Bessie Coleman

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Written by Jane Sellman

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Correlation

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Bessie Coleman

Introduction

In the United States in the 1920s, few women flew planes, and it was unthinkable that an African-American woman could fly. Yet Bessie Coleman did just that. Bessie was a brave African-American woman who fought discrimination to follow her dream of becoming a pilot. Her determination opened doors for other African-Americans and women who came after her.

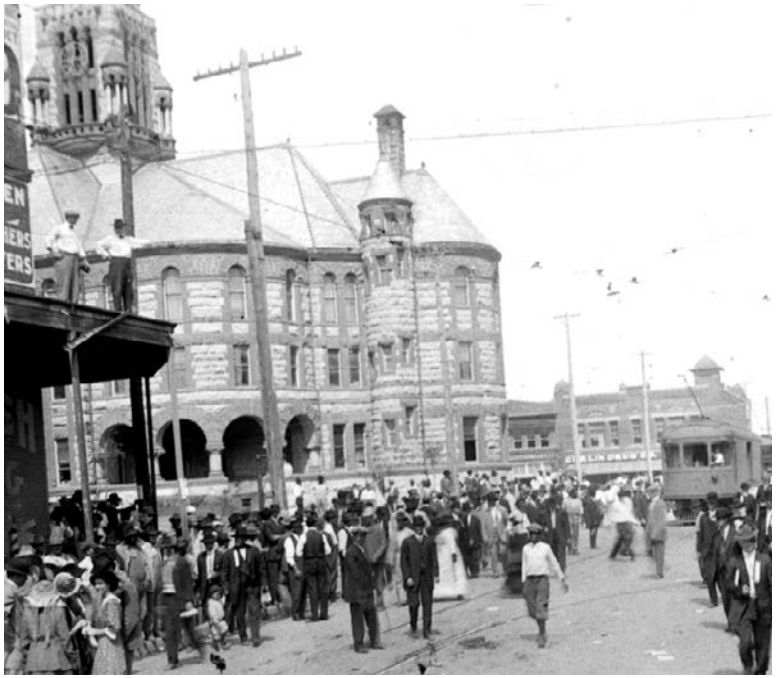
Growing Up In Texas

Bessie Coleman was born in Atlanta, Texas, in 1892. Her mother was African-American and her father was of African-American and Choctaw Native American descent. Her parents were **sharecroppers**. Bessie was one of thirteen children.

Two years after Bessie's birth, the family moved to Waxahachie (WAK-sah-HACH-ee), Texas, where Bessie's father hoped that the busy town would offer good jobs. Bessie started school in Waxahachie. She had to walk miles each day to an all-black school. She loved reading and books, and she was a whiz at math.

Waxahachie, where Bessie grew up, is close to Dallas.

Bessie's father was disturbed by the racial barriers in Texas. He believed that the family would be treated better if they moved to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. Unable to convince his wife to accompany him, Bessie's father left the family when Bessie was nine years old. Around that time, Bessie's older brothers grew up and also moved away. Bessie's mother worked as a maid, while Bessie helped take care of her younger sisters.



Waxahachie courthouse between 1911 and 1919

Workers pick cotton

In Texas, cotton growing was big business. During the cotton harvest, everyone in the family worked in the fields for extra money. Bessie hated picking cotton. It was hot, boring work, and during the harvest, African-American children couldn't go to school. Even though she worked in the fields, Bessie managed to finish all eight grades in the local school. She decided that she wanted to go to college, so she got a job washing people's clothes to save money. In about four years, she had enough to begin school. She enrolled in a college for African-Americans, but after one year she ran out of money and had to return home.

Moving To Chicago

Two of Bessie's brothers had traveled east to Chicago, Illinois, in search of work and a better life. One day, one of her brothers, Walter, contacted Bessie. He thought she could get a good job in the big city.

At the age of 23, Bessie boarded a train and made the trip to Chicago. It was a long and uncomfortable trip. African-Americans were forced to sit on hard wooden benches in a separate part of the train from white people.

Chicago 1919

Do You Know?

In Chicago in the beginning of the 20th century, most African American people had to live in separate neighborhoods from white people. In the Southside neighborhoods, African-Americans owned all the businesses. They had barbershops, like the one where Bessie worked, and stores, restaurants, banks, and nightclubs. Many became wealthy.

When Bessie arrived in Chicago, she moved in with her brothers, Walter and John, and their wives, making five people in one small apartment. Bessie took a class to learn to become a **manicurist**, and soon she found a job at the White Sox Barbershop on Chicago's Southside.

When America entered World War I, John and Walter **enlisted** in the army and went to France to fight. Bessie read newspaper stories about the fighting in Europe and worried about her brothers' safety. She also read about the brave pilots and was especially inspired by one, Eugene Bullard, an African-American who flew for the French.

Eugene Bullard

When her brothers returned, they told Bessie stories about the war. John teased her, saying that French women were braver than American women, and that they could fly airplanes. Hearing stories about the brave pilots made Bessie realize what she wanted to do. She wanted to become a pilot. But who would teach her? No one she asked would teach a black woman to fly.

Traveling To France

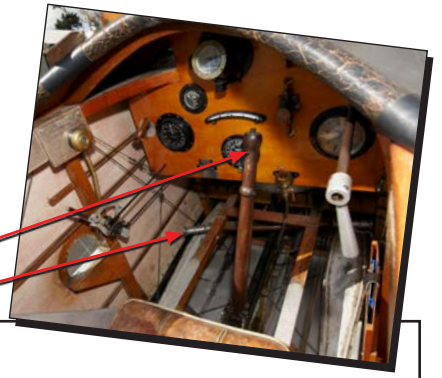
Bessie did not give up. Her friend Robert Abbott, the editor of a newspaper for black people, told her that she could go to France to learn to fly. Bessie would need a lot of money to pay for the trip and the lessons. She got a new job managing a restaurant and saved her money. She also took French lessons and quickly learned the language. Robert Abbott and other friends helped her pay for the trip as well.

Robert Abbott

In 1920, Bessie traveled on a ship to France. She was pleased to find that there was no discrimination against African-Americans in France. She could eat in any restaurant and ride wherever she wished on the trains.

Bessie found a school run by two brothers named Caudron, who said they would teach her to fly. The training plane they used was called a **biplane**. It had two pairs of wings and two open cockpits. The instructor sat in the front cockpit, and Bessie sat in the rear cockpit, watching as he moved the controls. It was very difficult to hear her teacher's instructions over the roar of the wind and the engine. Bessie was a good student, and in a few months, she was ready to fly **solo**.

In 1921, at the age of 29, Bessie became the first African-American female pilot. She also became the first African-American to earn an international pilot's license.



Do You Know?

Early planes had extremely simple controls. A stick, like a joystick, controlled the plane's up-and-down movement. A rudder bar on the floor controlled the side-to-side movement. Pilots pushed the rudder bar back and forth with their feet.

A plane performs a stunt at a modern air show.

Triumphant Return

In the fall of 1921, Bessie returned to America. Both black and white Americans learned of Bessie's accomplishment. She was interviewed by reporters and invited to special events. She was greeted with applause and respect.

Bessie's dreams did not end with becoming a pilot. She wanted to start a flying school for others, especially African-Americans. But she would need money to start the school, and the best way for a pilot to make money was to perform at air shows.

Bessie on September 4, 1922

Do You Know?

During the 1920s, few people had ever seen an airplane, and even fewer had been in one. Airplanes were small and dangerous, so people did not travel in them. Most planes were used for only two things: fighting battles and air shows. Air shows were one of the biggest and most exciting events of the time.

Before Bessie could be a part of an air show, she had to return to France to learn more about flying, including stunts and tricks. When Bessie came back to the United States, Robert Abbott helped her organize an air show near New York City on September 3, 1922. It was the first time a black woman had ever given an air show.

Barnstormer

Bessie's reputation as a pilot spread across the country. She became a **barnstormer**, a pilot who traveled around the country using farmers' fields for air shows.

Bessie's act pleased crowds wherever she performed. One of her stunts was the **loop-the-loop**, in which Bessie would fly her plane straight up in the air, turn upside down, and make large loops in the sky.

A pilot's view in a loop-the-loop stunt

Parachuting from a plane was another of Bessie's famous stunts. She also took people for rides in her plane. She gave many black people their first chance to fly.

Bessie took other steps to help put an end to discrimination. She insisted that everyone, blacks and whites, males and females, should be allowed to attend any of the events in which she participated. She would not give a show or a speech to a white-only crowd.

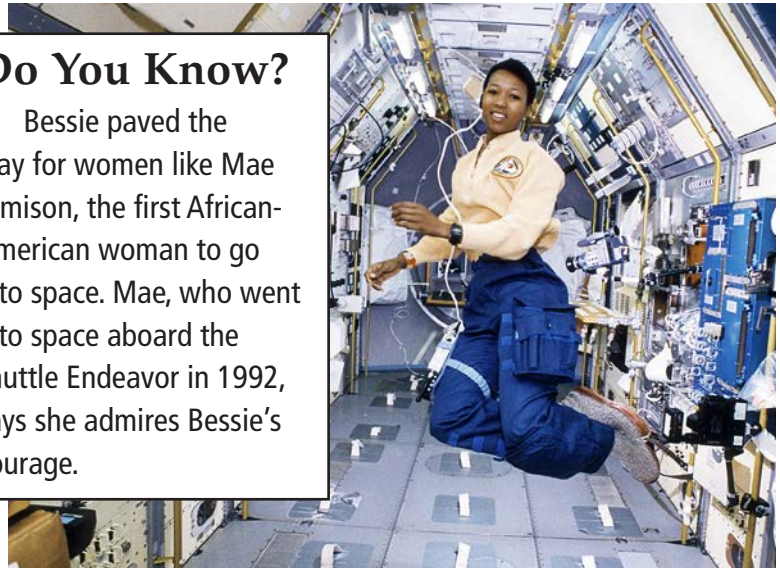
Bessie used early versions of parachutes like this one when jumping from planes.

Curtiss Jenny airplane

At first, Bessie had to borrow a plane for her shows. In time, Bessie had enough money to buy her own plane, a **Curtiss Jenny**. Shortly after she bought the plane, its engine jammed, and she crashed. Bessie had a broken leg, broken ribs, and numerous cuts. She was in the hospital for three months. As soon as she was released, Bessie went right back to flying.

Do You Know?

Bessie paved the way for women like Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman to go into space. Mae, who went into space aboard the shuttle Endeavor in 1992, says she admires Bessie's courage.



In April of 1926, Bessie agreed to do a show in Jacksonville, Florida that included a parachute jump. She and her **mechanic**, William Wills, took the plane up to pick out a spot for the parachute jump.

Bessie didn't wear her seat belt because she needed to lean out of the plane to spot a good place for the jump. The plane suddenly went into a spin. Bessie fell out of the plane and was killed. The airplane crashed, and William Wills was killed, too. It was a sad day. The country had lost a true aviation pioneer and one of its favorite pilots.

Bessie's Legacy

After her death, the U.S. Post Office issued a stamp in her honor and a Chicago street was named after her. May 2 has been declared Bessie Coleman Day in Chicago.

A Bessie Coleman coin was proposed in 1998.

Three years after Bessie's death, one of her most important dreams was fulfilled. The Bessie Coleman Aero Club was opened in Chicago. It was the first flight school for African-Americans.

Glossary

barnstormer *(n.)* a person who travels the country performing shows in rural areas, often on farms (p. 15)

biplane *(n.)* a plane with two pairs of wings (p. 12)

Curtiss Jenny *(n.)* a biplane model from the early 1900s (p. 17)

enlisted *(v.)* signed up for; enrolled in (p. 10)

loop-the-loop *(n.)* an airplane stunt in which the pilot flies straight up in the air, flips over, and flies straight down in a loop (p. 15)

manicurist *(n.)* a person who takes care of and polishes fingernails (p. 9)

mechanic *(n.)* a person who fixes machines, especially cars, planes, and other moving vehicles (p. 18)

sharecroppers *(n.)* farmers who work on other farmers' land and share part of their crops or profits (p. 5)

solo *(adv.)* by one's self (p. 12)

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