

The Clerk's Black History Series

Debra DeBerry Clerk of Superior Court DeKalb County

Willa Beatrice Brown

(January 22, 1906 – July 18, 1992)

“First Black Woman Pilot Licensed in the United States, First Black Woman to Possess a Commercial Pilot *and* a Master Mechanic's License”



Willa Beatrice Brown was born on January 22, 1906, in Glasgow, Kentucky. Her family moved to Terre Haute, Indiana where she graduated from Wiley High School. She attended Indiana State Teachers College and graduated in 1927 with a Bachelor's degree. Willa began teaching at Emerson High School's Roosevelt Annex the same year. In 1932, Willa moved to Chicago where she worked various jobs. In 1934, she met John C. Robinson, who introduced her to the Challenger Air Pilots Association, a group of Black pilots. Inspired by Bessie Coleman, the first woman to hold an international pilot's license (1921, from France), Willa began flight lessons at Chicago's Aeronautical University. She studied with Cornelius R. Coffey at the racially segregated Harlem Field in Chicago.

By 1935, Willa received her master mechanic's certificate and joined the Challenger Air Pilot's Association. She also joined the Chicago Girl's Flight Club and enrolled in a master's program at Northwestern University.

In 1938, with airman's certificate No. 43814, Willa Brown became the first Black woman to be licensed as a private pilot in the United States.

Willa and Coffey, along with then others, founded the National Airman's Association of America (NAAA). The organization had more than 2000 members across the Midwest and East Coast. In 1938, Will and Coffey opened the Coffey School of Aeronautics at the Harlem Airport. Their school, the first black-owned and operated flight school, was created to train black men to fly and provide cadets to the U.S. Air Force. And when Congress appropriated \$5,675,000 for the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA) to begin 220 pilot training programs across the country, the Coffey School of Aeronautics was authorized as a CAA school by January 1940. Willa acted as director and coordinator of training. Despite not being approved to provide training for the Army pilot training program, the Coffey School was selected to provide black trainees for the Air Corps' pilot training program at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. This pilot training program led to the creation of the Tuskegee Airmen and Brown trained nearly 200 of the men and women who

went on to become cadets or instructors. Many of her former students made up the 99th Fighter Squadron, also known as the “Red Tails”. Willa continued her work at Coffey, and in 1942 she achieved another “first” when she was the first black woman promoted to officer in the Civil Air Patrol (CAP). In 1943, she became the first woman in the United States who possessed both a mechanic's license and a commercial license in aviation. In 1946, Willa ventured into politics, running in the primary for Illinois's 1st Congressional District - making her the first woman to run in a congressional primary election. She lost, running again in 1950; she lost that bid as well.

Shortly after WWII, the Coffey School of Aeronautics closed. Willa continued advocating for equality in the skies. On January 26, 1948, President Truman signed E.O. 9981 abolishing segregation and ordering full integration of the armed forces. Willa returned to teaching in 1962 until her retirement in 1971. In 1972 Willa was the first black woman appointed to the Federal Aviation Administration's Women's Advisory Board and served on the board until 1974. In her life, she was married three times and widowed by 1999. On July 18, 1992, Willa Beatrice Brown died at the age of 86. In 2003, she was inducted into the Kentucky Aviation Hall of Fame.



Willa being sworn in as the first black woman Civil Air Patrol (CAP)