston taught for many years and as a teacher and she learned the power of a story to teach children their history and their legacy. She decided to stop teaching so she could go to Africa and learn more about the history of her people, then tour the United States and share her stories through storytelling.

Her performances are often enhanced with traditional instruments such as djembe, mbira or the 21-stringed kora. She calls herself a “griot,” or a traditional storyteller, a wise and knowledgeable storyteller who documents people’s history, the common human experience.



Charlotte Blake Alston

Charlotte Blake Alston has performed with many symphony orchestras as a narrator at some of the most prestigious performing arts halls in the country such as; the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Smithsonian Institution, the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts and at national and international Storytelling Festivals.

Ms. Alston has received numerous honors including the prestigious Pew Fellowship in the Arts. She holds two honorary PhDs and received the Circle of Excellence Award from the National Storytelling Association. She is a recipient of the Zora Neale Hurston Award, the highest award bestowed by the National Association of Black Storytellers. In 2021 she was named the Philadelphia Orchestra’s “Official Storyteller, Narrator and Host” marking an association that has spanned over 30 years.





# Bessie Colemans Life and Legacy

# Bessie Coleman's Life

**Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman** (1892-1926) was born as one of 13 children. Her mother was an African American maid, and her father was a sharecropper of mixed Native American and African American descent. The family moved a few years later to Waxahachie, Texas, and lived in a one room shack. Her parents could not read or write. Bessie and her siblings had to help make ends meet by picking cotton, meaning that she and her siblings only attended the Black school when crops were either already in the ground or had been picked. Bessie would also take in laundry to raise money, doing the wash by hand, since they had no electricity.

Around 1915, she joined “The Great Migration” and moved to Chicago, Illinois to live with her brothers. The Great Migration was a time between 1910-1970, where approximately six million African Americans left the Southern states to escape racial violence and the oppressive Jim Crow laws, to pursue economic and educational opportunities in the Northern states.

She worked for four years as a manicurist, while living with her older brothers. They had come back from World War I, with stories of women who were flying planes in Europe. That sparked her imagination, giving her dreams of learning to fly planes. No women, and no Black Americans, flew planes at that time in the United States.



Bessie Coleman with a Curtiss JN-4D, “Jenny” c.1924

# Bessie Coleman's Legacy

Coleman applied to flight schools all over the United States, but none would accept her because of her race. She refused to take “No” for an answer and so decided she would go to France to learn to fly. In America, no school would allow a colored student, but in France, all you needed was the passion and the dream.

With the backing of Robert Abbott, the influential owner of *The Chicago Defender*, the most popular Black newspaper in the area, she applied to flight school in Paris and was accepted. She taught herself to speak French, boarded a ship to France, and nine months later in 1921, had become the first female and the first African American to attain an International flight license. In Europe, she was considered one of the best flyers they had ever seen.



Bessie Coleman c. 1921

She wanted to open her own flight school for African Americans and have a regular aviation job but was continually turned down because she was Black, as well as a woman. She decided to get more training in Europe in order to do special aerial tricks. Coleman traveled across the US and performed loops, figure-eights and parachute jumps to integrated crowds. She was a sensation to all Americans and gave motivational talks at African American churches and events all around the country.

Coleman refused to fly in an airshow when she found out Black patrons were expected to enter through a separate gate than the White patrons. As she was the prime attraction, the event gave into her demands and let all patrons, regardless of race come through any entrance. Coleman was nicknamed “Queen Bess” for her leadership--both in the air and on ground. In 1926, as Coleman and her mechanic were preparing for an airshow in Florida, the plane malfunctioned, and they both fell to their death.

Coleman was a fearless woman who defied odds and was not afraid to be different. Bessie dared to dream of bigger things and inspired many with those dreams. Over the years, countless clubs, organizations and scholarships have honored Coleman's legacy and invoked her spirit while encouraging participation and equality in aviation and aerospace. Her story continues to inspire woman and young people of all races to this day.



# The Wright Brothers

# The Wright Brothers

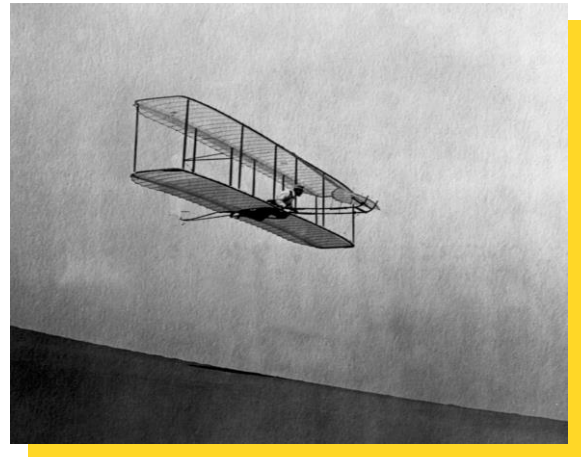
In 1903, brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright invented the airplane. These American inventors from Dayton, Ohio, had a fondness for machines and engines. Before they got into aeronautics, the Wright Brothers had their own printing shop and bicycle building and repair business.

Their bicycle repair business began to expand, and they eventually had five locations. They found out that airplanes and bicycles had a lot in common and towards the end of the 1890's, they began to build experimental airplanes. These first experimental unmanned airplanes, called Gliders, were nothing more than giant kites. They invented techniques in aeronautical engineering and flight testing that is still used today.



Wilbur Wright piloting the 1908 Wright Flyer in Pau, France.

The Wright Brothers, due to fearless curiosity and experimentation, had created the power of flight! The world soon became obsessed with flight, and the Wright's invention of the airplane, truly changed the world.



Wilbur Wright piloting the 1902 Glider. Kitty Hawk, NC

In 1902, Wilbur Wright piloted a motorless glider and they were able to make great leaps in the production and creation of the rudder, wings and eventually the motor. The Brothers were thrilled with the success of their glider, and it was after this flight, when they decided, they were going to invent the airplane.

They set about creating a propulsion system that could propel the aircraft when there was little or no wind. The Wright Brothers and Charlie Taylor, one of their bicycle mechanics, created a 4-cylinder engine and the propellers to help achieve sustainable flight. By 1905, they were able to make routine flights that were more than thirty minutes long.



# Resources

# Resources

- National Women's History Museum:
  - Biography, and Reflection questions: <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/bessie-coleman>
- National Air and Space Museum – Smithsonian:
  - Photo driven biography and additional videos and activities of Bessie Coleman: <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/bessie-coleman>
  - Photos and information about the Curtiss JN 4D "Jenny": [https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/curtiss-jn-4d-jenny/nasm\\_A19190006000](https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/curtiss-jn-4d-jenny/nasm_A19190006000)
  - Virtual tour of Wright Brothers exhibit: <https://airandspace.si.edu/virtual-tours/wright-brothers/?startscene=0&startlookat=-15,0,115,0,0;>
  - Interactive article, images and 3D Flyer of the Wright Brothers: <https://airandspace.si.edu/explore/stories/wright-brothers>
- NPR Austin:
  - Brief bio and audio spot on Coleman: <https://www.kut.org/texas/2017-03-31/texas-womens-history-month-the-first-black-female-pilot>
- PBS American Experience:
  - Biography: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/flygirls-bessie-coleman/>
- Sister of the Sky:
  - A nonprofit for promoting and supporting Female pilots of Color: <https://sistersoftheskies.org/>
- United States Air Force:
  - Biography of Coleman: <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/111769/bessie-coleman-woman-who-dared-to-dream-made-aviation-history/>
- Cradle of Aviation Museum:
  - Bio of Coleman and Influence on Dr. Mae Jamison: <https://www.cradleofaviation.org/history/history/women-in-aviation/bessie-coleman.html>
- France-Amerique:
  - French magazine that tells of her legacy in France: <https://france-amerique.com/bessie-coleman-black-wings-over-france/>
- Frontiers of Flight Museum:
  - Information, Pictures and Videos of the Curtiss JN-4D "Jenny": <https://www.flightmuseum.com/explore/jn-4d/>
- National Parks Service:
  - Activity – Learning from Women in Aviation: <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/learning-from-women-in-aviation.htm>



# Angels In The Wings



# Angels In The Wings

Angels in the Wings support the Children's Education Program of Performing Arts Fort Worth at the Nancy Lee and Perry R. Bass Performance Hall with gifts of \$1,000 and above. The Children's Education Program is an integral part of Bass Performance Hall but maintains its own support independent of Performing Arts Fort Worth. Each year, 70,000 students from Fort Worth ISD and North Texas experience high-quality curriculum-related performing arts programs at Bass Performance Hall that are free of charge to all participants because of the generosity of our Angels in the Wings. Visit [www.basshall.com](http://www.basshall.com) or call (817) 212-4311 for more information.

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