

The Clerk's Black History Series

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Elizabeth "Bessie" Coleman
(January 26, 1892 – April 30, 1926)

"First African-American Woman to Hold a Pilot License"



Elizabeth "Bessie" Coleman was born on January 26, 1892, in Atlanta, Texas. Her mother, Susan Coleman, worked as a maid, and her father George Coleman was a sharecropper. Her parents moved to Waxahachie, Texas, when Bessie was two years old where they lived as sharecroppers. Bessie walked 4 miles to school each day and thrived in the subjects of reading and mathematics. In 1901, her father to move to Oklahoma to try to escape discrimination. Bessie's mother stayed in Waxahachie with the children. Bessie grew up helping her mother pick cotton and washing laundry to earn extra money. By the age of eighteen, she saved enough money to attend the Colored Agricultural and Normal University (now Langston University) in Langston, Oklahoma - for only one semester.

At age 23, Bessie went to live with her brothers in Chicago where she attended the Burnham School of Beauty Culture and worked as a manicurist. Her brothers served in the military during World War I and shared stories with Bessie of the French women who could fly airplanes. This sparked Bessie's interest in becoming a pilot. She applied to many flight schools across the U.S., but no school would admit her because she was both black and a woman. Robert Abbott, the owner of the Chicago Defender and one of the first black millionaires, encouraged Bessie to move to France where she could learn how to fly. She began taking French classes at night because her application to flight schools needed to be written in French. Finally, Bessie was accepted to the Caudron Brothers' School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France. She withdrew the savings she had accumulated from her work as a manicurist and, with the additional financial support of Abbott, set off for Paris from New York on November 20, 1920. She received her international pilot's license on June 15, 1921 from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale.

On September 3, 1922, Bessie performed the first public flight by an black woman. She was famous for doing "loop-the-loops" and making the shape of an "8" in an airplane. People were fascinated by her performances. Bessie's dream was to own her own plane and to open a flight school. She gave speeches and showed films of her air tricks in churches, theaters, and schools to earn money. She refused to speak anywhere that was segregated. Bessie encouraged black people to learn to fly planes, saying "you've never lived till you've flown."



During a flight in February 1923, her plane's engine suddenly stopped and she crashed. She suffered a broken leg, a few cracked ribs, and cuts on her face. She returned to performing her daring air tricks in 1925.

On April 30, 1926, Bessie took a test flight with a mechanic named William Wills. William was piloting the plane as Bessie sat in the passenger seat. At about 3,000 feet in the air, a loose wrench got stuck in the engine of the aircraft. Neither William or Bessie could control the aircraft and the plane flipped over. Unfortunately, Bessie was not wearing a seatbelt and since at the time planes did not have any overhead protection, she fell out the plane, to the ground. The plane crashed with Wills inside, just a few feet away from Bessie's body. Both Bessie and William died.

Famous activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett performed the funeral service, as more than 10,000 mourners paid their last respects to Bessie Coleman on Chicago's South Side. In 1931, the Challenger Pilots' Association of Chicago started a tradition of flying over Bessie Coleman's grave every year.

By 1977, African American women pilots formed the Bessie Coleman Aviators Club. In 1992 a Chicago City Council resolution requested that the U.S. Postal Service issue a Bessie Coleman stamp. The "Bessie Coleman Stamp" was issued to the public in 1995.

In September 1992, Mae Jemison, the first black woman in space, carried a photo of Bessie Coleman with her on her first mission aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavor.

