



Bessie Coleman (January 26, 1892 - April 30, 1926)

Bessie Coleman was the first Black woman (and first of Native American descent) to earn a pilot's license, and has been an inspiration to generations of budding pilots for her courage and determination.

Born to a family of sharecroppers in Texas, Bessie excelled in school despite having to walk four miles each day to reach her segregated, one-room school building and spending the rest of her time helping her mother pick cotton and wash laundry for extra money. She did her best to earn enough for college, but had to leave after her first semester when the money ran out.

Several of her brothers had moved north to Chicago in the early stages of the Great Migration, and Bessie went to live with them at age 23. Dazzled by stories of aviation from their experiences in World War I, Bessie developed aspirations to become a pilot herself, but American flight schools at the time admitted neither women nor Black people. Luckily, her plight attracted the attention of the famous Robert S. Abbott, founder and publisher of the *Chicago Defender* (one of the premier sources of migration information for Blacks in the Jim Crow South), and he helped sponsor Bessie to attend flight school in France.

Realizing that in order to make a living as a pilot she would have to become a “barnstorming” stunt flier, Bessie spent nearly two years honing her skills in Europe before making her aerial debut on September 3, 1922. Demonstrating superior skill and stunning maneuvers, “Queen Bess” quickly became a national sensation, admired by black and white alike.

Understanding that her popularity could be capitalized on, Bessie used her platform to tour all around America, encouraging African-Americans and women to pursue their goals. She also fought against racism and segregation in all its forms, refusing to participate in air shows that wouldn't admit African-Americans and even turning down a movie role that would have required her to initially come on screen dressed in tattered rags, saying that she didn't want to perpetuate any negative stereotypes white America had about her race.

Sadly, Bessie Coleman died in 1926 while test-flying the first plane that she had managed to buy herself, but her contributions to the world did not stop there. She inspired the flight careers of William J. Powell, a fellow pioneer aviator and civil rights activist; Jesse LeRoy Brown, the first African-American to complete the Navy's basic flight training program; and Mae C. Jemison, who brought Bessie Coleman's portrait on the *Endeavour* on the trip that made her the first Black woman in space.

As for her lasting impression, Mae Jemison put it best when she said, “I point to Bessie Coleman and say here is a woman, a being, who exemplifies and serves as a model for all humanity, the very definition of strength, dignity, courage, integrity, and beauty.”