

Black History, Leaving a Legacy: Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman

By Jai Kulkarni

- She was not only the first African American woman, but the first Black woman in the world to hold a pilot's license.
- She was the first woman to get an international pilot's license.
- She was also the first woman of Native-American descent to hold a pilot's license.
- This extraordinary woman was a pioneer in aviation, helping to break barriers for African Americans and women alike.
- She was a famous aviator and became well-known for her stunt flying and aerial tricks.
- A public library in Chicago was named in Coleman's honor, as are roads at O'Hare International Airport, Oakland International Airport, Tampa International Airport, and at Germany's Frankfurt International Airport.
- She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame (2001) and the National Aviation Hall of Fame (2006). In 2014, she was inducted into the International Air & Space Hall of Fame at the San Diego Air & Space Museum.
- The U.S. Postal Service issued a “Bessie Coleman” stamp commemorating “her singular accomplishment in becoming the world's first African American pilot and, by definition, an American legend on April 27, 1995.”

Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman, the 10th of 13 children, was born on January 26, 1892 in Atlanta, Texas to parents who were both sharecroppers (picking cotton for the landowner). Her mother was African American, and her father's ancestors were Black and Choctaw, a Native American people.

At the age of six, Bessie attended a one-room, segregated schoolhouse in Waxahachie, Texas where she completed all eight grades. At the age of 12, she was accepted into the Missionary Baptist Church School on a scholarship. She continued to work hard and save her money to attend Langston University in Oklahoma, where she completed one term before running out of funds and returning home to Texas.

In 1915, a 23 year-old Bessie moved to Chicago, Illinois to work as a manicurist and to live with her older brother, who had served in France during the war. It was the adventurous stories of the soldiers returning from World War intrigued her and fostered her interest in aviation. Her brother's taunting claims that French women were superior to African American women because they could fly only fueled her motivation. As a matter of fact, very few women in the world – including American women of any race – had pilot's licenses in 1918. Those who did were predominantly white and wealthy.

Unfortunately, after every flying school refused to admit Bessie because she was both black and a woman, Bessie took a second job in order to save money and travel to France to pursue her dream to be a pilot. After teaching herself the French language in 1920 and receiving tuition assistance from Black philanthropists Robert Abbott (founder of the *Chicago Defender*) and Jesse Binga (a banker), she was accepted at the Caudron Brothers School of Aviation in Le Crotoy, France.

On June 15, 1921, Bessie became the first American woman to obtain an international pilot's license from the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale. With further training in France, she specialized in stunt flying and parachuting. However, when she returned to the United States, the racial and gender biases precluded her from becoming a commercial pilot yet again. In September of 1922, Bessie finally made her first appearance as “the world's greatest woman flier” at an American airshow honoring veterans of the all-Black 369th Infantry Regiment of the First World War.

Bessie returned to Chicago and continued to work for the next several years as a “barnstorming” pilot – performing riveting demonstrations of aerobatics. Popularly known as “Queen Bess” and “Brave Bessie,” she chose to perform only at air exhibitions if the crowd was desegregated and permitted to enter through the same gates.

While Bessie neared her goal of opening a flight school for African Americans in the United States, she was tragically killed on April 30, 1926 during a rehearsal for an aerial show. Bessie was only 34 years old.

Despite this tragic fate, Bessie Coleman is credited with inspiring generations of African American aviators, male and female – including the Tuskegee Airmen and NASA astronauts. But it took time for Bessie Coleman to achieve recognition beyond the African American community in her day. Mae Jemison, who in 1992 became the first African American woman to go into space, wrote in an afterword to “Queen Bess: Daredevil Aviator” that she had felt “embarrassed and saddened that I did not learn of her until my spaceflight beckoned on the horizon.” Later, the U.S. Postal Service issued a “Bessie Coleman” stamp commemorating “her singular accomplishment in becoming the world’s first African American pilot and, by definition, an American legend.”

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Want to know more about Elizabeth “Bessie” Coleman?

<https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/the-black-experience/flight-bessie-coleman>

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/flygirls-bessie-coleman/>

<https://kids.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/bessie-coleman>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/obituaries/bessie-coleman-overlooked.html>

Watch the short documentary *The Legend: The Bessie Coleman Story*