

Bessie Coleman

1892-1926

Bessie Coleman was born as one of 13 children to a sharecropper and his wife in 1892 in Atlanta, Texas. 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.

Texas



She always wanted to “amount to something,” as she put it, and joined the Great Migration north to Chicago around 1915, to find new opportunities. 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.

World War I was the first major war where airplanes were used as a significant part of the military. The airplane was invented by the Wright Brothers in 1903, just 11 years before the start of World War I. When the war first begun, aircraft

played a small role in warfare. But by the end of the war, the air force had become an important branch of the armed forces.



Bessie applied to flight schools all over the country, but none would accept her. She refused to take “No” for an answer. She decided she would go to France to learn to fly. 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, she had become the first female and the first African American to attain an International flight license. She was considered in Europe one of the best flyers they had ever seen.

In those days, planes were very simple: they had no steering wheel or brakes. Once a pilot landed a plane, he dropped a skid to drag along the ground until it finally stopped. The cockpit was open to the elements, with no protection. They were also much slower: the top flight speed was just about 100 miles per hour.

We have overcome the barriers within ourselves and dared to dream.

--Bessie Coleman

She wanted to open her own flight school for African Americans and have a regular aviation job but was continually turned down. So, after getting more training in Europe in order to do special aerial tricks, she became a barnstormer, traveling around the country. She also gave motivational talks to Blacks around the country, having become very famous.

She would not perform in an airshow that made Blacks enter by a separate gate. She was nicknamed “Queen Bess” for her leadership--both in the air and on ground.

She bought her own plane. It was in preparation for an air show in Florida, however, that she and her assistant crashed, both dying instantly. At her memorial service, thousands of people paid their respects. The Tuskegee Airmen paid tribute to her in 1929 by dropping flowers over her grave from the sky. They established a flight school in her honor. There are many streets around airports in Chicago and Florida named after her, to this very day.



You can be somebody. You can fly high just like me.
--Bessie Coleman



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